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Process Note

One of my final courses as an MFA student revolved around literary journeys, and as we explored physical, emotional, and linguistic journeys in novels and stories, I had time to reflect on my own writing journey from the standpoint of my thesis and of my time in the program. Like the most traditional of journeys, there was conflict (internal, for the most part), a mentor (my wise thesis advisor, Evelina Galang), and a destination—this collection of short stories. In working toward this goal, I tripped over many obstacles, but I also had an opportunity to learn from my scrapes and come to a fuller understanding of myself as a writer.

When I came into the program, I had a vague notion that I wanted to address the experiences of military families. As a child of the Air Force, I grew up moving nearly every three years, and that lifestyle left an indelible impact on me. But I came to realize that the themes I was exploring—moving and adaptation, the anxiety and loneliness of separation—applied to many contexts, so I broadened the scope of my stories.

Ultimately I followed a non-military story, the one that eventually turned into *Battle of Flowers* in this collection, and tried to write a novel from it, but struggled immensely. Although I spent the entire summer between my first and second years drafting pages and writing furiously, I was dissatisfied with the result and with the way that the project made me feel. When my thesis advisor offered helpful revision suggestions at the beginning of the fall, I came to realize that in turning my novel around, I would no longer be writing the story that I initially wanted to tell. After several anguished weeks, I put the novel aside with Evelina’s blessing and set out to develop the stories for this collection.
While I’m pleased with the stories I’ve generated over the course of the program, I am even more grateful that some of my writing weaknesses were exposed so that I can learn from my mistakes and try to avoid the same problems in the future. One of these weaknesses is a tendency to treat my characters with kid gloves, or to avoid pushing the story where it needs to go in order to have a true climactic moment. Story after story, I often struggle with clarity in character desire, as well as the issue of agency. In addition, I am more aware of heavy-handedness, and a slip toward caricature or too-common details in the sections of my stories that I have spent less time on.

The past two years have also taught me that I am obsessed with place in my stories, which makes sense considering that I have moved from one location to another every few years of my life thus far. I’ve discovered a newfound love for using Google Maps for research—although I’ve been to Bury St. Edmunds in England and to New Braunfels in Texas, and nearly all the cities and towns that appear in this collection, it was an amazing tool for double checking my memory and seeing what things have changed since I’ve been in those places. The other thing I found amazing about increasing place-based research is that the real world offers so many gems that can dovetail with threads from writing. At times, however, I could spend too much time researching and not enough time drafting my work, so in the future I’m going to budget time blocks for each to keep myself on track.

One area that I struggled with during the program was having enough time for revision. Before UM, I had very little experience with the revision process because I spend so much time on the front-end of a story. I have difficulty writing rough drafts because I want every sentence to be the right sentence from the beginning. Obviously, this perfectionism gives me a lot of trouble. I came into the program with no new stories ready to be worked on, so my first year was
largely an act of catch-up just to get first drafts out in time for workshop. As a result, I haven’t had as much time and energy for revision as I would have liked. Of course, embarking on a new thesis at the beginning of the second year puts quite a strain on the revision process as well, but I know that this is an ongoing project—I’m still interested in reshaping and tinkering with my stories, and continuing to revise them after my closing conversation.

However, I have had some revision success. Working on this thesis has allowed me to understand and respond to critical feedback with increasing awareness of how to shape and reshape my own stories. The stories collected here have developed through multiple iterations, and each version has taught me something new.

For one of my workshop classes, we were asked to create our own writing rubric, based in part on the components that we admire in the work of our favorite writers. We were then asked to analyze how our own writing could be measured according to the categories that we’d chosen. As far as my rubric is concerned, I feel that I have fulfilled some areas more than others. My first set of questions asked whether the characters are fully realized and completely distinguishable from one another. My next category involved the audience caring about what happens to the characters and whether the stakes are significant in the story. The last two components of my rubric were rather subjective. I asked if the writing was clear and beautiful and whether or not the narrative arc of the piece makes it seem complete. Beautiful language is my favorite part of storytelling, so it’s something that I hope to achieve in every piece that I write. Although there are many lines that could still use work, I do hope that the majority were clear, and that there were moments of beauty in the words. As for the completeness of the narrative arcs, it’s still something that I feel like I’m blindly stumbling toward at times, but I am
appreciative that my time in the program has taught me to understand the areas I need to focus more attention on as a writer.

After UM, my literary journey will continue, forever enriched by my time with the MFA community here. I look forward to the challenges ahead with these stories and others.
Magdalena Guerra-Morales rolled her shoulder blades up and back, inched her feet apart into a wide stance, and tucked silver-streaked tendrils of escaping hair back under her floral swim cap. The water aerobics class wasn’t set to start for another twenty-seven minutes, but every week it seemed like she had to get there earlier and earlier to snag the front corner spot.

