

considering garlands
ON ANTHOLOGIES



curated by DAVID LAZAR

John D'Agata
Robert Atwan
Joy Castro
Patricia Foster
Phillip Lopate
Jill Talbot



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ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#9

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As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press cultures.

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CONTENTS

Introduction by David Lazar	iv
John D'Agata and Phillip Lopate Interview	1
Joy Castro and Patricia Foster	28
Robert Atwan and Jill Talbot	63
Author Bios	106

INTRODUCTION

—David Lazar

I think I can offer you, in this parliament of philomaths,
entertainment of the most genuine sort...

—Christopher Morley, Preface to
Modern Essays for Schools

We are all indebted to Meleager of Gadara, who gave us the *Garland*, which stands for us as the beginning of the anthology, the anthologia, a floral collection, or in Latin, “florilegium.” Meleager connected flora as emblems to various poets and epigrammatists, thus the name of this anthological root of ours. Only parts of the original version of the *Garland* now survive, subsumed into the larger and later *Anthologia Graeca*.

But we can imagine that the urge to collect, to preserve, to arrange precedes even this. There is something floral, and something culinary in the urge to choose and arrange. Because there is the desire to recreate an experience in the anthology—just as there is in a meal, or garden. In all three cases, too, the impulse to share is a generous one, and also bound up in a reasonable degree of ego. As with the chef, the anthologist says, or rather, must assert, “I know what is good, or what is interesting.” And yes, the generous part, is “I’d like you to know it, too.” Perhaps that is confirmation. And sometimes, one might think, it is the desire for influence, though heaven knows that kind of hubris seems bound to have its second parachute fail.

I know I have frequently started anthologies out of pedagogical desires—wanting what I use in class to exist as a book, or wanting a book I’m thinking about using in class to exist. But there are so many motives for creating, what is, I think, an undertheorized art: anthologizing, part of the editor’s less than well-considered role in the literary arts.

Here, then are several of the more lively, specifically nonfiction anthologists of our contemporary stage: John D’Agata and Phillip Lopate, Joy Castro and Patricia Foster, Robert Atwan and Jill Talbot.

Related conversations can be found in *The Conversant* with [Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow](#), [Margot Singer and Nicole Walker](#).

In each of these cases, the subject is nonfiction because we don't think editors have talked much about this as an anthological subject. But then again, anthologizing has never been, shall we say, overspoken. Perhaps that's as it should be. Christopher Morley writes, "I am now aware, to speak somewhat lightly of the labors of anthologists: to insinuate that they led lives of bland sedentary ease." He is among the very few (and this in 1921) to talk about his labors in a more general way, and after he dispenses with his glibness, writes, "Indeed, the pangs of the anthologist, if he has conscience, are burdensome. There are so many considerations to be tenderly weighed; personal taste must sometimes be set aside in view of the general plan; for every item chosen half a dozen will have been affectionately conned and sifted.... It would be enjoyable...to write and essay on the things I have lingered over with intent to include them in this little book."

I hope you enjoy the conversations of our essayist-anthologists, in this little book. I think they talk about serving forth what they care about in ways that you, perhaps, haven't heard before, in their garlands of exchange.

JOHN D'AGATA AND PHILLIP LOPATE INTERVIEW



John D'Agata: We're here at the University of Iowa, finishing up a week-long visit by Phillip Lopate, who has been doing lots of Q&As, and has hosted a screening of a film about him. And last night he gave us a wonderful reading. I think at this point he's ready to declare that this is perhaps the best nonfiction program in the country. No?

Phillip Lopate: Why settle for the country? The world? The galaxy? Yes.

JD: There it is.

PL: And you are?

JD: My name is John D'Agata, and I'm here with Phillip. We've been asked to talk about anthologizing, or editing anthologies. David Lazar from Columbia College in Chicago gave us a series of questions that we may...

PL: Which we are going to ignore.

JD: Yeah, although if we get stumped we may turn to them. We'll also rely on you for some questions. Otherwise, we're going to wing it.

PL: Yes. So I've done three anthologies. How many have you done, John?

JD: I've done two, and I'm working on a third and final anthology.

PL: The first one I did was *The Art of the Personal Essay*, and I did that for Anchor Books. The second was *Writing New York* and the third was *American Movie Critics*. The last two I did for The Library of America. I got into *The Art of the Personal Essay* by teaching the personal essay. I kept trying to find an anthology to assign, and I kept having my students buying dozens of books, and there was nothing out there. There were anthologies of the modern and contemporary, but there was no historical anthology—which I thought was quite curious. So it finally dawned on me that I would have to do it myself. I got a contract to do it, and I hit the library and began reading. I read a tremendous amount, and there were dead-ends also. I remember trying to find out if there were Native American essayists, Arabic essayists, and I was told, "Well, there's a lot of religious literature, but not too much personal essay." And from the Arab countries, that's probably changed. In any case, what I was really trying to do was to get a storyline going, a narrative. It

was my ambition to assert a canon of the personal essay, to say, “This is not something new; this has been going on for a long time.” So I set upon this narrative. I wanted to find the roots of the personal essay, so I went back to the classical era, to Seneca and Plutarch, and then jumped over to Asia, to Sei Shōnagon (the tenth-century court-lady) and Kenko, and a few other things like that. Essentially I was saying that the personal essay grew out of diaries, out of letters, and grew out of these kinds of rhetorical exercises that the Greeks and Romans did. So, in a way, I was already taking a chance, because I wasn’t really presenting personal essays, but kind of like the mulch out of which the personal essay grew.

And then I went to Montaigne, who is universally acknowledged as a great personal essayist, from whom most of the tradition sprang, and gave him his own section. Then I went into the English essay, because it seemed to me in an odd way that Montaigne’s essays took root more in England than they did in France. It just suited the English love of idiosyncrasy and conversation, and maybe the French were a little more formal. In any case, the French had a different relation to Montaigne. Pascal and Rousseau both criticized Montaigne, so they set themselves up in opposition or distinction, whereas the English were happy to build on Montaigne (and Shakespeare was supposed to have read Montaigne). So I went all the way back to Abraham Cowley, Addison and

Steele, and Samuel Johnson. Again, in a way, Samuel Johnson was not a personal essayist, but I loved him so much that I put him in anyway. So then I came to the really great personal essayists of England, William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb. And then Robert Louis Stevenson and Max Beerbohm, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell. Then I had a section on foreign essays, which really was a kind of mixture of all kinds of traditions that went from Borges to Barthes to Benjamin (a lot of Bs) and Carlos Fuentes—I needed a Latin-American essayist. Generally, I did not feel obliged to be representative of every ethnicity and so on. But I was open to diversity. There’s a difference between being blackmailed by diversity and being open to diversity.

Next I moved on to the American tradition, which also was a very hale and hearty tradition, and went back to Thoreau, and Mencken, and all the way up through E. B. White and M. F. K. Fisher and so on—to the present. I have to say, in all three of my anthologies, the present was by far the hardest thing to do. I didn’t have perspective on who the giants were. The culture didn’t have that perspective. I put in Joan Didion, and Edward Hoagland and Seymour Krim, and a few people like that.

JD: Right.

PL: I found this to be true in all three anthologies. It happened again for me in *American Movie Critics*. I

was very sure I understood the whole development of American film criticism from the silent era until about 1975, and then I got scared. Because being a film critic myself, and knowing a lot of film critics, I knew I was going to hurt a lot of people's feelings by leaving them out. And also I didn't have the sense of perspective, because you could understand in film criticism that Otis Ferguson was important for Manny Farber, and that James Agee was important for other critics, and you could know that Pauline Kael and Farber and Parker Tyler and Andrew Sarris were major figures, but we hadn't had enough time to see who the major figures of the present were. The other side of this is that I really am more drawn to tradition. I've always been a little allergic to the avant-garde, the claims of the avant-garde, the presumptions of the avant-garde. I never wanted to beat the drum for the idea that this is the cutting edge, that this is what we need to build on next. I was really excited to find forerunners, and I'm prone to ancestor worship, you might say. I'm not prone to worship of my contemporaries.

JD: Let me correct you on one point, because you've actually done more than three. For a number of years you edited the *Anchor Essay Annual*, which was amazing.

PL: That's right! Three years. I did three more anthologies. And the *Anchor Essay Annual* (which for the last year was

called *The Art of the Essay*) was an attempt to build on the success of *The Art of the Personal Essay*. *The Art of the Personal Essay* was a huge success. So the publisher of Anchor said, "Let's establish our own franchise." And we were directly in competition with *The Best American Essays*. I thought, OK. I wanted to take a different tack. In the *Anchor Essay Annual* I included essays that were published abroad, not just in America.

I published, to my mind, more intellectual essays, not always so many narrative essays. So that was a ton of work. I subscribed to (or had free subscriptions sent to me from) every periodical in English, both here and abroad. And I have to tell you that my mailman came to curse me. Because every day he would deliver, you know, eight magazines.

JD: Right.

PL: I had to give him a really big Christmas tip. So all these magazines kept coming in, and I got used to disregarding the poetry, the fiction, just going immediately to the essays. But I had to keep up the reading. So, not to get too gross, but I couldn't go to the toilet without taking a magazine with me, or go on the subway. I was always reading in between meals. I was always reading these magazines, and I got a pretty good idea of who was out there, who was starting to

do interesting work. So after three years I demanded a raise...

JD: And that's when the series ended.

PL: That is when the series ended!

JD: But that's interesting...

PL: They offered me a small raise, but not as much as I wanted. I needed an assistant. I was the master and the slave, you know? I was the amanuensis and the eminence, you know? I was doing it all.

JD: That project's interesting because you got into it despite your reluctance, as you said about the film-criticism anthology, to pass judgment on your colleagues. And yet, at least for projects like your Anchor series or for *The Best American Essays*, there's a little bit of king-and queen-making that's involved in doing those.

PL: Yes.

JD: Not that it's actually accurate that one's life changes once you're in those anthologies, but that's the perception.

PL: Absolutely. It was a great boost to those who got tapped in that way. I still feel that with the Anchor anthologies, it was very hard for me to deal with the

present simply as a narrative (what's happening now, what's important?). And what I felt was that I placed a few bets.

JD: You were right for the most part.

PL: Thanks. In the case of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, that original edition has remained—I have never revised it. In the case of *Writing New York* and *American Movie Critics*, both of them were re-issued as paperbacks, and the publisher said, "You can put about 12 more pages in." So then I was able to place a few more bets. But it wasn't significant.

JD: This is sort of putting you on the spot, but we give you permission to speak immodestly. Why do you think *The Art of the Personal Essay* has been so incredibly successful? It's not just the best-selling nonfiction anthology, but I think it's safe to say that it's the most important nonfiction anthology as well. If you're using one anthology, it's the one you use. Why is that, do you think?

PL: Well, it's generous. It's a big chunky book. If it falls on your foot, you go to the doctor. It does present a coherent narrative. So for all those teachers out there who didn't want to present just the current moment, who wanted to say, "Respect the tradition," it really was the only one for a while that did that. Later on there were

others, but they sort of came and went. I think it was marketed very well, frankly. I do think that it has a lot of my personality in it, and there are anthologies that definitely reflect the anthologist's personality, and others where the anthologist recedes. I wrote the introduction to it, and that introduction has been photocopied a great deal, and so on. I was writing both the introduction and the headnotes at a moment of maximum enthusiasm. I really was a missionary for the personal essay. And years later, I started to feel that the personal essay wasn't so different from other kinds of essays, and wondered why had I corralled this one type of essay so much. I fell in love with Emerson, whom I hadn't put in *The Art of the Personal Essay* because he didn't seem to me a personal essayist. Later on, I came to see Emerson as totally personal. But I think that the book had a lot of conviction and enthusiasm behind it.

JD: And it also (and I know you've heard this before) really reminded us as a culture that the essay exists! I remember I was an undergraduate and in creative-nonfiction courses, as they were called then. And I remember it feeling, not to get too melodramatic, but it feeling like an event when this book came out. Finally, someone was recognizing that this thing exists and that we were a part of a heritage, not just...

PL: Yeah, not just a career, not Johnny Come-Latelys. I feel that way about the memoir also. I was always amazed

during the memoir backlashes, when the memoir was presented as this brash new form instead of something that went all the way back to St. Augustine and before that.

JD: Right.

PL: I had a different experience with all three anthologies because, with the first one, I had an editor (Charley Conrad at Anchor) who was very enthusiastic. And I also had some help from Ron Padgett at Teachers & Writers Collaborative. You'll notice this line giving Teachers & Writers Collaborative co-production credit. So what happened was that I had been an operative at Teachers & Writers for years, and they wanted to have something to do with this book. So Ron and Charley both got to pass on each of the pieces: I had to get it by both of them. I remember when I did the bold thing of putting myself in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, considering myself one of the more important personal essayists. I thought, I'll put in "Portrait of my Body" or else "Against Joie de Vivre," and Ron said, "You can't put that one in—we can't have the stuff about two pee-holes in your penis and all that. So we're going to go with 'Against Joie de Vivre.'" Ron also was very important in persuading this obscure little publisher who had put out Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* as a separate book. He got permission finally. He wore this guy down, and the guy said, "OK, you can

publish it, the whole thing, in *The Art of the Personal Essay*." I had the opposite experience when I did *Writing New York*, because we included in the hardcover edition E.B. White's famous essay "Here is New York." The publisher thought that he was dealing with the person that had the rights, only to discover that the person who had the rights had sold them to a small press that was going to put the piece out as a separate publication—at which point that press threatened to sue Library of America, and Library of America had to pay them off. In the paperback edition, the piece is not included. In the case of the two Library of America books, *Writing New York* and *American Movie Critics*: Library of America is an incredible operation, and they're very distinguished and really know a lot. Geoffrey O'Brien is the editor-in-chief, and Max Rudin is the publisher. So they knew a lot already, and they had graduate-student interns who would fetch things from the library. So in that case, I had a lot of help. But I also had some hurdles to jump. To give you one example, it was supposed to be the best writing about New York City, and when it first started out, they said they wanted a five-hundred-page book, and I said, "I can't do this in five hundred pages. I'll need a thousand pages." And of course that's a much greater burden on the publisher. They said, "No, you've got to keep it at five hundred pages." I said, "We'll see about that." So they kept coming up with interesting material. I kept coming up with interesting material. And

in the end, it was a thousand pages. By that time I was convinced, if I could only get fifteen hundred pages, I could really nail this thing, you know? And I think that always happens with anthologies. You think, Just a little bit more.

