

**Pixelated Faces in IRL (In Real Life) Places: Exploring How
“Textese” in Melissa Broder’s *So Sad Today* Builds Community
Among Confessional Women Writers**

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2018

By Austin Dowdy

Thesis Director
Dr. Deborah James

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Published in 2016 shortly after she revealed herself as the author behind the popular @SoSadToday Twitter account, *So Sad Today* is a collection of personal and confessional essays by poet and essayist, Melissa Broder. Along with the publication of this work, Broder is also the author of 4 other literary works: *When You Say One Thing But Mean Your Mother* (2010), *Meat Heart* (2012), *Scarecrow* (2014), *Last Sext* (2016), and *The Pisces* (2018). With a focus on highlighting autobiographical topics such as her struggle with mental illness, the impact of casual sex on her understanding of love, and the crippling existential dread that permeates her everyday life, Broder uses “textese” – or texting language – in *So Sad Today* to write about the intimate details of her life. The ways in which she employs textese resonates with a broad audience but especially with millennials who are familiar with technology-related language trends that continue to evolve with digital innovations.

In interviews, Broder has commented on the influence confessional poets, including Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, have had on her work; certainly readers familiar with the history of confessional literature can see how Broder’s work fits into that history. Broder has said that Plath and Sexton “weren’t afraid to bring emotion into poetry, and they showed the weave between darkness and light” (Bromwich). Yet Broder’s use of textese sets her collection apart from other works of confessional literature, and this thesis examines how the incorporation of this developing language trend opens a space not only for readers but also for aspiring women writers in particular who might want to use a similar technique to write about difficult life experiences. By applying reader-response criticism and reception theory to Broder’s work, this thesis contends that the digital era is ushering in a new kind of confessional literature, one that in some ways is even more welcoming to those who might otherwise have difficulty giving voice to their stories, all the while acknowledging that such digital access is not ubiquitous.

Confessional poetry was first coined as a term by critic M.L. Rosenthal in 1959 in an influential review of Robert Lowell's book *Life Studies*. Although Lowell was the central figure of the review, Rosenthal grouped him with other confessional poets like Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman because of their implementation of "private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems" (Harrod 1-2). In the review, Rosenthal defined confessional poetry as "embodying the issues of cultural crisis in the crises of the poet's own life," which may include one's desires, one's pains, or one's perceived "sins" against the world (Harrod 3). This turn toward confession in poetry startled many contemporary readers because of their personal and raw revelations and was a direct result of the impersonality that plagued mid-century poetry (Nelson 32). What made confessional poetry confessional, as opposed to just personal or autobiographical, argues Deborah Nelson, author of "Confessional Poetry," was the nature and context of its revelations. "This is, in key respects, a distinction of form, not content..." she writes, "The directness – the relaxation of iambic pentameter or the loosening of the rhyme scheme (without its abandonment) – created an impression of a casual and intimate conversation" (34). These revelations were often extreme and transgressive in respect to white, middle-class, heterosexual society and dealt with themes such as marital failure and infidelity, (hetero) sexual transgression, abortion, rage, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, the body in its most degraded or vulnerable states, and most importantly, emotional violence in the middle-class family (Nelson 34). These characteristics of postmodern confessional poetry are expanded upon by Robert Phillips, author of *The Confessional Poets*. He argues, "It is an expression of personality, not an escape from it. It is therapeutic and/or purgative. It employs irony and understatement for detachment. It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology. Personal failure is also a favorite theme,

as is mental illness. The poet strives for personalization rather than for universalization” (Phillips 17). By establishing characteristics that are common in postmodern confessional poetry, Phillips allows contemporary confession to be more easily identifiable for readers. However, these characteristics also surface the more negative implications of writing in such an exhibitionist way, such as the poet striving for personalization rather than for universalization.