Within moments, the door that lead to the locker rooms smacked against the wall and Cora Wagner emerged in the doorway, wearing the same baggy black skirted suit that she had all year. Cora took a few hurried steps forward, scanned the pool, and let out a big whooshing exhale.

“Good to see you,” Lena called out. “Something new with the hair?”

“Course not.”

“Hmm. Something seems different.”

“Maybe my mood.”

Lena widened her eyes and shrugged. Probably not. She gently twisted her torso one way and then the other, letting her arms slice through the water as she changed directions.

The woman who used to be Magdalena’s friend lowered herself into the pool rung by slippery rung and then cut through the water toward her. Lena sent up a little prayer for calmness and wished, for the millionth time, to have her friend returned to her.

“I have a favor to ask you,” Cora said.
Lena rolled her wrists, popping them on every rotation. The water buoyed her up, kissing her thighs, giving her strength. Stand up for yourself. Help her see.

Cora tried again. “This little rivalry of ours—”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Well, whatever it is…you’re in my spot.”

“Free country,” Lena said. She pulled one knee up out of the water and hugged it close to her chest.

“Yes. Sort of.”

Lena stared out past Cora at the sign on the cement wall: CAUTION! FLOOR SLIPPERY WHEN WET. As she switched legs, Cora prodded her in the shoulder.

“I’m not trying to make a fuss, but I really want that spot today.”

“Maybe you should get here earlier, then.”

“Just this once.”

“Uh uh.”

“I don’t want to be looking at your big head all class!”

Magdalena laughed and it echoed across the pool. She was surprised it didn’t make ripples across the surface of the water.

Other members of their class were fanning out in the pool. Lena hadn’t even noticed them enter the space, but then again they were hardly the kind of people who made you take notice. The women—Gwen, whose skin was covered in sunspots, Francine, who was always talking
about her Chihuahua terrier mix and his health problems even though no one cared, and Beth
Anne, the one who always wore her goggles too tight on the mornings when she swam laps
before class—all pretended that they weren’t listening. Lewis, the only regular male attendee,
was married to Gwen. He stayed in the back corner and couldn’t really hear all that well anyway.

“Did y’all hear that?” Lena asked. “Cora, bless her heart, thinks my brain is so big that
it’s blocking her view. Anyone else in the front row mind switching with her?”

Gwen and Francine and Beth Anne tittered to one another about eye strain and well-
established routines, and how mostly the ones in front were the shorter ladies anyway, and Lena
wasn’t exactly a mountain of a woman, so it was only fair. All this without looking Cora’s way.

“Now why would you go and do that, shout our business out to everyone?”

“Just being neighborly. You should try it.”

Cora softened her voice further. “Do you know what today is?”

“April something.”

One of the other women leaned against the side of the pool and ribboned her legs out
through the water. The ripples spread, disrupting the surface of the water between Cora and Lena
the way she’d imagined her laugh might have.

“It’s been a year. A year today.”

Everything stilled. Lena became aware of the pulse in her neck. Of course. Somehow a
whole year had passed already since the accident.

“Let me give you some tough love,” Lena said. She pressed a slick palm against Cora’s
shoulder. “You have to keep living.”
“I’m doing this, aren’t I?” Cora swept her arm out to indicate the pool, the building, the world. A whiff of chlorine and cleaning chemicals followed her movement, lifted into the air.

“A whole year and all you’ve got is water aerobics?” Lena asked. The others were staring now. Women they’d gone to high school with, women who had lined up with foil-covered casserole dishes at Cora’s house a year ago to offer their condolences and silent prayers of gratitude that it hadn’t been their family. “Look, that sounds harsher than I meant it. It’s just that…”

“You have no idea—”

“I miss the old Cora. The town needs her back.”

“Well, she’s dead.”

“That’s rather dramatic.”

“How could you possibly understand what it’s been like?”

“Maybe if you would just tell me, then,” Lena whispered. “You know, I’m the only one here treating you the way I always have. Because you don’t need my pity, or anyone else’s.”

This made Cora grind her teeth. Magdalena wondered if they were both thinking of that day when the ladies from this class and from the library and from the neighborhood had filled Cora’s front yard with their sympathy and their bouquets. Where Cora lived, each street was named for a different flower, but it seemed to Lena that every woman brought the same floral arrangement. She herself had left a note on the back porch that read, *God’s decisions can be hard to comprehend. Here if you need me. Not if not.*

A friendship over in fifteen words.
“Switch if you want,” Lena said softly. “It’s all part of God’s plan and we can’t pretend to know what it is that He wants.”

“What plan?” Cora said, but she stayed where she was.

The shower head above Magdalena pulsed, raining down water that faded from hot to lukewarm as it rinsed the chlorine from her body. While she wiggled her toes against the tile floor, careful to avoid the wad of multi-colored hair stuck in the drain, she replayed the confrontation, adding sharper comments and even a shove or two.

