Confessional Poetry and Blog Culture in the Age of Autobiography

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CONFESSIONAL POETRY AND BLOG CULTURE
IN THE AGE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By

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For Jonathan and Daina
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ABSTRACT

M. L. Rosenthal’s 1959 labeling of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies as “Confessional,” initiated a debate about the literary value of autobiographical writing. At the center of this controversy was the taboo subject matter explored by the confessional poets: madness, sexuality, alcoholism, depression, and suicide. Another form of autobiographical writing which similarly polarizes audience despite being born in 1999 is the blog. In this study, I explore various shared traits between confessional poems of the 1960s and modern-day personal blogs and aim to demonstrate how we might read them both as part of the larger conversation about the culture of confession and the age of autobiography.

This dissertation looks closely at works by three confessional poets, all of whose writing have recently experienced resurgence in popular culture—John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton—and draws a parallel between characteristic traits in their works and contemporary blogging practices. I borrow Berryman’s “Henry” from Dream Songs to illuminate the similarities between a poetic persona and an online avatar and argue that Berryman’s broken syntax foreshadows the fragmentation of language at work in modern-day blogs. I regard Plath’s contemporary cult following as an indicator of her acute audience awareness and explore how various Plath poems function as highly performative works of art intended to elicit a desired effect from readers. I compare Sexton’s writing about taboo marital and maternal subjects to the recent phenomenon of mommyblogging and explain how Sexton’s subversive poems paved the way for later women to engage in open, unapologetic life writing in blog communities. Ultimately, I argue for the reading of personal blogs as cultural artifacts and for the consideration of confessional blogs as a remediated American literary genre.
BLOGS AND THE CULTURE OF CONFESSION

The beating of a horse fouled Nietszche’s avatar,
thereafter never said he one sane word,
Henry is not like that
but the fear.

—John Berryman, Dream Song 378

I know now that my voice is not a liability. It’s not something to spray chemical death on.
[...] I was lucky, thirteen years ago, to be introduced to Berryman (and a lot of other writers and poets) by a poetry teacher who prized the voice: "Berryman's the finger, not the moon, if you feel me."

—Dr. Desiree, Em Dashes & Crazy Love, Wednesday, June 24, 2009

In “Why Contemporary Poetry Is Not Taught in the Academy” Michael McIrvin dismisses confessional poetry as irrelevant, claiming, “Poetry that is solipsistic and banal and masturbatory (i.e., seems to assume no reader, and speaks to little beyond the poet’s own tiny life) demands at best a voyeuristic reading or, more likely, a completely passive one in which no meaning is achieved for anyone except, maybe, the poet.” Blogs have been similarly discounted and sidelined as undeserving of scholarly attention. Irish journalist Ed Power rightly claims, “Nobody denies that 99% of blogs tend towards indulgent dross, churned out by writers who remain amateur for the straightforward reason that they aren’t very good” and also rightly adds, “The bloggers who matter may comprise only a tiny percentile, yet the breadth of their achievements . . . the possibilities raised by those achievements . . . justifies the hyperbole” (10). Power’s justification of a serious look at blogs might also be used as we look at confessional poetry and “the possibilities raised by those achievements.”

Criticism like McIrvin’s suggests that poets’ confessional subject matters have distanced them from contemporary audiences and rendered scholars unable to see their poems as part of
the larger tradition of American poetry. Additionally, Power’s commentary provides insight into the limited ways in which blogs have been examined from scholarly perspectives. Both confessional poetry and blogs have been pushed to the margin of literary studies by those who deem them too emotional or reactive. In some cases, confessional poetry and blogs have been unjustly dismissed as inapplicable to others’ lives. As this dissertation will demonstrate, these two forms of writing have much in common, and by looking at them alongside one another, we might garner a better, fuller understanding of them both, as well as the twentieth century as an age of autobiography.

I disagree with assessments like McIrvin’s and see confessional poetry instead as a nexus in twentieth-century American poetry that bridges the gap between Whitman’s effort to make the public private by sounding that “barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world” and the first weblog in 1999, the virtual roof of the world wide web.

More than simply acknowledging “the breadth of their achievements,” as Power writes, this dissertation seeks to define the confessional blog as a new literary genre, although with roots in a tradition of confessional writing, to explore similar works in confessional poetry which have profoundly shaped the way we write about the self, to situate confessional blogs within the larger scope of American literature and the age of autobiography, and to ultimately legitimize a deeper, more scholarly look at new media within a larger literary tradition.

To demonstrate how the complexity of shaping one’s online identity and being a member of an online network, such as a blogging community, makes some blogs more than “indulgent dross,” as Power notes, I have outlined a number of traits confessional blogs share with confessional poetry. The idea is that by understanding confessional blogging through the lens of confessional poetry writing, scholars might build on an established conversation about confessional poetry to talk about confessional blogs and borrow from the language used to discuss poetry to now discuss blogs. Here are the shared traits I will explore in the following chapters:

1. Autobiographical content, often initiated by crisis and resulting in catharsis through the divulgence of the crisis to a community of participative and passive readers through the creation of a persona and a performance.
2. A common form identifiable by its fragmentation of personal identity by the discarding of some personal traits and amplification of other characteristics (see
Kirsch 125). For our selected Confessional poets, this is the lyric poem form (Vendler 35). For blogs, this is its resemblance to the personal diary and the shipmaster’s log with time stamping and reverse chronological order.

3. The creation of an audience or readership with a personal connection to the autobiographical content and, in the cases of collaborative writing workshops and the blogosphere, the possibility of interaction between the poet and the reader and the possible blurring of lines between the two.

4. The necessary performative aspects of the writing self caused by the author’s creation of a fictive persona through which to communicate with his or her readership and by the author’s implicit awareness of a voyeuristic audience.

These traits are prevailing elements of confessional poetry that, when applied to confessional blogs, help us to understand this genre of writing as heavily influenced by the first. By looking for these specific traits in examples of blogs alongside examples of confessional poetry, we can better understand how the first form of writing anticipates and foreshadows the second one. Generally, these traits illuminate the origin of the direct treatment of taboo subjects we see in contemporary blogging practices. Specifically, these traits help us link various confessional poets with concrete modern-day examples of bloggers engaging in similar subversive writing acts.

To explore how these traits manifest themselves in confessional poetry and blogs, I have chosen three poets whose lives and works reflect traits shared by blogs and blog culture: John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. In each chapter, I investigate how each poet’s life and work anticipates some element of contemporary blog culture. The final chapter of the dissertation synthesizes these shared traits and posits what this might mean for how blogs can be situated into ongoing studies of literature and new media.

At its core, this dissertation offers a small response to the division between the literature and composition specializations in the academy and an attempt at reconciling the two by demonstrating how the study of new media and traditional literary studies can complement one another. The division between the two fields is undeniable though it runs counter to that interdisciplinary conscience most of us have to weave together that which is different and demonstrate similarities.¹ And composition and rhetoric’s incorporation of new media studies in

¹ This act of weaving together current works with those it refers to is often called linking or tracking back in new media discourse.
recent years has provided even more challenges for unification in English departments. There are those, of course, who embrace the new technologies and those who resist them. This dissertation does not seek to argue that ‘newer is better’ or ‘adapt or die,’ but it does seek to show how a new form of writing, these confessional blogs, might be seen as a natural next step in American self-writing and that we ought not dismiss an evolving form of writing which may help us to better understand the way we live now and the culture surrounding digital writing and web publishing. It can also help us understand the rise of confessional poetry and its main features.

The comparison between confessional poetry and blog culture attracts me because it creates a parallel between two ‘bastard’ forms of writing. The words from McIrvin I opened with provide only a glimpse at the argument made by many critics that the study of confessional poetry is fruitless. Many others have argued that it is too concerned with shock and titillation than in craft or “art,” and that this misplaced attention wrongly results in exhibitionism, narcissism, and self-indulgence. The same has been argued about the worthlessness of blogs, with some clueless detractors as to what the purpose of writing—or even reading—an online diary might be. I agree that writing must be relevant to its audience and resonate with them in order for it to be significant and “matter,” to borrow from Power’s words. But other print forms of writing have alienated audiences in the past, particularly in American literature. Walt Whitman, whom I discuss multiple times in this study as the indirect source of all confessional poetry, himself had to be self-published because the average consumer of nineteenth-century poetry was outraged by the content or form of his work. While confessional poets did find publishers interested in their work, much of the reputation they garnered was due to their controversial lives and deaths, not simply because of the merits of their work.

This study also works from the premise that we have only scratched the surface when it comes to discussions of new media. I argue that there are shades of differences—both between media and genres—that we must account for when discussing new media, and this study, by zeroing in on one of the many forms on online writing, offers one such closer look at an example of a writing technology and the way we might build upon preliminary discussions of it.

Discussions about political blogs are common, and articles have been written about using blogs as a teaching tool. Some scholars, such as Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd, have argued that blogs should be classified as a genre. Scholars such as Viviane Serfaty have offered an entryway to discuss blogs from a structural point of view, focusing on blogs’ organization and
content. But little has been done to demonstrate where, specifically, blogs should be categorized within the context of a larger American literary tradition, or as a contribution to a varied and vital field of autobiographical writing. To address this gap, this study seeks to define the confessional blog as a genre and locate it within the American tradition of autobiographical writing, leading back to the confessional poets and, before that, to Walt Whitman’s poetry.

I argue that by forging a connection between existing autobiographical writing in print and more of the same on the Web and fixing confessional blogs within the American literary tradition of writing about the self that we might take cues from the ongoing literary scholarship about American literature and expand our discussions about the effects of blogs in a more meaningful way. As I noted, scholarship on blogs is currently limited to discussions of political blogs and their relationship to traditional journalism; this study explores the nature of online diary writing and its impact on blogging communities.

Before I address how the confessional poets individually relate to my study, it is necessary to lay the groundwork for this discussion by exploring the origin of the term “Confessional poetry” and how it relates to what I call the confessional blog. To begin, after Robert Lowell read W. D. Snodgrass’s draft of Heart’s Needle, he began reconsidering his own writing approach. Lowell’s earlier work had been impersonal, highly wrought, and formal, having been heavily influenced by the doctrine of impersonality Lowell learned from New Criticism and T. S. Eliot’s essays. The product of this reconsideration spurred along by Snodgrass was Life Studies, a groundbreaking collection of poetry which delved into taboo issues, such as Lowell’s family problems and personal bouts of depression. Critic M. L. Rosenthal, in his review of Life Studies, called the work “Confessional,” a label which stuck and which most subsequently labeled “Confessional” poets resented. The term, for most, implied some tasteless divulging of personal secrets, as well as the devaluation of poetic form itself, shifting audiences’ attention away from the poet’s work and onto the poet’s life. I rely on the label in this study to distinguish three poets who wrote about personal, autobiographical content from others who do not place private experiences at the center of their work. To distinguish autobiographical blogs dealing with intimate, personal issues often seen as taboo from other non-personal blogs, I have adopted the term “confessional blog.” When I use this term, I am focusing on the traits these online diaries share with the three confessional poets I focus on: Berryman, Plath, and Sexton.
These three poets were chosen both for their shared traits and the differences among their works. These poets offer a good cross-section of the larger group of confessional poets, and each of their works helped shape American literature in a profound way. The poets are united, as most other confessional poets are, by their reflection on personal struggle, whether this was the death of parents, personal mental illness, alcoholism, or the allure of suicide. Yet the individual content of their poetry, their poetic techniques, and their perceived relationship to the audience of readers offer shades of differences which also parallel distinctions in modern-day blogs.

The first three chapters are each devoted to a confessional poet and a trait that their work shares with contemporary confessional blogs. In Chapter One, I discuss how John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* foreshadows the disrupted syntax and use of a fictive persona we see in contemporary blogging practices. I argue that Berryman’s use of Henry can be likened to the bloggers’ invention of a handle or avatar to craft a self for public consumption in the blogosphere. Additionally, I argue that Berryman’s relation to Henry, and similarly bloggers’ relation to an avatar, is highly complex. Through masking some aspects of his identity and adopting pseudonymity for the sake of the confession, Berryman is newly at liberty to reveal himself to his readership. The mask of Henry enables him to communicate in fascinating ways, as he uses Henry and Henry’s biographical details which are also often autobiographical for Berryman.

Sylvia Plath, the subject of Chapter Two, is at the center of a discussion about writing as a highly performative act. To demonstrate how Plath’s work anticipates elements of contemporary blog culture, I emphasize the way her poetry stages the author-audience relationship, so powerful even after her death that the poems generated a cult following, making her an immortal iconic figure of the artist-wife done wrong.

The third chapter analyzes Anne Sexton’s poetry alongside today’s *mommyblogs* and argues that Sexton’s harsh portrayal of the domestic sphere paved the way for contemporary wives and mothers to admit their imperfections and personal failings within the blogosphere. The chapter offers examples of Sexton’s marital and maternal anxieties and draws parallels to modern-day mothers admitting similar issues in confessional blogs as a therapeutic act.

The final chapter synthesizes the first three chapters and focuses on the causes and consequences of creating these subversive confessional works. I argue in Chapter Four that the very nature of confessional blogs, the way they juxtapose the public with the private, publishing
personal information on the web for an audience of voyeuristic strangers and the way they foster a false sense of intimacy between the author and the reader, is a nod to the lineage of autobiographical American works which came before them.

Overall, this dissertation argues that confessional poetry, more now than ever, is of enduring importance and relevance to English studies, both for literature and new media scholarship. By connecting confessional poetry with contemporary blogging practices, I explore how confessional poetry anticipates various aspects of the prevailing culture of self-writing. I discuss the interesting resurgence of confessional poetry in popular culture—including indie songs inspired by Berryman, a major movie about Plath’s life and countless books detailing her life and stormy marriage, and current debates out the legacies of Sexton and Plath in representations of mothering—and what this means about those engaged in the revival of confessional works.²

Ultimately, the aim of this dissertation is to offer an entryway into looking at blogs and the prevailing confessional culture that generates them in a way that benefits ongoing discussions about both American literature and new media studies. By drawing meaningful parallels between renowned confessional poets, such as Berryman, Plath, and Sexton, and contemporary blogging practice trends, this dissertation seeks to in some small way bridge the current gap between literary and new media studies and demonstrate how intersections already exist between the two, intersections that, if studied further, might allow us deeper insight into literary traditions and emerging new media alike.

These intersections can be understood in three ways. One parallel between the confessional genres is the nature of the self and what happens when the self is the subject of the writing. Consequences of this include the necessary performative elements that emerge when the writer adopts a persona to mask the “true” self. A second parallel between the genres is the cultivation of memoir and autobiography in an age of media, spectacle, and consumer culture. Because of this, the writer risks becoming sensationalized as a celebrity and dismissed as inauthentic. A final intersection is the practice of writing as therapy for writer and audience alike. Specifically in the case of Sexton and mommybloggers, the initial impetus for writing is to

² See “Smothered to Smithereens” by Stephen Burt for more on the subject of the contemporary poetics of motherhood and Rachel Zucker’s Museum of Accidents.
achieve a release from the everyday strain of motherhood. Reading such blogs may also be cathartic, as it functions as group therapy, where those in pain can see they are not alone.

Ultimately, the evolution from the sixties to today shows an ever-expanding culture of confession and autobiography. This dissertation considers some important aspects of that evolution and how confessional poetry opens the door to much of what has happened.
CHAPTER 1
MEET “HENRY”: POETIC PERSONAS AND ONLINE AVATARS

When Brooklyn-based indie rock band The Hold Steady released *Boys and Girls in America* in 2006, a new generation of readers was introduced to John Berryman in the single “Stuck Between Stations.” In the song, lyricist and lead singer Craig Finn recounts the January night in 1972 when Berryman leapt to his death from a double-decker bridge in Minneapolis:

The devil and John Berryman
Took a walk together.
They ended up on Washington
Talking to the river.

Finn juxtaposes Berryman’s seeming invincibility with the inevitability of his suicide when he writes,

There was that night when we thought John Berryman could fly.
But he didn’t, so he died.
She said, “You’re pretty good with words, but words won’t save your life.”
And they didn’t, so he died.

Finn’s representative use of Berryman signifies the depressed and suicidal artist figure. Finn uses Berryman both as poet-icon and fellow person to reflect on our collective mortality as he shifts from a third-person reference to Berryman and an unnamed woman to the first-person plural we, invoking images of decay and eventual immobility:

We drink and we dry up
Then we crumble to dust.
We get wet and we corrode
And now we’re covered up in rust.

In January 2007 another Brooklyn-based indie band called Clap Your Hands Say Yeah released “Mama, Won’t You Keep Them Castles in the Air and Burning?” which similarly
alludes to the depressed and suicidal poet—“Like Berryman / Bed-wet poet fears / That better
men drink taller beers”—leaving listeners with the line “time does not cut deep / But cuts most
absurdly,” an existential ending much like that of The Hold Steady’s “Stuck Between Stations”
and its images of decay and death.

In August 2007 Texas-based indie rock band Okkervil River followed suit and released
“John Allyn Smith Sails,” which also relays Berryman’s death, this time through a first-person
perspective. Despite Okkervil River’s account including morbid physical details left out of
“Stuck Between Stations”—“my bones and skull,” “a broken me,” “tongue torn out . . . balls
removed”—“John Allyn Smith Sails” turns into a happy, celebratory song where life is “the
worst trip” and Berryman in his death is finally headed home. The band, sending him off, closes
the song with their version of the Beach Boys’ “Sloop John B.”—a play on Berryman’s name.