JD: Right.

PL: So for instance, one of the most glaring instances I can remember is Dorothy Parker. We kept looking at Dorothy Parker material, and it wasn't that inspiring. I, being a coward, would have been happy to slip her in, especially in the fifteen-hundred-page edition, but her work had dated. Part of what we were trying to do was to decide things by literary standards, so the other thing that happened was that I looked all through Robert Caro's biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, which is one of the most important books about New York City. I'd like to blame Geoffrey O'Brien and those Library of America people, but to me too, a little bit, it seemed like high journalism, not really like literary writing. So in the end we did not put a chapter from *The Power Broker* into the book. And I have to tell you that every time I come upon Robert Caro at cocktail parties now, he turns away. He doesn't offer his hand. He's never forgiven me. Never! I've made an enemy for life.

JD: Wow.

PL: That also happened with the *American Movie Critics* anthology. Because Library of America was publishing it, the whole idea was to offer the canon of American movie criticism as a species of American letters. So it wasn't just about movies—it had to be well-written. In fact, I purposely put in some people like John Ashbery and Paul Goodman and Carl Sandburg, because they had written some movie criticism, and I wanted to show how movie criticism had captured the imagination of American writers, even those who weren't regular film critics. So there was this critic, Dave Kehr, who published in the *New York Times*. Dave is a very fine film critic, but I just never really fell in love with his prose style. So I left him out of the first edition. Then, when the paperback gave me a chance to add something, everybody said, "You have to put in something about criticism on the Internet." Because that's the next big thing, you know, criticism on the Internet. So I took something from David Bordwell's blog. I took something from Stephanie Zacharek. And I took this kind of debate that had occurred on Dave Kehr's blog about the Terrence Malick movie *The New World*. Kehr had registered his intelligent reservations about the movie, and then other people had piled on, arguing with him, or agreeing with him. You know, this is the kind of rude thing that happens in blogs.

JD: Right.

PL: But I thought it was a perfect example of this Internet village or community coming to an opinion about a movie. Well, Dave would not let us use that entry, because it wasn't only his voice. So he also turns away slightly when he sees me at parties. Though he will talk to me.

And you too, John, obviously must have felt there was an inadequacy in my personal-essay anthology, for you to try to amend and correct it. There had to have been some discontent, if not careerism.

JD: I started working on my first anthology, *The Next American Essay*, when I was a graduate student here at Iowa. I think I first thought of doing it when I was 22. I got the contract for it when I was 23. So certainly there was...

PL: A cocky young man!

JD: There was a great deal of cockiness and brashness involved. And yet, while this may sound like I'm trying to blow something up your ass, I think I was inspired by *The Art of the Personal Essay*. I was inspired by the feeling at that time that the essay was finally coming into its own. It felt like...

PL: A moment?

JD: Yeah. A moment that seems to have lasted now 20 years. Though as some students were saying last night at the party, this resurgence keeps popping up. Every couple years someone seems to declare a renaissance of the essay. And indeed that's how it felt for me. And so I felt inspired to start exploring what else the essay could do—which I think was the purpose of my first anthology. When I was a student I didn't feel very connected with the nonfiction world, aesthetically I mean, and so working on *The Next American* helped me find a sense of community.

PL: Yes! Yes!

JD: I started looking for writers who looked like what I thought I looked like at the time. So while I was here as a student, I wasn't thinking of it as an anthology, or something that would be published. I was thinking of it as a project through which I could learn something about another kind of essaying. So I started digging through history. And it's when my first book, *Halls of Fame*, found a publisher with Graywolf that my real cockiness came out, and I said, "Well, if you want this book, perhaps I can interest you in this other thing too." And I somehow talked them into letting me do an anthology as part of a two-book deal. And by that time (I was 23, 24), the anthology was fifteen hundred pages. It went back as

far as I could possibly stretch a conception of the essay. So it went back to Sumer.

PL: You trumped me there! I did not get into Sumerians.

JD: And Graywolf agreed to do (or at least a version of) it! Fiona McCrae, who is the publisher of Graywolf, and was my editor at the time, very smartly said, "Listen dude, you're 23 and no one knows who you are. I doubt we can sell a fifteen-hundred-page book of Sumerian essays. So how about you do a version of this that's all-American and mostly contemporary and we'll see how it goes and maybe we can follow it up with something else?" I said, "Sure." And then I just started trying to shape it. But as cocky as I was, I did still understand that I was young and unknown. I may have had enthusiasm and passion, but I didn't have any authority. So I started trying to figure out how I could put something together that would not sound like I was trying to pretend that the editorial voice in the book was the voice of God, handing down the best essays from world history, but rather to show that this project was a personal document—which is what every anthology is unless it's put together by a committee. I think when I do an anthology I'm creating some of the most personal stuff I'll ever put out there, because anthologies are all about selection, all about opinion: you are putting yourself out there far more than you may be in the stylized performance of a memoir or a

personal essay. There's very little hiding in an anthology. So I wanted to acknowledge that and create an intimate anthology. That's how I came up with the idea of writing introductions that were partly about the writers whose work was being introduced, partly about their essays and partly about me. So it was, for lack of a better way of putting it, an attempt to straddle the personal and the critical, trying to say something about the essay while pretending that I didn't have any authority to say anything about the essay. And I think I lucked out, starting it so early, you know? I was working on it before my own first book came out. And I lucked out because I wasn't part of the literary community. I didn't know these people that I was passing judgment on, choosing or not choosing to appear in the book. So I lucked out in that I didn't feel that burden at all. Although, also, I doubt anyone would have cared whether they were in or not at that time. So I let myself make the decisions that I wanted to make, and so I included some texts that were traditionally considered poems and stories.

PL: Did anybody refuse to give you a piece?

JD: No one refused to give me anything. I did the permissions myself. So I was only working with publishers. Everything had already been published, so I didn't work with the writers directly. But the Susan Sontag story that's included (which I call an essay) hit

a small hiccup, because the rights were owned by her agent at the time, the Wiley Agency. So I wrote to them. And they gave me permission because I suspect if you're willing to pay they're willing to give you permission to do anything with a text. So I thought that was great. But then, right before the anthology was about to come out, somehow Sontag heard about this project, and that this story of hers was going to appear in an essay anthology, and she wrote me a letter. I'd never had any contact with her before then, and I was however old I was: 23 or 24. She wrote me the most terrifying letter I've ever received in my life. It was terrifying partly because it was from Susan Sontag, and also partly because it was a Susan Sontag letter that explained to me that she understood Wiley had given me permission to do this, but they had done so without her blessings—that she did not approve of this, that she had spent her career trying very hard to separate her fiction, which she considered her “creative” work, from what would be perceived to be her essay work (which I guess she considered her less creative work).

PL: And she wanted to be known more as a fiction writer than an essayist.

JD: Yeah. So here I was calling one of her stories an essay. It was too late though. We had a contract, and I think the book was already in production. So there was

nothing that could be done. Nevertheless she wanted me to know that I was a very bad boy, and that she was going to destroy me if she could. I'm joking: she didn't say that. But she scared me. But then the book came out, and I sent her a few copies of the anthology and also apologized, and she sent me a much smaller note that basically said "OK, I kind of see what you're up to here; I still don't approve, but all right." And then the issue was dropped and I was able to continue using her piece. But otherwise I didn't face any problems. I faced financial problems, because a lot of the texts I wanted to use were extraordinarily expensive. There's a David Foster Wallace essay in the book that came from a collection he did with Little Brown (which I think is owned by Time Warner), and they wanted, I think, two thousand dollars or something for it. So I wrote to David Foster Wallace, who I didn't know at the time, and I said, "Listen, I'm just this kid trying to put out this very passionate project. Can't you help me?" And he wrote to someone in charge and they dropped the fee down to maybe fifteen hundred dollars, or something.

PL: Two thousand doesn't sound so bad, actually.

JD: You don't think so?

PL: No, because sometimes they really sock it to you. I had an experience which didn't turn out quite as happily as your Susan Sontag experience, with Joan Didion.

Because when I was doing the *American Movie Critics* anthology, I found these movie reviews that Joan Didion had done for *Vogue* when she was a young gal about town—*Vogue* writer, you know?

JD: Mhm.

PL: And I thought that they were fresh, interesting, and it was great to have them. And the editors at Library of America thought so too, and these pieces were in the galleys. And suddenly, Joan Didion said, "No, this shall not pass." And I had known Joan Didion, vaguely. I had talked to her a few times. And I wasn't trying to get in touch with her, but I had her number in my rolodex, and I just called it, and she picked up the phone—there was Joan Didion. I said, "Joan, this is Phillip." And she said, "No, you can't have them." And I said, But you know, they're so lively, so charming. And she said (that was the wrong word to use for Joan Didion), "I'm not interested in being charming. I'm not interested in this." From her perspective, these were embarrassing juvenilia. Because it was before she had become capital-J Joan capital-D Didion. And she did not want these embarrassments out. I lost a lot of respect for her on two counts. One, she should have had more of a sense of humor about herself. Two, I was a fellow essayist—she should have done it out of collegiality, you know? But she wouldn't do it. So even though they were in the galleys, they

didn't appear in the book. I think, also, she had decided she was not a movie expert. But she didn't have to be a movie expert.

JD: Right. That raises an interesting question about the appeal of finding something new, something fresh.

PL: Exactly!

JD: Especially from an established writer like Didion—it would have been perceived as a find.

PL: She was treating it like nude pin-ups that she had done when she was a waitress and trying to get through college.

JD: There's an interesting question you have to ask when you're doing an anthology, of how important it is to present new work from well-known writers. When I was doing my second anthology, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, I found myself treading ground that you had already well traveled. I knew I wanted Sei Shōnagon, whom you include in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, because she spoke to the same argument I was trying to make. Kenko similarly, and Natalia Ginzburg, and so what do you do? Do you...

PL: And Montaigne, the same essay.

JD: The exact same essay. And so with some of those I could use different translations. There was a new Shōnagon translation, for example. But it puts you in a dilemma. These folks are speaking to your argument, and yet it could make you as an editor look like you aren't imaginative enough to find alternative writers.

PL: But I really feel that you have to put the chestnuts in even if they're obvious. For instance, in *Writing New York*, we did it with Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener." It's one of the five or three greatest short stories ever written about New York City, you know? I said, "This has got to go in." They said, "But it's in every anthology in the world." And in the end, it went in. I just thought, Come on. It's obvious, but sometimes things are obvious for a reason, because they're peaks—they're mountains. So we put that in and we put in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" by Whitman, because it's just too great. We put in some of Whitman's journalism. But you know, you can't always buck the obvious. And one of the things that interested me was to assert a canon, and this is at a moment already when there was a lot of antipathy in the academy to the very notion of a canon.

JD: Mhm.

PL: And I thought, you know, maybe there was antipathy to the canon of fiction and poetry. But there hasn't even been a canon in the personal essay yet.

JD: Right.

PL: So I put in "Notes of a Native Son" by Baldwin, which is so important, and now is in every anthology. But it needed to be in that anthology.

JD: I'm working on a third anthology now, which is covering mid-seventeenth-century American essays up to mid-twentieth-century, and I've sent a number of preliminary tables of contents to my editor, and she noted my ballsy and perhaps also asinine choice not to include Baldwin. And it's because I hadn't been able to think of an alternative to "Notes of a Native Son." I finally did find something that I did want to include of his. So I compromised on that. And it wasn't that I didn't want to include him, but (despite what you just said, which I agree with entirely) I felt I couldn't include that. It felt...

PL: I mean, there are at least a dozen Baldwin essays: "Stranger in the Village," "Equal in Paris" and so on. And the first half of *The Fire Next Time* is amazing. So what did you finally put in?

JD: Well now I don't want to say, because it's none of those! I put in something about him and Mailer being reporters at the same boxing match, which I thought was fascinating, imagining them there. So I also put in Mailer's essay on the fight, right beside Baldwin's. The

two texts speak very interestingly to one another. Will you ever do another anthology?

PL: You know, I won't say never. But from time to time people have asked, "Do you want to update *The Art of the Personal Essay*?" It feels a little too much like: do I want to re-write one of my older books?

JD: Right.

PL: I don't want to re-write those books. Let them stand in all their flaws.

JD: Yeah.

PL: I don't really want to do an art-of-the-contemporary-personal-essay book. If I do another anthology, it's probably going to be something specific, like I'm very interested in the urban sketch. And that could include stuff from Germany, France, the United States and so on. The city sketch, you know?