While twentieth-century confessional poets were undoubtedly caught up in a late-century stylistic movement that was part of a larger aesthetic and political impulse that transgressed the boundaries of private life, some critics believe that they were more interested in self-exhibitionism and everlasting fame (Nelson 35). While the confessional poet as an egoist is not the approach taken in the remainder of this research, more controversial criticism like that of Charles Molesworth’s is necessary to present a full and unbiased history of confessional literature. Molesworth, author of “‘With Your Own Face On’: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry,” argues, “The confessional poet wants in some sense to be his own muse.... Only then can the poet take his place with the immortals, only then will the rules of discourse be recast and the audience be made up of the dead and the not-yet-born” (170). He later goes on to state that confessional poets have “oversensitized ego[s], the final statement of the exacerbated sensibility” (178). By characterizing confessional poets as completely void of any desire to establish meaningful personal rapport with the reader and only interested in their own success, Molesworth disregards the relatability confessional poetry can establish with readers in its dealing with serious themes such as personal failure or mental illness. The negative criticism received by the original confessional poets still has an impact today on contemporary confessional memoirs. Miranda Sherwin, author of *‘Confessional’ Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination*, writes,

Whereas such confessional memoirs are devoured by the reading public, they are simultaneously derided by critics as sensational, self-promoting, and ultimately lacking in literary standards. This divide between popular and critical reception is not merely a product of scholarly disaffection for the poor aesthetic standards of the contemporary zeitgeist. Indeed, the overriding opprobrium from the critical establishment for the late twentieth-century confessional impulse can be traced back to the confessional poets themselves, who likewise enjoyed a wide readership but suffered from the slings and arrows of an especially outraged criticism. (2)

Sherwin argues that the initial negative reception of late twentieth-century confessional poets has created the misconception that confessional writing somehow lacks serious literary standards. However, with confessional writers like Broder entering the contemporary literary scene and building community for confessional women writers through her unique form and content, confessional writing is anything but lacking in terms of significant impact and meaning because of its ability to be inclusive of a group that have been previously harshly criticized and even ostracized from confessional literature and the personal-confessional genre overall.

The personal-confessional genre itself is said to have begun with Augustine's *Confessions* in 400 AD and fully formulated in Rousseau's *Confessions* of 1782 (Bleakley 17). The genre also dates back as a therapeutic tradition event before the advent of psychotherapy, which as a practice undoubtedly shaped confessional literature of the twentieth century (Nelson 33). "The personal-confessional narrative (as a specific variant of autobiography) is offered as a revelation of an individual's interiority, usually centered on emotional life..." writes Alan Bleakley, author of "Writing with Invisible Ink: Narrative, Confessionalism, and Reflective Practice," "... where identities are constructed through confessional modes, rather than

confessional modes revealing identities” (16). The crafting of identity through confessional modes is further explained by Jo Gill, author of *Modern Confessional Writing*, who states,

Confession, then is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poetic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth. It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable, and thereby confessional. (4)

By producing truth through carefully crafted narrative, the goal for the confessional writer is not to simply express repressed prior lived experience, but rather to achieve a better understanding of their own intersecting identities. Mary Beth Harrod, author of “Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres, expands upon how these identities are constructed through confessional modes by stating, “While memorable literature is grounded or based in a literary genre (poetry, fiction, memoir, etc.), it is a confessional voice that speaks to us, transforms us, renews us, and attempts order. The confessional voice is trying to position itself among the ordered world when disorder feels suffocating and impenetrable” (7). It is because of Harrod’s argument that this paper will use “confessional literature” as opposed to “confessional poetry” in its analysis of the literary style, because of the fact that confession transcends a singular literary genre and can be present in many forms of literature. Hilary Clark, author of *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark,* ultimately expands upon why confessional literature has significant scholarly merit. In her book, she writes,

We should listen to the personal narratives of illness and disability – really attending to them on their own merits, as opposed to using them in order to come to diagnoses and impose regimes of treatment – because such narratives give voice to the ill, the

traumatized, and the disabled, those trying to make sense of catastrophic interruptions or shifts in their lives, and help them navigate the bewildering, impersonal context of medical diagnosis and treatment. (3)

Because these confessional narratives allow for writers to find some sort of order in such a disordered world, the writer's experience with serious themes such as mental illness can bring about understanding and healing for certain communities of people. However, it is also important to examine how these works are typically received outside of these communities by literary critics through the concepts of reader-response criticism and reception theory.