To understand what accounts for this resurgence of Berryman in popular culture, we must
think of how Berryman’s The Dream Songs of the 1960s transcends time and becomes applicable
to a new generation of readers. Reflecting on the recent revival of Berryman’s work by those
whom he calls “sad young literary men in skinny jeans,” Steve Marsh in an article published in
September 2008 addresses the myriad traits of Berryman’s work, in terms of both form and
content, that appeal to a twenty-first century readership:

His haunting Dream Songs, though more than forty years old, are startlingly
modern—confessional like a blog, with the abbreviated syntax of the text
message, and infused with the kind of protective irony that permeates the Internet.
Like a role-playing game, Berryman’s poems even contain an avatar, “Huffy
Henry,” when the poet was feeling intolerably eggheaded, and “Henry House, the
steadiest man on the block,” when he was feeling more manly and stable.
Berryman’s self-awareness is a prototype of our modern brand of ironic self-
defense. Dream Songs anticipate the way we communicate now in a way the verse
of his contemporaries—Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell—
doesn’t.

In this chapter, I expand on the revealing comparison Marsh draws between Berryman’s
poetry and contemporary online culture. Focusing on Berryman’s use of a fictive, third-person
persona (Henry) in relation to personal, autobiographical material, I explore specific examples of
his treatment of depression and suicide in The Dream Songs.
I agree with Thomas Travisano’s assessment of the confessional paradigm needing reevaluation, given the “damage done so far [. . .] to obscure the career-long conversation about poetry and poetics that engaged Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Elizabeth Bishop” (32). Even M. L. Rosenthal who coined the term ‘confessional poetry’ while reviewing Lowell’s Life Studies in 1959 later called it “both helpful and too limited” and responsible for creating a “confessional school [which] has by now done a certain amount of damage” (25). Travisano’s suggestions about the need for a fuller analysis of confessional poetry goes beyond limiting critical paradigms. For example, his suggestion that we “need to rethink how these poets [. . .] construct a grammar of dreams, how they implicate pictures and other visual objects in a verbal space, how they incorporate prose rhythms and speech patterns into their verse, and how they deal with problems of knowledge, history, culture, grief, and loss in an environment of epistemological uncertainty” is the impetus for my own reconsideration of how we read confessional poets as an antecedent to contemporary blog culture and read Berryman, in particular, for his impact on how we might better interpret authors’ use of fictive poetic personas and how they consequently impact the very nature of authorship and reader participation in the literary work (69-70) .

In this chapter, I plan to provide some tools to arrive at confessional culture as it is manifested in both Berryman’s The Dream Songs and in modern-day blogs. By looking at the parallels between the two—that is, the syntax, the personal, autobiographical content, and the use of a fictive persona whether by the author’s use of an avatar or simple handle—I will demonstrate a new way to make sense of Berryman’s Dream Songs and reconcile them within the corpus of confessional poetry along with a new way to understand how the confessional blog as a genre fits into the larger conversation about autobiographical writing and the age of the memoir.

In a 1970 interview with Peter Stitt on the subject of what makes a great artist, John Berryman said, “mostly you need ordeal. My idea is this: the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him [. . . .] I hope to be nearly crucified.” If Berryman’s assessment is correct, that the greatest ordeals generate the greatest artists, then Berryman’s body of work should remain a fixture in the canon of great American literature. At the age of ten, John Allyn Smith’s father shot himself in the head right outside his son’s bedroom window. Shortly after the suicide, his mother married the landlord,
and John was given the name Berryman. At seventeen, he attempted suicide and was later hospitalized at twenty-five for nervous exhaustion mistakenly diagnosed as epilepsy. The successes of Berryman’s academic and professional life were overshadowed by the shattering suicide of his father, and Berryman became an alcoholic whose nervous condition persisted through three marriages, the birth of three children, and intermittent periods of recovery until his eventual leap from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis in 1972.

Readers might believe, especially given Berryman’s own philosophies about personality and ordeal informing the poet’s work, in addition to the mistaken clichés about confessional poetry containing only autobiography, that he would write from a direct, personal point of view and use his own voice. Some critics believe he did, but Berryman vehemently denied ever equating himself with the speaker of *The Dream Songs*, “Henry.” In fact, so thick was the controversy that Berryman, in his foreword to the second edition of *The Dream Songs*, added what amounts to a disclaimer about an “imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof” (vi).

Responses to Berryman’s distancing himself from Henry ran the gamut. For every critic like Denis Donoghue who sees Berryman set apart and separate from Henry, there is another who sees the poet as inextricable from his speaker. In 1969 Donoghue wrote, “For my own part, I have no difficulty in accepting the invented character Henry as distinct from the maker in 77 *Dream Songs*.” Offering a contrary perspective in his collection of critical essays on Berryman, J. M. Linebarger refuses to believe Berryman’s identity is entirely absent from Henry and supports this by listing the vast number of other personas (versions of Henry) present in *The Dream Songs*:

Some of Henry’s other names are Henry House, Henry Pussy-cat, and the Rabbi; and his unnamed friend might be named “cagey John” (51). The poet dons not only these masks but others in *The Dream Songs*: he is often a cat, once a raccoon (57), an opossum (355), a deer (56), and, in one wild analogy, a helicopter (367). Whatever the masks, the informing personality of John Berryman is behind all of them, despite his tongue-in-cheek disclaimer in the introductory note. Henry is an
“imaginary character” only in the sense that all characters are in literature—or, more exactly, in autobiography. (80)

Helen Vendler seems to agree in part with Linebarger’s assessment when in *The Given and the Made* she calls the voices of *The Dream Songs* Berryman’s “split underselves.” Vendler, however, emphasizes the clear distinction between the poet and persona in ways that Linebarger does not when she argues that “the fastidious John Berryman writing the poem never enters the verse and never interacts” with the voices. For both critics, Berryman’s presence is clear in the text, though Vendler pinpoints the influence of being more Berryman the man than Berryman the poet.

Critics’ views on both sides are perhaps best summed up by David Perkins when he writes,

> In poem after poem, Henry inventories his state and finds it awful. We hear about his desperations, death wishes, sexual hungers, griefs, drunks, boredom, follies, fractures, and so forth. The intimate disclosures of most people are depressing, but Henry’s are more so. For Henry’s are Berryman’s. (To take Henry as Berryman is naïve; not to do so would be more naïve.)

Joel Connaroe offers the bluntest dismissal of them all when, in his chapter on “The Lonely Laments of Henry Pussycat,” he writes in a poignant parenthetical interruption, “(I say Henry and mean Berryman. I think that anyone who reads the songs carefully will reject the assertion that they are about an imaginary character—some details, of course, are invented, but the sequence adheres closely to the facts of the poet’s life and mind.)” (95). I agree with Connaroe here; the complexities of Henry line up with the complexities of Berryman, and Henry seems to be a quasi-anonymous outlet for Berryman, a tool of catharsis for him to use to communicate that which he could not otherwise say freely.

Yet when asked about his relationship with Henry, as he was in 1968 by John Plotz, he was quick to deny they shared any identity: “Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand I am not Henry. You know, I pay income tax; Henry pays no income tax. And bats come over and they stall in my hair—and fuck them, I’m not Henry; Henry doesn’t have any bats.” By the end of his life, however, Berryman’s perspective changed even if slightly, as he admitted in an interview that Henry was an “outlet” and “a way of making my mind known.”
What then was the purpose of using Henry to distance himself from the reader? What was accomplished through Berryman’s use of Henry? Linebarger asserts that Berryman uses Henry in response to the age of anxiety, pointing to Henry’s often contradictory statements and Berryman’s unwillingness—or inability—to side with either one of the them. Linebarger writes, “[H]e was trying to allow for the ‘drift-of-life,’ the expression of tentative views as well as permanent ones, the right to hold opinions sometimes only momentarily” (92). For every light, humorous Henry moment, Berryman presents a dark, depressing one. Linebarger interprets Henry as “the archetype of modern man, or at least of the modern poet” and sees Henry as “[l]ost in an existential world, living on the edge of madness” (151).

But some readers, like Robert Lowell, acknowledge not only Berryman’s choice to use Henry but the necessity of using Henry. Starting with the same interruptive and corrective statement as Connaroe, Lowell starts, “The poems are about Berryman, or rather they are about a person he calls Henry.” Lowell clarifies, “Henry is Berryman seen as himself, as poète maudit, child and puppet. He is tossed about with a mixture of tenderness and absurdity, pathos, and hilarity that would have been impossible if the author had spoken in the first person.”

Lowell’s comment highlights the connection between Berryman’s use of the mask of Henry in The Dream Songs and the creative manifestations of the self we see at work in contemporary online culture, specifically in blogging communities.

One unifying trait between the two confessional forms is the reader’s sense that they are both fractured. The blog form mimics the traditional shipmaster’s log, relying on reverse chronological order. While blog searches classify and organize the blogs thematically, individual blogs categorize posts only by month and year, resulting in a broken, organic narrative as subjects vary daily, and stories are often interrupted. Just as some critics have argued that it is problematic to read one Dream Song in isolation of the others and make sense of it, I have found that many blogs, especially those of a confessional nature, function the same way. Reading a single entry may be likened to eavesdropping mid-telephone call. The contexts and references are easily lost on a new listener, but the longer one listens, the more sense it begins to make.

In 1994 Louise Glück explained this fragmentation in The Dream Songs as a product of Berryman’s multifarious voices and pinpointed it as his breakaway from the conventional lyric form in poetry: “Berryman’s primary disruption of the lyric is the fracturing of the voice [. . . .] these are noisy poems—shattered, voluble, fragmented, desperate, dramatic, futile.” While Glück
acknowledges that *The Dream Songs* is about a “search for such wholeness,” she refrains from saying whether or not Berryman achieves the wholeness by the work’s end. An answer, I think, can be found in the patterns that emerge within the text in the thematic connections among individual poems the same way continuity in an otherwise fragmented blog emerges across its entries.

For example, a closer look at *Dream Songs* 1, 14, 29, 75, 76, 77, 91, 133, and 384 illustrates Berryman’s unique treatment of depression and suicide through the eyes of a lonely Henry. Each of the poems, written across the span of nine years, offers readers insight into Berryman’s own mental state.

First off, Berryman frames *The Dream Songs* and introduces the audience to Henry in “Dream Song 1.” Berryman establishes the conflict to be resolved by the book’s end as Henry’s general malaise and discontent with the world around him. He does not pinpoint specific enemies; rather, all that is in the world strikes Henry as working against him. The themes of depression and how one deals with the constant tug towards death that Berryman explores in “Dream Song 1” recur throughout the book.

The first Dream Song offers an example of such a therapeutic hour at work, as Berryman sets the stage for the rest of the songs. Henry, described as “[h]uffy,” “unappeasable,” and “wicked & away,” is pouting and depressed. Berryman writes of a seeming hopeless state, the kind of sentiments a patient might share about his life while lying on a psychologist’s couch, though Berryman’s style of relying on a third-person persona is unquestionably unique:

All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry’s side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don’t see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived. (7-12)

In this stanza, the world is described as that which initially warms then flees Henry because of one adjective “woolen,” which invites readers to see the world as clothing, a cover to conceal or hide the self. After “the departure,” as Berryman phrases it, referring perhaps to his father’s suicide when all went wrong, Henry isn’t shielded by this cover any longer; he is cold, exposed. The line, “Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought” suggests Henry’s dissatisfaction with
life, as he does what he’s always done, but fate (that which “falls out” without our intervention) follows, revealing his inadequacy. What once worked no longer does, and he spirals downward into a new habit of discontentment.

Henry is then described as “pried open for all the world to see” as he becomes the victim of the world’s scopophilic tendencies, our compulsive need to see that which others may wish to conceal. This victimization is necessarily complicated because of the tension with the confessional poets’ use of poetry for self-exposure, that voyeurism which fuels the readers’ scopophilic tendencies. Henry has, according to the speaker, survived against the odds, yet it is a scenario that the poet presents which isn’t always survivable, as evidenced by the poets examined in this study who ended their own lives.

Berryman reflects on the “departure” of the world as a “lover” by foreshadowing what the ensuing poems will be about: “What he [Henry] has to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be” (13-14). The idea here is that the world in its current state, so unkind and cold, cannot endure, or at least those forced to live in it cannot endure.

A first-person shift occurs in the final stanza of the first Dream Song when Berryman writes, “Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top and I sang” (15-16). Alluding to Zacchaeus here at the moment when Jesus sees him above the crowd, Berryman recalls a heyday, a time before the depression when all the world seemed to suddenly go wrong, when things were okay, or at least livable. For the confessional poets in this study, such a time always preceded illness and the fall. Yet the final word Berryman leaves isn’t one of hope; rather, it is the apocalyptic message that pertains to Henry, Berryman, and the other confessional poets. He closes, “Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed” (17-18). Even through Berryman’s inverted syntax, wherein what we expect to come first comes last, and what we expect to come last comes first, he suggests that the world is upside down and backwards, implying his existentialist theme that life is loss and pain.

From the outset, Berryman leads the reader to ask questions about the very nature of Henry. For example, why is Henry “hiding”? The reasons might be twofold. Is there something that is shameful he wishes to conceal? Is he hiding for self-preservation, to protect himself? *The Dream Songs* portrays the world as the ultimate traitor and the world’s treatment of Henry as the

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3 This tension is further explored in the next chapter, through discussions of Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” and the audience’s response to the poem.
ultimate betrayal. This is summed up in “Dream Song 1” when Berryman recalls, “All the world like a woolen lover / once did seem on Henry’s side / then came a departure” (7-9).

In addition to Berryman’s foreshadowing the work’s key themes in “Dream Song 1,” he uses this first poem to broach key issues that coincide with the content of other confessional poets’ works. Readers might consider, for one, what role exposure plays in Berryman’s work, as Henry is threatened by his being “pried / open for all the world to see” (11-12). It is as if the confession is being forcibly extracted from Henry, which is interesting if one considers Henry to be Berryman; this would suggest that Berryman by writing The Dream Songs was compelling his own confession “for all the world to see.” Some answer to the question of who is compelling what and from whom can be derived from the poem, also, because it hints at the fragmented style and multiple voices of the entire Dream Songs as a poem. Donoghue interprets “Dream Song 1” as coming from three voices:

Three voices, two lines each, speaking in one stanza. The first voice is objective, the poet introducing his character, giving the gist of his theme. The second voice may be received as Henry’s voice, recalling the good times, sycamores and songs. But the third voice is different from either; it is generic, representative, apocalyptic, Mankind rather than any particular man, Henry or J. B. or anyone else. In this third voice the feeling is universal rather than local; it is consistent with the first and second voices, but distinct, as if its experience were the history of the world rather than the fate of a man. It is my understanding that these three voices are nearly as many as the poet requires for his long poem... (“Berryman’s Long Dream”)

Donoghue’s reading of “Dream Song 1” and its distinct voices invites a comparison between what Berryman is doing in The Dream Songs and what happens on modern-day blogs where people engage in the act of confessing their own depression. In the same way that Berryman hides behind the guise of Henry and these other voices which seem to represent other aspects of Berryman’s personality—the other who censors, the third who reflects objectively—bloggers hide behind handles and avatars to communicate personal thoughts to their readers.

An example of a blogging community that functions like this is Depression Tribe. The site offers a place for members to start blogs and participate in forums focused on mental health issues and serves as a depression support community. Like in “Dream Song 1,” bloggers reflect
on their negative relationship with the world and disconnection from others. One blogger, LonelyFemaleForever, writes an entry titled “I’m a stranger to the world,” which reads, “I’m one of the ones people vre afraid to touch. I’m one of the wones people dont want to get closer with. IM also one of the ones scared to be touched. Scared to be torn again. So i will be always untouched. Now i know my place and accept my destiny. Being an observer and writting things people might not understand by sight. I’m a stranger to the world” (sic). Another blogger on Depression Tribe, Hiroshita, reflects on the risks involved when exposing one’s personal struggles to others, citing the “unwavering criticism [. . .] from pretty much everyone” he is met with and saying that “I feel like all I am exposing is flaw after flaw.” Hiroshita opens up to other members of the community about his depression, saying, “I guess I don’t really have a point. I’m just feeling worthless tonight. [. . . .] We all want to be loved, we all want to matter.” The subject of Hiroshita’s blog entry is interesting because he is reflecting on the nature of blogging. The foundation of it is written discourse, which is a lonely act, yet the networked medium blogging occurs through, the Internet, allows the writer to directly and immediately address his readers. While Hiroshita comments on the risks of overexposing himself in public, he ironically ignores the exposure that occurs within his blog, where he reflects on the most private of matters. Like Berryman, the writer who names himself Hiroshita on Depression Tribe is free to speak without fear of the “risk” or “criticism” he sees as threatening in real-world communication. The online exchanges through the use of another identity enable him to connect with an audience who would not otherwise know about his personal struggle with depression.

While two criteria of good writing are typically specificity and concrete details, Berryman uses ambiguous references to his advantage and employs multiple poetic personas, masks, and pronouns without antecedents to achieve particular effects. Adam Kirsch’s The Wounded Surgeon classifies the use of pronouns without antecedents as “powerfully vague” (139). Kirsch points to Berryman’s reference to academic politics as the unlikely inspiration for the archenemy “they” that appears in the poem and argues that it is better for its ambiguity. Had Berryman made the pronoun reference more specific, more directly about a “they” involved in an academic squabble, the poem would have been less effective by excluding other audience members. One might say as much for Berryman’s use of the mask of Henry, as the persona enables him to be Everyman and nobody at once.
The complexities only begin there, as Henry’s diagnosis cannot be limited simply to that of depression. I agree with Helen Vendler when, in *The Given and the Made*, she treats Berryman’s personality like a dichotomy of manic and depressive and explains how it translates into his portrayal of Henry: “. . . when the depressive side of bi-polar illness is ascendant in Berryman, Henry is represented as paralyzed by a pervasive apathy, an unwillingness to play even his own game.” Vendler sees “Dream Song 14” as a prime example of this shift in perspective.