JD: That's interesting.

PL: But I don't think I'm going to change *The Art of the Personal Essay*. I'm not going to second guess myself.

JD: Because they're books.

PL: They're books, yeah. And they tell a story. I mean, one thing that you said that I really agree with is that one of the reasons that you do these anthologies is you want to find a community. It may sound very self-serving to put it this way, but you want to find a lineage that will end in you. But you know what? Every writer does this. They don't always end up editing an anthology, but writers always look for that trail of ancestors that will end in them.

JD: Sure. Sure.

PL: When people ask, "How do you find a voice, and how do you find a style?" in a sense, what you're finding is your ancestors. And then, for me, it was like hoping to please them. When people say, "Who do you write for?" I say, "I write for a lot of dead writers."

JD: Absolutely.

PL: And they're looking down at me, as if they're saying, "It was a good try, Phillip—I know what you were trying to do." At least they would have a sense that I'm trying to do something of the same order that they were able to do.

JD: Yeah. My goal in life will only be fulfilled if, after I die, Plutarch pats me on the back and says, "OK. Not great. But all right."

PL: Not bad.

JD: You can come to the poker game, if there is one.

PL: He's in Limbo you know, because he wasn't Christian.

JD: Damn.

PL: That's where I'm going to be, too, because I'm not Christian either. So I have a better chance of playing poker with Plutarch.

JOY CASTRO AND PATRICIA FOSTER



David Lazar: To what extent do you think anthologizing is a radical act, or can be, and to what extent might it be conservative—the impulse to preserve? Can you speak to these impulses or tensions?

Patricia Foster: The idea of anthologizing (gathering, assessing, arranging, presenting) can be either radical or conservative depending on the conceptual framework defined by the anthologist and the writers she selects to represent and extend that concept. I like the idea of anthologies rife with tensions (both radical and conservative), impulses that allow and provoke the potential promise and inadequacy of the anthologist's ideas. There's something stubborn, maybe even arrogant, in the presumption that the anthologist can engage (entice? cajole? enlist?) 10 or 15 or 20 writers into writing toward a cohesive vision—or even a challenging one. The control the anthologist has (conservative in instinct) is one of selection, editing, sequencing, prefacing, and yet at some point in the process (once

the table of contents is defined, and certainly when the anthology is published), the anthology can feel like putting on a too-tight dress that the anthologist wears as casually and as pleasurably as she can since the seams can no longer be let out or the hem lengthened or the neckline raised. This is also why conceiving and editing an anthology can be so intriguing and so maddening.

When I edited my first anthology, *Minding the Body*, it felt like a radical act. At the time (1990–92), my challenge was to validate the female gaze, to say that the confessional voice matters, to insist that a woman's private voice is an authentic way to speak to power. The impulse to edit this anthology emerged from my own angst. For a long time, my sense of the body was aligned with the hysteric—the body as a theater of subversion. I wanted to tease out that pathology in myself (its psychogenic distortion), but I wasn't ready intellectually or emotionally to extend my own narrative into a manuscript (a conservative, protective impulse). I needed other voices. I needed to be in conversation rather than a cappella. I didn't want grand meditative narratives or quirky ironic gestures. I wanted the close-up, the intimate voice, the repressed memory, the anger and resentment and curiosity and chaos of the bad girl, of the sad girl, the silent, scared girl who'd turned her face aside but now looked directly at me. I say "girl"

here because that's the vernacular I grew up with in the South—the place where I conceived and edited the anthology, and where women's voices were so often silenced. There's a link between "the silence of the body and the silence of the tongue," as Cixous, the French feminist critic, writes in *The Newly Born Woman*. I agree with that.

I thought it radical in 1992–94 for women to write intimately about the pleasure and subversion of the body, to write in the genre of the personal essay as well as in the genre of the short story, even after the Women's Movement had galvanized women in the 1960s and '70s. By the 1990s, many writers and critics assumed that feminism had resolved many of the inequalities and "silences" of women. I didn't think so. And I wasn't alone. Here's part of the review from the *Women's Review of Books*: "So for those who proclaim that in the 1990s American women have finally achieved tremendous power and gains, *Minding the Body* is a needed slap-in-the-face reminder that women still live in a separate sphere—the objectified body."

Focusing on women's essays also felt new to me in the early '90s. Historically, the essay has been a male enclave. In Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*, there are (by my count) 11 women writers out of 50 writers presented. I just got out the 1996 *Best*

American Essays, guest-edited by Geoffrey C. Ward. In this volume, there were five women essayists out of 22 essays presented. In the 2013 *Best American Essays*, guest-edited by Cheryl Strayed, there were 10 women essayists out of 24 essays presented.

In 1990–93, it was certainly more radical than conservative for a woman to even think of herself as a personal essayist. In my educational career, the literary pecking order suggested that “the secret inner life” must be transmuted into fiction or poetry to have validity, and that the cultural voice must speak, at least in part, through journalism. From BA to MFA to PhD, I never once had a course devoted to the essay.

What’s interesting to me now is that what felt radical to me in the early 1990s (to present the confessional female voice as a political act) feels amazingly familiar in 2013. Most of the essays in *Minding the Body* were conservative in style, using a traditional narrative structure. There were no eccentric, chaotic forms, no stylistic provocations, no in-your-face endings or proclamations. But then, “radical” and “conservative” are slippery terms, affected as most things are, by history.

Joy Castro: I think the genre itself, the anthology, is a neutral vessel, and it can operate at either end of this spectrum. Most exciting to me are the anthologies

with the intention to break ground. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, which was transformative for so many of us, springs immediately to mind. For me, recent anthologies that have functioned in a groundbreaking way (because they have made room for new, previously silenced voices), include Ariel Gore and Bee Lavender’s *Breeder: Real-Life Stories from the New Generation of Mothers*, Michelle Tea’s *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class* and Lorraine López’s *An Angle of Vision: Women Writers on their Poor and Working-Class Roots*. When I worked with Susanne Antonetta and Barrie Jean Borich to edit a special issue of *Brevity*, we definitely worked with a radical agenda in mind. We were responding to the VIDA counts that have revealed the continuing paucity of work by women in many of the most prestigious publication venues.

On the other hand (to contradict myself), I’m not honestly sure that making room for the voices of marginalized women can be seen as theoretically radical anymore (it’s a fairly run-of-the-mill notion, from some standpoints). But the editorial work itself, the effort to get those voices out there, is still radical labor, because those voices remain suppressed within our culture. It’s work that still needs to be done.

With *Family Trouble*, my hope was to break new ground, since no other book exists that addresses the vexed topic of depicting family members in memoir, and it's an issue about which many writers and writing students feel urgency. While I don't see the project as particularly radical, I do see it as political and progressive. *Family Trouble* serves as an initial exploration of a controversial issue. I created the book I wanted to read and learn from, the book that didn't exist.

It's certainly also true that anthologizing can function as a conservative operation. I'm always excited to read the "Best of" anthologies in different genres each year, but I'm often a little disappointed, because there can sometimes be a sense of traditional aesthetics in control. It depends on that year's editor, and also on the series editor who does the initial culling. Sometimes I find that the "Notable" selections (the lists in the back) are more aesthetically exciting than the pieces that make it into the book. Perhaps that's because the series editors have the luxury of being more wide-ranging, more expansive, than the editor—who must narrow the selections down to a dozen or so. Or perhaps it's because the series editors' exposure to the form is greater, so they've become a bit bored (as I have) with the merely solidly excellent, and they're looking for something jazzier and different.

PF: I like how we've both focused (intuitively and intentionally) on women's voices, on supporting women's writing. When I read that paragraph about the VIDA count, I had to stop reading and look it up. Well, it's scary. Grim. I think I've been in some kind of bubble, because the majority of applicants to our MFA program are female (as are many of my writer friends, and they're publishing widely). But the overall numbers favor male writers in every magazine posted except for *Tin House*. *The New Yorker* numbers for 2012: Female 218, Male 583. *The Paris Review* numbers for 2012: Female 18, Male 70. *Tin House* has more balanced numbers: Female 70, Male 67. In all of those figures, I couldn't help but wonder how many represented marginalized women writers. Do you mind discussing how (in terms of transforming or directing your reading) the VIDA count radicalized your agenda for the magazine you were editing?

JC: A discussion about VIDA's findings was, if I'm remembering correctly, the impetus for the project, and in editing the special issue of *Brevity*, we worked to include writers who'd been multiply marginalized. We still live in a publishing context where privilege (especially white, male, heteronormative, upper- and middle-class privilege and the variations thereof) is not named—where the staff of one of the hegemonic magazines mentioned above, for example, just repeat

the words “best” and “excellent” when they talk about its publishing criteria.

I’d seen, anecdotally, over many years, what the VIDA counts have now incontrovertibly borne out: the significant privileging of male writers over female writers in many of the most prestigious journals and magazines. This is particularly surprising when, as you say, so many applicants to and graduates of creative writing programs are women. I was so grateful to VIDA for those pie charts, so we could all see clearly together what many of us have noticed and questioned for a long time.

We can develop concrete ways to fix this. Most orchestras in the United States now use blind auditions, with the musician positioned behind a curtain, and their proportion of female musicians has shot up. Publishing needs to figure out comparably effective structures for eliminating gender bias in the vetting process. And of course, there’s the comparable issue regarding writers of color...

DL: Do you see your role as anthologist as transparent or abundant. When someone picks up your anthologized volume, is your presence generous or minimal?

PF: First, I want to consider this question by shifting it slightly: as an anthologist, did I become more transparent to *myself*, or rather, did anything cry

out from me that I hadn’t expected? Literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the relationship between knowing and not knowing. Sometimes it’s the ability to express the “not knowing” that is the most interesting. When I wrote the introduction to *The Healing Circle*, I was surprised at my own confusion about illness—at how deeply I resented the responsibility to “pass” as a healthy person, to appear well and energetic in order to inspire confidence about my abilities and position. I wanted to be able to claim “the sick self,” to let go of the vigilance of trying to be well, but deep down I was just really pissed at how much time and energy being sick required, and how much time and energy pretending to be well required. Freud says something about how the desire of consciousness is “not to wake up,” to remain asleep. Writing about illness for that anthology felt like skating very close to a subject that scared me. And still does.

In response to the larger questions: my role as anthologist has differed with each anthology. In the first three anthologies, my quest was personal and political as well as literary, and there is, I think, a more abundant anthologist’s presence in them. I wrote introductions that defined the conceptual framework for each book, articulated the political/aesthetic focus, and included my own essay in two of them. I remember feeling shy about including these essays, and didn’t do this until

each essay had been accepted for publication by a literary journal. But, in the end, I'm glad I included them. Oddly, it made me feel more responsible, more committed, more transparent as a part of the book. I've also co-edited two anthologies, and this affects the sense of my presence, because I'm negotiating with a partner about aesthetic and conceptual decisions. In *The Healing Circle*, which I co-edited with Mary Swander, we agreed that I'd write the introduction and she'd write an afterward. In *Understanding the Essay*, co-edited with Jeff Porter, he agreed to write the introduction and I wrote the essayistic prefaces to each essay. These transactions felt necessary and sane. I want to think of my presence as generous, but I think that judgment comes from the reader.

JC: Here I think of Vivian Gornick's valuable advice for memoirists, at the beginning of *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, regarding the necessity of choosing the particular self that best suits the material. By choosing and refining the right persona for the subject at hand, and winnowing away all aspects of the self that are extraneous, we bring focus and clarity to the project.

In editing *Family Trouble*, I chose to be only my memoirist-self—not the author of literary thrillers, or the scholar of modernism, or the short-story writer. Other

aspects of my writerly and scholarly self are effaced in the text. Moreover, I was a memoirist troubled by a particular question: how do memoirists negotiate the tricky territory of respecting family privacy while revealing personal material?

That self, that persona, that troubled memoirist, was allowed to be fully present and fully transparent throughout the solicitation and editing process, and as I composed the introduction to the volume. My introduction articulates the anthology's core animating questions (ethics, aesthetics, craft, and how our choices within each realm are influenced by the issue of family) as clearly as I could, and highlights passages by essayists that I found particularly compelling. When there was developmental editing to be done on particular submissions, I repeatedly steered essayists toward those key questions, so the volume would have topical unity. Their answers, however, range freely.

In that way, I suppose you could say my own concerns on that score were both abundant and transparent: immediately apparent, undisguised and present throughout the collection as the key shaping forces.

As a writer, I'm always grateful when an editor provides both clarity of focus and a lot of freedom, and that's the kind of editor I tried to be.

DL: To what extent have the volumes you have edited stayed close to the idea you originally envisioned for them? Did they evolve?

PF: I'm happy to say that each anthology I edited or co-edited stayed fairly close to my/our original conception. And yet there were always surprises, especially when I received an essay that complicated the thesis in a way that I hadn't imagined. For *Sister-to-Sister*, Lori Hope Lefkowitz, an associate professor at Kenyon College at the time, wrote a marvelous essay, "Leah Behind the Veil: Sex with Sisters from the Bible to Woody Allen." It's beautifully written and brilliantly argued. When I conceived of the anthology, I never thought about asking a woman writer to write a hybrid essay (both personal and scholarly) engaging such historical scope. But someone suggested I get in touch with Lori, and when I read the essay, I knew that her essay complicated and deepened my own ideas about the trickster motif in sister stories.