First, it is important to define both of these concepts and explain how they relate to the reception of confessional literature. Reader-response criticism is a literary theory that focuses mainly on the reader and their subjective experience of a literary work. In the introduction of her book *Return of the Reader*, Elizabeth Freund makes the argument that reader-response criticism introduces "questions such as *why* do we read and what are the deepest sources of our engagement with literature? what does reading have to do with the life of the psyche, or the imagination, or our linguistic habits? what happens - consciously or unconsciously, cognitively or psychologically - during the reading process?" (5). This type of criticism focuses solely on the reader and their subjective response to the text based on their ability to relate to the author's lived experiences. Expanding on this literary theory, reception theory is a form of reader-response criticism that specifically emphasizes the reader's reception or interpretation of a literary text. Robert C. Holub, author of *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, defines reception theory as "a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader" (xii). Holub also emphasizes the differences between reader-response criticism and reception theory, mainly noting that while reader-response critics are spread across the world and

may have no interaction with one another, reception theory is a more cohesive, conscious, and collective undertaking by both institutions and critics alike (xiii). Nonetheless, the subjective experience of the reader associated with both reader-response criticism and reception theory is significant when examining the critical reception of works by confessional authors like Broder.

When examining how Broder's *So Sad Today* was received by literary critics, one must take into consideration the previously-mentioned concepts of reader-response criticism and reception theory. Two critics that were vocal about Broder's collection of essays, Alexandra Coakley and Haley Mlotek, relate *So Sad Today* to both their own experiences and the introduction of the work into the world of larger genre conventions. Coakley wrote in *Slate*: "To classify *So Sad Today* as the latest popular entry in a wave of confessional, feminist lit is to undersell its grander preoccupations with the horror and the humanity of the depressive mind. While Broder aligns herself with and agonizes over distinctly female issues, her gendered angst and healthy righteousness routinely collapse into the extremities of her mercurial mental state" ("Melissa Broder"). Coakley believes that critics should focus more on the work's ability to accurately document mental illness, rather than its initial appearance as just a confessional piece of feminist literature. "The common thread in the book, writes *New Yorker* contributor Haley Mlotek, "is Broder's willingness to confess even those parts of her life that she considers shameful or embarrassing... Such intimately confessional writing is as much an attempt to connect as a way to unload." Observing that the book sparked "a sharp sense of feminine recognition," Mlotek also noted that "recognition is not the same as deep connection, and Broder's preemptively dismissive sense of humor just as often acted as a barrier keeping me out" ("Melissa Broder"). Based on Mlotek's critique, she believes that Broder attempts to connect with the reader's own experiences, while also establishing emotional distancing through

dismissive humor. By doing so, the reader is able to voyeuristically observe her personal life experiences, but also keeps them at a distance by distinctively marking her experiences as her own and unable to be entirely related to. However, this “sharp sense of feminine recognition” is what could potentially encourage aspiring confessional women writers to adapt Broder’s use of the confessional essay to be open about their own life experiences in literature, creating a community of women that have agency over their narrative and the inspiration to write in the personal-confessional genre.

Born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and now based in Los Angeles, California, Broder grew up with her younger sister, Hayley, and their parents, Linda and Bob. While at Baldwin School, an all-girls school in Bryn Mawr, Broder composed her first collection of poetry in the third grade. While the content of this collection is unknown, it is certain that it inspired her writing as an adult about her lifelong battle with depression and anxiety, including her obsessive thoughts about dying since the age of 12. “Broder’s earliest memories of acute anxiety are from the eighth grade, when her Hebrew School’s repeated attempts to remind the children about the horrors of the Holocaust ended up convincing Broder that another genocide could happen in the U.S. ‘I needed to know where the safe spaces were,’ she says. ‘I was terrified day and night’” (Joiner). By her senior year of high school, Broder was also diagnosed with anorexia, which was eventually brought under control with the help of a nutritionist and therapist. Although she credits her relationship with food as being her longest relationship, Broder began new relationships with cigarettes, Adderall, Ritalin, Benzodiazepines, vodka, psychedelics, and weed, as an incoming student at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. While at Tufts University, Broder was also the editor of the literary magazine *Queen’s Head and Artichoke* (Joiner).