“Dream Song 14” begins with the famed line, “Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so” (1). If “life” is what happens in the world, then this perspective is a dramatic shift from the first song where the world is the despised traitor. In “Dream Song 1” Berryman sees himself at odds with the world, but by “Dream Song 14,” Berryman seems to have dismissed the world as the enemy; rather, he sees it as something which should entertain or delight him but has fallen short and through no real fault of its own. He cites specific marvels which leave him unsatisfied: “After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn” (2-3). The word “great” is repeated again to depict the literature which he finds the most boring of all. The “flash and yearn” pertaining to people alludes to desire, and he finds even this uninteresting.

Berryman suggests through “Dream Song 14” a shame associated with boredom, recalling a childhood memory when his mother warned, “Ever to confess you’re bored / means you have no / Inner Resources” (5-7). The use of the word ‘confess’ here suggests that boredom is a sin, something to be hidden away from others. In particular, the poem suggests that those who wish to claim imagination cannot admit to boredom without forfeiting their own creative reputation. Berryman admits all these things, confessing that he is “heavy bored,” as if to suggest that a numbness to the world has overcome him (8). While these sentiments do differ from the harsh, dramatic tone of “Dream Song 1,” they are not entirely set apart from his earlier depression as expressed in the first poem. Being uninterested in daily life is a part of depression, and the feelings of boredom he explores in “Dream Song 14” appear in blogs about depression as well. Blogger LJ on *Depression Tribe* confesses, “I have a feeling of nothingness. Im not sad, Im not happy. Im not anxious, Im not peaceful. I am nothing. I stare into space, at the wall, out the window. Looking but not seeing anything. Thinking but not having any thoughts.” The numbness and indifference about the world for both “Henry” and “LJ” indicate a marked disconnect from others, also indicative of their depression. Ironically, they both share it through
the confessional medium: the poem for Berryman, the blog entry for LJ. This irony stems from the paradox of conveying feelings of disconnect through the blog medium. Participating in the blog community implies a connection.

As soon as Berryman points out in “Dream Song 14” that “Peoples bore me,” we as readers realize that we are being treated separately from the “peoples” to which he refers. Why else would Berryman address the cause and subject of his boredom? Berryman makes this shift even more apparent by pointing out, “Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes,” thus making the earlier subject of the poem the object. By revealing his disgust with himself and his own depressed persona, Berryman achieves further intimacy with the reader through his use of Henry, and in a formerly public medium—the published poem—Berryman attempts to achieve privacy.

Although the technical execution of a blog differs, a similar happening occurs as the confessional content of some blogs, like on Depression Tribe, tends toward the private yet is exposed in very public ways by writers with concealed identities. Those who have not blogged before have difficulty understanding exactly who is talking to whom, but bloggers—regular and real bloggers—will quickly correct the misconception that they are talking to strangers. To the blogger, the readers are fellow bloggers, friends; there is nothing to hide.4

Yet the writers do hide in the blog behind their handle and blogging persona. To reveal themselves involves risk, a similar risk which Berryman avoids when he compels Henry to do all the talking for him in The Dream Songs. Looking at three other poems in which Berryman directly treats the subject of depression is helpful in explaining what he hides and why: 29, 133, and 384.

In “Dream Song 29” Berryman alludes again to an emotional weight that sits upon him: “There sat down, once, a thing on Henry’s heart / só heavy” (1-2). The poem depicts Henry’s helpless state, as he is described as “weeping, sleepless” (3). Berryman explains that “Henry could not make good,” reaffirming his inadequacies and how he cannot alleviate his depression. His inability to remedy his situation is suggested as Berryman writes, “Starts again always in Henry’s ears / the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime” (5-6). His sadness has become a habit, and it is in the repetition of things that Henry has begun feeling unfortunately cyclical.

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4 This relationship between blogger and blog reader also pertains to Berryman’s declaration that “Life, friends, is boring.”
When Henry does act, his actions are never as he has intended. The second stanza demonstrates this with the line, “Ghastly, / with open eyes, he attends, blind,” so even though Henry makes the attempt to see something, he cannot (9-10). He is inevitably impaired. The noises he hears confirm this: “All the bells say: too late” (11). Berryman’s description of the world and its sounds are as if all of creation is in on the joke that is Henry; the cough, the odour, the bells—they are all aimed at getting to him, and they do.

Henry responds to the agitating world with what seems to be violence. The third stanza of “Dream Song 29” offers the visceral, gruesome language associated with a murder scene. The words and details of a murder pile up to make the reader think that Henry has killed someone, yet Berryman’s scrambled syntax is designed to exonerate Henry. He writes, “But never did Henry, as he thought he did, / end anyone,” in a style like E. E. Cummings’s “Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” wherein our eyes almost have to lose focus on the details to understand the plot (13-14). Robert Lowell, in response to “Dream Song 29,” considers the dissolution of conventional syntax as “relentless indulgence” which obscures “the what or why of a passage” (110-11). Lowell concludes in his review of 77 Dream Songs that “one must give in” to Berryman’s indulgences in the fragmented style which risks “disintegration” because the “risk and variety” of the work depend entirely upon it (110-11). The violent hallucinations depicted in “Dream Song 29” are a prime example of this. Henry is maddened at times in the work, and “Dream Song 29” offers a moment where Henry’s primal nature is revealed both through the subject of the poem—the killing—and the form of the poem—the inverted syntax which obscures the message and leaves us wondering whether or not Henry did it.

The hallucination of “Dream Song 29” offers readers a metaphor through which to interpret the whole of Berryman’s Dream Songs. The line “hacks her body up / and hides the pieces, where they may be found,” is metatextual because Berryman himself is burying revelatory truths about himself within the poem. The hacking of the body is suggestive of the necessary fragmentation of language Berryman undergoes to conceal himself within the work while he reveals himself, too. Additionally, the fantastical use of violence in the poem indicates some guilt on Berryman’s part, as the outburst suggests a frustration, Berryman’s inability to communicate. The only option remaining is to use force, even if ineffectual, to reach the father as in Plath’s “Daddy.”
As The Dream Songs progresses, Henry’s—and Berryman’s—depression evolves into yet another state. As I mentioned earlier, The Dream Songs begins with Henry at clear odds with the world. We see this change by “Dream Song 14” where Henry’s depression is no longer charged with fury or anger but is now characterized as complacency, apathy, and a general lack of concern about the world because it has let him down. In “Dream Song 29” Henry’s frustrations indicated in “Dream Song 1” resurface through Berryman’s depiction of Henry’s helplessness and inability to cope with his situation, and it is at this moment that the line between Berryman and Henry becomes blurred because of the question of what Henry (and Berryman) has hacked up and is in the process of burying. Moving into “Dream Song 133,” Berryman draws out another comparison between Henry and himself:

As he grew famous—ah, but what is fame?—
he lost his old obsession with his name,
things seemed to matter less,
including the fame—(1-4).

The start of “Dream Song 133” sets apart Henry from other poetic personas because Berryman is slowly erasing the line that separates him from his poetic creation. Henry becomes in “Dream Song 133” an avatar for Berryman the poet as fame is overtly addressed. It is important to note that popularity is not assessed; rather, the ambiguous ‘fame’ is called out, and this term offers far less concrete connotations. “Dream Song 133” includes the mention of fame six times. Berryman drives home the point that fame is simply exposure—sometimes overexposure. It has nothing to do with an easy or pleasurable life. Berryman praises his own “hard work,” but he poses the question, “[W]here are the delights / of long-for fame, unless fame makes him feel easy?” (12-13). Berryman reflects here on what he has achieved and the lackluster benefits of that achievement. This moment of reflection in the poem prompts a question about the nature of blogging, as well. What is its purpose? What does anyone get out of participating? Of creating the blog? Of consuming it?

Like Berryman suggests in “Dream Song 133,” it is relief or an ‘easy’ feeling one strives for while divulging personal matters. Although Berryman writes of Henry’s fame throughout two stanzas, he admits in the third, “I am cold & weary,” still confessing that which plagues him as though fame and exposure have not solved the despair. The purpose of blogging is not the same as writing a personal diary entry. This suggests that the catharsis occurs not at the point of
writing the blog but at the moment of publication, that exposure of the self where the private turns public.

Berryman recounts several times in *The Dream Songs* that Henry does hard work, yet the real efforts occur not when he is writing but when he is communicating to others, garnering his own fame. In “Dream Song 134” Berryman paints a sickly, pained portrait of Henry, the teacher, describing him as “Sick at 6 & sick again at 9” (1) with “all this gas & shit blowing through” (16). Yet Henry, by the end of the poem is said to have “arose, benign, & performed” (18). It is such performance that connects Berryman’s use of Henry to the nameless blog author’s use of an alternate identity. And the identity goes beyond a simple avatar. Like Berryman’s decision to employ his twelve-line poetic form with disjointed syntax, the blogger chooses the appearance of an interface to communicate something about himself. As Rak has observed in a study of blogging and digital identity, “These features [in blog software] provide ways for bloggers to represent their online selves, as well as a point of translation between offline life and online life, in the form of links which tell readers something about the blogger or bloggers. The design of blogs, too, is assumed to be representative of who the blogger is, or what sort of impression the blogger wishes to make” (173). So, someone—even in the interface or poetic form chosen—has been designed for the express purpose of putting on a performance. By this, I do not mean to suggest that the feelings and experiences in the poems and found online in blogs are not realistic or truthful. What I am saying is that the author’s words are inevitably shaped by the personality through which those words pass, whether this is a poetic persona or an online avatar.

Berryman’s final line of “Dream Song 133,” “It seems to be solely a matter of continuing Henry / voicing and obsessed” (17-18) is exemplified near the end of *The Dream Songs* when the object of Henry’s obsession—his father’s suicide—comes to the fore. In this line, Berryman refers to the compulsion he feels to continue performing. This relates also to blogging and the desire to blog regularly, to keep the performance going for the onlookers. Berryman writes “Dream Song 384,” which Jeffrey Alan Triggs labels, “the thinnest of disguises for Berryman himself, stripped of his irony, boastfulness, and self-mockery,” enables Henry to voice the particulars of the tragic circumstances of his father’s death, which match the details of Berryman’s own father’s death. While “Dream Song 384” offers a continuation of the theme of

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5 See “Dream Song 134.” This poem similarly reflects the irony about the performance Berryman puts on for the audience, his students.
depression throughout *The Dream Songs*, the subject here is not boredom or discontent with the world at large; rather, it is a focused mix of anger and grief over the loss of his father, as Henry reflects graveside:

> The marker slants, flowerless, day’s almost done,
> I stand above my father’s grave with rage,
> often, often before
> I’ve made this awful pilgrimage to one
> who cannot visit me, who tore his page
> out: I come back for more… (1-6)

The opening image of the poem opposes what one might expect, a firmly planted, upright tombstone with flowers to lament the lost. Instead, Henry is met with the image of a tombstone worked out of its place a bit, “slanted,” with no evidence that he’s missed by anyone, “flowerless.” The reference to sunset, “day’s almost done,” serves both to signal the end of Henry’s battle with his long-dead father and also the end of *The Dream Songs*. The “rage” Berryman refers to seems almost misplaced at this moment, as the dead cannot receive or respond to the emotions of the living (“who cannot visit me”), and so those emotions seem wasted on the father. And, consequently, this Dream Song, because of its futile attempt to communicate with one who may not receive the message, seems especially blog-like. It signifies the desire to express oneself without the promise of reciprocity. The idea that Henry may as well give up on solace from this standing at the graveside is reaffirmed in the line, “I’ve made this awful pilgrimage to one / who cannot visit me,” as the pilgrimage is portrayed as a religious habit, a ritual which offers no comfort or end, so he acknowledges the futility of speaking to one “who cannot visit” him. Berryman likens the world to literature and us all having been a page in its book, as he describes his father’s suicide as an act of tearing out a page, a selfish act which keeps the book as a whole, Berryman’s world, incomplete, unreadable, and thus incomprehensible, irreconcilable.

The second stanza of “Dream Song 384” acknowledges Henry’s helplessness despite acknowledging the futility of his graveside anger. Although Berryman uses language to suggest Henry’s control in the situation—“I come back for more”—a willing involvement with the deceased, the second stanza stands in opposition to this, as Henry waits for “indifference”:

> I spit upon this dreadful banker’s grave
who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn
O ho alas alas
When will indifference come, I moan & rave . . . (7-10)

Here, Henry poses a question to the reader who may have experienced the same. This is much like the act of blogging in the sense that a conversation is started in hopes that an empathetic listener will join in. The syntax of this stanza is unusually traditional compared to other songs. Henry’s language isn’t inverted or confusing when he recounts the details of his father’s death. It is not until the third stanza when Henry decides what actions to take that the syntax becomes fragmented again and emotions strike the reader as more visceral when he callously proposes to

. . . ax the casket open ha to see
just how he’s taking it, which he sought so hard
We’ll tear apart
the mouldering grave clothes ha . . . (13-16)

This maniacal end to the poem brings The Dream Songs full circle, as it refers back to “Dream Song 1” and Henry’s inability to get what he wants from the world. All Henry desires in “Dream Song 384” is the comfort of indifference, but the world will not give it to him. Thus, he ends the poem with what J. M. Linebarger calls, “a vicious and mad wish to re-kill his father,” much like what readers witness at the end of Plath’s “Daddy.”

Critics make sense of this ending in a variety of ways. Lea Baechler, for example, reads the end as ironic: “the corpse of the father who has lived, begat, and willfully ended his life [. . .] compounds the rage and impotence the poet experiences in response to what is irreversible” (621). The ironic twist is meaningful because it signifies in a real act of violence toward one who cannot respond (“cannot visit”) Henry and Berryman’s inability to rage against—and get a response out of—the harsh world around them. Vendler takes a different approach, interpreting “Dream Song 384” as a manifestation of the “unmanageable Id,” saying that Berryman’s attempt to capture this results in “broad cartoon-like strokes.” These are, however, productive according to Vendler: “Cartoon-strokes enable him [Berryman] to render his life-donnée in literary terms, at the considerable cost of an occluded and alienated authorial self, concealed behind its puppets” (52).

Vendler’s phrasing to describe “Dream Song 384” may remind readers of the many connections between Berryman’s work and that of confessional bloggers. The idea of Berryman
being an “occluded and alienated authorial self” parallels the lives of bloggers, engaging in the solitary, lonely act of writing to communicate with a world whom they may be alienated from were it not for the connections enabled by technology. The “cartoon-strokes” and “puppets” Vendler refers to invoke images of bloggers’ avatars or handles, the “broad cartoon-like strokes” the writers use to portray themselves to members of the online community.

I agree with Vendler that Berryman accomplishes two things in *The Dream Songs* through his use of Henry as a poetic persona: it “enable[s] him to render his life” and simultaneously “conceal [himself] behind [. . .] puppets.” Berryman’s publication of *The Dream Songs* seems to signify a key shift in confessional writing, that is, not so much what one can confess but how one can confess it. While other confessional poets wrote from a personal perspective through a personal voice without the use of a consistent poetic persona, Berryman adopted Henry’s persona to communicate his experiences. I argue that Berryman foreshadows the current confessional culture in his use of syntax, autobiographical content, and use of an avatar since much the same occurs within the blogosphere, especially where confessional blogs are concerned: the hidden and the revealed are juxtaposed by the medium. As poetry did for Berryman, networked technology for bloggers allows for authorial anonymity while exposing personal writing to a countless number of online readers. It was because of Henry and the genre of poetry that Berryman was able to expose his personal struggles—particularly those of depression and his suicidal tendencies—and it is because of the hiding that the bloggers are similarly able to uncover themselves. Yet Berryman is only one example of the many confessional poets who have ushered in this culture of confession in the age of autobiography.

In a 2004 review of Berryman’s *Selected Poems*, edited by Kevin Young, Edward Hirsch asks a loaded question: “Berryman combined a passionate, disrupted syntax with an irreverent blend of highbrow and lowbrow dictions—part Shakespeare, part minstrel show, part baby talk. Who could have predicted such a salty, ostentatious and exaggerated comic style—or known that it would come to seem so intensely literary and inevitably American?” (BW12). Hirsch’s commentary underscores the essence of what counts as “American” writing, and his suggestion is that it is such an unpredictable, untraditional blend of forms and languages. It is “disrupt[ive],” and it is unapologetic—again uniting Berryman’s work with the modern-day blog genre.

Young’s introduction to Berryman’s *Selected Poems* offers readers further insight into what it means for Berryman to have written in such a way at such a time as the mid-twentieth
century in America. First, he establishes Berryman’s break from traditional poetic forms, arguing that “the long, fragmentary form he practiced and in some ways invented does not fit the way we are taught poetry today” (xvii). I see this “long, fragmentary form” as a physical trait shared with the structure of a blog. Berryman viewed The Dream Songs as one long poem and each individual Dream Song as simply an installment of that longer work. Much the same could be said for the structure of a blog since it is, after all, a single blog, though the range of its blog entries are wide and vast, at times seeming to have nothing to do with the body as a whole. Examples of this are particularly evident in personal blogs wherein the thematic thread is simply the author’s life experiences. The titles of personal blogs typically allude to these sundry topics. Coming Full Circle is the title of one personal blog where the blogger, Erin from Charlotte, North Carolina, indicating the diversity of subjects she includes in her blog. Every aspect of Erin’s life seems recorded in Coming Full Circle, from extensive entries about her debt problems stemming from a wedding planned but cancelled after she found out about her fiancé’s multiple and recurring infidelities, to how much she misses her grandmother who has passed away. Erin posts about the death of her cat and how her boyfriend is getting a separate place so that he can mature; she insists they are not breaking up. Erin writes lengthy posts about her passion for Christian music and posts in between include strings of pictures of Erin, posing in a tank top with a tattoo on her chest, out partying with her friends. The range of issues covered in the blog is vast, but the common theme is that each entry represents some aspect of her life. Despite its thematic focus, the blog is incredibly focused on Erin and helping the audience understand her.