When Jeff Porter and I began editing *Understanding the Essay*, I was surprised that the finished product stayed very close to our original premise: to present a tradition of close readings of the essay, a kind of old-fashioned demonstration of how reading is inextricably tied to the art of writing. This had been done in poetry and fiction, but not in the essay as a genre. Our intent was to ask 20

writers to choose one of their favorite essays and provide a close reading/analysis of that essay. The main problem we worried about was covering the historical arc of the essay canon. We worried about getting "favorites" that bunched up in one time period. But, to our great relief, we had essays from Montaigne to David Foster Wallace. Of course, there were many writers who were left out (Seneca, H. L. Mencken, E. B. White, Adrienne Rich, Annie Dillard, to name a few), and we didn't attempt anything as ambitious as including international writers beyond the formative English and French. We also knew we'd have an introductory overview of the poetics of the essay, a formal glossary and a brief biographical introduction to each essay. We didn't stray from this format.

I must admit this was much the same for the other anthologies I edited or co-edited. Writing a formal proposal for each anthology, and having at least half of the contributors committed (with at least a third of the essays already written), made the process fairly smooth. I think the process might have been much different if I'd sold the idea of the anthology without having at least three or four completed essays in hand.

JC: I've edited only one anthology, and yes, my vision for it did evolve. I initially imagined that it would include writers working across the genres who had published

material about their families: poets, fiction writers, memoirists, dramatists, etc.

The book's first editor thought that a focus on only memoir would help the book cohere. That made sense to me. I was sorry to lose some of the essays I had initially solicited, because I think that what writers from other genres have to say about the challenges of including family material in their literary work is valid and fascinating.

But staking the claim of nonfiction does bring different pressures to bear upon a text, so, in the end, I'm glad the collection was restricted to memoir. By removing the other essays, we made room in the book for a wider variety of perspectives on nonfiction treatments of the subject. It was a good call.

My focus was really, from the very beginning, a question, a kind of curiosity, and the pieces in the collection educated me. Each new piece showed me different, smart ways to think about the issue.

One challenge for me, as a novice editor, was arranging the pieces in an order that made a kind of sense. I know that, as a reader, I don't often obey the table of contents. I cruise through a collection and read the pieces that strike me at the moment. But I still wanted to provide a kind of shape, a kind of order, so that if a reader *did* read

front to back, there would be a feeling of progression, of continually developing nuance and wholeness. With 25 very different essays, that was a difficult and satisfying puzzle. In that sense, my vision for the form of the book was an evolving one, influenced by the varying contents and styles of the essays I received. The contributors shaped my conception of what the book really was, and then I shaped the text accordingly.

PF: I love that you bring up shape, particularly in regards to organizing the table of contents. I agree that's a huge challenge, one I've struggled with too. Like you, I tend to browse an anthology and pick out pieces that appeal to me because of my familiarity with the writer or the appeal of the title—something that seems wry or esoteric and whets my appetite. But when I'm the editor, the table of contents is a conceptual and stylistic concern. When Jeff and I were editing *Understanding the Essay*, we wanted it to have an historical context but we felt bored by the idea of a traditional chronology. We also worried that the uninitiated writer (we were hopeful that this anthology would appeal to undergraduates) might be daunted by beginning with a close reading of Montaigne. So a reverse chronology seemed the way to go.

DL: Most anthologies have somewhat limited shelf lives—some rather short, some longer. The influence

they have is not necessarily commensurate with the length of time the anthology stays in print. What did you most want from your anthologies? To keep work in print, or to influence the discussion, or the literary zeitgeist, or some balance therein?

PF: My desires have always leaned toward influencing the discussion, and I don't want to limit that to the literary zeitgeist. I remember Clark Blaise saying, in one of his books, something like: I don't want literature to teach me about literature; I want literature to teach me about life. I bow to that. I'm not in the camp that reads literature (or anthologies of literary works) only to admire and compare stylistic feats, the grace notes of craft. I don't mean to imply that I'm ignorant of the importance of style (it's necessary and integral to any literary work), but I am less interested in work where style trumps content, where style *is* the subject. Books that have stayed with me, that seem "necessary," are books that extend the solitude of the self, show how the inner life can flourish, present narrators with deep resentments and raw sensitivities, and simultaneously expand my community.

Vivian Gornick, in *The Situation and the Story*, says, "Penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary, it is hard, hard work." I like that quote. It suggests to me the personal and political dilemma

of women writing the body, women writing about their enmeshment with and separation (loss) from their sisters, writers exploring a life in two worlds (the community of the sick and the community of the well), writers examining with deep attention an essay they love. All of these areas resonate as "familiar" in the zeitgeist of culture, and yet their very familiarity can make them hidden until a writer reveals another layer of meaning. I love a particular passage, from an essay by Tom Sleigh titled "The Incurables," in *The Healing Circle*. He's talking about the "wild oscillations of fortune" of Asclepius, a god of the healing arts: "Asclepius's brushes with death and his miraculous escapes seem an emblem of the human mind faced with its own mortality as it ricochets between hope and despair." How can I not want to influence the discussion about how the ill, the afflicted, those trapped in the body (as we all are) claim a sense of self, how the psychological and the physiological influence each other, how we all want the silver bullet, the shaman, the myth-maker to relieve us of the fragility of the mortal body?

JC: My main hope for *Family Trouble* was that it would be helpful, useful and clarifying—both for writers and teachers of memoir (as a resource on craft and ethics), and for the many readers who are curious about this issue. I wanted the book to say: here's how we writers think about it—and we do think about it a lot; we're

generally not cavalier. It offers a variety of ethical ruminations and practical strategies. Its contributors model both ways to think and things to do.

Since memoirists' concerns about their works' relationship to family seem unlikely to disappear soon, the book may enjoy a long shelf life. But this particular anthology is also very much bound by its place and time. Our conceptions of "the family" in North America in the early twenty-first century may not be relevant for long. It serves as a statement for now, for here. If this question about family privacy and memoir continues to preoccupy us, then this anthology will be superseded in the future by more versions that speak to future configurations of family, and to newly evolving social and political pressures placed upon writers. If the question doesn't remain urgent, then *Family Trouble* will serve to document a particular concern during a particular moment.

My particular goal wasn't to keep work in print, as most of the essays in the collection had not been previously published, but to bring into print, into the public conversation, the previously unshared thoughts of memoirists on an issue that concerns many writers and readers of the genre.

DL: We all have favorites that we seek to supplement or even competitively to replace. In addition to your

own work, two of my favorite essay anthologies are Lydia Fakundiny's *The Art of the Essay* and Christopher Morley's *Modern Essays*. Both have very sympathetic introductions. What are some of your favorites? And speak to your anterior and ulterior anthological motivations.

PF: One of my favorites is the 2007 *Best American Essays*, edited by David Foster Wallace, in the series edited by Robert Atwan. David Foster Wallace begins with such an astute psychological profile of the reader of the *Best American* series that I laughed out loud (guilty as charged, I didn't read his introduction until last). It's one of his great gifts to analyze the psychology—and often the conformity—of cultural choices, and then to gather up the potential critical advantages of that choice (the tendency to by-pass the introduction of any anthology) for his own introduction. So smooth. So sly. Even if, by chance, you've never heard of him, you like him already.

I also like how he articulates his lack of concern with the "differences" between fiction and nonfiction, which have been talked about so much that it's become a soporific. I like what he says so much that I want to quote it here: "Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder—because nonfiction's based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and

complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they're executed on tightropes, over abysses—it's the abysses that are different. Fiction's abyss is silence, nada. Whereas nonfiction's abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc." He does what needed to be done, revealing his lack of concern, making the comparison simple, then interrogating that simplicity and clarifying how, for himself as a writer, the genres complicate themselves.

Perhaps most moving to me is his assessment of his choices, a critique not of genre per se but of the complications facing the culture (that Total Noise embroiled with the "cataclysm of Iraq, the collapse of congressional oversight, the ideology of neo-conservatism, the legal status of presidential signing statements, the political marriage of evangelical Protestantism and corporate laissez-faire") and the clarity and brilliance with which certain essays address and distill this crises. I find it incredibly hard to synopsise David Foster Wallace because, in doing so, I always lose the humor of his comments, the way they crack me up even when they're relating the most dire situations. I also like that the introduction functions as its own essay,

which is what I think good introductions do: provide a thesis and, in doing so, create a voice that illuminates the anthology.

Other anthologies I would add to the list: *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, and *In Brief*, edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones. *In Brief* has great examples of different types of writing that work quite well for class exercises and for my own daily boost before I start writing.

JC: I really like *In Brief*, too, as well as Kitchen and Jones's earlier, similar collection, *In Short*. Both undergraduate and graduate students respond well to those essays. To write short essays well is quite hard, I find—to achieve that taut compression. But students, for whatever reason, look at very short essays and feel relieved, unintimidated, thinking: Oh, I could do that. In terms of anthologies that provide useful models, my graduate students have also embraced *Food & Booze: A Tin House Literary Feast*, edited by Michelle Wildgen—perhaps for obvious reasons. It's excellent, very teachable. Even if students aren't focusing primarily on food (or booze), the collection helps us think about the cultural meanings of how we dine, and their nonfiction on other topics sometimes begins to include micro-narratives of meals

or meal preparation as a way to reveal culture and character.

As far as editorial motives go, my goals for the *Family Trouble* project were to answer a question, to learn what other writers thought about a problem that concerned me, to fill a gap. *Family Trouble* is political at its heart, because what we expect of family is often what we expect of our culture, our society. Being able to go public with the privacies of family life, as memoirists do, illuminates the politics that happen in the home. I wanted to be conscious of the diversity of family configurations: how various cultures think about family and how different individuals are treated within families. To this end, I included pieces by LGBTQ writers like Alison Bechdel and Rigoberto González, Asian American writers like Bich Minh Nguyen, African American writers like Faith Adiele, Latino writers like Lorraine López, Native American writers like Allison Adele Hedge Coke, writers on adoption like Karen Salyer McElmurray and on disability like Ralph Savarese, and of course a good balance of women and men, in addition to heavy hitters in the field of creative nonfiction like Mimi Schwartz, Sue William Silverman and Robin Hemley.

Some of my favorite anthologies have participated in similar sociopolitical operations. On the issue of ethnic identity, for example, I particularly like Lorraine López

and Blas Falconer's edited essay collection *The Other Latin@: Writing Against a Singular Identity*, which successfully broadens and complicates our ideas of who U.S. Latino/as are. I'm also excited about Jennifer De Leon's anthology of essays *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education*, which fills a similar gap in our cultural understanding.

Moving beyond the genre of the essay but sticking with the topic of *latinidad* in literature, I'm grateful for John Christie and José Gonzalez's *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature*, which was invaluable to me when I first began teaching Latino literature, and Rigoberto González's *Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing*. Ilan Stavans has done an incredible job with *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, one of those inexhaustible resources that has the heft of bricks.

In another area, the field of modernist literature would be immeasurably poorer without Bonnie Kime Scott's groundbreaking anthology *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* and her later collection, *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*. Scott changed the way we think about the field. I couldn't have done my own scholarship on modernist writers like Jean Rhys, Tess Slesinger, Meridel Le Sueur and Margery Latimer without her work.

DL: In making your choices, especially with contemporary writers, there are going to be cuts and inclusions that have consequences amongst one's writer friends, since one is forming a canon of the included, a personal charmed circle of those who deserve to be in the book. Talk about your considerations and some of the responses you've received.

PF: I've had little experience with the personal drama that surely must occur in other anthologies (thus, the question). I felt most passionate about the anthologies that were intensely personal and political, and I've always gotten amazing responses from people, even lovely rejections from those writers I knew might throw my request into the trash, writers like Toni Morrison and Adrienne Rich. Considerations, for me, were defined first by the subject and the writers I knew who might have a particular story and/or perspective that interested me. When I was first developing the ideas for *Minding the Body*, I wasn't sure how to approach other writers, particularly those I didn't know. A friend called to say that Lucy Grealy (whom I knew from the Iowa Writers Workshop) was ready to write about Ewing's Sarcoma, the cancer she'd had as a child, and the many reconstructive surgeries she'd undergone throughout her twenties in an attempt to "fix" her face. Lucy and I talked about it, and within a month she'd written the essay "Mirrors." We agreed that I could use it in

Minding the Body in exchange for her publishing it first in a national magazine. Very quickly, *Harper's Magazine* bought it. Some essays I was familiar with, and so asked for reprint rights: Nancy Mairs's "Carnal Acts," Naomi Wolf's "Keep Them Implanted and Ignorant," Margaret Atwood's "The Female Body." Other essays were the result of queries to writers I admired, the focus of the final essay often a pleasing surprise.

In contrast, Jeff and I, as editors of *Understanding the Essay*, were most concerned about the pedagogical value of an anthology of close readings to students, teachers, writers and fans of the essay. We both knew writers who read, taught and wrote in some sub-genre of the essay and thus we had many potential contributors. Because the structure was pre-conceived (a close reading of a favorite essay), we trusted that each contributor would find a writerly critical form that complemented the chosen work. For some of the essays, there was almost no editing at all. For others, there were many drafts. To my mind, that's the way with each anthology I've edited. The one or two essays we couldn't use resulted, mainly, from time constraints. That is, the writer had too much on his/her plate to do a more extensive revision.