After graduating from Tufts in 2001 with a degree in English, she moved to San Francisco to work as a grill cook and to canvass for the Sierra Club which “[she] loved because [she] could do it stoned” (Joiner). Although Broder refuses to talk about her recovery, she points out, “I love drugs, but for me they don’t work. It sucks when it stops, because it’s this thing that kind of saved you from anxiety and depression. Who wants to feel? Feeling is so gross” (Joiner). At 25, she relocated to New York to get an office job and to get clean, aspiring to work in editorial publishing but ending up in publicity. While in New York, she spent nearly seven years attending night school at City College of New York to receive her MFA in Poetry, while also working as a publicist at Penguin Group USA. During this time frame, her first collection, *When You Say One Thing But Mean Your Mother* was released in 2010, with her collection *Meat Heart* following in 2012.

In October 2012, after working at Penguin Group USA for seven years and publishing her first two volumes of poetry, Broder began to slip into a darker period of her life. Not only was her husband, journalist and short-story writer Nicholas Poluhoff, beginning to suffer from an unknown neuroimmune disease that causes fevers, weakness, and brain fog, but she was also dealing with an increased bout of anxiety and depression. Broder looks back on this period of her life by saying,

I’d gone through periods of anxiety in my life, where the panic attacks were more intense or less intense, basically I would get into these cycles. I was going through a particularly harrowing cycle of anxiety – it was fall 2012 – and I would go into work and I would be afraid that I literally couldn’t even sit there. I’m kind of a perfectionist, and I catastrophize, so I was like, well, if I can’t sit here, how am I going to come back in tomorrow, and if I can’t come back in tomorrow how am I going to work, and if I can’t

work, then how am I going to support myself – it would sort of spin out into the ultimate worst-case scenario. I was just really scared. And I also had a lot of depression under that, which I didn't even realize was depression. (Tuttle)

This was the impetus for Broder to launch the Twitter account @SoSadToday from her office at Penguin, where she began to tweet raw and humorous tweets about body image, food and dieting, sexual fantasies, and existential fears (“Melissa Broder”). Growing quickly to more than 30,000 followers, including celebrities like Katy Perry and Miley Cyrus, this Twitter account was a way for Broder to “purge the constant tide of emotions, fantasies, and fears that flooded her mind.” According to Bryn Lovitt, Culture Reporter at *Vanity Fair*,

While she'd taken a similar approach to the several collections of poetry that made her a star in the underground literary world, @SoSadToday was an entirely different beast. The anonymity of the account allowed Broder to shamelessly engage with her anxiety and its distinct connection to pop culture without feeling a published poet's pressure to uncover its greater meaning (Lovitt).

In 2015, however, this pressure shifted when Broder came out as the author of the @SoSadToday Twitter account when she began to make publicity rounds for the publication of her book of personal essays with the same title, *So Sad Today*.

So Sad Today contains essays about sex and death, anxiety and depression, addiction and meditation – the same themes that animate her four poetry collections (Tuttle). When asked about whether or not she is glad she revealed herself as the author of @SoSadToday, Broder responded,

I am. Maybe I'm foolish, maybe I am fucking up my life by making all this stuff public on Twitter. I always say that my dream job is to work at [cosmetics store] Sephora, and I

had a dream the other day that I tried to get a job there and they Googled me and went, ‘Um, no, this person cannot be trusted to be putting makeup on someone.’ So I was really scared leading up to it, but once I did it I felt strangely protected, and that might just be because of the outpouring of positivity (Bromwich).