Young writes of Berryman as a poet who rejected the forms of his literary predecessors, Pound and Eliot, saying that they, too, did the same to Whitman, their literary predecessor, and that this was a natural, necessary part of the creative process, to respond to or reject something. As he accepted the National Book Award for His Toy, His Dream, His Rest (1968), the second volume of The Dream Songs, Berryman pointed out, “Both the writer and the reader of long poems need gall, the outrageous, the intolerable—and they need it again and again [. . . .] It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models” (qtd. in Young xxi). So, Young is relating this difference between Berryman and his predecessors as the key to his being established as a literary fixture in American literature. He concludes, “Like his raucous character Henry, protagonist of The Dream Songs, Berryman emerges in his life and work a ‘human American man.’ What The Dream Songs admits—meaning both ‘lets in’ and ‘fesses up to’—including
alcoholism, race, sex and sexism, depression, obsession, and desire, makes it all the more American” in part because of the direct, unapologetic treatment of these subjects (Young xviii). This “human American man” is also who we meet in the blogosphere, as the anyone-can-post-anything model enables Everyman to “admit” all these things Berryman does.

One of the most important points Young makes is about the roles audience and the subconscious play in relation to Berryman’s work; this is where he brings in Vendler’s arguments in *The Given and the Made*. Young writes, “We [as readers] are not so much the priest privy to the confession as we are (as Helen Vendler has convincingly argued) the silent therapist listening to the analysand’s rantings” (xxii). Again, this point underscores the significance of Berryman’s writing in mid-twentieth century in America and demonstrates another way he anticipates today’s confessional culture. The audience’s role as “the silent therapist” and the author’s content as “the analysand’s rantings” seems to describe the relation of members of blogging communities to the blog just as much as Berryman’s audience to *The Dream Songs*. In Erin’s *Coming Full Circle* blog, she is a stranger writing to strangers, but she confesses, “Every year on my birthday, I cry . . . just for a little bit” and speaks candidly about the loss of her best friend who shared her birth date. Erin’s posts indicate an acute awareness of the audience’s presence. For example, her May 26, 2009, post is titled, “psst . . . . here I am . . . . I’m here . . . . I’m here” and speaks to the complex relationship between the public and the private. Erin writes, “I wish I could pour my heart out onto these pages because what some of you think and say about my life actually means a lot to me. HOWEVER . . . . some things are meant to be private . . . .” Given the content of Erin’s ‘full circle’ blog, this statement that “some things are meant to be private” begs the question of what, exactly, is too private for a blog. What else could she share that she has not?

Like Vendler’s assessment of confessional poetry as happening on a therapist’s couch, an argument might be made for reading a blog like Erin’s in the same way. Although she distinguishes the private from the public, there seems to be very little Erin will not or cannot share with her community of readers. One post is titled, “so tired of being sad” and is paired with a picture—seeming to be taken by webcam—of Erin, arms crossed, averting her eyes from the camera to emphasize her melancholy. Erin’s act of producing a post from this sad, fed up emotional state is fraught with contradictions. To some degree, she is not content being sad on her own, but the act of publishing these thoughts and this image to the blog rewards or consoles
her. The audience is the one who can fix her, or at least make her feel better temporarily. And so is formed a full circle of another kind, the exhibitionist and scopophiliac relationship between author and reader: the exchange of hurt and chaos for sympathy and attention.

In the same way that Young likens Berryman to “an on-stage double for a vaudeville of race, mock tragedy, and harsh comedy” and *The Dream Songs* to “a kind of masque—elaborate, mannered pageantry” (xxiii-xiv), bloggers have been likened to participating in the “global autobiography project” of the Internet (Murray 252). Laurie McNeill addresses the consequences of Web diarists’ anonymity on their audiences:

> Bloggers’ simultaneous verisimilitude and immateriality account for readers’ conflicting impulses to accept them as real people even as they read them as characters in a life fiction. As an emerging form of life writing, online diaries serve as fresh reminders of the tenuous division between “life” and “art,” between virtual and actual, realms that these texts seem to straddle more explicitly than traditional written autobiographical forms. Their interstitial status, which makes it harder for audiences, and even authors, to distinguish the represented from the real, contributes, perhaps, to my own concerns about how to read these texts, how to approach these narratives as a genre and as life writing. (45)

McNeill’s assessment of the way readers consume blogs and, consequently, bloggers’ identities seems consistent in the way that Berryman’s *Dream Songs* have been interpreted through the years. Although we read Henry as a “characte[r] in a life fiction,” we similarly and simultaneously accept him as “a real person,” as a version of Berryman. In the same way that McNeill suggests blogs “straddle” more traditional forms of writing, so did Berryman in *Dream Songs* merge diary writing and the lyric poem. When McNeill accounts for the benefits produced by the blogs’ “interstitial status,” we might also be reminded of Adam Kirsch’s argument in *The Wounded Surgeon* that Berryman’s approach is “powerfully vague” (139). These parallels between two confessional genres—the confessional blog and Berryman’s song—situate blogs within the larger conversation about autobiographical writing. I would add here that Berryman’s use of pseudonymity and fragmented syntax liberates him from conventional expectations within poetry and that a similar pseudonymity and fragmentation of conventional writing occurs in confessional blogs to set it apart from other digital writing.
This point extends not only to the use of a fictive avatar but also to the freedom to divulge the private, which is a consequence of that avatar. Janet Murray addresses this ambiguous space between the private and public which enables such liberation when she writes, “The enchantment of the computer creates for us a public space that also feels very private and intimate” (99). McNeill responds to this, extending the argument to include how writers react to this ambiguity:

…the illusion that identity can be secret or shrouded online contributes to writers’ sense that they are free to, or perhaps required to, tell all. Online diarists combine a traditionally confessional genre, the diary, with a medium that makes confessions widely available but still anonymous, impersonal, separate from diarists’ online lives and identities. Though some writers meet their readers in “real life,” the majority of their audiences remain virtual, a part of only their online existences. (27)

Most interesting about this borderland between the open-invitation of the Internet and the forbidden spaces of bloggers’ “private” lives is whether it is possible to cross the lines or to behave in such a way that the liberation is limited, that the openness must be hedged to prevent threat to the blogger, and whether any risk is involved once a fictive avatar—or poetic persona in Berryman’s case—has been adopted. Judging from online examples and Berryman’s own experience in trying to distill and set apart Henry’s experiences from his own in interviews—the answer is yes.

Although, as McNeill reminds us, “online diarists write with an awareness of and a desire for a reading public,” the needs of the public to see everything, know everything can outweigh the blogger’s desire to make public the private (44). McNeill’s example of this comes from a blog entitled Dreams of Glass, wherein blogger Nora warns, “if you don’t belong here, you probably know that, and you should leave, k.” Despite Nora’s willing publication of her private life’s happenings, she posts a hostile response to those engaged in “journal stalking.” She writes in a September 1, 2002, journal entry titled “Fuck you stalkers,” “if you know me and you give a shit about my life, perhaps you should CALL ME or EMAIL ME instead of STALKING my journal” (qtd. in McNeill 45). This is like Berryman complaining about being “pried open for all the world to see” despite being the one who is laying himself out for the onlookers. Even though Nora has seemingly invited the public into her private life by posting details about her daily life,
she refuses to own up to its publicity, removing posts she feels others have violated her privacy by reading even though it was she who initially posted the information for all to see. Likewise, when readers see the innumerable similarities between the lives of Henry and Berryman, they feel invited to ask the question of whether the two are one and the same, a proposition which Berryman vehemently denied and a question which Berryman eventually deflected. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, some scholars like Donoghue engage in the willing suspension of disbelief and see Henry as set apart from Berryman, but others—the majority of others—like J. M. Linebarger believe that ignoring the transparency of Henry with an opaque Berryman standing behind him limits our understanding of The Dream Songs. Regardless of which side we take in this debate, it seems clear that Berryman’s use of Henry invites some questions about our modern use of avatars in online communications—are we Henry, or aren’t we? Does it matter?

Amardeep Singh’s distillation of blogger traits is especially useful in connecting a blogger’s handle with Berryman’s use of Henry, a consistent poetic persona in The Dream Songs. He connects blogs with eighteenth-century broadsheets like the Tatler and The Spectator in his 2008 article “Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics.” Singh clarifies the difference between publishing anonymously and pseudonymously, which he says is a more specific way of publishing anonymously:

Blogging pseudonyms are generally not fleeting aliases but fixed public identities, which are strongly associated with a particular author’s style and ethos. The impressive proliferation of blogging as a form of writing has disseminated the category of “author” to an unprecedented level of true mass-culture participation, though the prevalence of pseudonymity in blogging suggests that “authorship” may be at once more influential and more disposable than ever before. (21)

Singh’s description of bloggers as “fixed public identities, which are strongly associated with a particular author’s style and ethos” seems also applicable to Berryman’s Henry, the version of himself which is also “not fleeting” but a carefully crafted version of himself, which he uses repeatedly to communicate his innermost thoughts about such things as depression and suicide.

The current trend is to view e-writing as “an extension of writing on paper, particularly in the case of online diaries and blogs” (Rak 167). One of the first cyberdiarists—and the one who coined the term cyberdiaristes—French writer Philippe Lejeune argues that intimacy is the primary unifying factor between blogs and the paper-based genres, such as poetry: “Intimacy
does not exist in solitude; it is always interiorized. The cyberdiarist indicates this [desire for]
replies by including an electronic address, not as a betrayal of the secrets of the self, but as a way
to accomplish his/her deepest wish, which is to have access to an alter ego . . .” (qtd. in Rak 167).
This is quite similar to Berryman’s “deepest wish” and how he achieves it through his use of
Henry as the “alter ego.” Readers need only look to blog-like poems such as “Dream Song 127”
where Henry confesses the depression and death he feels lingering around him and which he will
inevitably succumb to:

All souls converge upon a hopeless mote
tonight, as though
the throngs of souls in hopeless pain rise up
to say they cannot care, to say they abide
whatever is to come.
My air is flung with souls which will not stop
and among them hangs a soul that has not died
and refuses to come home. (11-18).

Berryman translates his own desperation and “hopeless pain” into Henry’s experience in The
Dream Songs, as the series of poems grows increasingly grim. Only halfway through the book,
Berryman acknowledges Henry’s state of perpetual agony in the world and though he thinks it
can go on only so long, he is faced with temporary recoveries which signify only an extension of
an agonizing life, not a recovery from it.

“Dream Song 130” opens with one such moment when Berryman mistakenly senses that
an end to the pain has come when he writes,

When I saw my friend covered with blood, I thought
This is the end of the dream, now I’ll wake up.
That was more years ago
than I care to reckon [. . .] (1-4)

The following song refers to a “waking dream” wherein Berryman starts reflecting on his own
life as though standing above it. It suggests the numbness that comes with some depression,
wherein one moves through the motions without having a real engagement with the world. Like
Berryman’s use of poetry to engage the world in alternative ways, online diarists’ use of blogs
reflects a means of communicating without the risk of divulging one’s real identity;
consequently, there is necessarily some degree of disconnect through both mediums. It’s the coping mechanism that arrives after the pain of the depression grows too great to bear; the only option left is to experience reality as if it were a dream. By writing of oneself as the subject of a creative work, some other, disconnected narrative, as occurs sometimes within blogs, the author can distance himself from the painful reality that surrounds him. Berryman writes of this otherworldly, out-of-body experience in “Dream Song 131”:

Come touch me baby in his waking dream
disordered Henry murmured [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] I am insane, I think,
they say & act so.

I am insane, I know
and many of my close friends were half-sane
I see the rorshach for the dead on its way
Prop them up!

Let pass from me this cup (1-2, 8-9, 12-15, 18)

This poem makes sense only within the context of the complete Dream Songs. Other poems are the same, requiring the complete Dream Songs context, which is likely the reason Berryman referred to the songs as a single poem and each song as simply an installment of it. The final line is key: “Let pass from me this cup” in which Berryman offers a Biblical allusion to sum up his response to the experience of being Henry. When Jesus prays that, if it is possible for this cup (symbolic of his forthcoming betrayal and crucifixion) to pass from him, God would let it pass, we see that in his willingness to continue along the path before him, he is weak and desirous of a better fate although he knows what must remain ahead of him. This is significant in a different way for Henry because his plight lacks the significance and payoff of Christ’s, yet like Christ, he has been dealt a fate he must accept. To resist it would be futile. The act of blogging might be likened to Henry’s futile reaching out for help. Consolatory replies to pained bloggers are not uncommon on blog sites like Live Journal. One LJ member sums it up: “Hey. I don’t you’re your whining! Feel free to whine to me any time. That’s what LJ friends are for! :->” (Lolotheveggie,
“A Little Slice of Heaven: Depressed”). With an awareness of the significance or payoff of the suffering, it is, perhaps, easier to endure the pain. For those without that solace, talking it out might be the only option—the writing of Henry’s poems, the composition of a blog for an ambiguous audience of strangers.

I would like to return for a moment to Amardeep Singh’s argument about the effect of pseudonymity on authorship. Although Singh is referring the “mass-culture participation” achieved in blogging, poems like Berryman’s also contribute to the notion of a “disposable” author because Henry, at once, can be a stand in for Berryman and the reader, as well. In “Dream Song 132,” titled, “A Small Dream,” Berryman’s reference to technology in “the Golden World” (1) might be interpreted to mean that the poet is the great inventor and the poem is the invention: “I’ll turn the machine off, / you’ve danced and trickt us enough” (2-3). So, the work is manufactured to entertain and to amuse, but mostly to engage, to busy the mind. Berryman closes the poem, suggesting a blur between “my” and “Henry,” too: “If the dream was small / it was my dream also, Henry’s” (17-18). This line seems to be a manifestation of Carl Jung’s collective unconscious at work so much that the dream and the fleshly struggle to achieve happiness becomes an archetype itself, and as much as Berryman is Henry, so is the reader. It is exactly because of poems like “Dream Song 132” that Singh’s assessment of the dissolution of authorship as it pertains to blogging seems also to apply to Berryman’s confessional poems.

In an interview Berryman himself addressed this engagement of the reader via Henry, calling the fictive persona “a series of conceptions—my conceptions. . . . He only does what I make him do. If I have succeeded in making him believable, he performs all kinds of other actions besides those named in the poem, but the reader has to make them up” (Stitt 31). This suggests a participative core of Berryman’s work that is also the heart of blog writing. The Internet changes the function of the personal diary, so when the diarist turns cyberdiarist, the very nature of the writing must change. Conventionally, diaries have been kept under lock and key, hidden under mattresses, away from brothers, mothers, and lovers. Because the contents of the diary are private, they are assumed to be scandalous. For a diarist to unlock his or her diary and share it with another, trust is extended, and the author and the reader share an unparalleled intimacy. The cyberdiarist’s approach is more akin to Berryman’s: change the name to protect the innocent, create a gateway in the form of encrypted writing—for Berryman, this would be the garbled syntax Henry adopts; for bloggers, this would be SMS language, or txtspk. Lowell
commented on this adaptation of language in his elegy “For John Berryman” in which he writes, admiringly, “I feel I know what you have worked through, you / know what I have worked through— we are words; / John, we used the language as if we made it” (203).

A connection such as this—the common ground between confessional blogs about depression and suicide and the content of Berryman’s *Dream Songs*—makes it worthwhile to look again at *The Dream Songs* beyond the confessional paradigm and instead see how further reading of such works inform our understanding of authorship and reader participation in confessional blogging communities. In both cases, it seems that the act of writing is spurred along by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the world and the author’s unfavorable personal circumstances within the world, paired with a need to react to or reject something one finds reprehensible, and ultimately, a desire to respond, to connect and to communicate with others in an effort to achieve catharsis through publication, whether this occurs online or on paper. This is not to say that making “art” and blogging are the same; I do not intend to equate or confuse the two. I am arguing that there are some shared traits between the art and the blog, that their causes, methods, and consequences are sometimes shared. By looking at the confessional blog as a genre, in retrospect, it helps further the discussion Travisano advocates about confessional poets, which is a newer look at confessional works removed from the shadow cast by the ‘Confessional poetry’ label. Specifically, this study’s analysis of the confessional blog as a genre enables us to see the far-reaching impact of the confessional poets and their strategies for writing autobiographical works that serve as cultural artifacts and help us to better understand a generation. Given confessional poetry’s unique means of capturing the ills and anxieties of the twentieth century and confessional blogs’ trait and content similarities, it seems to follow that we might look at confessional blogs also as cultural artifacts and, consequently, better understand some aspects of twenty-first century life, perhaps its own ills and anxieties.

Ultimately, this analysis of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* is only one piece of the puzzle and serves only to introduce a more comprehensive look at how these two genres—confessional poetry and confessional blogs—overlap in interesting ways that further our ability to better understand how they fit into the larger conversation about the significance of the complex structure and language and how this impacts life writing.