I'd like to think the "charmed circle" also includes the reader. I might be naive, but I've certainly read essays in anthologies that became models for me, absolute turn-

ons. Most of the time my first thought isn't, *Why didn't they include me*, but *How can I use that* (technique, structure, etc.) for my own writing or teaching. This is not to pretend that I don't have the jealousy gene. It thrives in the same patch as anger and scorn and self-pity. But when I'm involved in my own work, jealousy stays quiet, minding its manners.

JC: It's interesting that the question would be phrased that way. It makes complete sense to me now, at the end of the editing and publishing process, but I did not initially perceive myself as having that kind of power, or of determining a "charmed circle." Because there are so many books published each year, so many anthologies, my own project seemed like just one among many opportunities for writers, and I didn't envision it as being a very big deal.

Moreover, I'm not really that established as a writer, so I don't have that many writer friends. I solicited essays from people whose work I admired and who seemed like they'd have something to say about the topic, writers who were often quite a bit above my own literary pay grade, like Dinty W. Moore, Judith Ortiz Cofer and so on. The one previously published essay I went after was by Alison Bechdel. It wasn't like we were buds or anything. Of the 25 contributors, I'd met only a few personally when I began the process. I think I'd have called only

one a friend at that point, though I've become closer to a few as the five years of this project have unfurled, and we've seen each other repeatedly at conferences and so on.

My acceptance process was as inclusive as possible: as long as the essays engaged the key questions of the anthology in interesting, fresh ways, I tried to include everything I received in response to my solicitations. In terms of length, style, form and tone, they vary greatly, and I preserved that variety—for me, it makes the book more exciting, more like a real conversation with wildly different personalities at the table. A few of the essays needed a lot of development in order to articulate their positions fully, and I was surprised to find that I really enjoyed doing that kind of work with the authors.

I felt very sorry about every essay I had to cut, and I only did so at the behest of the presses' editors and outside readers. (The manuscript went through the vetting and acceptance process at two different university presses—it had two editors and five outside readers in all—so there were several changes.) As a new editor working on my first anthology, I appreciated their experience and judgment.

The contributors whose work had to be cut were all more or less amiable about it, and I feel grateful to the

ones who were especially gracious with me. No one likes to have work rejected, and I empathized.

In terms of those who were less so, I was surprised. As a writer myself, I always assume rejection as the default response, and I credit the editor with knowing what's best for his/her project. He/she is the authority on his/her own vision, and I'm OK with that. I feel lucky, grateful and excited when an editor decides that my work is a good fit. I can't imagine becoming irate or hostile with an editor if a piece of mine were rejected or had to be cut as a project evolved. Yet some authors do feel that way.

I was shocked, and pained, and very sorry about it. Actually, I felt awful for days whenever an author was upset by my decision. For me, that was probably the worst part of the process. But my job was, ultimately, to serve the book and its readers—not the writers, however much I might respect them.

It was difficult, though. It made me realize what editors sometimes have to go through, and I now feel even more empathy and respect for them. Being on the writer's side of the table, facing continual rejection, is painful and hard, but so is doing the rejecting. I know that now.

Actually, I have a question that's kind of related. How do anthology editors who are also writers balance editorial

work with their own writing? Just speaking pragmatically, editing a book takes a surprising amount of time, and that's time that can't be spent on one's own writing. How have you made those decisions about allotting time and energy?

PF: It's hard for me to generalize about this because when I do, I want to say: editing sabotages the writing. That's my knee-jerk response, and I know it's not quite true. Like everything else, editing an anthology depends on the context of other things affecting my life: teaching, health, state of mind, family, money worries. There's a tendency (at least for me at the start of an anthology project) to assume that I won't have to sacrifice any writing time, that I can edit and respond and conceptualize about the project in some fantasy time frame that, of course, never exists. It's my Voodoo Anthology Mode. Once that mode's shattered, I'm much more realistic. When I'm editing an anthology or a special issue of a literary quarterly, I have less focus for a continuous narrative project. I can usually write essays or a short story while I'm teaching and editing an anthology, but no more. One of the reasons I've liked including an essay of my own to anthologies is that I don't lose the writing self in the process. This also puts me in the same place as the contributors—creating a focused narrative that speaks to the thematic or stylistic concerns of the book.

It's funny, but I'm just remembering that when I was editing *Minding the Body*, I sent everything by snail mail. I still have huge folders of papers, copies of letters sent, letters received, contracts, edited versions of contributors' essays, ads, comments from the editor at Anchor, you name it. But there was also a space between sending out comments on contributors' essays and hearing back from them, so there was this breather. I'd write like a maniac then. When Jeff and I were co-editing *Understanding the Essay*, I remember that I spent much of May, June and July working on the book, reading and re-reading essays, working on the prefaces to each close reading. My room was a mess of books and folders, everything in its own hermetic stack. I don't think I wrote anything new during those months. I'm sure I revised a few essays, but there was nothing generative.

JC: I posed the question because of my own genuine curiosity. Editing *Family Trouble* schooled me in the intense amounts of time and energy that go into anthologies. When I began the process, I had a breezy, uninformed "How hard can it be?" attitude. The hubris! Five years, many drafts, and 953 e-mails back and forth with contributors and editors later, I'm duly chastened.

I was working on other projects all the while, and I was able to publish a couple of novels and an essay collection during that period. However, finding time for everything,

while teaching and doing campus administration, was a challenge. I could never have done it all when my son was young.

One thing that interested me was that my agent (whom I love) warned me repeatedly about the time that editing an anthology would take away from my other work. This is likely because one of the genres I work in, the literary thriller, has at least the potential of being commercially viable, and so the allotment and protection of my time and productivity was a matter of concern for him.

I wonder if other writers are ever pressed by their agents in this way to steer clear of anthology projects, and how that affects which projects make it into print.

With that in mind, are there other anthologies that you'd consider editing, dream projects that might lie in your future?

PF: Right now I can't imagine editing another anthology, but there are two that come to mind that I'd love to read and teach. First, I'd like for someone to do an historical/critical anthology of essays by women. Such an anthology would provide a roster for many of us who teach the history of the essay or seminars in the essay. Is there a poetics of women's essay writing? Is there an historical arc before the late nineteenth century? Are there travel essays, lyric essays, personal essays that are

self-contained, vivid narratives beyond the 11 in Phillip Lopate's book? Well, of course, there are, but I don't know many women essayists before Virginia Woolf.

A second anthology I'd love to have in my library is one that focuses on the craft and techniques of research used in creative projects, particularly projects beyond memoir. I find that students who have majored in journalism or who have worked in journalism are much better at research than those with an English degree. There's an urgency now in knowing how to find and use source material, how to embed facts and historical information in creative work, how to cultivate and make use of oral history, when and how to do immersion research, even how to make use of a failed interview. I'd buy that book immediately. I think this could be applicable to both fiction and nonfiction. Students writing memoirs are now doing a lot of research work, giving cultural context to their stories and making them much richer. I've noticed that a lot of contemporary novels are research-based.

Another anthology I'd like to read involves mapping the tradition of the Southern essay. The South, as a region, has focused primarily on fiction and poetry. Only recently has the essay gained ground with writers like John Jeremiah Sullivan, Dorothy Allison, Guy Davenport, Karen McElmurray, Frye Gaillard and Diane McWhorter. There's such a rich tradition of story about family and

place in the South that the essay, as a reflective genre, has been, at best, quietly introduced. But it does have a history, most notably in the essay-journalism covering the Civil Rights Movement.

JC: I'd love to read both of these books. On the issue of research, I love and have taught Philip Gerard's smart, practical *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*, which isn't an anthology—it's a single-author book. An anthology that collects different experiences of research and its use would be wonderful. One that might come close (and that must have been a herculean editing project) is Mark Kramer and Wendy Call's terrific *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. It helpfully addresses issues like immersion research and interviews. But while it's broadly useful, it's oriented primarily toward journalists and nonfiction writers. I'd be very interested to see pieces by novelists who have incorporated significant amounts of research in their work. The questions faced by fiction and nonfiction writers in this regard must be different, and hearing about the choices authors make in different genres would be fascinating.

I love the idea for the anthology of women's essays, particularly one that would engage early practitioners of the form. In 2012, modernism scholar and memoirist

Tracy Seeley organized an AWP panel on this very topic. Her own paper was on Alice Meynell, who wrote personal essays in the 1890s. Jocelyn Bartkevicius spoke on Woolf, Marcia Aldrich talked about Louise Bogan's memoir work, and I talked about Meridel Le Sueur and Margery Latimer's nonfiction in the 1920s and '30s. We focused on female forerunners of contemporary creative nonfiction (lyric essays, experimental forms) and there was a lot of audience interest.

PF: I can't believe I missed that AWP panel. It's probably absurd, but I wish you'd propose it again. I'd love to include Josephine Herbst, a journalist and novelist of the '20s and '30s whose essays and memoirs are collected in *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain*. I think the audience would come again.

ROBERT ATWAN AND JILL TALBOT



Preface: David Lazar sent us a series of questions, and while we didn't answer them directly, we did keep them in mind during our conversation, which took place over the course of several weeks via e-mail. We began with this question: to what extent do you think anthologizing is a radical act, or can be, and to what extent might it be conservative—the impulse to preserve? Can you speak to these impulses or tensions?

Robert Atwan: “Anthology” derives from the Greek term meaning to gather (*legein*) flowers (*anthos*). So an anthology is like a literary bouquet. Anthologies have been a publishing venture since the ancient world. The impulse, to my mind, is largely conservative, in the sense that most anthologists are selecting the works they consider the finest examples of a genre, with the intention to preserve these works for future generations, even posterity. This is especially the case when it comes to the numerous literary anthologies published for educational purposes. For example, the two-volume

Harper American Literature I helped edit back in the late '80s and worked on for several editions is intended to collect significant works by major American authors—Franklin, Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, Wharton, Hemingway, Stein and so on, from colonial times to the present. Much of what a collection like this contains is not a surprise, because the purpose is to present students with canonical works. Certain major authors must be included if the anthology is to do its job. That is why if you compare the table of contents of various American Lit anthologies you will invariably find the same authors and much of the time the same works, give or take some editorial discretion. The main differences would be in contemporary chapters where no solid canon or consensus of works has been determined, yet even here literary reputation will play a large factor in whether a writer will be included or not.

This isn't always the case with anthologies designed for college courses. Once while we were discussing the art of anthologizing, the brilliant essayist and critic Alfred Kazin told me that an essay collection he was invited to edit for a college publisher flopped because he selected only pieces he liked and didn't pay sufficient attention to the authors and selections everyone expected.

But for the most part, anthologies assembled for pedagogical purposes (such as introductory courses

in the short story, or drama, or essays or seventeenth-century poetry) keep a close eye on canonical works, with only a quirky selection here and there.

This is not the case with literary anthologies that set out to make a point or demonstrate a trend. Such radical anthologies are less usual but their effects can be highly influential. I'll just mention three examples of game-changing anthologies: Harriet Monroe's 1917 collection *The New Poetry: An Anthology*; Alain Locke's 1925 collection *The New Negro: An Interpretation*; and Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson's 1973 collection *The New Journalism*. The key word is easy to spot.

When I first circulated a proposal for an annual collection of essays in 1984, I didn't realize how innovative the idea was until I saw how much publishing resistance it encountered. I had just written a review of the O. Henry Award stories for *The New York Times* and, as a big fan of essays, wondered why the genre I enjoyed so much wasn't featured in an annual volume. I soon found out why—"essay" at the time was one of the least appealing words in contemporary literature. Publishers studiously avoided it, and when I finally found a publisher interested in such an annual book I did not have an easy time persuading the editor that "essay" was the best and only word to use in our title.

Is *The Best American Essays* series conservative or radical? I guess it functions in both ways—it preserves in a uniform series some wonderful pieces that may gradually have drifted out of public attention, while at the same time it features each year new writers and prose styles from little-known sources that many readers would never have been exposed to.

Jill Talbot: Anthologies, as you point out, Bob, have different purposes, and whether or not one falls into the conservative or radical category may depend upon preservation versus proclamation. Your mention of college textbooks, those anthologies offering an overview of canonical works, of preserving a literary tradition and history, reminded me of my literature surveys in undergrad, when I'd quietly acquiesce to the selections.

Eventually, I developed the ability to question the canon, to seek out marginalized books and authors. Anthologies were rarely included in my exploration, because anthologies were conservative, conventional, whereas my purpose was to rally against convention, to call upon (via culture, gender, sexuality, experimentation) those excluded voices. It was then I began to wander the side roads of the literary landscape, to find the forgotten towns and abandoned buildings of literature.

When I co-edited *The Art of Friction* with novelist Charles Blackstone, we asked writers to contribute an essay or a story and offer a brief commentary on the intersection of fiction and nonfiction. We purposefully didn't identify the genre of each selection, in an attempt to foment genre interrogation. Phillip Lopate described the anthology as "muddying the waters," and in *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction*, I turned my attention toward how those waters are tested, or not, via self/genre-examination. Is "meta" equivalent to "antithetical"? "Ancillary"? Or something else altogether? In other words, I wanted writers to wander off the map, but to also be the self-conscious guides to the exploration.