In the interview, she is also asked about whether or not she ever feels she exposes too much in her raw and confessional style of writing. She responds by saying,

Definitely. The essay on my vomit fetish [where fantasizing about vomit helps achieve orgasm] – a couple of months before the book came out I realized, ‘Wait, this is actually going to be in the world...?’ To this day, when my aunt says she has the book, I just want to rip that chapter out. Before the book came out, I said to my agent, ‘I think we have to take this out, nobody has to know this much stuff.’ They told me to think about it, so I showed it to a couple of writer friends, and they said, ‘You *have* to keep this in.’ I’ve had people refer to that essay recently as the centerpiece of the book. But still it would be so much easier for me if it was not in there (Bromwich).

Even after the release and success of *So Sad Today*, Broder still has worries about the implications her confession could have on the perception of her as an individual – especially by family members. However, it is this same confession that also highlights the impact of digital technology on contemporary literature and the space it opens for aspiring women writers who might want to use a similar technique to write about difficult life experiences. Often compared to other confessional authors such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, some of her collegiate inspirations, Broder’s work is nonfictional and allows her readers to become aware of and to relate to her private life experiences. Although similar in theme, Broder draws a fine line between her collections of poetry and her collection of personal essays,

I think *So Sad Today* and my poetry contend with a lot of the same themes: longing, the reality of death, the desire to escape into fantasy, the world not feeling like enough. But with *So Sad Today*, I get to approach themes through a more colloquial or contemporary jargon, whereas with the poems I like to keep the language very primal and pure – void of pop culture (Escoria).

Despite this distinction between her writing, whether it is verse or prose, Broder makes clear that all of her autobiographical writing makes her feel a sense of agency over her narrative – despite all that life has thrown her way,

...The nonfiction helps me feel like I have some control over my narrative. I could be going through shit and kind of write my way out of it, or share it with others and it makes me feel like I have some control, if only to put it into my own words. And poetry, that feels like alchemy. It's a way for me to access the magic of life – I mean the thing that I want, which is to always feel like I'm in some kind of flow. You know, I'm an addict; I always want to feel high (Tuttle).

As demonstrated in this interview, the agency that Broder feels when she writes is what pushes her to continue writing both poetry and nonfiction – writing that is gaining more attention and notoriety within notable literary communities. In 2017, she was awarded a Pushcart Prize for her poem “Forgotten Sound” in her collection *Last Sext*. Further, in May 2018, she released her first novel, *The Pisces*.

While the language deployed in the essays in *So Sad Today* serve as a larger implication for the intended audience of twenty-first century confessional literature – millennials familiar with the technology-related language trend of textese or texting language – that she refers to as “pop-cultural and disposable,” she makes clear that her poetry is often primal and timeless.

Broder describes her poetry as “very obsessed with sex, death, longing, filling the existential void in our lives.” She also adds, “I don’t like using language that’s in any way pop-cultural or disposable. I like language that’s very timeless” (Tuttle). The title of her latest poetry collection, *Last Sext*, contains a reference to the pop-term “sexting,” but this is “the only word in the entire book that ... you wouldn’t have been able to understand 100 years ago” (“Melissa Broder”).

From this interview, it is clear that Broder is intentional about using language in her poetry that is unable to be influenced by the more pop-cultural and disposable lingo of her time. Because Broder began publishing as a poet before she transitioned to a more stylistically and linguistically different style of confessional writing, the language in her poetry is worthy of further investigation before analyzing the content of her essays in *So Sad Today*.

Broder’s assertion that the language in her poetry is timeless proves to be true in an analysis of the first poem of her latest poetry collection, *Last Sext*, titled “I Am About to Be Happy”. Broder writes, “Can you feel it? / You are art and you are not art / Yesterday I thought it was good to be dead / I babbled, a wildwoman boiling your pelt / I wore you as my t-shirt and mouth / I said it was good for you to be art / Save me from death, let me rise from the dead / Today I bury your body” (1). When analyzing the content of this poem, an obvious interpretation is that the poem is about liberation and the speaker freeing herself from the ties of a bad romantic relationship. When examining the form of the poem and Broder’s specific linguistic choices, however, it is clear that all of these words would easily be understood by the reader even if it was read a century prior to its composition. Ultimately, this analysis proves Broder’s assertion to be true that her poetry utilizes a more timeless language as opposed to the disposable language she uses in *So Sad Today*.