The resurgence of John Berryman’s poetry into popular culture may be read as an indicator that the ills and anxieties of one post-war generation have become those of another,
contemporary generation. The images of brokenness, decay, and general dissatisfaction with
one’s world has seemed to transcend Berryman’s work and made its way into contemporary
blogging discourse. Because of these similarities, the lens through which we read Berryman, and
other confessional poets’ works, might be borrowed to look critically at modern-day blogs of a
similar, confessional kind so that we may better understand the emerging life writing genre and
this new generation of life writers.
CHAPTER 2
“EVERYONE AND NO ONE”: PLATH’S “PEANUT-CRUNCHING CROWD” AND AUDIENCE AWARENESS IN THE CONFESSIONAL BLOG

In “Lady Lazarus” Sylvia Plath sheds light on her conception of audience and her role as an entertainer—a stripper, even, as it relates to the suicidal speaker being undressed before the collective voyeur reading her words, reading her body. This chapter borrows its title from one of the most striking images in the poem—“the peanut-crunching crowd”—that forces its way in to see the woman on display, and aims to address the ways in which the author-audience relationship affects the functionality of confessional genres. A closer look at “Lady Lazarus” reveals that Plath anticipates the effects of her performative, confessional acts, and shows how she acknowledges the audience and its collective desire to engage with her as a voyeur, as she actively portrays herself as the passive spectacle.

When looking at the details of “Lady Lazarus,” one must not neglect to address the significance of the title itself and how it sets us up for the greater experience of the poem. From the start, Plath juxtaposes a highly sexualized performer with the Biblical resurrection figure. While the subject is a woman who “like the cat” has “nine times to die” (“Lady Lazarus” 21), the treatment of that subject is not what readers might initially expect. Instead of mournful or dark, the tone resembles a vaudeville curtain call during which the lady has set herself on display, though she is manipulated by others in control—“They unwrap me,” (28) and “They had to call and call” (41). They are the active ones for whom she is the object being unwrapped and resurrected.

Despite the poem’s clear focus on the performance of death and the resurrection—she calls it “the theatrical / Comeback in broad day” (51-52)—the poem itself is a performance, and through this portrayal, the poem suggests Plath’s complex notion of art as both confession and exhibitionism. Here Plath brags about her special skills. She is specific and unashamed about these “comeback” happenings:
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call. (45-48)

She is sheepish in some phrasing, saying, “I manage it—” (3) and “I guess you could say” (48), but those hints at humility are quickly dwarfed by lines announcing her triumph over death. She professes herself as an artist, writing, “Dying / Is an art, like everything else” (43-44). And by the poem’s end, she embodies a commodity; even the fragmented pieces of her are worth paying to see:

There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

In short, Plath anticipates the value of her confessional acts, acknowledging the audience and their desire to engage with her as a voyeur and have her remain the passive display. And yet she simultaneously seems to criticize her readership and audience for their prurient fascination with her pain and suicide attempts. She seems to do this so that the act of putting herself on display is viewed as a selfless sacrifice of herself; in doing this, she crafts the illusion that she is the victim, the one who is being watched without inviting the watchers. Yet it is just that, an illusion, as she is the one perpetuating the “hearing of [her] heart,” the unveiling of her “scars.”

Working from Susan Bordo’s theories about the female body as object, Lisa Narbeshuber, in “The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath’s Poetry,” writes that “Plath brashly pairs the private with the public, to the point where the personal all but dissolves into a ludicrous public performance or event, with the body as displayed object” (186). Narbeshuber emphasizes here Plath’s intentional shift away from the personal toward the persona ready—even eager—to be consumed by the public. It signifies Plath’s consideration for audience above all else.
To provide clear examples of how Plath portrays the complicated relationship between author and audience, I draw from other Plath poems like “Tulips” and “In Plaster” in which she writes about the self and the pain of depression and offering careful readings of “Cut,” “Edge,” “Elm,” and “Daddy,” all of which shape the way readers might view Plath’s distinctive author-audience relationship and our understanding of Plath poems as performances. Each of these poems shows how Plath deals with the complex private/public tension in her writing. Collectively, these poems illustrate how Plath sets up this complicated relationship to audience, reveal how she wrestles with mixed feelings about the act of confession.

By looking closely at Plath’s works, I demonstrate that while she is the artist (“Dying is an art”), her work is subjected to the audience’s consumption and approval. She privileges herself as the one who chooses to engage in these acts and lives even through death, assuming that she is in control over them, yet they, invariably, are fueling her voyeuristic acts by engaging in them as spectator. Would she, after all, perform the same way with no one in the audience? This is a question that extends far beyond Plath’s narrative and into other confessional genres, especially that of the confessional blog, as both genres play upon the delicate balance between confession and exhibitionism. And in poems like “Lady Lazarus,” in particular, we see links suggested between confessional poetry and contemporary blogging, as well as the legacy confessional poetry leaves to today’s culture of generating writing about the self. It is the complex relationship between confession and exhibitionism, in particular, that enables us to consider how the relationship between author and audience informs our understanding of confessional genres.

I argue that viewing Plath’s writing—from her poetry to her journals and letters—as a performance offers an entryway to related discussions about audience awareness and its impact on the author in other genres, such as the confessional blog. While recent criticism has sought to reconcile the vast differences in how we approach Plath’s work—through the lens of biography or not, with Plath as a pitiful victim or not—one thing the criticism has failed to do is explore Plath’s acute self-awareness and how we reconcile this with the ‘abandoned wife’ and ‘helpless mother’ figures.

Susan Van Dyne’s “The Problem of Biography” discusses the way that Plath biographers have, through their conflicting accounts of the poet’s life, engaged in critical debate about how Plath’s works should be read. Van Dyne contrasts the myriad perspectives biographers have
taken to interpret Plath’s life and her work’s significance, ranging from Anne Stevenson’s “egregious” psychopathographical readings of the poet’s work to diagnose her mental illness (5) to Linda Wagner-Martin’s “responsible” reading of Plath as a feminist (8). Van Dyne classifies Janet Malcolm’s The Silent Woman as “definitive” in its attempts to redeem Ted Hughes’s reputation and Paul Alexander’s Rough Magic as succumbing to “the serious flaw” of including incredulous sources and counting them as research (12).

Diane Middlebrook’s Her Husband most effectively bridges the gap between Plath biography and criticism. In the book, Middlebrook reads the marriage between Plath and Hughes alongside their poems, illuminating the similarities between their work and, consequently, their literary influences upon one another. Also, Christina Britzolakis blurs the lines between biography and criticism in “Ariel and Other Poems,” where she reads Plath through the lens of Freudian literary theory. Similarly, Lynda K. Bundtzen’s poses psychoanalytical arguments about her work, also situating Plath within the context of Freudian scholarship.

A second set of scholars deals less with biography and more with Plath’s relation to the cultural landscape of America in the 1950s. Following Steven Gould Axelrod’s lead to shift Plath scholarship away from biographical criticism and into cultural criticism, Deborah Nelson argues that Plath’s corpus is heavily influenced—and even chiefly concerned with—Cold War issues.

Like Axelrod’s and Nelson’s approaches, my own study serves as a more cultural than biographical critique of Plath’s works. While this study certainly deals with confessional aspects of the poems and, at times, borrows from Plath’s biography to help explore and explain the work, biography is not the focus. In contrast to the work of Axelrod and Nelson, this chapter serves to examine the ripples and aftershocks sent by Plath’s writing rather than studying the cultural landscape which caused it. This is not to say I am rejecting biographical and psychological critiques in existing Plath scholarship; in fact, it seems impossible to discuss Plath fully without reflecting at least in part on Plath’s life, especially regarding her childhood and specifically through a Freudian lens, given the outsized presence of her husband and father in her poems and the complicated relationship with her mother, Aurelia, as exemplified in Letters Home. I am, however, looking to Plath’s work as a forerunner of contemporary blogs because of each genre’s distinctive dynamic between author and audience and its implicit awareness of the complexities of the act of confession and exhibitionism. To that end, I am discussing Plath primarily for the
performative aspects of her work and the various masks she adopts in an attempt to shock and manipulate the audience, usually into feeling sympathetic for her, as she crafts a victim identity for herself while ironically maintaining authorial control and deciding what gets confessed and how.

While some might argue that changing voice is a given when changing writing purposes and genres, Plath stands apart from other confessional poets in the way that her audience has attached itself to her in a uniquely personal way in the years following her death and has taken a surprisingly active role in responding to her works and her legacy. Because of this, Plath is an ideal example of how the relationship between author and audience functions, particularly in modes of writing that deal with personal and autobiographical material, as confessional poetry and blogs do. This relationship between author and audience connects the study of this literature to the larger discussions of rhetoric and how language is shaped by this relationship between the writer and the reader. The larger argument here is that Plath’s conscientious crafting of poetic persona lends itself to an intimate reading experience, one which draws in readers in a uniquely personal way.

As I noted in the introduction, more recent scholarship has returned us to confessional texts and asked scholars to reconsider their hasty dismissal of the poetry and look at it again through different lenses that, as the critics suggests the poets themselves do, go beyond the emphasis on biography and delve into big-picture matters. I believe this suggestion offers an opportunity to reevaluate prevailing attitudes about e-writing, specifically confessional writing in the blogosphere. I have argued in Chapter One that the blogging act and thoughtful use of an avatar is much like the practice of writing a confessional poem, as in John Berryman’s use of recurring Henry. Here, I am extending this comparison to the aspects of confessional writing pertaining to audience, relying on Plath as an example of these dynamics at work.

Audiences can get the clearest vision of Plath by looking at the diversity of her voices and beginning to understand how she craves audience attention and pursues it in her writing, eliciting a direct and active response from readers. I see Plath’s propensity to forge meaningful connections with her readers as remarkably similar to the author-audience connections currently established in the blogosphere.

In “Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty,” David Yezzi offers another way of looking at what defines confessional poems as such:
What makes a poem confessional is not only its subject matter—e.g., family, sex, alcoholism, madness—or the emphasis on self, but also the directness with which such things are handled. [. . .] By relying on facts, on ‘real’ situations and relationships, for a poem’s emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth. (n.pag.)

As I have mentioned before, many critics challenged the worth of confessional poetry for its subject matter and “directness” alone, but still others criticized it for its emphasis of performance, of what seemed to be a lack of “emotional authenticity” of the poet despite the poem’s emotional truth. One such critic is Howard Sergeant, who offered harsh words regarding the state of poetry in 1971: “[T]he new audience appears to be an undiscriminating one, demanding a certain type of poetry and tending to reduce poets to the basic level of performers” (106). Statements like these, of course, work from the premise that performance is not a skill; rather, performance is a cheap guise to cover a lack of talent.

Based on Plath’s sentiments in poems such as “Lady Lazarus” and her journal entries, however, the performance was just what Plath desired to do well. When she writes, she is putting on a show for the express purpose of eliciting a reaction from the crowd. Their response is her reward.

In her 1962 interview with Peter Orr when asked about the modern trend of recording poets reading their own work, Plath speaks to this desire to achieve a particular response from the audience: “I feel that this development of recording poems, of speaking poems at readings, of having records of poets, I think this is a wonderful thing. I’m very excited by it. In a sense, there’s a return, isn’t there, to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, to come across” (n.pag.). Regarding the manipulation of the facts for the sake of art, Plath offers this answer:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise [sic] with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be a
kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (n.pag.)

In sum, Plath defends her use of Holocaust metaphors, which caused such sweeping controversy and drew the harsh disapproval of critics like Irving Howe, for two reasons: one, the belief that artists, confessional or otherwise, should maintain the right to amend the facts for the sake of the works they create and, two, the belief that poems, confessional or otherwise, should relate to something larger than the self. To do this, to connect the private to the public, sometimes requires logical leaps or stretches, and the performative elements of her work complete the task of drawing in the audience and making the work matter to them on a private level because she has made her private life public.

I interpret Plath’s ability to make meaningful connections with her readership as remarkably similar to bloggers’ relationships with their respective blogging communities currently established online. Whether we examine Plath’s work, as I have in this chapter, from the angle of crafting “tricks of voice,” directly addressing the reader to evoke readers’ responses, entering the writing act as a performance, or generating controversy by making the private public, identifying such trends in her poetry and exploring them from the angle of author-audience relationships lays the groundwork for discussing author-audience relationships in other confessional genres.

This relationship may be best understood as it relates to Plath’s identity as a performative author and performance-driven works. Like the blogger who participates almost transparently in the look-at-me-Ma era, Plath similarly strove for reputation and visibility. Both wrote in ways which elicited response and audience interaction: bloggers with public posting, Plath with public and recorded readings. The arguments here about ways of reading Plath’s works as a performance may lead to arguments which can help to explain the blogging boom in 2003 and may assist us in answering questions about the very nature of blogging.

Some of these questions are why people are compelled to post private information on blogs for “everyone and no one,” why some blogs continue to be written even without followings from fellow members of the blogosphere, and what attracts blog readers—is it the desire to seek out those with which we have common ground? Or is it the scopophiliac desire to see and
understand the Other? Or could it be the voyeurism Plath saw as central to poetry writing and reading?

By referring to Plath’s works as performance-driven poems, I do not intend to negate her sincerity in writing them, the reality they contain, or the emotional impact they are capable of making; rather, I am arguing that Plath’s poems are confessional works which were crafted to achieve a prescribed effect on the audience. Because confessional blogs are posted for immediate public consumption, it seems that the author’s audience awareness would be at least as great if not greater than that of Plath’s works. Looking at confessional blogs as performance-driven works enables us to view them as products of thoughtful writing aimed at, as most works are, audience satisfaction. Just as Plath’s poetry was written for more than cathartic impact, so blogs seem to be. If catharsis is the goal, one might need only to write in a diary. The act of blogging is quite different from this; it is writing with a clear audience in mind, and doing this requires more thought on the author’s part regarding voice and form. The focus on audience is significant in confessional blogs, and because of this, as with Plath’s poems, it begins to legitimize blogs as a potential subject of literary studies and invites us to rethink the role of blogs within the scope of autobiographical literature.

One poem which serves as a metaphor for confessional writing is “Cut.” The poem, addressed to Susan O’Neill Roe, Plath’s nanny at the time, who told her to set aside time in the mornings to write, and consequently, whom some believe to be part of the reason Plath was able to write *Ariel*, offers a fantastical look at the accident—or was it an accident?—of cutting her thumb “instead of an onion.” The poem begins, “What a thrill—” which play with our expectation for a person’s initial reaction to having cut herself with this surprising joy at having done so. To read the poem literally might suggest that Plath is a self-mutilator, but the poem’s images and dedication suggest a more figurative explanation, as by the close of the first stanza, when Plath writes, inquisitively, “The top quite gone / Except for a sort of hinge,” that the writing, like the cutting, is a subversive, analytical act.6

Although the images are gripping and harsh, “hinge / Of skin, / A flap like a hat,” Plath’s focus is on the poetic elements of the consequence of the cutting, the bleeding, as the poem turns

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6 In Robert Phillips’s “The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath,” he points out, “In ‘Edge,’ to be dead is to be perfected! Her earlier terror at death, thus, becomes a romance with it, and her poems themselves are what M. L. Rosenthal calls ‘yearnings toward that condition.’ Freud believed the aim of all life is death, and for Plath life was poetry. So by extension, poetry for her now becomes death, both conditions inseparable. She as much as says so: ‘The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it.’”
fantastical with surreal elements she pairs with her bleeding thumb to explain the experience, the “thrill.” For example, she playfully and endearingly addresses the thumb: “Little pilgrim, / The Indian’s axed your scalp.” The next image, “Carpet rolls / Straight from the heart,” invokes the familiar idea of rolling out the red carpet while juxtaposing the injury with an occasion to celebrate. She depicts herself as though at a party, “Clutching my bottle / Of pink fizz,” and follows it with a whimsical rhyme, “A celebration, this is.”

Plath turns then to images of battle: “A million soldiers run, / Redcoats every one. / Whose side are they on?”—a question which invites reflection on what the act of cutting, of writing by opening up that metaphorical vein, does to a person. I posed the question earlier of what balance Plath achieves between confession and voyeurism, and I read this poem as positing this same question, as mid-poem, Plath writes unashamedly and unapologetically, “I am ill.” This line invites the question of whether the illness she refers to is physical—that injury initially a surreal “thrill” but now settling in and painful—or mental, since the average person would not celebrate an injury.

Some textual evidence for connecting bleeding with writing occurs just after Plath’s admission of illness when she writes, “I have taken a pill to kill / The thin / Papery feeling.” Here, Plath uses paper’s negative connotation, its thin and disposable nature. Consequently, her blood is juxtaposed with the ink on the page. If her illness is mental, that “pill” which remedies her is the act of bleeding onto the page, the act of confession. This falls in line with the dedication to the nanny who facilitated her personal therapy through a writing schedule.

To address the question of where Plath fits between confession and voyeurism, Plath may strike readers as the happy exhibitionist in “Cut” because the bleeding, that metaphorical reference to putting the private on public display (“Carpet rolls / Straight from the heart”), is romanticized and, consequently, cause for celebration.

“Edge” offers readers another example of Plath’s juxtaposition of destruction with creation. While the tone and form of “Edge” are radically distinct from “Cut”—it does not read as a manic episode or cutesy rhyme in places but instead is contentedly solemn and stripped down—the content of the poem indicates that through death, “The woman is perfected.” While “Cut” is written from a first-person voice, “Edge” is conversely written from a third-person point of view, as the Plath who would be dead just six days after penning this poem, is replaced with the stand-in “she” and “her” references.
As in “Cut,” Plath engages in an interpretive analysis of images in “Edge,” as she writes,

Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Despite words connoting emptiness and darkness, the poem does not strike readers as particularly mournful; rather, the death is positive. Plath’s reference to “a Greek necessity” doubtlessly refers to the Greeks’ belief in the acceptance of the afterlife and necessary death in order to reach the afterlife. In line with the Greek philosophy that when one’s life is over, it is simply over, Plath describes the woman’s feet, “We have come so far, it is over,” and suggests the departure from life as a natural, necessary next step in one’s journey. Plath’s speaker takes on the perspective of the moon, which is described at the end of the poem as having “nothing to be sad about”; it is simply observing a fact of life.