Metawritings, in one sense, preserves what David Shields has referred to as "our cultural moment," in that it emphasizes the overwhelming self-referential and meta-quality to our lives, via again what Shields refers to as "Twitterization." With Facebook status updates, tweets, blogs and Instagrams, we're not only capturing and sharing our lives, we're all living in a Baudrillardian state of hyperawareness. So *Metawritings* predicates the cultural and social impulse by showcasing how writing reflects it. Yet. Yet. It also proclaims a departure from the anthology form. If the content is meta, so should follow the form. In that sense, I consider *Metawritings* a radical anthology. Instead of a collection of works that stand side-by-side without interaction (think of strangers in an

elevator), the writers, the readers and the editor are all in conversation. Part of this involved interviewing each contributor, and also asking contributors to respond to one another, thereby creating a conversation, a community (think of strangers leaving a cocktail party in an elevator). As I write in the meta-introduction, "Interviews, by nature, are 'meta,' and I asked some of the writers here to respond to interviews [and essays] of other contributors, thus acknowledging the artifice of what you're holding—this is an anthology." (I like to think of a reader who gets to that part and glances nervously around the coffee shop—wait, is she *here?*). Yes, I believe so.

So whereas I sat quietly in those college classrooms, never questioning, never willing to go beyond what had been presented and always feeling as if what I was holding, the words on the page, were distant (and I was always a bit lost), as an editor I gathered a group of writers and readers in the back row of the essay class and asked what it is we're writing and how and why. And how the moment informs that. Perhaps as an anthologist I'm insisting: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may."

I have taken us toward the idea of the role of the anthologist, and your list is far more prolific and diverse than mine, so I wonder how you see yours?

RA: I've done numerous anthologies—on essays, American literature, mass media, politics, pop culture, etc. for college publishers. And for trade publishers I've done several poetry collections and with co-editors assembled books devoted to poetry and the Bible, advertisements, movie star memoirs, and others. I've always felt I've made my presence visible, usually by means of an introduction and commentary.

With *The Best American Essays* I had a decision to make right from the start. The book was being packaged with *The Best American Short Stories*, which had been around since 1915. With the 1978 edition of the stories, Houghton Mifflin began inviting guest editors (the first was Ted Solotaroff, the second Joyce Carol Oates). When we decided to launch the essay series in 1986, I'd noticed that the story collections contained only introductions by guest editors; a few paragraphs describing the series and its submission policies comprised a "publisher's note" in front. Although the publishers expected me to use the story collections as a "model," I wondered if I should contribute something of my own to each book, perhaps an annual foreword to each volume that would appear along with the guest editor's introduction. I decided to do that, believing I should make my presence felt. First of all, a new series celebrating the essay required explanation. I was of course worried that if the series had legs I would in a few

years start running out of things to say about the genre, but I was warned that if the series didn't catch on there would be no more volumes, so I thought a foreword was also needed to help promote the genre to a reluctant reading public. For the first few years I restricted my forewords to seven paragraphs. I forget when I began to be more expansive, but the 2014 foreword was my twenty-ninth and I don't believe I've run out of things to say about the essay. Each year, I'm glad I made that initial decision.

JT: I look forward to your foreword every year, Bob, and while your annual rumination on the state of the essay, both past and present, varies in focus and detail, I have noted a recurring insistence that essayists return to the "ever-shifting processes of our minds and our moods," alongside your observation (and frustration?) that "Dedicated essayists—the sort of writer who thinks, feels and patiently explores ideas and emotions *essayistically*—are rare, even in this series." I see part of your role as that of a "noted anthologist" who makes an annual call (plea?) for a return to "deliberation on a topic," in the "unsystematical grappling" tradition of Montaigne, Johnson, Hazlitt, Emerson, Woolf and Dillard.

However I'm curious as to how you see the essays chosen reflecting that call, since *The Best American Essays*

features guest editors (among the luminaries: Elizabeth Hardwick, Gay Talese, Joyce Carol Oates, Susan Sontag, Stephen Jay Gould, Lauren Slater, David Foster Wallace). In a review of the 2011 collection, edited by Edwidge Danticat (and one of my favorite editions), I wrote:

In this year's introduction, Robert Atwan boldly claims that this is "the most diverse in the series, both in its range of writers and in its exciting arrays of themes and topics"—thirteen women, eleven men, eleven multicultural, four with British ties, one experimental (aren't they all?), sectioned pieces, others linear, more narrative, commentary, and one an exquisite prose poem (in my mind). In the 2009 edition, Mary Oliver leaned toward the literary, Christopher Hitchens in 2010 foregrounded the academic essay. Danticat bows toward humanity.

In fact, Mary Oliver's (meta) collection, in part, inspired *Metawritings*. From my initial query letter to potential contributors:

In *The Best American Essays 2009*, edited by Mary Oliver, there are two pertinent pieces, Chris Arthur's "(En)Trance" and Patricia Hampl's "The Dark Art of Description," which speak to the essayist's attention to metawriting, as well as the predilection for wandering rumination versus a

fiction writer's consideration of linear arc. Yet we are well aware that not all essayists wander, and not all fiction writers stick to the map. Arthur and Hampl both claim a difference between the how and the why of what is emphasized in the essay versus the story and how that emphasis works to its respective genre's end. Moreover, fifteen essays of the twenty-one in this year's collection are, in some way, writing about writing.

Because the guest editors, including 2013's Cheryl Strayed, reveal their own penchants and predilections as writers, I'm curious as to how your experience as Series Editor might be an "ever-shifting process."

RA: It's true that as series editor I tend to privilege the reflective, meditative, personal essay, the kind of literary essay Montaigne originated. When I began the series I know many people considered this type of writing antiquated and (to use a term that's still pejorative) belletristic. But a number of essayists were beginning to re-think the genre past E. B. White, and they added an intensity and urgency to the form—I'm thinking of Baldwin, Sontag, Didion, Dillard. They were reshaping the essay in ways I wanted the new series to showcase. Unfortunately, Baldwin died at the age of 63, a year after the first volume of *Best American Essays* appeared. It

would have been wonderful to have signed him on as a guest editor.

But you're correct in pointing out, Jill, that the guest editor plays a significant role in deciding types of essays and the overall shape of a particular volume. When I wrote my first proposal for the series, I didn't imagine a guest editor but assumed that I would make all selections. But the only publishers interested (however nervously) just happened to be the publishers of the renowned short-story series, and they would only proceed if I agreed to an annual guest editor. At first I worried about losing some control, but it was that or no series, and so I agreed. I was soon very happy I did, because I realized how much more interesting it was to feature a different perspective on the genre year after year. To be honest, I hadn't thought of that advantage when I circulated a proposal in 1984.

I also realized how much I would enjoy collaborating with some of our nation's most prestigious writers and thinkers. For the first book I invited Elizabeth Hardwick, who graciously took on the difficult task of starting a literary series from scratch. I wasn't even sure how many essays I'd find that first year. I think Hardwick's collection is still the smallest volume. I invited her because I wanted to make it completely clear that the new series was dedicated to the essay as a literary genre, not just a

hodge-podge of magazine articles, pieces, profiles and commentary.

But I thought I would be making a big mistake if from the start I defined "essay" and "literary" too narrowly. I didn't want the series to be viewed as academic or quaintly belletristic. Wasn't there a steady stream of what was being called "literary nonfiction" appearing in journals month after month? Were these essays? I could make a case either way. But I encountered these works with the same literary respect and enthusiasm that I brought to more traditional essays, so I decided my definition of "essay" would be elastic and allow for a wide variety of guest editors: those who preferred criticism and commentary, those who loved prose experimentation, or others whose predilections were New Journalism, memoir or confessional writing. So for the second book I paid my literary respects to the New Journalism and invited as guest editor one of the nation's outstanding nonfiction writers, Gay Talese. It was a sign that the series would be hospitable to journalistic and investigative essays.

The past 50 years, at least since the 1960s, have seen tremendous changes in nonfiction in general, and these changes, in my opinion (and despite my generic preferences), have clearly and irrevocably expanded the concept of what an essay is.

JT: David Lazar, the curator of this chapbook and the editor of the anthology *Truth in Nonfiction: Essays*, as well as two forthcoming anthologies, *After Montaigne* and *Essaying the Essay*, claims, "The desire of the essay is to transgress genre."

In his introduction to *Truth in Nonfiction*, Lazar espouses the practices of "invention, compression, and the use of the imagination," and draws from Montaigne's "Of the Force of the Imagination," in which Montaigne refers to both the "shadow" and "substance" of history, the various readings of it. *Truth in Nonfiction* is an anthology of literary essayists delving into the maze of memory, the presentation of persona and the representation of reality, thereby redeeming the artful essay from the strictures of fact. As Judith Ortiz Cofer notes in that anthology, "The truth of art is different from the fact of history."

In your introduction to the 2009 edition of *The Best American Essays*, you address these questions and point out, "The more literal the essay was expected to be, the less literary it became." A spate of nonfiction anthologies have recently been published that tout this idea of transgression. In his introduction to *Blurring the Boundaries: Explorations to the Fringes of Nonfiction*, B.J. Hollars notes, "The boundaries of genre remain unique for each writer." One of his contributors, Steven

Church, echoes Montaigne in describing the role of "inventing, adding, and embellishing" in his work.

Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, editors of *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, claim, "Creative nonfiction is the preeminent expression of the blurry reality of our times....[a genre distinguished by] the ways in which the raw material of 'reality' is transformed into literary art."

In *Metawritings*, essayists invest themselves through the ways in which "artifice shapes the artist's reality. And vice versa."

The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre, an anthology edited by Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins, features "creative nonfiction writers [reflecting] on whatever far, dark edge of the genre they find themselves most drawn to."

I don't think any of these at-play-in-the-fields-of-the-genre anthologies would exist without John D'Agata's 2003 anthology *The Next American Essay*, in which D'Agata begins with John McPhee's 1975 essay "The Search for Marvin Gardens" and offers an essay for each subsequent year. These essays are described as "unrestrained, elusive, explosive, mysterious." This is just to say: so much depends on a shift. So whereas you point out "New" as a trend of progressive anthologies, the anthologies I've just mentioned fall into the category

of subversive. In other words, these anthologies are calling from the Montaignean shadows. Yet I wonder if they are reflecting a trend in essay writing or are creating that trend via pointed calls for subversions, er, submissions. Because the majority of essays in these anthologies I mention (with the exception of D'Agata's) are not previously published pieces—they were expressly written for the anthology.

RA: When I hear about the value of subversion and transgression it makes me want to write an essay called "In Praise of Conformity!" Anyway, I'm not sure why the word "subversive" is uttered so often with +++ signs floating above it. I so often see it employed as a positive characteristic, something even heroic. I can imagine that at times subversive acts or writing should be characterized that way. But isn't the word essentially neutral? The Southern governors opposed to the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling on integration in public schools acted subversively to that opinion, at least according to the President who sent in troops to enforce the law. But back to essaying: as someone interested in the genre, the subversion I'm most interested in is self-subversion, the kind Montaigne or Mill demonstrates, or Emerson, the inner-dynamics of never getting too comfortable with one's own positions and opinions. Most people I've met over a long life in and out of academia can't live that way—they live lives of conclusion, require

a fixity of position, are annoyed by the bugaboos of self-contradiction and of course abhor deviation from whatever opinions they hold as immutable truths. (I'm getting all this from John Stuart Mill.)

By the way, I love McPhee's "The Search for Marvin Gardens." It's a wonderful, innovative tour de force that blew my mind in 1975, when I first saw it in *The New Yorker* (and included it soon after in several of my anthologies—it also appears in *The Best American Essays of the Century*, which I did with Joyce Carol Oates in 2000). But I wouldn't consider it subversive. I wish, though, that McPhee wrote more essays.

JT: Not long after 9/11, I visited a used bookstore in Los Angeles and wandered the aisles looking for editions of books I collect. Before leaving, I asked the owner if he might contact me via e-mail if he received any more Jack Kerouac, and he quickly answered, "No. I've stopped doing that because the government collects these lists now and your name will show up as someone connected with subversive literature." I thanked him and quickly ducked out of his store, but not before feeling a bit nervous, a bit dangerous, and more than a bit confused—did he mean "subversive" stylistically? Kerouac's syntactical subversion of traditional prose with his "bop prosody"? Or was it in his content, in his subverting the 1950s status quo? If we challenge,

if we call into question, does that make us subversive? And in that sense, wouldn't McPhee's critique of popular culture's appropriation of American domestic imperialism and the greed that dipped a city into squalor be such a challenge? Of course, his disjunctive, or parallel-narrative, approach has become one of the most common structural patterns in the contemporary essay, so that what once was experimental has become standard.

D'Agata used the term "Next," as in progress (I assume), so maybe I might have used that term—suggesting that the anthologies we both admire advance the form or the genre in some way. I never intended to apply the term in a political context, but rather to pick up on the language of these anthologies. So I'm going to backtrack a bit, Bob, and highlight what it is I see as being advanced in recent anthologies (and journals).

You mention you admire self-subversion in the essay. So does David Lazar. In "Queering the Essay," he claims, that persona in the essay "is never fully controlled or calibrated; it is subversive, and always has been." Lazar accurately identifies the ways in which the essayist's persona is performative, aptly drawing the connection between gender and genre. Mary Cappello, another brilliant thinker about the essay, argues in *Bending Genre*, "Creative nonfiction requires its practitioners

to work simultaneously inside a discipline and athwart it." In other words, to work with it and against it. More conversive, perhaps, and less subversive? But wait, in a meta-essay published by *Ninth Letter*, Robin Hemley offers this: the essay "prefers subversion to blending."