Broder's poetry serves as interesting juxtaposition to the textese or texting language utilized in her personal and confessional essays in *So Sad Today*. In the essay, "One Text Is Too Many and a Thousand Are Never Enough," Broder includes text messages that she refers to as "grammatically hellacious" sent from one of her love interests: "He said: its incribly hard not to harass you i love you still obviously... / He said: god i already regret this communication... howefver i must say that I huhhhh... the longer the type the lobgner i realize my mistake... i love you so much... i love ur life... i am crying... you are th e best human im sorry im in marrakech ...i am very drunk in morroccoan country..." (Broder 110). As can be determined by the reader, the essay is blatant with informal texting lingo and misspellings, simulating the drunkenness of this particular love interest. By including these messages sent to her in their raw and unedited form, Broder's confessional essays in *So Sad Today* reveal truth about what it is like to engage in romantic relationships in the twenty-first century, especially with the emergence of digital technology and social media that make it easier for superficial conversations like this one to occur. Ultimately, it is important for the reader to take this disposable language into consideration when approaching the remainder of the collection not only to realize how textese is influencing our contemporary understanding of what a "confession" looks like in literature, but to also understand Broder's intended audience of those who are at least somewhat familiar with these developing language trends.

This conversational superficiality perpetuated by digital technology is also evident in the essay, "Love Like You Are Trying to Fill an Insatiable Spiritual Hole with Another Person Who Will Suffocate in There," where the reader sees actual text messages between Broder and one of her romantic interests as she ends her relationship with him:

Me: hiii. so, i have been doing some thinking and some talking here in LA and have decided to give... monogamy a try. with my husband. but this means an end for you and me in a sexual/sexual context. i am deeply sad as I write this. we did so good. good love. another lifetime? :)

Him: Okay. :) Obv bummed but way more important you do what's good in the long sense. Would be cool to reconnect on a literary basis in a while, but good to give it space

Me: who knows what is good? i am doing my best. i fell hard for you. you're that good. i wld have chosen you. and i wld have wanted you to be mine. but you belong to the world and the stars. i don't really know how to do things half-measures. i am sorry to do this over text. know that i'm crying at starbucks.

Me: and yes. space then literary/friendship even, sounds good.

Him: I'm wrenched. I'm not sure I can do things full measure, and for that I don't want sympathy, but I think you understand. I wish you all luck.

Me: Love to you. Goodbye for now

Him: Love to you. Goodbye. (Broder 59)

Between the smiley faces made with a colon and a parenthesis to the shortening of words like “obviously” to just “obv,” the language deployed in this text message exchange clearly demonstrates a language that appeals to millennials familiar with technology-related language trends that evolve with digital innovations. Again, this language not only demonstrates Broder’s intended audience of millennials, but also how textese can be used as a model for how other aspiring confessional women writers can be open about their own life experiences in literature.

Over the last century, the gradual change in language used in confessional literature has been studied closely by other literary scholars. From the timeless language utilized by late-

twentieth century confessional poetry to the pop-cultural and disposable texting lingo or textese used in the twenty-first century by Broder, this shift in language is best explained by Genevieve Marie Johnson, author of “The Invention of Reading and the Evolution of Text.” She writes,

As the human species continues to evolve, human communication continues to evolve... Human communication is facilitated by human tools and technologies and, most recently, by digital technology... With regard to this, the evolution of text (e.g., written formats and materials) is the very evidence of the continued ability and joy of the human invention of decoding text (i.e., reading). Reading, in the most general sense, and all those involved in facilitating, understanding and using the processes of reading, might maintain open-mindedness by situating reading in an historical and evolutionary context. Literacy is and has always been intertwined with technology. (Johnson 121)