It is interesting, however, that Plath inserts a line at the end of the poem, which, though it contains no overt references to death or the body imagery early on, is perhaps the most gripping and disturbing line of the poem. Plath describes the woman who is “perfected,” writing, “She is used to this sort of thing.” Readers might ask in response to this how one could be “used to” dying. In its final stanza, “Edge” is most similar to “Cut,” as it ultimately refers to one who is depressed and in need of catharsis and anticipates the necessary end (“a Greek necessity”). In “Cut,” the bleeding is the effective remedy; in “Edge,” dying is the cure.

Both “Cut” and “Edge” offer more distinct perspectives on depression and dying than “Elm,” written in 1962, a year before her death. Plath performs with a confident, sure voice, “I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root: / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there.” Plath’s reassuring comments on the listener’s situation turn dark, as she begins writing more specifically about what has plagued her: “the sea you hear in me / its dissatisfactions” and “the voice of nothing.” The two options Plath poses to deal with the sadness are crying, which she says resembles the sounds of “its hooves,” or suicide, which she explains as “the sound of poisons,” or “this big hush.”
As in “Edge” where Plath alludes to the moon as a mute and inactive bystander, Plath again borrows from astronomy images to depict the helplessness of the depressed person. In “Elm,” unlike in “Edge,” the natural elements are guilty of persecuting her and are anything but mute and inactive. Plath describes her pain by referring to the sun, the wind, and the moon:

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.
Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.
The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

The effect of Plath’s cataloging natural elements and the pain they impose suggests that all of creation is at war with her. She tropes beauty with pain, offering Emily Dickinson’s image of hope (“the thing with feathers”) with a predatory cancer, putting on the face of the persecuted victim:

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.
I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

The dramatic difference in the treatment of depression and death between “Edge” and “Elm” is best explained by how her pain resolved itself through the viewing of suicide as an escape from the struggle of living. Plath depicts her victimhood at the hands of the depression and madness as though it is something otherworldly and unstoppable—even the trees are in on it: “murderous in its strangle of branches.”

Plath continues playing the part of the helpless, victimized, sympathetic self in “Daddy,” though she takes on an angrier, more vindictive voice in the poem. Plath’s performance begins with the disenfranchised daughter figure who was cheated because her father died too soon.
When Plath writes, “Daddy, I have had to kill you,” the audience becomes immediately aware of the daughter’s hatred toward her father. In moments which might, in isolation, be interpreted as a sweet daughter longing for her father’s return—“I used to pray to recover you”—Plath reminds us that she wants him back only to kill him again.

Plath connects her negative feelings toward her father with her own inability to communicate with him: “I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw.” To demonstrate the disconnect and the foreignness she felt while trying to speak to her father, Plath portrays herself as the inarticulate, stuttering child, borrowing from German, his native language: “It stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak.” Plath classifies the response to her struggling voice as dismissive: “An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew.” Consequently, Plath portrays herself as that other, the enemy of the fictive version of her father she creates: “I began to talk like a Jew. I think I may well be a Jew.”

In the poem, Plath perceives her father as ignoring her real self, so she finds herself appropriated by an alternate version of herself, as indicated by the speech she adopts in place of her father’s native tongue. The “dark thing” Plath explains as oppressing her in “Elm” recurs here in “Daddy,” as she speaks openly of fear and pairs it with dark elements, images bound to pictorial representations of Auschwitz, Hitler, and the Holocaust. Plath hammers hard the dark imagery, piling up references to the color black—“So black no sky could squeak through,” “You stand at the blackboard, daddy,” “the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two,” and “A man in black with a Meinkampf look.” When Plath refers again to the color black, she attaches it to the classic representation of communication—the wires connecting people at a great distance through the telephone—so when she writes, “The black telephone’s off at the root, / The voices just can’t worm through,” she is referring to the version of the killing of her father she could manage, the mythic memory of the happy family and perfect father others perpetuated and she felt bound to. In the line, she releases herself to disrupt the existing narrative of her father’s life and to interpret the ripple effects of his torture on her damaged, childlike self.

Robert Phillips reads the line about the black telephone as being of greater significance than simply a mechanism of communication. Phillips writes,

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7 Otto Plath was not a Nazi, so this qualifying description is needed to avoid confusing the facts from Plath’s interpretation of the situation.
“Daddy” is a poem of total rejection. When she writes that “the black telephone’s off at the root,” she is turning her back on the modern world as well. Such rejection of family and society leads to that final rejection, that of the Self. Her suicide is everywhere predicted, in poems of symbolic annihilation such as “Totem” and in statements of human fascination with death.

Phillips’ interpreting this line as a rejection of life beyond her father coincides with the readings of “Cut,” “Edge,” and “Elm” I have offered. The personification of the root as an extension of the self is not presented only in “Daddy.” “Elm” opens with the image of the root when Plath writes, “I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root,” and so in these references Plath is referring to a vaster, deeper awareness which goes, along with the metaphor, beneath the surface. 8

Because Plath is a confessional poet, our vaster, deeper awareness of her art as performance hinges upon our understanding of her biography, and for Plath, because so much of her work rests upon the heavy impact of her family, specifically her father and her subsequent recovery from the memory of him, upon a close look at her familial influences and life as a child in the Plath household.

Although it is mostly speculation, one might argue that Plath, had she survived her depression and lived past thirty, would have continued along the trajectory established even in her toddler years of acute self-awareness and a perpetual desire to please herself by pleasing and impressing others. Even Ted Hughes has argued this. Central to her poetry is the presence of a paternal authority figure, whether this was her father, Otto Plath, or one of the many stand-ins, like the date conquests she collected like poetry prizes. Her father’s reputation as an austere academic played no small role in her needing to perform well academically and put on an intellectual acrobatic show for the family. The first evidence of Sylvia’s inherent competitive nature coincided with the birth of her brother, Warren, when she was two.

Edward Butscher describes at length Plath’s early childhood eagerness to attract attention and be praised, starting with her reaction to Warren’s arrival by labeling him a “threat” to Sylvia (10). Fearing she would lose her father’s attention because of the new baby in the house, Sylvia

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8 Theodore Roethke’s “Root Cellar” also offers a unique treatment of roots. Despite their existing in utter dark and dampness, the roots persist in living life. As in Robert Philip’s Freudian treatment of Plath wherein she lives life most fully through her poetry about death, Roethke’s poem offers a look at life beneath the surface that runs counter to our conventional understanding of this location below the ground.
“memorized the Latin names for various insects, and the father proudly showed off her skill whenever the chances arose, doting on his daughter’s apparent precocity” (Butscher 10). Butscher interprets Plath’s drive as an attempt to earn affection through good works and reflected on the negative behavioral pattern it triggered: “Sylvia had to be on stage for him, demonstrating her own worth [. . . .] it suggested to the quick-witted child that her major worth as a human being depended upon what she did rather than who she was” (10-11). This pattern continued as Sylvia transitioned into public school as a model pupil from the start. Her school records reflected straight A’s throughout high school. One critic writes of Plath’s emotional ties to school: “[A]s long as she was a student, Sylvia functioned splendidly [. . . .] anything less than first-rate work might shatter her fragile sense of self” (Bawer 9). In “Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession,” Bruce Bawer describes Plath as “an obedient, overachieving daughter who found security (or, at least, a semblance thereof) in the structures and schedules of the classroom and whose sense of self-definition appears to have depended from an early age upon her ability not only to meet but to exceed the expectations of her parents and teachers” (9).

The consequence at times meant trading in opportunities to fit into social crowds for individual, personal academic successes: “Sylvia was impressing her teachers, often doing more work than required, while attending lectures and chapel regularly; but in social terms she remained something of an outsider. A few of the upper-class girls in Haven House treated her with an ill-concealed derision stemming from their stereotyped American distaste for solitary scholars” (Butscher 47). Considering Plath’s detail-oriented awareness of everything around her, it follows that Plath would have been aware of the sacrifice of friends and dates she was making as a consequence of her overachieving. Nevertheless, she must have weighed the temporary popularity with peers with the lasting reputation she could make for herself through her work—as her father had with his career and publications—and decided that the latter was worth it. Evelyn Page, one of Plath’s writing instructors characterized her as being “driven by a ‘terrifying fear of mediocrity,’ she disciplined herself to scale peak after peak, which wore her down physically and mentally, although she would have been the last to admit it. Exhaustion, like the illness, represented a surrender of the will” (qtd. in Butscher 86). Edward Butscher concluded in his biography that “creativity, the certain sign of a special fate, an escape from mediocrity—was even more crucial [to Plath] than academic prowess…” (91). Nevertheless, Plath’s attention was
divided between the world of poetry and prose, where she focused on her craft, and the world of journalism, where she knew she could earn a respectable living (Hughes, “Introduction”).

Consequently, Plath’s tenacity and determination to be a literary force to be reckoned with is a common focus for Plath scholars. In her introduction to Plath’s Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage, Linda Wagner-Martin describes the poet as “obviously a well-educated, disciplined writer who usually avoided the sentimentalities of some female writers” (1). Wagner-Martin’s choice of words here, “avoided,” implies Plath’s conscious shift away from other poets’ styles and toward her own voice. A friend of Plath, Elinor Klein, recalls Plath’s showing off of her rejection slips: “I’ve got hundreds. They make me proud of myself. They show me I try” (27). Jane Baltzell Kopp who studied at Cambridge alongside Plath recalls,

[S]he was ambitious in many directions, and she rarely did anything without striving (I choose the word with care) to excel [. . . .] not so much giving herself pleasure as somehow trying (so it seemed) to satisfy someone very difficult to please. The variety of these things she concerned herself with meant that her activity tended to be disintegral [. . . .] as though she was frantically trying to “get somewhere” in an almost literal sense. (28)

A. Alvarez offers a similar description of Plath: “She seemed effortlessly good at things: she was a prize scholar as well as a prize poet; and later, when she married, she was good at having children and keeping a house clean, cooking, making honey, even at riding horses. There was a ruthless efficiency in all she did which left no room for mistakes or uncertainties” (57). Kopp’s and Alvarez’s assessments of Plath here applied directly to her writing life, as well.

In Plath’s writing process, whether for prose or poetry, she scrutinized the details and struggled for honesty, accuracy, and audience applicability. In the introduction to Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams Hughes notes Plath’s desire to improve her attention to detail by cataloging description from her observations and guilting herself if she forgot anything: “After visiting a neighbor’s house, she would detail the décor and furnishings with laborious tenacity, and upbraid herself for failing to remember exactly what motif adorned that particular lamp, and exhort herself to get a mental photograph of it on her next visit” (1-2). Responding to Plath’s journals, Marni Jackson identifies the relationship between author and audience as evidenced in her poetry: “In her formal writing Plath struggled constantly with self-consciousness and her desire to please a certain audience (she sometimes dreamed in New Yorker typeface). But in her
journals she is all vulnerability: not only is the writer’s love of the world here, but so is the fearful ‘50s woman driven to be everything to everyone’” (304). Jackson’s assessment of Plath’s journals indicate that Plath’s self-awareness was rooted in the natural audience-awareness that comes with the drive to create but also a fear—the fear of being discounted or rejected by others. This fear refers back to her need to seek approval from male figures, from Otto Plath to Ted Hughes—to make them love her by performing well for them. If she could only entertain them enough to keep their eye focused on her, she could remain the center of attention and stay happy. If their eyes wandered away, whether to their work or another person—Warren or Assia—then she interpreted it as a rejection of herself and a failure of her work, the performance.

Understanding the dynamics of Plath in her interactions with peers and family should inform how we read her work as a careful crafting of the self. While one might argue that any writer might be best read this way, this argument hold especially true for interpreting Plath’s writing, as her writing explored the dynamics of her familial relationships in ways that other, less confessional writers’ work does not. If in all these cases Plath seemed chiefly concerned with how she would be read, it follows that Plath would be similarly concerned with how audiences read her through her work.

I disagree with those writers, like Marni Jackson, who point to “vulnerability” in Plath’s journals, suggesting that the most authentic version of herself emerges in the diary writing and argue instead that the audience is presented with yet another version of Plath’s writing voice which is still intended for a public audience. If from childhood Plath was “determined [. . .] to be great, a great writer at the least of it,” and was emboldened by the ego so many others describe her as having, it follows that Plath would have been concerned about her public legacy from that very young age and written everything with some version of the audience in mind (Sexton, “The Barfly Ought to Sing” 30).

In the last twenty years, seven Plath biographies have been published, each with its own spin on her life: Anne Stevenson’s Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (1989), Ronald Hayman’s The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath (1991), Paul Alexander’s Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (1991), Diane Wood Middlebrook’s Her Husband: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, a Marriage (2003), Linda Wagner-Martin’s Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (2003), Edward Butscher’s Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (2004), and Peter K. Steinberg’s Sylvia Plath (2004). In every case, the biographers emphasize the moments in Plath’s life that seem most
valuable to them, and in each of their cases, it seems that interpretation of the events overshadows the events themselves. In fact, this interpretation seems rather unavoidable from any author’s perspective, given the controversial nature of the story being relayed. The biographers themselves are certainly aware of the problematic nature of the task before them. In a 2004 interview, Diane Middlebrook explains her role in the text: “I don’t think you should go in with the notion you want to find out who’s right, especially if you’re thinking about marriage splits. That’s not what the biographer should do. The biographer should ask, ‘what was going on? Who was bringing what to the table at that moment?’” (Macdonald). And while Middlebrook’s vision for what a biographer should do is ideal, this illuminates also the challenge biographers face and the necessary imperfection—the subjectivity—that emerges in most texts resulting from authorial bias. I would argue that the clearest vision audiences can get of Plath is through looking at the diversity of her voices and beginning to understand how she craves audience attention and pursues it in her writing, eliciting a direct and active response from readers. To demonstrate this author-audience relationship, it is important to look first at key poems which provoke a reaction from the reader. I argue that these poems function only as installations of a larger, master performance and that Plath’s letters and journals are also part of this performance. For other authors less concerned about perfection and their lasting legacy, the equivocation of letters and journals as a poetic performance might be problematic. For Plath, however, this argument that conventionally private writing forms can and should be read as an attempt at performing for an audience holds.

Peter Davison, who knew Plath as an undergraduate, said she was “always trying to create an effect, to make an impression” and spoke of her life “as though she were describing a stranger to herself, a highly trained circus horse” (qtd. in Bawer 10). Anne Stevenson’s Plath biography explains her behaviors as self-preservation: “Haunted by a fear of her own disintegration, [Plath] kept herself together by defining herself, writing constantly about herself, so that everyone could see her there, fighting and conquering an outside world that forever threatened her frail being” (qtd. in Bawer 10-11). The question, “What are you doing?” was made famous by Twitter, a website which builds networks of users who follow and are followed by and following and limits posts to 140 characters. Facebook borrowed this model, without the space limitation, for members’ status updates posted continuously on the news feed, a change which was shortly followed by MySpace as well. And I agree in part with Stevenson’s argument
here. It does seem that the “bitch goddess” Bawer claims that Butscher portrays in his Plath biography is a manifestation of Plath’s own insecurities, reflective of a neediness to craft a makeshift, stronger version of herself to withstand the stresses of reality. But it only works in this sense: the resurrection of the broken Plath into the immortal, larger-than-life goddess figure, not vice versa. How then do we make sense of the writing Plath engages in which does not reflect the “bitch goddess” persona? Certainly, it must be read differently than as a means to cope with an otherwise “frail being”; what use is reconstructing another frail being in place of the first? It seems that Stevenson’s reading holds up when looking at the Plath of *Ariel*, but her argument is insufficient when readers deal with the broader scope of Plath’s writing, which includes letters and journals since they are, in my view, all written performances for Plath.

Unlike Anne Sexton, whose confessional content and style began with her first published book of poetry *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Plath followed in line with Robert Lowell, whose initial works reflected much care for traditional poetic forms and fulfilling readers’ expectations, and who only moved into the confessional mode after being prompted by other authors. Sexton, of course, did not do this alone but was clearly and openly influenced by W.D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*. Like Davison has said, Plath’s early work read like “advanced exercises” (77). He also noted the marked shift away from these poems in *The Colossus* toward the contents of *Ariel*, commenting on the context in which Plath’s new voice emerged:

It has become fashionable—or if not fashionable, at least common—for poets to set down their autobiographical crises, first person and second person and all, as a qualifying confession to admit this to the fraternity—a kind of professional good conduct pass. All the difference in the world, however, lies between such antics, *performed always with an audience in mind*, whether explicitly in the poem or implicitly in its tone, and, on the other hand, such terrifying lines as these, from several of the poems in *Ariel*. (emphasis added) (Davison 76-77)

As Davison writes, these works, “performed always with an audience in mind,” are generated to elicit response from readers, he is contrasting contrived performances with the supposedly less artificial artistry found within *Ariel*. Peter Porter, in his review of *Crossing the Water*, writes, “In this period of Plath’s poetry, objects come towards the reader like frightening Greek messengers” (46). Her unique ability to simultaneously terrify and romance readers seems to have traversed the years since her death. In response to the same book of poetry, Paul West writes, “Reading her
is like standing on the San Andreas fault or crawling on a glass roof; she sets up a nerve-wracking excitement after which, as the poems end, you feel drained and down. She cannot be read aloofly’” (8). Again, in West’s response a phrase insisting on her intentionality—“she sets up”—implies Plath’s precise control over her work and, consequently, her audience. Leonard Sanazaro’s arguments are along these same lines in “The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, a Reconisderation” when he writes, “[T]he core of Plath’s poetic experience was personal experience, but for her the creation of art necessitated control and manipulation by the ‘informed and intelligent mind’” (91). This self-awareness sometimes proved to be a drawback for her.