Had she been too harsh? Lena dispensed a handful of body wash from the pump on the wall and set about scrubbing her arms and legs. At the same time, she thought of the accident, of the rains that washed out from the Hill Country and flooded the roads in an instant, of how she learned days later from a newspaper that Cora’s daughter and her three grandsons had been swept off the road in their burnt orange SUV.

Lena tried to imagine the weeks at the hospital, where doctors forced air into the daughter’s lungs even while her brain left no trace on the machines. The youngest grandson, the only survivor. The other two boys dead on impact, or drowned—Lena had never heard definitively. What she did know was painful in itself: the fight between Cora and Frank and their son-in-law over what it meant to be alive, and whether the shell on the hospital bed could return to them.

Lena paused, suds building up on her torso. There had been no other squeaks of shower handles or tugs of curtains for quite a while. All the other women must be on their way home already.
After toweling off and massaging cream into her chlorine-dried skin, Lena dressed and wandered back past the pool to exit the Senior Center. A dark patch drew her eyes to the deep end. Lena blinked, moved closer. There was a person in the water, submerged. It was Cora. Her body faced away from Lena, who noticed with relief that her arms and legs were moving in the water. How long had she been under there?

Seconds ticked away on the giant clock at one end of the room. Lena, paralyzed, urged herself to think. Should she fetch someone? Dive in herself? Leave the woman alone with her suffering? Lena moved toward the pool, ready to wade in, clothes and all, but at the last moment Cora’s arms clawed up toward the surface and she broke the water, sputtering and coughing.

The image of Cora flailing underwater was all Lena could see when she woke up the next morning and offered her morning prayers. In the backyard, a crowd of grackles pecked at fallen birdfeeder seeds. Lavender flowers had erupted on the Mexican oregano, and a black and yellow butterfly alit on a bloom. Life was all around, and much of it was good.

Lena padded back into the house. She put on her most cheerful dress, a loose lime green number, and dug out her straw hat that was still studded with colorful tissue paper flowers from Fiesta the year before.

Every light was green for the short drive to Cora and Frank’s house. When Cora opened the door a fraction, Lena surged inside.

“Get dressed.”

“Excuse me?”
“I’ve changed my mind,” Lena said. “I’m not letting you wallow anymore.”

The cat, Cheeto, tried to bolt out the front door. In the confusion, as Cora blocked Cheeto with a bony foot, Lena shut the door behind her.

“No offense to Frank,” Lena said. The flowers on her hat rustled as she bent down to rub Cheeto’s jaw. “What do you think is going on?”

“You need to get dressed and get in my car, or we’ll be late.” Magdalena turned Cora around and pushed her in the direction of the bedroom.

“No offense to Frank.”

“I don’t know. I have a lot to do.”

Cora retreated into the kitchen, where heat blazed in through the window above the sink. Pockets of sunlight trapped themselves in the baked-on colors of the suction-cupped suncatchers her daughter had made decades ago. The sun had been up for a few hours already, and it felt like summer.

“You need to get dressed and get in my car, or we’ll be late.” Magdalena turned Cora around and pushed her in the direction of the bedroom.

“Frank’s still sleeping.”
“He’ll be fine. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” Cora said, but Lena gave her a withering look so she fished out a piece of scrap paper and a pencil and she scribbled out a note for Frank. Lena watched over her shoulder as she wrote Out with M(!) Home as soon as she’ll allow.

The traffic into San Antonio was insane, even though the parade wouldn’t start for another hour and a half. They had to park and walk, carrying the camping chairs, and Lena had to remind herself to slow down so Cora could keep up. These days she was so slow, so plodding. She walked with her chin folded down onto her chest, and it hurt Magdalena to see.

They passed blocked intersections and children throwing cascarones, confetti-filled eggs that were supposed to be broken over someone’s head to let color rain down on their hair. The sun was shining with the intensity it always seemed to reserve for parade days, and Lena could feel that on the back of her dress a sweat outline in the shape of her bra was materializing.

At last, the two women found an area where the camping chairs were only two or three rows deep. Nearby, at a small cart, a man peddled paletas.

Lena asked, “Don’t those look to die for?” She pulled a crumpled ten out of her wallet and hovered by the cart. “Dos, por favor. Una paleta de coco y…what flavor do you want, Cora?”

“I don’t want to owe you anything,” Cora mumbled. Lena shrugged.

“Una de fresa. You want the fruit one or the cream one? De fresa de agua, sí.”

As she handed Cora the strawberry popsicle, Lena said, “I’ve been talking to God about you.”
“And this time he talked back?”

They claimed a spot and hunkered down in the camping chairs.

Lena flapped a hand at her. “Don’t be ridiculous. He doesn’t have to talk.” She paused, and they both worked on their paletas before the mid-morning sun could consume them. “Do you believe in signs, Cora?”

Children near them made buzzing sounds with miniature plastic yellow trumpets. A toddler sneezed. A thick mucus snake oozed down toward his mouth. Lena smiled.