Because I kept getting stuck on that line, I contacted Hemley and asked if he might "unpack" that line for me, and here's what he sent back:

That essay you're quoting was written in a somewhat satirical tone and I was trying to subvert a kind of self-seriousness from which essayists sometimes seem to suffer. That said, I was being at least partly serious. Literary essayists have crashed the party [literature] to which they weren't invited and the word "blending" seems too polite a word for the essay. "Subversive" seems about right for me—while blending can be a kind of subversion, there are essays that masquerade as poems and stories, which revel in confusing the reader.

I like Hemley's description of the essay as masquerading as other forms. Each of the above-mentioned authors advances the idea that the essay is not a fixed form and not a genre that merely blends elements of genre, style and structure—but bends them. Consider the language of the titles of the anthologies I've alluded to here:

“Bend,” “Blurring,” “Boundaries,” “Edges,” “Fringes.” “Each word,” B. J. Hollars notes in his introduction to *Blurring Boundaries*, “takes us one inch farther from the ledge.” What ledge? The edges of genre, where we get nervous, where we feel dangerous, and where we write not to subvert genre but to restore the genre to its tradition of invention and play and contradiction and contrariness and interrogation. Because, after the James Frey fiasco and the Nasdijjian appropriation of the Navajo, conversations of creative nonfiction were condensed to Fact versus Fiction, which took over the genre airwaves with accusations of “You lie!” (I’m hearing Joe Wilson’s outburst during Obama’s 2009 address to Congress in my head now.)

Recently, Charles D’Ambrosio visited Columbia College Chicago and commented on the journalistic essay versus the literary one: “It’s not that I’m lying. It’s that I have a harder time finding the truth. I’m writing about the difficulty of knowing anything.” Yes. How can one be held to factual accuracy when interrogating what one doesn’t know?

This year, an established and respected literary journal published “The Nonfiction Issue,” in which its editor essentially posted a “No Liars Allowed” sign on the door of the issue’s treehouse. I remember when the call for the issue’s submissions went out. I contacted a writer

affiliated with the journal, who discouraged me from submitting, who graciously suggested that the editors were more prone to a different style of essay than what I write. When I read that issue’s introduction, I felt as if I were the subversive writer, since I write, like so many writers I admire, in the liminal space between fiction and nonfiction. To establish factions (you’re an essayist or you’re a liar) sets up a divisive argument about a genre grounded in empathy and universality—as if you can write memory and persona and perspective accurately or not at all.

When I read these anthologies, including my own, I sensed a pushing back against the rigidity and the diminishing capacity of the debate about genre(s) that had overshadowed any nuances. So I reached out to the editors I’ve mentioned here to ask them:

Was the inspiration for your anthology in any way to resurrect the essay from the strictures of the fact-versus-fiction argument? That nonfiction must be relegated to the Truth/truth? Or that somehow James Frey/Oprah (Oprah) put the genre into a tailspin and that we must right the plane in the direction of invention and art and play? Or was it something else entirely?

We all agreed that this goal was indeed part of the initial or underlying motivation: to move the conversation

beyond, to carve out a space for genre-bending works, to offer what had been absent in print: a conversation about creative nonfiction. What it was. How it worked. Why we write it. How we can play with its rules. Where it can go. Nicole Walker answered, "Fiction has narrative theory. Poetry has poetics. Nonfiction needs a theory of its own."

And it's via this theoretical lens that we're seeing how far writers can bend the genre without breaking it (working "inside the discipline and athwart it"). So perhaps you're right: these anthologies aren't subversive, but they are challenging either/or thinking, calling into question familiar strictures, and, hopefully, interrogating what we are and what we do by asking complex questions and refusing to settle on exact answers and consistent resolution. That is the essay.

Yet these anthologies aren't alone. To return to *The Best American Essays*, your 2013 foreword highlights the presence and significance of literary journals. In particular, you focus on one that includes "cutting-edge writing...traditional and hybrid," one that gives "greater emphasis to non-linear narratives and blended genres," one that welcomes the "unclassifiable" and offers "new directions in the contemporary essay," and finally, one "far from typical...featuring some remarkably quirky items."

Is the essay in an age of experimentation, or is it, do you think, returning to its origins?

RA: I didn't mean to come down so hard on the notion of what's subversive. Having grown up in a working-class family in Paterson New Jersey, I learned about Allen Ginsberg early (in fact, his father Louis was my favorite uncle's favorite teacher at Central High School). And yes, *Howl* was a subversive book—I believe if someone were to make a list it would be one of America's top-ten subversive books of the twentieth century. It had an enormous effect on me. But what's subversive for one generation is mere cant for a later. The Beats are now sadly the subjects of advertising and awful films.

As I said earlier, "subversive" is a neutral term and could attach to anything, so I don't automatically valorize it. What's more interesting to me in writing is: what's at risk? What risks is the author taking? Subversive behavior isn't automatically risky. Look at our culture—that sort of behavior is the spine of just about every Hollywood feature, in which we see some supposedly courageous individual taking on "the system" or the "establishment." What's cooler in America than being anti-establishment? I wonder sometimes about what's truly subversive in academic culture, when practically every critical article I read in professional journals praises subversive and transgressive behavior, and seems to argue that anything

that undermines a system of belief, an authority or a generic category is inherently valuable. Maybe a truly subversive cause would be an academic movement that proposes to subvert and undermine tenure.

Along these lines, the hot word now in corporate culture is “disruptive,” a term that grew out of the Harvard MBA program in the late ‘90s, and is now used in a positive sense throughout Silicon Valley to describe innovative business strategies. A friend of mine is currently writing ad copy to promote a disruptive and revolutionary new skin cream. No kidding!

So I prefer thinking about risk, especially when it comes to the essay. The personal risks of frank self-disclosure. The guts to report embarrassing things about oneself—and by that I don’t mean the usual self-congratulatory self-condemnation (we all know the kind: “When I was 12 I got a kick out of stealing cars, especially those parked in the affluent neighborhoods where I knew I didn’t belong”). I like to read essayists who don’t care about being liked, who actually report their vices without turning them into virtues, who test ideologies rather than exhorting them. Though they’re never autobiographical, I like Emerson’s essays because I enjoy the dramatic conflict of his sentences and the resistance to ordinary persuasive rhetoric. I like how he tries to persuade us not be persuaded. And he’s big on surprise! And I especially

like essays that challenge the aesthetics of the genre. And of course I enjoy and appreciate anthologies that feature all of the above.

I understand what you mean by blurred boundaries (I like the alliterative sound, too), and I’m all for essays that erode conventional borders, etc. But like Walt Whitman, I also like sharp edges and clear outlines—without which there’d be nothing to blur. Anyway, the blurring of outlines, in art and writing, has been going on since the Renaissance. The eighteenth-century German critic G. E. Lessing put it nicely: “Genius laughs at all the boundary lines of criticism.” Todorov in his 1970s book on genre said that paying attention to genres may seem like “an anachronistic pastime.” So, as with subversion, I don’t automatically valorize blurring generic boundaries either. It depends (and I’m sure we’re in agreement) on what’s at risk, what’s at issue.

And to finally get around to your question: yes, I do think that the essay is in an exciting stage of experimentation (although again that was its origin with Montaigne) and that writers are happily feeling essays out. I entirely agree with Nicole Walker that nonfiction needs a theory of its own. Not that I’m an avid theorist, but I think that the essay especially would profit from some rigorous critical consensus on its aesthetic (yes, some old-school

formalism would help) principles and compositional properties.

This is all by way of saying that the essay should be viewed as a form of imaginative literature. I think many people in the field agree with this, but the dispute between fact and fiction, truth and lies, has to my mind been an impediment. I don't think we should be framing the conversation in terms that have been established primarily by late twentieth century source- and fact-driven journalistic standards. But I also don't believe an essay can be considered imaginative just because it ignores or makes up facts.

JT: Yes, I'm in firm agreement on risk in the essay. But also in the anthology. In their editor-to-editor conversation as part of this chapbook, John D'Agata and Phillip Lopate discuss the risks they took as anthologists, such as whether to include or exclude certain pieces, along with the challenges in procuring certain works. Lopate refers to an anthology having a personality, suggesting that the best anthologies somehow reflect the personalities of their editors. D'Agata adds that every anthology is a personal document, that you are putting yourself out there far more than you may be in a stylized performance of a memoir or personal essay, that there's very little hiding you can do. When I listened to their conversation, I remembered the risks I took with

Metawritings. To begin with, I remembered the query (asking writers I had never met, with the exception of two, to be a part of the anthology), and here's why: not only was I asking writers for their work, but their unpublished work (I made two exceptions). I was handing out an assignment, essentially. Also I interviewed each writer via e-mail, question-by-question, a process that took me over a year to complete. In fact, two of the interviews had to be re-done due to authorial submission switch or editorial suggestion. In other words, the essays in the anthology changed so the interviews had to change.

Another risk I felt I took was in writing a meta-introduction, which begins: "In his introduction to *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Larry W. Phillips begins with this sentence: 'Throughout Ernest Hemingway's career as a writer, he maintained that it was bad luck to talk about writing.'" So I began by calling the premise of my anthology into question, and each segment of that introduction collage references the introductions to other texts, such as the metawriting opening of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, introductory remarks made by postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon in two of her books, or Gregory Orr's introduction to his essay which appears in *The Best Creative Nonfiction 3*, edited by Lee Gutkind. I also was self-referential and not just a bit silly, as in my reference to Facebook status updates and Twitter prompts ("What are you doing now? Jill Talbot

is writing an introduction”) or in my introducing a joke (“A prologue, and introduction, and a foreword walk into a bar, er, a book”). That was a self-conscious comment on the fact that my introduction follows a prologue by Pam Houston. I also took risks with each interview, in my attempts to mirror the personality of the writer I was interviewing, so if a writer wanted to be serious-minded, I followed, while others (I think of Lazar’s interview) became more playful.

Finally, my inclusion of two controversial pieces were long-game risks. The first, “The Facts of the Matter,” by Anonymous, took up the most space in my e-mail inbox over two years—tracing an ongoing balancing act between the contributor’s vision and intentions (adamant that the piece be published anonymously) and Iowa’s concerns that readers would feel manipulated. There’s another element to that essay that the press wouldn’t let stand unless I asked Anonymous about it in the interview (and also revealed the writer’s identity). I reveled in the exchanges and the challenges, the risks, because I believed in what the writer had done, and I fought both for the piece and the writer. Glad I did.

Another piece I had to fight for was the excerpts from Lena Dunham’s screenplay from her first feature film, *Creative Nonfiction*. Initially, I included the entire script, but external readers balked at an entire film script in

an anthology, so I included only excerpts (still some readers complained the excerpts weren’t compelling enough). The press had concerns about the placement of a film script among prose pieces that, again, blurred boundaries of genre, or called them into question altogether. While we were in the process of putting the anthology together, Lena Dunham’s second film, *Tiny Furniture*, was released to much acclaim and fame (*The New Yorker* did a profile of the then 24-year-old), and Dunham signed her HBO contract for *Girls*. When Joe Parsons, the gracious editor at Iowa at the time, e-mailed to ask me once more to justify her inclusion in the anthology, I mentioned that I had contacted and conversed with Lena in her pre-fame days, amid her earliest (and most raw) experimentation and exploration of the intersection of autobiography and fiction (*Creative Nonfiction* was, in fact, a project she did for a creative nonfiction course at Oberlin, which went on to be featured at the 2009 South by Southwest festival). Since the publication of *Metawritings*, Dunham has had an essay, “First Love,” appear in *The New Yorker*. Incidentally, it was named a Notable Essay of the Year in *The Best American Essays 2013*. She’s also signed a book deal for over three million with Random House for her debut essay collection. (Imagine all the young writers out there who erroneously believe essaying to be a lucrative career.) Regardless, I had a hunch about Dunham, and I took the risk. Again, glad I did. Her work

and my interview with her is in *Metawritings*. Because of that, I watch every episode of *Girls*, hoping to catch a copy of my anthology on Hannah Horvath's nightstand.

Ultimately, I always viewed *Metawritings* as an extremely personal document, and in doing so, I took the advice my father gave me when I was in high school. He wrote me letters when he wanted to give me advice, and he always included a quote at the end. In one letter, he ended with these words from Ricky Nelson's "Garden Party": "You can't please everyone, so you got to please yourself." As a 16-year-old, I took that advice as permission to do whatever the hell I wanted without considering consequence. As an editor, it guided me to create the anthology I wanted, but at each turn, each submission, each interview, I asked myself, "Can you stand behind this?" What's in the anthology is there because I said, "Yes."

RA: Essentially, I agree with Phillip and John that there's something quite personal going on in the act of anthologizing. And there's a risk in that, too. I mentioned earlier what Alfred Kazin said to me about an anthology he assembled for a college publisher, in which he made the mistake of including only essays he liked. I made a similar mistake a few years later in assembling a short-story collection for college students—I pretty much avoided the "chestnuts" and settled only on stories

I thought readers would enjoy. That book vanished without a trace. In fact, I don't even have a copy. Of course I included many famous writers, but I selected a different Cheever story or Oates story than was usually found in such collections—still the truth is that the college market usually wants the customary fare. I'm not being cynical. There are plenty of good educational reasons for this.

I've had better luck, though, with a few trade anthologies of poetry where I also made selections based entirely on my own taste. For the annual *Best American Essays* I read an enormous number of essays over the course of a year, but I hand over only a hundred to a guest editor who makes the final choice. I try my best to be completely neutral, and am reluctant to single out any selections I feel more drawn to than others. So though I do some significant narrowing of the field, the final table of contents each year will reflect the literary taste and personality of that particular guest editor. I'm a shadowy presence in the background. So, with that annual series at least, I can't share exactly John and Phillip's experience, and yours, of putting oneself out there, except of course in my annual forewords.