Johnson believes the evolution of text as it relates to confessional literature promotes the joy of reading and is an inevitable part of the evolutionary shift in language from timeless to pop-cultural caused by digital technology. Alvin Kernan, author of *The Death of Literature*, agrees with Johnson that digital technology is changing the face of traditionally published works of literature and even argues that it is a detriment to the print-based institution of literature as we know it. He writes,

As a print-based institution, literature was bound to be deeply affected by any change in the status of print and the writing-reading skills needed to use it. In the long run the shift, which is at the center of the transformation to postindustrialism, from a book to an electronic culture, of which the literacy crisis is one major symptom, marks the end of the old literature. (Kernan 143)

Although Kernan agrees that electronic culture was bound to have an impact on literature and argues that it “marks the end of the old literature” – or as the title of his book insinuates, the death of literature as we know it, – it is not clear whether or not he believes the transition from a print-based institution to more of an electronic one is a natural evolution because of the joy of reading and the pleasure that comes from decoding text. Regardless, this change in language in traditionally-published literary works because of digital innovations has been noticed by scholars such as Kernan since the 1990s. With the contemporary publication of confessional works like *So Sad Today* that are so clearly influenced by digital technology, this evolution of language in literature is undoubtedly worthy of ongoing academic study.

A final observation regarding the changes of confessional literature from the late-twentieth century to the twenty-first century is the shift in what is considered “oversharing” in contemporary North American women’s writing. Although confessional poets like Plath certainly shared elements of her personal life such as her struggle with mental illness and consequential suicide attempts through carefully constructed personas, Broder shares significantly more personal information that she explicitly states as her own lived experiences. According to Rachel Sykes, author of “‘Who Gets to Speak and Why?’ Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women’s Writing,

Over the past decade, as social media has produced new and increasingly wide-reaching ways to share the details of our everyday experiences and milestone life events, oversharing has increased in popularity as a cultural term. Indeed, the rise of oversharing in its twenty-first century context is now indivisible from the implementation of ‘Web 2.0’ in the late 1990s and the subsequent development of websites that privilege user-generated content. (154)

Being that Broder's *So Sad Today* began as a Twitter account as a direct result of the user-generated content made possible with the implementation of Web 2.0, Skyes would argue that social media platforms enable her and other North American women writers to "share, discuss, and help create an autofictional literature to represent subjects that are deemed 'too much' by the dominant culture" (Skyes 164). The term, oversharing then is only "designed to dismiss the popularity of such texts, accusing the author of 'spilling out' confessional content and denying the creative labor, agency, and intent of the women writer" (Sykes 159). Although appearing to be just a contemporary slur for the information sharing methods of women, oversharing is a term that can carry both positive and negative connotations in the twenty-first century. While women's use of autofictional style leaves them susceptible to accusations of oversharing, especially if their writing is explicit, mundane, or depicts the personal, sexual, and intellectual lives of white, heterosexual North American life, it has also created a community of North American women that collectively grapple with the publicly imposed boundaries between the mundane and explicit, the real and the fictional, the share and the overshare (Sykes 169). Overall, Broder as a twenty-first century confessional author falls into this community of women and is paving the way for more North American women writers in having their autofictional works published for the masses, changing the way society perceives the "oversharing" nature of confessional literature and what is even considered literature at all.

Broder's use of textese ultimately sets her collection apart from other works of twentieth and twenty-first century confessional literature, opening a space not only for readers but also for aspiring women writers in particular who might want to use a similar technique to write about difficult life experiences. The digital era is ushering in a new kind of confessional literature, one that in some ways is even more welcoming to those who might otherwise have difficulty giving