For example, Hughes addresses the limitations Plath experienced in her prose writing as a byproduct of her self-consciousness. Hughes explains these shortcomings in his introduction to \textit{Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams}: “Part of the stiffness probably came from the fact that she was always trying to write a pastiche of the sort of writing she imagined was wanted by the journal she had in mind” (2). This self-editing was evidenced even in her journaling processes. In the same introduction, Hughes notes Plath’s reasoning for keeping a notebook: “Her motive for keeping the journal varied. The handwritten notebook entries were generally negative self-castigation, or a means of rallying her determination to get through something or other” (1). In his introduction to \textit{The Collected Poems}, Hughes discusses how the disciplined process of journaling translated to the process of poetry writing. Up until September 1960 when she began dating and keeping final typescripts and revisions of poems, Plath “systematically destroyed [handwritten drafts] as she went along” (Hughes, “Introduction,” \textit{CP} 17). All these behaviors indicate an awareness of audience and an awareness of her forthcoming legacy and seem similar to Emily Dickinson’s ritualistic habit of binding and keeping poems for posterity. In both cases, a simultaneous awareness of audience and mortality seem present.

In fact, it seems that the attraction suicide held for Plath, as well as her emphasis on death in her poems, whether it was her own or another’s, played an integral role in how she viewed her audience. After all, during life, the audience acts as a voyeur, fueling the artist’s awareness of self and need to craft her own identity in a means acceptable to the onlookers; after death, these roles are oddly reversed—this is where the artist’s mouth is shut and the audience is left to interpret and give power to the words she wrote in life. The audience, consequently, is put in a position of power to determine the weight of the legacy the artist leaves. Their connection to her
is indicated by their remembering her, and she lives on through them. They reject her by
forgetting her, and she is silenced by their inability to recall her.

Many of Plath’s later poems point to her victimization and marginalization by the
presence of the audience, yet at the same time is a welcomed entity. The voices in the poems, at
times, mark delusion, as she embraces romantic views of the audience loving the show—that
performance she puts on (as in “Lady Lazarus”). Many of these same poems foster a connection
with the audience as she communicates her personal struggles in ways that resonate with the
audience and invoke a larger, communal experience, disrupting the awareness of her being the
spectacle and their being the spectators. This is a Dickinsonian “I’m-nobody-who-are-you”
moment wherein Plath, in her seeming isolation from the rest of normal society, draws in the
anonymous reader.

Barbara Hardy touches on this connection between Plath’s “steady consistency toward
death, not life” and simultaneous attraction of the audience (61). Hardy sees this as a shared bond
between Plath and her readers rather than something that separates them: “We are never enclosed
in a private sickness here, and if derangement is a feature of the poetry, it works to enlarge and
generalize, not to create an enclosure” (61). In this way, Plath makes her work more attractive
for a larger audience because it rests on the border between traditional, depersonalized poetic
forms and the confessional lyric. In addition to its craft, artistry, and form, traditionalists can
appreciate her writing for its consciousness of situations outside of herself and broader social
contexts in ways that they might not appreciate Sexton’s work, for example, since it deals more
overtly with her experience with suicide attempts and madness and makes far fewer efforts to
look beyond herself to connect with audience. Hardy describes the applicability of Plath’s poems
best with the following metaphor: “She [Plath] is drawn to sickness, mutilation, attacks, and
dying, but each poem is a controlled and dynamic image with windows, not a lining of mirrors [. . .].
The poem opens out to our experience of sickness and health…” (71-72). As a consequence
of Plath’s efforts to make her poems applicable to others’ experiences, her work has greater
relevance to a larger audience, and this goes beyond “the peanut-crunching crowd” she refers to in
“Lady Lazarus.”

To demonstrate Plath’s complex treatment of audience in her work, I will point out
examples in two key poems: “Tulips” and “In Plaster.” I am focusing primarily on the
complicated way in which Plath views her audience—their attention to her fuels her but keeps
her dependent. This argument is clearly foreshadowed by her relationships with father-figures, specifically her dependence upon the approval of Otto Plath and Ted Hughes. In both “Tulips” and “In Plaster,” we see Plath engaging in writing as a performance and putting on a show as a different version of herself in an attempt to garner a response from the audience.

“Tulips” is only one of the poems in which Plath portrays herself as an empty receptacle. The details throughout the poem emphasize physicality: objects in the room, physical body parts, and the body as an object. “Tulips” is an example of the complex relationship between audience and author. For instance, the second stanza reads, “They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut” (Plath, “Tulips” 8-9), suggesting her powerlessness, yet she alludes to a sense of personal control as well in the opening stanza: “I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly” (3). She continues, reiterating her semblance of power: “I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons” (6-7). While she is relinquishing power to the authorities in the hospital, her sentences begin with the first person, active voice—“I am learning” and “I have given”—in such a way as to prove her own authority, though she has none. She admits, “I am nobody” (5) and describes herself as a rock—“My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water / Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently” (15-16)—and while this phrasing suggests her powerlessness because of the silence of rocks and the connotation pebbles carry of being nuisances (“pebble in my shoe”), Plath follows it with the benefit she draws from their presence over her like such water: “They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep” (17). Plath continues with a seemingly paradoxical fused sentence with the loss of a person instead of a suitcase: “Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—” (18). Also interesting is the complex relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Losing oneself offers a negative connotation, yet Plath immediately follows it with “I am sick of baggage,” as if the loss of the self is her preference, as if the losing is liberation.

Even Plath’s relation to her family in “Tulips” is not what readers would expect. Plath begins with conventional familial images: “My husband and child smiling out of the family photo; / Their smiles catch onto my skin,” yet she twists the image by adding the final,

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9 The line “Pitcher of milk, now empty” in “Edge” suggests the dead woman’ emptiness and “perfection” because of it. Like the pitcher, the woman, too, can be read as a receptacle for milk, especially with the dead children mentioned in the prior stanza.
descriptive clarification, “little smiling hooks,” and suddenly the language shifts from a positive, emotional portrait, to a painful, physical one (20-21). The smiles, within the context of the poem, are the agitators, “conveying a sense of entrapment” (Curtis 177). Perhaps they are the “baggage” she is sick of and must lose herself to lose them although it is unclear whether readers should tie this to postpartum depression. Some critics read “Tulips” as having originated from a labor-related hospital stay; others don’t.

Diana Curtis begins her discussion of the poem by pointing out that Plath had written it “eleven months after giving birth” and says that the poem was written in a neighbor’s study,” suggesting that the poem had emerged from her experience having a baby (177). Jeannine Dobbs deals with the poem’s origin quite differently, pointing instead to Hughes’s mention that Plath wrote “Tulips” “after being hospitalized for an appendectomy in March of 1961” (n.pag.). Margaret Dickie Uroff concurs with Dobbs’s assessment, yet Dobbs additionally relates the poem to another hospital stay: “She had miscarried just a short time before this operation; probably the second hospital confinement triggered associations with death and birth” (n.pag.). Regardless of the reason for the hospitalization that inspired Plath to write the poem, it seems clear that Plath is reflecting on the “baggage” of family while she is in the hospital, regardless of whether or not they are the reason for her being hospitalized.

Despite being rid of all this “baggage” from life and letting “things slip” from herself, whom she characterizes in the poem as “a thirty-year-old cargo boat” (22), she is glad for the separation, writing, “I am a nun now, I have never been so pure,” invoking the chaste body as if to say all her life’s mistakes—the husband, the children—have been undone (28). In her essay on “Tulips,” Diana Curtis writes of this separation: “Plath had discovered sanctuary there that was not to be found at home, and in the poem her speaker cherishes the quietude of the hospital” (177).

In “Tulips” the flowers represent the object of a loving gesture toward the hospitalized individual. Plath rejects the tulips, writing, “I didn’t want any flowers” (29) and “The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me” (36), likening them to “A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck” (42). For Plath, the giving of the tulips is a farcical gesture. She describes the presence of the tulips as the presence of a makeshift family whom she does not want present:

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen. (43-49)

One might read this as the hallucinations of a madwoman, that Plath is seeing the plant threaten her physically. However, the metaphor of the flowers being family still stands, and we can see how the superficial issuing of flowers to someone in their time of need might be viewed as a “too-little-too-late” gesture because of the line “Nobody watched me before, now I am watched” bearing the double meaning of flowers and family. Additionally, the tulips seem to be symbolic of life and vitality, reminders that cause her pain by calling her attention to her tie to those things. Why, she wonders, would they care for me now when they neglected to earlier? Why should she respond to this sudden issuance of attention?

Most interesting about “Tulips” is the juxtaposition Plath invokes between emptiness and fullness. In most cases, fullness would be desired and emptiness despised. Plath tropes this by making the emptiness, the consequence of her illness, the benefit of her illness. She writes, “I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty,” and the image invoked is one of the supine corpse, the body lying on the table, arms distal, as if dead. So, Plath juxtaposes death with life as the goal of the patient.

“Tulips” offers an example of a writer’s need to communicate a struggle to those sharing a similar struggle. Poetry’s capability of allowing the writer to share private secrets with a public audience, set apart and separate from those who caused the struggle is not altogether unlike the capability of a confessional blog, which enables the author to communicate a struggle to a sympathetic reader, typically one who is not part of the pain. As with a confessional poem, such as “Tulips,” the writer is liberated to share the struggle because the page, like the screen for the blogger, is a captive audience which will not deny or question the validity of the pain the author divulges. In this way, both confessional genres serve as catharsis for the writer. It seems that part of this catharsis is achieved through the act of performing for the audience. The pain is lessened through the process of translating it from reality to the page or screen.

“Tulips” is not the only poem where Plath employs the performance to transcend the pain. Plath uses similar sickness metaphors in the poem “In Plaster,” wherein she writes of a
division of the self: “There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and the old
yellow one” (1-2). She invokes the same physical images of death in the poem, referring to the
white person, “She lay in bed with me like a dead body” (6). The poem emerges quickly as a
discussion of which is better: the white person or the yellow one. Plath concludes early on that
the yellow one is, surprisingly, the better of the two since “it was I who attracted everybody’s
attention, / Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed” (18-19). The reference to
“everybody’s attention” reflects Plath’s preoccupation with the question of audience.

One key difference between the Plath portrayed in “Tulips” and in this poem is that
“Tulips” contains a single, ill voice; “In Plaster” delves instead into a battle of two minds inside
one person—one is white and normal, the other is yellow and sick. In creating this contrast, Plath
is able to capture the struggle she undergoes to reconcile the tug between the two. Where in
“Tulips,” the reversal of Plath is seen in the authorities milling about the hospital, in “In Plaster,”
Plath is her own worst enemy. She writes in third person, “[S]he was resentful— / Wasting her
days waiting on a half-corpse! / And secretly she began to hope I’d die” (38-40). In “Tulips,” the
death is release for the person wishing for it.

Throughout “In Plaster,” Plath also translates death into freedom although it is only
freedom for half the person. The effect of the yellow person beneath the white person is atrophy:
I wasn’t in any position to get rid of her.
She’d supported me for so long I was quite limp—
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
So, I was careful not to upset her in any way
Or brag ahead of time how I’d avenge myself.
Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully. (43-49)

The duality of the person here is a necessary one, Plath suggests, and despite the unevenness of
the co-dependence, it is better than the alternative since neither can live without the other half.
The sick woman relies upon the healthy woman for strength, and that seems clear, but Plath
tropes this by the end of the poem—the same type of inversion that happens in “Tulips”—when
the yellow woman says, “I’m collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her, / And
she’ll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me” (55-56). There are three things to note
about this ending, which is essential to understanding the whole of the poem.
First, it is unexpected that the yellow woman is in control from the background. This is suggested in the active voice used to say, “I’m collecting my strength.” In this line lies an optimistic hopefulness that one might not expect from the ill of the two. While she suffers, she plans: “one day I shall manage without her.” Next, readers should note the complicated way in which Plath alludes to emptiness and how her treatment of emptiness changes from “Tulips” to “In Plaster.” The voice in “Tulips” desires emptiness but only because she desires separation and finds that death is freedom. In “In Plaster,” emptiness is portrayed as the plight the white woman will have to endure in the end when she gets what she deserves from the yellow woman. Death for the white woman isn’t desirable, yet it is to be preceded by the same emptiness that seems to stand for peace and solace in “Tulips.” Lastly, it seems that the yellow woman, though sick, benefits the white woman in some way because the yellow one closes the poem with the prospect that the other woman will “begin to miss” her, as though she’s as reliant on the yellow woman as she is on her. One might even read “In Plaster” as a metaphor for the author-audience relationship, especially as it relates to confessional writing—the sick writing for the scopophiliacs. They depend upon one another and fuel each other.

Additionally, Plath’s family has provided a lens through which audiences can view Plath. Marni Jackson’s “In Search of the Shape Within,” published in response to Ted Hughes’s release of Plath’s journals, best sums up the awkward and at times unnecessary editorial intrusions, calling them “long editorial shadows that fall over these pages”:

First, Hughes tells us how he destroyed her last notebook because he didn’t want their children to read it. Then, Plath’s mother steps in at midbook with a signed release as a preface to a section that is hostile toward her. And the general editor, Frances McCullough, has spared us certain “intimacies” that “have the effect of diminishing Plath’s eroticism, which was quite strong.” We’ll have to take her word for it, because what she gives us instead are passages interrupted by the word “omission.” [. . . .] The decision to publish her journals should respect her contradictory selves; instead, the editing makes us feel that Plath’s husband, mother and editor are peering over our shoulders as we read, much the way Plath hallucinated them peering over hers as she wrote. (305)

And while Ted Hughes (and Olwyn Hughes, his sister) bore the brunt of criticism for putting his fingerprints on her work and seeming to silence her through his overzealous pruning and
restructuring of *Ariel*, not to mention his destruction and loss of years’ worth of Plath’s journals and Olwyn’s adamant denial of scholars’ requests to quote from Plath’s works, his was not the only voice speaking for Plath.

Aurelia Plath’s publication of *Letters Home*, the mishmash of Sylvia’s juvenile correspondence compiled in an attempt to prove herself a good mother and Sylvia a happy, innocent daughter, proved only to further convolute the self that Plath wanted audiences to recognize as her own. Jo Brans suggests that these letters offer the clearest portrayal of Plath’s personhood: “My point is simply that we can learn very little of the Sylvia of the poetry, the only Sylvia in whom we can take a legitimate interest, from these letters” (57). Additionally, in “The Girl Who Wanted to Be God,” Brans argues, “To ‘know’ Sylvia Plath, finally, we must return to the poems, where she created her most singular self” (216). Yet much of the work remains an artifice crafted by Aurelia. In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Christina Britzolakis writes that “[t]he Sivvy persona of *Letters Home* is an attempt to reflect back to the mother, as in a mirror, a co-authored ‘desired image’ of success and fulfillment” (22). Additionally, she writes that the letters hinge on a “plot of mutual reparation,” functioning as “vicarious or substitutive nourishment, cementing a shared project of deferred gratification” (Britzolakis 22).

Yet Aurelia’s recasting of her ‘Sivvy’ only contributed in part to the master portrayal of Plath; in fact, the majority of the poet’s legacy, like other confessional poets, was influenced by her dramatic life story as much as her poems’ recollection of it. In short, no other confessional poet’s story has been as haunting as Sylvia Plath’s. Even before her marriage to Hughes and her own rise to fame, the pretty, blond sophomore’s disappearance from Smith College garnered the public’s attention until she was found in the crawlspace beneath her mother’s house, “more dead than alive” from pills and vodka (Wagner-Martin 105). Plath lived in the shadow of Hughes’s name and reputation, publishing only *The Colossus* prior to her suicide by gas in 1963 at the age of thirty. The image of her children, ages three and one, locked away in the playroom with the window open and some food and milk set out still lingers with Plath’s readers alongside the question of whether Hughes’s infidelity pushed her to the breaking point. Plath has become, consequentially, the Marilyn Monroe figure of American poetry, a tragic symbol of perpetual youth and beauty.

Some critics, like Irving Howe, argue that Plath’s acclaim as a poet stems from the public’s intrigue with her personal life, saying that while she is a good poet, her work resonates
so profoundly because of the surrounding controversies, rather than its aesthetic merit. Paul West puts it most bluntly when he writes, “Had Sylvia Plath been ugly, and not died in so deliberate a manner, I wonder if she would have the standing she has” (8). If we look only at The Colossus, West’s assessment, while harsh, is not too far from the truth. The book of poems is tedious at times and while it dazzles with its intricacies of language and form, it fails to perform the way her posthumous works do in their unique ability to attract and engage the audience. Peter Davison offers more direct criticism: “The early poems, many of them published in a collection called The Colossus [. . .] seemed to have no absolute necessity of being: they read like advanced exercises” (76-77). Yet in the same way that Plath performs in her posthumous works, such as the acclaimed Ariel and The Bell Jar, she performs in The Colossus, flexing her scholarly muscles and showing off how well she can put on traditional poetic forms. Despite the differences in content and form, Colossus and her posthumous works are both performances geared toward appealing to and appeasing a specific audience.

It is this very balance between confession and voyeurism that enables us to read Plath as a performer alongside contemporary blog culture. The implicit understanding Plath has with her audience, the voice that invites them to watch her as long as they believe her and accept her, is key in defining blog audiences and understanding the influence the author has over the audience, and, more importantly, vice versa.