There are, I should add, many types of anthologies. I don't know if anyone has constructed a taxonomy. For example, besides a large number of college

“readers,” I’ve done a few books that featured original, commissioned essays. As you know, this is a different animal from collections that depend mainly or entirely on previously published material. Such books involve a great deal more conception time and a lot more hands-on-editing. But all literary magazine editors know this, especially when they embark on a theme issue. Aren’t most literary magazines mini-anthologies? Look at one of my favorites, the beautifully edited *Lapham’s Quarterly*, with its intriguing themes and splendid mix of old and new material.

Years ago I proposed a collection of small books that I would like to see in print, but the project languished. These would all be small anthologies of American essayists, mostly, but not all, in the public domain. The idea would be to invite current essayists to select a particular author and feature the 10 to 15 essays they consider outstanding. I have, for example, an interest in Nathaniel Hawthorne as an essayist (he’s quite good, though Emerson didn’t think so), and I’ve put together a table of contents of what I consider a dozen or so of his best essays. By the way, it’s a little complicated, because Hawthorne mixed his short stories and sketches (as did Irving) without any designations of genre in his several collections. So I had to sort through and separate the “sketches” (a term that included travel pieces, personal essays and observations) from the tales.

Anyway, to establish a model, I drafted an introduction (since lost in the bowels of an external drive) that discussed Hawthorne as an essayist, and added notes and commentary. I thought small collections could be done for Emerson, Irving, Whitman, Melville, London, Stephen Crane, Repplier, Du Bois, Bourne, William and Henry James, Thoreau, Fuller, Wharton, Easley, etc., etc. Each book would conveniently introduce readers, and perhaps new readers, to essays they may be unfamiliar with, and at the same time present this work through the creative perspectives and personalities of today’s noted essayists and creative nonfiction authors (that is, with the personal stamp John and Phillip mentioned as essential to anthologies). With largely nineteenth and early-twentieth-century writers (Stephen Crane wrote some wonderful sketches of city life), and with small books, the costs of such an essay/nonfiction project would be reduced.

JT: We create the anthology we want to read. The anthology I co-edited with Charles, *The Art of Friction*, came about from a conversation we had on my front porch one afternoon about our own writing. He argued that my essays are fictionalized personal narratives, and I countered that his autobiographical fiction may be read as memoir. So in that sense, the anthology we created sought to create a reader (I like that term) of such works. Yet *Metawritings* was inspired by inquiry. I wanted to

see what metawriting looked like in the story versus the essay, but I only received one fiction submission—so the anthology went from a fiction/nonfiction reader to a collection of essays. Moreover, I initially envisioned a range of metawriting: from a subtle meta-move in an essay (a phrase, a sentence) to a complex, multi-layered metathon. But once I started receiving submissions, I had to rearrange my idea. I had to be extremely flexible, just as a writer has to get out of the way and see where an essay leads her. I allowed the anthology to take its own shape. I even ended up eliminating some essays I had solicited.

When D'Agata recently mentioned that the current anthology he's working on is his "last," I wish I had been in that audience to ask the question, "Why your last?" And then I begin to wonder if I have another anthology in me. I certainly have ideas: "The Lost Paragraphs," an anthology of excised paragraphs from published works of fiction and nonfiction, along with the writer's explanations for the paragraph's omission (actually that one fizzled out after I collected over 50 submissions from a list of impressive writers but encountered a lack of interest from several editors); an anthology of drafts (the writer's draft and a fellow writer's comment on the draft—I envision hand-written comments and markings, a throwback anthology, if you will). So you see I'm particularly invested in thoughts of process right now.

Maybe that's why I admire Dinty W. Moore's *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, because each contributor offers a flash essay, a craft essay, and a prompt for the reader (writer). Yet I can't discuss anthologies without mentioning the anthology that changed my life, and that's Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*. As a writer, I started as a poet, and while I was in graduate school, I kept hearing the term "creative nonfiction" and dismissed it because I thought it sounded bland. Generic. One semester, the only workshop available was in creative nonfiction, so I wearily registered. The text for the course was Lopate's anthology, and the first assignment was to read his introduction. I wish I could show you all the underlines I made—the comments in the margin, the "Wows." I couldn't even wait until the next week for class to tell my professor how I responded to the introduction, so I went to his office, the anthology clutched to my chest, and announced, "This is me." Neruda writes, "Poetry arrived / in search of me." That anthology arrived in search of me, and I gave myself over to the essay.

I wonder which anthologies made a difference, or continue to make a difference to you. And if you, like D'Agata, like me, have future anthologies in mind.

RA: Well, I'd love an opportunity to do the imaginary series I mentioned before, which consists of small

collections of outstanding essays from some of America's most distinguished writers, whether known as essayists or not. I just included a lovely Hawthorne essay on Niagara Falls in a college anthology I co-edited. And Hawthorne, after all, wrote one of the most famous essays in American literature as an introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*.

But speaking of anthologies that made a difference in my life: I can think of one right off hand, a series that was started in 1952, but that I didn't come across until my senior year in high school in 1957–58, and which I then continued to collect and read in college. I grew up in a bookless home—my Dad read the tabloids and racing sheets, but other than that I never saw either parent with a book in hand (a daily fact which taught me that many very wonderful people don't ever read). So I loved finding anthologies, because they were like mini-libraries. The series I'm thinking of was called *New World Writing* and was published by the New American Library as a paperback literary magazine for a mass audience. It sold for 50 cents (not exactly cheap in those days). I can talk of it concretely now because I held onto a few of the early editions from college days, and have them handy. They still look good and the contents are still enticing. As the editors in the first edition announced, it was not only a "sprightly anthology," but a book and a "little magazine." It contained a mix of material from literary

journals, first serial rights and original submissions. There's an afterword on "Literary Hospitality" by one of the editors, an Arabel Porter, which sets out the ambition of the series—to find new writers and create new readers in a post-war America. I wouldn't have discovered the books if my dad hadn't liked to bring me along to pick up his racing form at a huge Rexall drugstore on Market Street in Paterson. That store had several revolving metal racks for paperback books that I loved to spin around and around while studying the titles. It's where I found the Signet edition of *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1958. Cheap books and anthologies like these played an indispensable role in my literary education. I've always been grateful to editors and publishers like Arabel Porter, who (having started on the editorial board of the New American Library in 1945) must have been quite a pioneering woman back then.

I wonder, though, what shape anthologies will take in the future. One problem I see and come across often is the rapidly increasing permission costs involved in obtaining rights. These costs have risen fairly recently, because of the need to obtain electronic rights, a greater consolidation of rights providers, and the rising financial expectations of estates. I just dropped Raymond Carver from a college anthology because of the outrageous amount the estate was now charging for a short story. It's tough to negotiate unreasonable fees (which of

course increase the price of textbooks) and, often, especially with the need to cut costs to fit a production budget, it's far easier to replace an expensive selection with a different, more affordable one from another author. Which I did. But if more and more publishers find Carver is breaking their budget, that also means he may gradually vanish from the contemporary canon, which will be unfortunate. So, many ideas I have for new anthologies are stopped dead in their tracks once I begin to consider the time, effort and expense they might involve.

Yet this problem makes anthologies that feature original commissioned work more attractive. Do you see such books (and this is something you know well) becoming more appealing to publishers? Do you think anthologies in general will go increasingly into e-books or online publishing? Personally, I find collections online unappetizing (actually I can't even think of one), but perhaps it will be inevitable.

JT: I'm curious. Which Carver story did you want? And did you "replace" him with a Carveresque author?

RA: I forgot: I should have mentioned it—the well-known "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love." I always admired it, but I also wonder if its appeal is fading. We decided to replace it with a classic Hawthorne

story and ease the permissions budget. What's more affordable than public domain!

JT: That Carver story will always appeal to me. But if writers like Carver do begin disappearing from anthologies, I sense that more instructors will defer to the course packet. Just the other day, a writer asked on Facebook if anyone knew of an anthology of experimental short fiction or if he were destined to keep creating course packets. Many writers/instructors answered they do course packets because they can't find an anthology to do everything they want to do, and, in that sense, I can see a trend toward online anthologizing as a means to quickly establish niche collections of current work.

I do see a trend in anthologies offering (predominantly) original works, but that (and this is obvious) is only relevant to anthologies of contemporary literature. Beyond the college anthology, which necessitates the collection of canonical or established works, anthologies are evolving. And I'm speaking only to essay anthologies here.

When I finished putting together *Metawritings*, I knew I had a different kind of anthology—one that was interactive. And the anthologies that have been published in the past few years, and the ones forthcoming that I've mentioned, reflect the writer's presence on the page,

in the essay, resulting in an interaction between reader and writer.

But I don't think that this is a trend in reaction to economic restrictions. At least for me it wasn't. For me it was the desire to create something new, something that hadn't been done before, so I wanted new work to accomplish that. Besides, not every writer metawrites, so my "assignment" asked writers to engage with their writing in a very specific way. And I know that Hollars and Singer/Walker asked for something specific from their contributors, too. So writers are students again, answering assignments in order to achieve the anthologies editors have in mind. It's quite different from the request to simply "have" an existing piece. That's what Charles and I did for *Friction*—though we did ask for commentary, so we did ask for something new there.

But here's the challenge: not all writers want to turn in an assignment. In my experience, many writers sent me links or one-line responses, "Sure, you can use such-and-such." Therefore, I didn't pursue their contributions, because I needed, I required, writers who were willing to engage with the experiment. So some may read *Metawritings* and say, "Where is _____? and _____?" I've never been asked, but I'm assuming those questions are out there, as they are with any anthology.

Another concern for some writers was exposure. They expressed hesitation because they wanted their essay to be read by "more people." Now that says something—that those writers assume that a work in an anthology won't be read. For these reasons, if editors pursue an original-content approach, it seems to me a specific type of anthology contributor will emerge (perhaps those at the beginning of their careers, those who need a CV line or those willing, via time or inclination, to do the work). Let me add: the contributors to both *Metawritings* and *Friction* (those award-winning, established and emerging writers) were all professional, engaged, enthusiastic and helpful. In particular, Bernard Cooper, Cathy Day, Pam Houston, Kristen Iversen, David Lazar, Marjorie Sandor and Ryan Van Meter (via their contributions and our conversations) inspired me in ways that continue to impact how I think about the essay and my own writing.

Interesting: Dzanc Books had an annual anthology series, *The Best of the Web*, but it only ran for three years. So take that for what it's worth.

I, for one, am an admirer, reader and collector of anthologies, and I'm sure you're the same, Bob. If I'm honest, I've become a bit obsessed with them (as you and anyone reading this has already figured out).

I don't know if the doors to anthologies are going to close due to exorbitant costs or Internet clicks or

whatever else comes along to disengage and distract us, but allow me to close with an appropriation of a line from Zadie Smith's essay, "Some Notes on Attunement," which appears in *The Best American Essays 2013*:

"[Anthologies] are what I know, and the [anthology] door in my personality is always wide open."

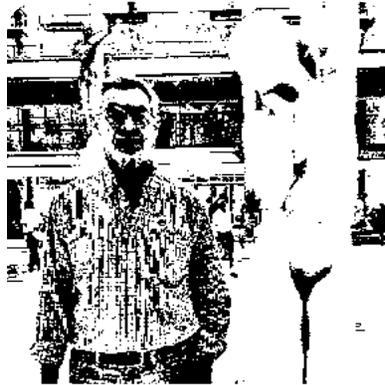
RA: About course packets substituting for anthologies: I had only one experience with this, and it was discouraging. I was teaching an undergraduate course on the history of the essay, and I wanted to feature a lot of early material not easily found in existing anthologies. So I decided to make my own course packet. I took a large folder to a local Kinko's, hoping to get copies made. They refused, saying they needed permission from rights-holders. I said that everything I wanted copied was in public domain (which it was), and then they floored me by asking me to supply proof of that for every selection. They couldn't simply take my word. So I gave up. It was a fairly large class of over 20 students, and I didn't have the resources to do this on my own. I noticed, though, at Harvard, where my son was an undergraduate classics/literature major not so long ago, nearly every course he took used such packets. Some of them were quite good, but I never found out if the professors had to clear permissions for their selections, though it appears they did. I wonder if some excellent course packets were ever

turned into published anthologies. It would be a great way to field test a table of contents.

I, too, had a nice collection of older anthologies, some going back to the nineteenth century, but when I downsized last year and moved from a large house to a Manhattan apartment I had to dispose of most of them. I kept only a few. Some, like the *New World Writing* series I mentioned, I had a personal, sentimental attachment to. Others had historical significance. They all provided an interesting snapshot of an era—like one little anthology I kept, simply called *Great Essays*, edited by Houston Peterson for Washington Square Press in 1952. It begins with Montaigne and ends with E. B. White. I like that the anthologist concludes the book with afterword "Regrets," in which he apologizes for the many fine essays and authors he left out. In my experience, that's something that comes with the art of anthologizing—always a regret for what's being left out.

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Robert Atwan is the series editor of [*The Best American Essays*](#), the annual he launched in 1986. The editor of numerous anthologies, he has published on a wide variety of subjects, such as dreams in ancient literature, early photography, Shakespeare, poetry, literary nonfiction and the cultural history of American advertising.

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