“If I did, I’d probably be depressed,” Cora said. “More depressed than I already am.”

“Well, I do. I think everything’s a sign. It’s more fun that way.”

“Yeah? Okay, so…we’re at a parade, right? What will the horse shit signify?”

Lena made a sour face. “Maybe it’s a sign of your disbelief.”

“Sure. Or the general meaninglessness of life. But you were saying?”

So Lena told her of the series of minute indications that she’d notice in the past week alone—the landing of a ladybug on her left hand, the turning on a traffic signal to green at the precise moment that she drove up to the intersection, the experience of yet another rainless day—that had encouraged her to try again with Cora. Little moments of happiness. The truth, though, was that she had showed up at Cora’s house because of the moment at the New Braunfels Senior Center when her old friend struggled in the pool and she saw her own loneliness reflected.

“I’ve been thinking about moving. Me and Frank.”

“What? Where would you go?”
“If we could get out of here, we could start again.”

“Where?”

“Maybe Oregon.”

“Cora, you’ve never even been as far as Houston.”

“Not true! Frank and I honeymooned in Galveston.”

Lena thought of the great hurricane that had destroyed the town a century before. Thousands dead, even more stranded. God designed nature to give and to take, and no one wanted to accept that.

“They let you die in Oregon. At the end of your life, you know. The doctor will honor your wishes.”

“This is the only place you’ve ever lived,” Lena said, “And what about your grandson?”

The first float approached. Cora kept her eyes glued to it and wouldn’t look at Lena. Finally she said, “Aidan hardly speaks anymore.”

The parade was a blur of pageant queens beaming from flower-covered floats and high school marching bands blasting 1970’s hits. The crowd shouted “Show us your shoes!” and members of the Fiesta royalty—duchesses and princesses and queens—lifted their bedazzled skirts high enough to reveal cowboy boots or Converse shoes or equally sparkly heels. There were kings, too, El Rey Feo and Rey San Antonio, but no princes, which Lena always found curious. She shaded her eyes from the sun and the sparkle, feeling pride in the city, nostalgia for the layered memories of attending the Battle of Flowers parade over the years, and shame that she didn’t know how to pass this flicker of happiness on to Cora.
“Did you use to want to be Miss Fiesta San Antonio?” Lena asked.

“I was real short back then. No one would have seen me.”

“Never stopped me,” Lena said. “I would’ve loved it. To wear one of those dresses, have everyone looking at you.”

One of the bands got stopped up right in front of them. They were playing “Smoke on the Water” and their heels snapped up and down, keeping time as they waited. Sweat rolled down the sides of their faces and landed on their thick woolen uniforms. At the end of the line closest to them, a high schooler with a saxophone hanging from a strap around her neck grimaced in between sections of the song.

“I saw you in the water,” Magdalena told her. “Yesterday. After class.”

It took a moment for Cora to process this.

“I…left my watch at the edge of the pool,” Lena lied. “It was stupid really. I almost forgot to take it off before class and I forgot to pick it up after. And when I went back in…I almost called 911, Cora, I swear. Why on Earth were you doing something like that? When you have Frank to think of, and your grandson, and me. The whole town, in fact.”

“I wasn’t…it wasn’t.”

“You can’t leave, that way or any other way. You can’t move. Don’t you see?”

The band started moving again. Lena kept her eye on the girl with the saxophone until the band members were so far away that the plumes on their helmets blurred together and she was no longer sure she had the right one.

“I’ve never been so scared for you, even right after everything happened.”
“Don’t.”

“You can’t keep torturing yourself. I won’t let you.”

Cora shook her head. She flipped the popsicle stick in her hand, end to end.

As gently as she could, Lena said, “At some point, you have to find a positive way to move on. Not running away, not…drowning yourself…”

“I wasn’t—”

Cora was cut off by the cheers of the crowd. At last, she asked, “What is there to move on to?”

“I don’t think any of us knows that.”

“Maybe I should go to a psychic, or get my palms read, huh?”

The parade wasn’t over yet, but Lena stretched her legs and suggested they find a place for lunch before the crowds did.

“I’m serious about moving,” Cora said.

Lena’s stomach sank. “You have our support here.”

“Maybe anonymity would be preferable.”

The wind switched directions, offering a whiff of the promised horse shit to their noses.

“I want to go home,” Cora said.

“And do what?”
Instead of answering, Cora stood up and jerked the limbs of her camping chair closed. The people behind her grumbled and tried to sit up taller to see one of the paper flower floats drift by.

“Mommy, I can’t see!” a little boy cried.

Lena collected her belongings quickly, gracefully. “Pardon us,” she told the family behind them, and the two women edged their way back out of the crowd, camping chairs in tow.

They had fish tacos and watermelon agua frescas at a small restaurant with glossy plates tacked up on the walls.