voice to their stories, all the while acknowledging that such digital access – and consequently the understanding and utilization of textese – is not ubiquitous. After all, “39 percent of rural Americans lack broadband access – in contrast to only 4 percent of urban Americans. And 69 percent of rural Americans use the internet, compared to 75 percent of urban residents. This means less participation in the culture, society, politics, and economic activity of the 21st century” (Strover). Although there is a population of North American women that do not have access to the resources to adequately understand the language trend of textese, it is important to note that there are many essays in *So Sad Today* that are written in the same timeless language that dominates her poetry collections. For those women that do have access to the internet, however, their recognition of Broder as a twentieth-century confessional woman writer is important when considering the gendered argument of this paper. While Broder has the potential to inspire many other communities such as millennials or the LGBTQIA+ community, it is important to make this a gendered conversation because of her ability to be inclusive of a group – women – that has been previously harshly criticized and even ostracized from confessional literature and the personal-confessional genre overall. From the negative criticism of Plath and Sexton in the late-twentieth century to the overwhelming press and impressive literary accolades awarded to Broder in the twenty-first century, American society has come a long way in its perception of confessional literature. Going forward, it is important that we as a society continue to open the avenues of expression for confessional women writers to be open about their lived experiences, building greater community for those that have been previously excluded from the confessional genre. With writers like Broder leading the way for greater reception of these works in North America, there is no doubt that a more equitable resurgence of “confession” will soon become a reality.

Works Cited

- Bleakley, Alan. "Writing With Invisible Ink: Narrative, Confessionalism and Reflective Practice." *Reflective Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 11–24., doi:10.1080/713693130.
- Bromwich, Kathryn. "So Sad Today's Melissa Broder: 'I Just Want to Rip That Chapter Out'." *The Observer*. Guardian News and Media, 08 May 2016. Web.
- Broder, Melissa. *Last Sext*. Tin House Books, 2016.
- Broder, Melissa. *So Sad Today*. Scribe Publications, 2016.
- Clark, Hilary Anne. *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*. State University of New York Press, 2008.
- Escoria, Juliet. "The Writer Behind So Sad Today Is A Very Real Adult." *The FADER*. The FADER, 15 Nov. 2016. Web.
- Freund, Elizabeth. *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*. Routledge, 2013.
- Gill, Jo, editor. *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. Routledge, 2006.
- Harrod, Mary Beth. "Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres." 12 May 2007.
- Holub, Robert C. *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Methuen, Inc., 1984.
- Johnson, Genevieve Marie. "The Invention of Reading and the Evolution of Text." *Journal of Literacy and Technology*, vol. 16, no. 1, May 2015, pp. 107–128.
- Joiner, Whitney. "Why Is Melissa Broder So Sad Today?" *ELLE*. ELLE, 29 Aug. 2017. Web.
- Kernan, Alvin B. *The Death of Literature*. Yale University Press, 1990.
- Lovitt, Bryn. "So Sad Today Author Melissa Broder on Twitter Anonymity and Internet Addiction." *Vanity Fair*. Vanity Fair, 15 Mar. 2016. Web.

“Melissa Broder.” *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2016. *Literature Resource Center*,
go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&u=ashv45734&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CH100032179
2&it=r&asid=a4318404a6b3049d00481b1a50925260.

Molesworth, Charles. “‘With Your Own Face On’: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, May 1976, pp. 163–178.,
doi:10.2307/440682.

Phillips, Robert. *The Confessional Poets*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

Nelson, Deborah. “Confessional Poetry.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*,
pp. 31–46., doi:10.1017/cco9781139032674.004.

Sherwin, Miranda. *"Confessional" Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination*. Palgrave
Macmillan, 2011.

Strover, Sharon. “Reaching Rural America with Broadband Internet Service.” *The Conversation*, The
Conversation US, Inc., 16 Jan. 2018, theconversation.com/reaching-rural-america-with-
broadband-internet-service-82488.

Sykes, Rachel. “Who Gets to Speak and Why? Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2017, pp. 151–174., doi:10.1086/692482.

Tuttle, Kate. "The Only Addiction "That Hasn't Tried to Kill Me": Melissa Broder on Confessional Writing, Anxiety, and How Much Honesty Is Too Much." *Salon*. Salon Media Group, Inc., 26 Mar. 2016. Web.