“I wonder how many people have died from eating raw or undercooked fish and seafood,” Cora commented, tapping on the short health and safety advisory at the bottom of her menu.

“See? That’s one of the ways you’ve pushed us all away, making everything about death and dying.”

“Everything is about death and dying.”

Lena ran her fingers through her still-dark hair and squinted. “I have to tell you that this whole outing has been even more awkward than I’d imagined it.”

“Such refreshing honesty.”

“It’s what I’m good for.”

“What were you expecting, sunshine and butterflies?”
Lena thought of her backyard and smiled. It was still possible, to keep Cora here, to help her be happy so that they both could enjoy life again. After dabbing at her mouth with a napkin, Lena said something about ordering flan. She flagged down their food server and made the request, joking about her insatiable sweet teeth (“Not just one…it’s all of them!”) and demanding that Cora order something too. More sweetness.

“No death by chocolate cake?” Cora asked, adding enough emphasis to the word to make Lena grimace. She ordered a stack of bunuelos and picked at them.

“I think it’s awkward because there’s no road map for this sort of thing,” Cora said. “And besides, maybe I’m happiest this way.”

“You’re not happy at all, though.”

“Would you be?”

Magdalena closed her eyes. She meant to list things to be happy about, simple ones like the flight of a grackle or the progression of a parade, but all she could think about was the annoying cry of the grackle, or the grimace of the girl with the saxophone. “Don’t move,” she said a last.

Cora shook her head. She insisted that she no longer had anything to contribute to a friendship. The food server stacked their plates and took them away.

“You have to live a purposeful existence, or what’s the point?”

“That’s exactly it! There is no point!”

The food server returned with a check and they fought over how to split it.

“I think you need help.”
“I think we all do.”

Lena said, “That’s a start.”

On the drive back to New Braunfels, the strawberry paleta and the watermelon drink and the bunuelos worked their way up and Lena had to pull over so that Cora could rid herself of all the sweetness. She took in ragged breaths, the way she had when she burst out of the water. Lena reached out for her hand and they sat together quietly until the waves had subsided and they could go home again.
Critical Sample

Anthologies, Aesthetics, and Inclusion: Cultural Skirmishes in the Battle Between the Poets

Before Donald Allen’s anthology, *The New American Poetry*, clashed with the formalist tradition of poetry typified by its main competitor, *New Poets of England and America*, Robert Frost bemoaned the existence of subjective poetry collections. For him, “literary canons and the critical generalizations which produce and sustain them are instruments of literary repression wielded by professors” (Lentricchia 183). Decades after this pronouncement, anthologies remain embroiled in the struggle between selectivity and inclusiveness, though concerns about academic control and canon formation have been periodically eclipsed by debates surrounding poetry aesthetics and identity politics. Ironically, these discussions—which include everything from the aesthetic battle between *The New American Poetry* and *New Poets of England and America* to recent controversies surrounding the selection process of various editors and anthologies—are rooted in the overarching historical issues of control over the past and future of poetry that they distract from. In addition to revealing the problematic aspects of the system underlying anthology creation, though, anthology battles also serve as a reflection of the culture of poetry that produces them.

Donald Allen’s foray into poetry anthologies resulted in the two-camp model of poetry aesthetics, in which avant-garde, experimental, or postmodern poetics pitted themselves against the formalist tradition. Challenges to these dichotomous attitudes—where tradition and stability stand in direct opposition to innovation and change—complicate the divide between the poetry mainstream and the various channels of subculture attempting to subvert it. In *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, editor Alan Kaufman claims that a community has been created out of a
sense of alienation. Outlaw poets, according to Kaufman, “have butchered the sacred cow of literature and eaten its parts” because “they want their poetry to inspire the kind of fever normally reserved for the Superbowl and hot sex”. In its appeal for the creation and celebration of a more visceral body of poetry, The Outlaw Bible is simultaneously advocating for inclusion while undermining the importance of the body of literature that it wishes to join.

A decade after the publication of that anthology, publishing house W. W. Norton & Company produced American Hybrid, a collection intending to remedy (or at least attempt to remedy) some of the aesthetic divisions present in the culture of poetry. In the introduction, editors Cole Swensen and David St. John establish their intentions to offer an alternative to the oppositional forces at work:

“This anthology springs from the conviction that the model of binary opposition is no longer the most accurate one and that, while extremes remain, and everywhere we find complex aesthetic and ideological differences, the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous ‘camps’ in diverse and unprecedented ways.”

This attitude, reflective of contemporary attempts to broaden the poetry canon, echoes the sentiments of an increasingly globalized society. Yet these discussions are hardly radical. In 1919, before Allen’s collection reshaped the question of poetic styles, Louis Untermeyer attempted to represent immigrant and minority voices in the first edition of his anthology, Modern American Poetry, as a challenge to “traditional producers of literature, whose typical objects of representation were people like themselves, with privileged routes to the acquisition of literacy” (Lentricchia 180). Despite Untermeyer’s efforts, cultural inclusiveness and minority representation remain at the forefront of the anthology discussion an entire century later, and the
aesthetic argument that led to *American Hybrid* evolved out of a similar emphasis on change, social and otherwise.

It is intriguing to note that in the introduction to *Postmodern American Poetry*, another anthology with the Norton imprint, editor Paul Hoover argues against *American Hybrid*, perhaps because of its attempt to marry two traditions that he has a vested interest in keeping distinguished from one another. Evidently, Hoover thinks very highly of his own collection, calling its first edition a great success that “became the classroom standard for teachers and students interested in new developments in poetry” and “had a powerful and surprising impact on contemporary American poetry”. Although encouraging instructors to promote contemporary poetry is laudable, Hoover’s dismissiveness of alternative pathways undermines his own message of supporting new developments in the field. When poet and essayist Rachel Hadas declares that “sometimes one wishes anthologists felt more beleaguered, less confident they’re putting the right poem in the right pigeonhole” (13), her comment serves as a backlash to the overconfident judgment suggested by some editors, including Hoover. In fact, acknowledgement of the difficulties associated with anthologizing poetry might lead to higher levels of transparency in the process and greater attention to the implications of selectivity on canon formation.

There can be no doubt as to the controversial nature of anthologizing literature, and the *Best American Poetry* series, through its annual compilation by a new poet editor, serves as a litmus test of sorts for the political and aesthetic clime that such debates arise from. Most recently, in the latest installment of the anthology series, the scandal surrounding editor Sherman Alexie’s inclusion of poet Michael Derrick Hudson’s work under a Chinese pseudonym sparked discussion on identity politics and affirmative action in the editing process. In a blog post for the
series, Alexie sketched out the rules that he had imposed on his selection process, many of which derived from his “highly critical” views of the “aesthetic range…cultural and racial representation…gender equality…and nepotism” (itself as “common as oxygen”) reflected in previous editions of *Best American Poetry* (Sherman Alexie Speaks Out). After expressing his tactics for supporting underrepresented poets, including those outside of the academy, those writing in more obscure poetic forms, and those from minority groups, Alexie’s transparency turned to a self-evaluation of the process, and his reasons behind including the controversial poem. Regardless of Alexie’s intentions and the furor that emerged from his selection, his conscientious assessment of the editing process offers a clear-eyed view of the challenges inherent in editing a collection of poetry.

Although a new editor is invited to helm the selection process for *Best American Poetry*, series editor David Lehman’s presence is felt through the forewords initiating each collection, which have recently been compiled into their own text, *The State of the Art: A Chronicle of American Poetry, 1988-2014*. As a document recording the state of the *Best American Poetry* series (if only a slice of the contemporary poetry being produced), it highlights trends, including demographic shifts that have occurred in this timespan: “Many more women, persons of color, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and so forth, are engaged in writing and publishing poetry, and what they produce does not necessarily conform to the imperatives of identity politics”. Essentially, the political culture and the art world are marching in lockstep, their mutual impact confirmed through the poetry selected for these anthologies. Though the existence of the collection *The State of the Art* is somewhat presumptive in and of itself, Lehman’s influence in the anthology world cannot be denied. Indeed, Denise Duhamel’s forward to the book of forwards refers to Lehman as “a distinguished man of letters and arguably
most important tastemaker of contemporary American poetry” (Lehman). She praises Lehman for his insight into the state of contemporary poetry, and notes his devotion to critical theory and the impact of the historical.

In a merger between these interests, Lehman also edited the most recent version of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, which he declares “a comprehensive, one-volume anthology of American poetry from the seventeenth-century origins to the present”, before expounding on the anthology’s goal to establish a more inclusive canon. Lehman’s stance on canon formation and his control over the editor selection process for his contemporary anthology series, when coupled with his reassessment of the entire history of American poetry may impact the debate on inclusion and exclusivity in anthology creation. Indeed, through its longstanding, quarter-century tradition, its rotating door of poet editors who must each be selected in their own right, and its mission to collect contemporary poetry from a single year without the benefit of hindsight, the *Best American Poetry* series and its longtime editor find themselves in a uniquely influential position in the battle surrounding anthologies.

Where the series may benefit from multiple editorial perspectives championing a variety of aesthetics over time, more traditional anthologies risk pigeonholing themselves with a singular vision. Former Poet Laureate Rita Dove, in her introduction to 2011’s *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry*, is keenly aware of the “Sisyphean task” she faced when editing the text and attempting to promote a diverse group of poems, poets and styles, and she goes so far as to self-consciously note that she is a poet and not a critic. The tone of Dove’s introduction, from its frustration with the politics of selection, to its indignity over the effects of privilege and its disgruntlement with the state of poetry as a business, practically invites a counter-attack from the poetry establishment. Helen Vendler, in her scathing takedown of Dove’s choices in the *New
York Review of Books, offers just this. Primarily concerned with the anthology’s inclusiveness, Vendler suggests that editors like Dove “may now be extending a too general welcome” and that “selectivity has been condemned as ‘elitism’, and a hundred flowers are invited to bloom”. While anthologists throughout history have faced concerns of inclusiveness and exclusivity, these concerns have risen to the forefront of poetry politics, nudging the debate over aesthetic styles somewhat to the side.

Despite continual concerns raised by the process of sorting through the vast amount of poetry and championing only some of it, the anthology business continues to expand. As the boom of collections and material to be collected continues, discussions surrounding the success of these endeavors offer reminders of the major concerns affecting anthologies. Critic David Hopkins, in his article “On Anthologies”, analyzes the demand while grappling with the ways in which canon formation, literary judgment, and anthologizing find themselves intertwined (287); in “Can Poetry Matter?”, poet Dana Goia criticizes nepotism in the system and pleads for anthologists to be “scrupulously honest” in selecting poems so that they can “move, delight, and instruct readers, not…flatter the writing teachers who assign books”. Clearly, the conscientiousness of anthologists plays a crucial role in determining what will be read in the near future, and potentially for years to come.

Increasingly, reactions to anthology controversies often tend toward the inflammatory, though some critics attempt to provide suggestions for revising the anthologizing process. In a response to the Best American Poetry controversy, Conor Friedersdorf indicated his desire for a new system of inclusiveness involving “race-conscious groundwork” and “race-neutral judging”. The former would entail soliciting heavily from underrepresented groups while the latter would require Friedersdorf to select poems without seeing their bylines. Such a framework could offer a
bipartisan solution to the bickering between anthologists advocating for exclusivity and those requesting a broader representation of styles and poets. Besides leveling the proverbial playing field for both outsider poets and establishment poets, Friedersdorf’s plan would make strides toward reducing editor bias and nepotism. Additionally, its acknowledgement of past privilege could reshape the poets that receive recognition while more broadly reflecting the undercurrents of social change that have led to it.

Of course, it should be noted that these discussions are not limited solely to the realm of poetry. Only a few days ago, *The New Republic* offered up a piece that pitted *The Unprofessionals*, a largely traditional and realism-based short story anthology from *The Paris Review*, against *New American Stories*, a collection of fiction intending to celebrate genre fiction, equalize the gender effect, and promote stories about outsiders (Sacks). Reviewer Sam Sacks summarizes the battle, nearly identical to those occurring in the realm of poetry, as follows: “two anthologies, two visions of American fiction: one exclusive, one eclectic; one that seals its ears to the clamor of the industry, one that takes inspiration from the chorus of voices being published”. This type of prose implies a future resolution between those who include and those who exclude, one that may entail a compromise between the barrier-breaking outsiders and the current establishment struggling to maintain its own status quo.

As long as there are anthologies, there are likely to be disagreements, but it appears that the overarching literary culture is currently experiencing a shift in focus. While each generation of artists typically rebels against the principles that came before them, an increasing emphasis on inclusiveness may lead poets, critics, and readers to question the necessity of these compilations. Scholars have long noted the inherent exclusiveness of collections, as when Hadas reminded readers that “whether the anthologist bewailing his dilemma knows it or not, poetry anthologies
involuntarily foster limits and exclusions at least as much as inclusions and liberations” (130). Anthologies remain essential in the struggle to cope with the immense volume of poetry that exists or is about to exist, but the controversies that continually surround their political machinations, if probed enough, just might provide the opening necessary for an overhaul of the system.
Works Cited


Annotated Bibliography


I found this to be a lovely collection of short stories, set in America and Nigeria. The book deals with issues of gender, sexuality, and immigration in thoughtful ways, and the collection has a cohesive thematic identity. That cohesion is something that I worked toward in my own collection.


This novel depicts a dystopian future where women are entirely under the control of religion and society. The feminist message follows one handmaid as she breaks free from the system. Feminist issues inform my work, and this novel reminded me of the power of female-driven storytelling.


This posthumously-assembled collection showcased Berlin’s talent for telling short but impactful stories about working-class individuals across a variety of landscapes. My one complaint is that the book felt overstuffed, and a few of the stories seemed so similar to earlier ones because of repeated characters, locations, and themes, that I felt some of them should have been trimmed from the collection. Overall, though, the book encouraged me to continue spreading my stories out geographically, and to firmly situate my characters according to their jobs and locations.

Boudreaux excerpted her novel at the off-site AWP 2016 reading that the University of Miami co-hosted with Carolina Wren Press and LA’s NPR station. Immediately after, I read the book and found it to be a lovely but painful coming-of-age story about a young black girl growing up in Mississippi during segregation. This is a protagonist age that I tend to return to in my own work, so it provided inspiration for building narrative voices and complicated families.


Set in Palestine and America, the stories in this collection are linked and span nearly a century of characters and events. These stories concern themselves with the concept of home—from building it to returning it, and the work is an impressive example of stories that can stand alone but that also craft their own larger narrative together. Through Darraj’s collection, I was inspired to seek out more links between my stories, in order to emphasize them.


Diaz’s second short story collection also features characters developed in his first collection and in his novel. These stories focus on love, adultery, and Dominican-American culture and are an excellent resource for looking at strong voices and dialogue. I thought that it was odd that one of the stories featured different characters than the others, though thematically they still remained cohesive.

The first novel of the Neapolitan series, this book depicts the childhood and adolescence of two friends growing up amid violence in Naples. The descriptions are beautiful and the characters multi-faceted and intriguing. Ferrante’s work electrified my own love of language, and this is something I hope to emphasize in later revisions.


The second novel in Ferrante’s series offers a feminist critique of modern Italy while depicting the two women’s lives while they are in their twenties. I’m interested in how macro-level concerns affect characters in their day-to-day lives. This is something that has started to have a greater infusion into my work.


This novel is the fourth and final one of the series, and leads the reader up to the disappearance of one of the women, first described in the prologue to the first book, and an understanding of why the novels have been written. The novels fit together so well that they could be read as one long continuous story. Although I love epics, I have never written one, but after reading these, I gradually started working on stories with a greater number of characters and feeling empowered to try out larger narrative scopes.


In the third novel, Ferrante explores adulthood and motherhood. Although the women enjoy love and suffer through heartbreak, their relationship to one another is ultimately the most important aspect of the series. I finally started to write about female friendship
in a few of the stories for my collection; though the topic is important to me, it was never something that commonly emerged in my writing.


This novella emerged from the same seed as Kincaid’s iconic story “Girl.” It offered a powerful critique on colonialism while detailing the title character’s coming-of-age story on the island of Antigua. Since many of my young characters are facing similar challenges of growing up, I tried to learn from Kincaid’s creation of Annie’s voice.


The short stories in this collection were darkly funny, with well sketched characters and commentary on contemporary concerns, including 9/11 and the war in Iraq. I was inspired by the levity in Moorie’s work even when dealing with heavy topics. Eventually, I would like to be able to find more of that balance in my own work.


Morrison’s first novel is beautiful and heartbreaking. It follows Pecola, a young black girl who yearns to be blue-eyed, through tragedy and pain. I was inspired by the focus on a young female protagonist, and the need for those stories to still be told. “Rubbernecking” and “The Land of Enchantment” both follow very young girls, and several of my other stories are told from the perspectives of high school-aged young women.


At Chantel Acevedo’s recommendation, I fell under the spell of this magic realist novel. The Southern landscape is something that informs my own work, so I enjoyed this
setting. The boy’s longing for his father was also encouraging for my reexamination of conflict and character desire during revision.


We read this slim, powerful novel in Manette Ansay’s Fiction Forms class, and I was amazed by its gorgeous, relentless voice. One thing that I tried to apply from Otsuka’s work was her use of significant detail. When I worked on a revision of “The Land of Enchantment,” I repopulated the world with the remains of a character’s hoarding instincts, and allowed those details to reflect and deepen the action of the story.


After reading *Swamplandia!* a few years ago, I was interested in reading more of Russell’s fantastical work. Although most of my writing skews toward realism, I did explore the potential of fantasy with my story, “Harbinger.” Russell’s ease with strangeness in this short story collection is something that inspired me to take a few more risks than I otherwise would normally.


This novel-in-stories centers on the delightfully unlikable title character, and others in her town. I hoped that my stories, which are less linked than Strout’s, could nevertheless give a similar series of longterm emotional responses. Where Strout’s stories cycled back and forth in time, mine moved geographically, and I hoped that that would deepen thematic links from story to story.

Manette Ansay recommended this collection to me, as military family stories intermingled with civilian ones. Like Berlin’s stories, these varied in location and focus, but Vaughn’s collection was especially thrilling for me, as I had never seen another writer tackling the military family lifestyle before. Interestingly, about half of the collection was focused on these topics and used the same narrator, a woman who grew up as an Army brat, and the other half were unrelated. Because of this collection, which was still cohesive, I felt like my stories could follow a wider range of subjects.


We read this novel in Evelina Galang’s Fiction Forms class, and I loved the voice of the young female narrator. The setting—a small town in Mississippi on the eve of Hurricane Katrina—was detailed and added pressure and tension to the narrative. Several of my stories are set in states along the Gulf Coast, so I found inspiration in the atmosphere that Ward created.


I read this quirky novel at Chantel Acevedo’s recommendation, and it shed light on how to create wacky, interesting characters. As I developed Malcolm and Alice in “Malice,” I was inspired by the family in this book. Additionally, the novel’s interest in art is something that spoke to me with my own writing, where music, theatre, and other artistic interests tend to surface.