In 2008 Michael Wesch presented “An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube” at the Library of Congress, addressing the role of audience in web communications. Wesch presented a student-created vlog in which the student is said to speak to “everyone and no one.” This phrase, far from an oxymoron, has a meaningful application to confessional poetry and shapes our understanding of autobiographical genres, such as the confessional poem and blog.

As much as these genres seem to imply dual audiences (the “everyone and no one”), they similarly suggest a dual anonymity at work as the author’s and audience’s identities aren’t fixed but are rather malleable depending on the nature of the texts. Plath is a prime example of the author’s ever-changing presence in the text. Robin Peel’s Writing Back refers to what she calls “an act of deliberate performance” in two ways on Plath’s part (15). She writes, “One of these [ways] identifies particular writings as conscious experiments in voice. The other, suggested by the expression ‘writing back,’ reads Plath’s poetry and fiction as performed responses to the would-be controlling forces…” (Peel 15). One argument might be that these “would-be
“controlling forces” are the readers themselves, and Plath is responding directly to their desire to see and hear her.

In “Death Is the Dress She Wears: Plath’s Grand Narrative,” Victoria Anderson writes about the complex relationship between audience, author, and confession displayed in Plath’s poetry:

Confession here is not precisely confession, but rather something hovering dangerously between fiction and testimony, and itching to play to the crowd [. . .] a good confession is metaphorized as a sexual technique exercised to attain specific ends [. . .] Plath here is seen to deliberately entice the peanut crunchers, the bored spectators, desperate for sensation—while setting herself up as an expensive whore. (79)

Embellishing and some degree of fiction writing is key in concocting the elaborate scheme to get the audience’s attention. Even in Plath’s journals where she, interestingly, uses third person to directly address the “everyone and no one” she is writing to, she writes about a “true Confession,” implying that a confession, by definition, may contain fiction. It is not simply telling all the truth but telling it slant, to borrow from Dickinson; rather, it may mean lying altogether to achieve a desired effect. Addressing this, Plath writes,

I am now in the midst of writing the biggest true Confession I have ever written, all for the remote possibility of gaining…filthy lucre. A contest in True Story is in the offing, with all sorts of Big Money prizes. [. . .] Sylvia just finished the rough draft of a whopping true Confession of over 40 (you can count them) pages, trying to capture the style, and let me tell you, my supercilious attitude about the people who write Confessions has diminished. It takes a good tight plot and a slick ease that are not picked up overnight like a cheap whore. (Journals 541-42)

Readers note through Plath’s own confession about Confessions that her emphasis in writing this genre is financial. Her decision about style is not authenticity but based on fitting into the genre expectations set for her by other authors. Finally, she notes the technical aspects of the confession needing to be in place in lieu of elements of truth. Again, her focus is not actuality; it is marketability and, consequently, audience appeal.

The implication of Plath’s focus on marketability seems to affirm the claims made by some scholars about the question of confessional poetry’s worth: Is it an artifice posed as
authenticity craftily designed to shock and manipulate the reader? Plath, even by her own estimation, is at times putting on a show to elicit a reaction from a crowd, and I would not argue that this is necessarily a negative aspect of her work, as it happens in all poetry, all art. The only difference is that others have imposed the term ‘confessional’ on it and thrust all the associated limitations and restrictions upon it, defining what it should and should not do.

In fact, I would argue that it is an admirable quality of the work because the performance Plath puts on, however contrived, can still function as a means of catharsis and liberation from the authentic pain of her life. Similarly, the confessional bloggers we read as putting on similar performances through this new online genre of autobiographical writing are engaging in a similar catharsis and liberation. Both genres seem to be valuable examples of how people in contemporary American culture deal with deep personal traumas. The very awareness of the “peanut crunching crowd” and its necessary impact on what authors choose to do and say in front of it is significant on its own.
CHAPTER 3
“MY KITCHEN, YOUR KITCHEN”: ANNE SEXTON AND DOMESTIC IDENTITY FROM HOME TO HOMEPAGES

Anne Sexton’s best known poem, “Her Kind,” speaks to the otherness experienced as a wife and mother. Most interesting about the poem is its refrain—“I have been her kind” (7, 14, 21)—read alongside the description which so clearly sets Sexton apart from the mainstream woman we expect to see emerge from 1950s America. This mass marketed Suzy Homemaker image of the wife and mother provided the cookie cutter template for all women who needed to know their place and role in the American household in the middle of the twentieth century. The picture-perfect Stepford wives were modeled with appliances and cleaning products galore, and their designated domestic spaces conjured images of a successful husband and happy, well-mannered children. Even images of the 1950s supermarket, that home away from home for the American woman, suggested the happiness elicited from a life of order and abundance, and this shopping space was established to entice and to sell to a specific consumer: the domestic goddess. Yet, just as Allen Ginsberg called into question the American ideal of capitalistic consumerism and John Updike problematized the instinct to conform—both responding directly to these supermarket, happy household images—Anne Sexton wrote poetry that called into question women’s satisfaction with these paradigms of the perfect and the plenty. In her poems Sexton juxtaposes the order and abundance perpetuated by 1950s media with the chaos or lack she senses in these domestic spaces.

Sexton’s frustration with those domestic ideals the 1950s media established might be read as her rejection of it, as she is directly responding to her inability to fit into the contrived mold with all the expectations accompanying it while in her current, imperfect state. She goes so far as vilifying herself as a “witch” in “Her Kind” and offers a call for women who are also “Her Kind” by exposing them to the deepest secrets she has in the form of poetic confession. Despite the hefty criticism her work endured, those returning to Sexton’s work almost half a century later
can reflect on its role in delving into taboo issues that have, consequently, become increasingly less taboo since her inclusion of them in her work.

What Sexton does in “Her Kind” is especially complex in that she emphasizes oddities and deviance, and all the descriptors point to those witchy ways which make her an outsider, an Other, all the while sympathizing with another group, which she classifies as “her kind.” While Sexton’s focus is her deviant behaviors and identity, evidenced by the physical description of herself—“lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind” (5)—she ends up allying with “her kind,” a class of women she sees out there, living just like her. In the poem, Sexton likens herself to “a possessed witch” (1) who is “dreaming evil” (3), both phrases highly suggestive of things beyond her control. If she is possessed, she is not the one deciding her actions; surely her dreams are the manifestations of her subconscious or unconscious, not something she decides. Caroline King Barnard Hall further explores Sexton’s use of the witch figure:

Witches (always female, of course) are by nature alienated, different, shunned by society. More important, a witch possesses magic powers. [. . . .] This witch may appear an ordinary woman in daytime, but she lives on the border of sanity and normalcy, going out into the night world to pursue her true imaginative vision, transforming the ordinary domestic scene into something mad and nightmarish. (90)

When she says the woman like her is “not a woman, quite,” she refers to the preconception of what a woman of the 1950s should be—that Donna Reed persona, the good girl—so to fall short of this is to fall short of being, in her mind, a “woman” (6). If the “caves” are the witches’ homes, then Sexton vilifies the family in “Her Kind,” pointing to the domestic chores that fill her days with frustrations:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves;
whining, rearranging the disaligned. (8-12)

By the poem’s end, the woman is persecuted, the object of onlookers’ disdain, yet Sexton portrays her as unrepentant of her ways since she cannot change them: “A woman like that is not ashamed to die” (20). The poem, therefore, ends with the fearless, sexual figure of the woman—
“my nude arms” (16), “my thigh” (18), “my ribs” (19)—remaining strong and decisive to the end as the empathetic voice closes the third and final stanza. The image of the speaker’s bare body being exposed and consumed by the hungry onlookers may serve as a metaphor for Sexton’s confessional writing in which she makes the private public, even to the embarrassment and horror of her friends and family. The act of exposing that which should be covered up and forgotten about is common ground, too, between the writing of Sexton’s poetry and mombloggers’ exposure of the self and their imperfections as parents and, interpreted critically as some, failures as women. I am talking specifically about a recent trend called “mommyblogging,” that is, any blogging done that is focused on the maternal experience, usually regarding parenting struggles. But the public admission of weakness, of otherness, may be interpreted as a subversive act that, however ironically, empowers the woman. Sexton’s voice in “Her Kind” is brazen and bold. She writes in detail about the oddities plaguing her body, the struggle to maintain normal appearances when she appears anything but normal, and she is unapologetic. She writes in concise, declarative sentences, defining herself: “I am her kind,” and, like the confessional momblogs themselves, it offers the implied question of “Who’s with me?”

The second half of To Bedlam and Part Way Back offers a look at the witchy woman’s life outside the institution. It is comprised of three poems: one short and two long poems. Each of these poems offers a key to understanding Sexton’s complete body of work. The first, “For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” defends the nature of confessional writing—especially writing that focuses on personal struggles in the domestic sphere. The second, “The Double Image,” emulates W.D. Snodgrass’s model of the confessional poem, “Heart’s Needle,” wherein he spoke candidly about the painful loss of his daughter through divorce. Sexton’s poem is similarly broken into sections which outline her experience of being separated from her own young daughter as a consequence of being hospitalized after multiple suicide attempts. The third, “The Division of Parts,” recalls Sexton’s loss of her own mother, an experience which, to some degree, forces her to assume responsibility for her own role as a mother.

Sexton’s writing, like that of other female confessional writers of the mid-century, was groundbreaking and controversial because it chose to represent domestic, feminine experience in a newly honest and shocking way. At the time that Sexton worked as a poet, women were expected to conform to the conventional roles of wife and mother, and Sexton unapologetically called into question marital and maternal paradigms by her overt references to her perpetual
misery stemming from her domestic and mothering duties. Sexton’s autobiographical writing serves as a powerful antecedent to contemporary works about marriage, maternity, and a woman’s role in the home. While Sexton’s biography indicated that she was an especially mentally ill woman who could not be considered the norm at the time, her poetry sheds light on some problematic dynamics of domestic spaces, particularly the resentment felt by the woman when she is naturally expected to be all things to all people but cannot fulfill these roles.

After Sexton’s controversial women’s writing paved the way for other women to start discussing these taboo issues, technological leaps began facilitating these controversial conversations between women. In recent years, Web 2.0 has garnered a reputation for being progressive, inclusive, and democratic. In many cases, this means that Web 2.0 is uniquely able to transcend the limitations of conventional, physical space, and in this regard, I am discussing not only how we are able to communicate between far-apart geographical locations but also the way we are made more comfortable talking about those subjects we have not been comfortable talking about with others face-to-face. Web 2.0 enables interpersonal connections and communication on a large scale in ways that were not possible in previous generations through its use of pseudonymity and online publishing software. This is due mostly to the advent of networked online communities, through the interactivity afforded by public web space, hyperlinks, and tags. Since the advent of blogs, SNS, and wikis, citizens of the web have woven themselves a new cultural fabric—one big, collective life comprised of voice upon voice.

Sometimes, as argued in Chapter One, the voice is a stand-in, a carefully crafted persona or avatar used as a mouthpiece for the citizen himself, and ironically, this artifice enables transparency and the author’s story to be told. In other cases, as those outlined in Chapter Two, the author can become consumed by audience and the work might be viewed as a theatrical performance. In both chapters, I focused on how confessional poetry and the electronic spaces within Web 2.0, specifically confessional blogs, offer people ways to engage with others that they might not otherwise have had access to in traditional spaces.

Thus far I have emphasized the distinctions between confessions among a community in physical spaces versus in electronic spaces, specifically in confessional blogs, yet I find that, in many cases, the spaces are more alike than unlike. In this chapter, I argue that Anne Sexton’s work made some women’s issues less taboo and enabled women to write comfortably and openly about previously taboo issues, such as their inability to fulfill gendered societal expectations. In
other words, her work helped create an entirely new cultural landscape in which women now feel free to write about motherhood and marriage without hiding their ambivalence. The platform blogs afford as part of Web 2.0 has facilitated these taboo-shattering discussions about motherhood, maternity, and marriage, and the topics Sexton broached in the 1950s have been fully exploited in online forums and confessional blogs written by twenty-first century women.

Even though Web 2.0 offers myriad ways to mix and remix genres, as with these new manifestations of marginal mothers online, I see Web 2.0 as a space increasingly inhabited by traditional topics and communities rooted in the paper world. This was inevitable, say Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, as old media invariably informs new media, in particular, the ways we conceive of it and the ways we interact with it. What I mean by this is that some paper traditions and face-to-face communities have made their way online with surprisingly little change in practice or interaction. It seems that Web 2.0 initiates new communication venues but that its users determine content—and how and why that technology is used—by remediating traditional content and simply changing venues.

The domestic space is a prime example of this shift. It seems to me that many mothers and wives have simply moved from the home to the homepage, altering the methods by which they accomplish domestic goals but not necessarily changing the goals themselves.

A relatively new development in blog culture is its genre-specificity. Craft blogs, cooking blogs, and parenting blogs ("momblogs") have emerged as virtual places where domestic women can gather and exchange homemaking tips. Scrapbooking and quilting, traditionally paper and fabric crafts, have gone digital, and with this shift has come the appearance of scrapbook and quilt blogs. Crops, where women gather to scrapbook alongside one another, have gone electronic, and users log on to do digital scrapbooking at the same time as others, using a chat function to keep the conversation going. Quilting bees work the same way.

Most interesting is that the mainstream versus margin difference between mothers happens online also. What I mean by this is that the gap establishing the difference between the average mom and the super moms or subpar moms is as visible online as it is in everyday life. Just as the 1950s saw women fit into or fall short of the domestic ideal, contemporary blogs reflect the same dynamic. For every happy housewife attending a cyber crop, Photoshopping, color-coordinating, Bedazzling, and e-pasting her life into a collage of motherly bliss, there is another on the brink, suffering from postpartum depression or otherwise unable to cope with the
daily stresses of being a mother. So, even as the twenty-first century has brought with it radical
changes in technology to make our lives easier, the people themselves are not all that different.
While the twenty-first century American woman has life and work choices available to her now
that she did not have in the mid-twentieth century, she reserves the right to be a Donna Reed if
she chooses, even as she texts her children to alert them to the dinner she cooked from her Food
Network online recipe box.

In this chapter, I shift away from general discussions of author voice and audience to
focus on a specific genre of confessional blog—the domestic blog. I am comparing Anne
Sexton’s treatment of marriage and motherhood to that within domestic-oriented confessional
blogs. The topic of these blogs is domestic dissatisfaction, and they are written primarily for
catharsis and connection to other likeminded women. While Sexton’s taboo-breaking writing
about marriage, motherhood, postpartum depression, miscarriage, abortion, menstruation, and
affairs challenged the domestic ideals of the 1950s and invited other women plagued with similar
issues to speak up, it is interesting that today the same conversations occur online under the
cover of pseudonymity, which suggests that contemporary women still cannot speak of them
openly and unashamedly.

My purpose in this chapter is to explore the way that Sexton was able to delve into
domestic subjects and to compare this to the way that women engage similar issues in
confessional blogs. The commonality of subject and theme between genres invites us to reflect
further on how these two forms of writing—confessional poetry and confessional blogs—fit into
the larger landscape of autobiographical writing in the twentieth and twenty-first century. In
short, it seems that Anne Sexton and female confessional poets helped to usher in the way in
which women today write about their experiences of being women and mothers that one finds
today on confessional blogs.

To understand Sexton’s body of work, one must first understand how it began. After the
birth of her second daughter, Joyce (“Joy”), Anne Sexton was hospitalized for what we now term
postpartum depression. In short, she was unable to cope with the pressures of motherhood and
was, consequently, emotionally disconnected from her children to the dangerous point where she
could not care for either of them. I. A. Richards’s poetry program on television spurred her to
write and share this writing with her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, who encouraged her to continue
writing as part of her recovery “as a means to dispel her sense of worthlessness” (Davison 133).
Her first publication, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), centered on her institutionalization and pulled in audiences with chilling details about her time as a mental patient. The book opens with “You, Doctor Martin,” wherein she describes herself as “the queen of this summer hotel” (6) and “queen of all my sins / forgotten” (38-39). Sexton juxtaposes the conventional perception of the asylum as a barred-window prison with regal language associated with castles. The ironic use of the words “summer hotel” in place of mental institution or hospital figures sickness as vacation, and in her mind, since she has elected to stay there, a privileged one; it has not been put upon her, and she is not the victim of her circumstance. Readers who understand the autobiographical context of the poem understand that she has retreated to the hospital from the home and, hence, prefers the company of the doctors, nurses, and other patients to that of her family.

“Music Swims Back to Me” reflects similar ideas about the institution as a positive alternative to the domestic space. In the poem, Sexton romanticizes the experience of her first night “in this private institution on a hill” (10). Part of the release of the hospital is that Sexton can indulge herself with childlike behaviors and forego household responsibilities. Even though she is specific about the ways in which the doctors and nurses exert control over her—“They turned the light out” (2), “They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.” (25)—she does not depict them as oppressors in the institution; rather, they are comforts to her because they take care of her and leave her to her whimsy. She describes the scene:

```
Imagine it. A radio playing
and everyone here was crazy.
I liked it and danced in a circle.
…………………………………………………………
the music swims back to me.
The night I came I danced in a circle
and was not afraid. (11-13, 30-32)
```

In “Music Swims Back to Me” Sexton appreciates the authority the hospital staff has over her. She is not impeded by it; she is freed from responsibility, and this release empowers her.

Sexton offers a similarly positive look at the institution in “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” in which she acknowledges being the object of someone else’s voyeuristic gaze, study, and interpretation and acknowledges that she is validated by that study. She gains power through
being observed, it seems, in this poem, and this is similar to some of Plath’s work, as well, which I elaborated on in Chapter Two. The poem’s theme can be summed up by its two driving lines: “My business is words” (1) and “Your business is watching my words” (10). Sexton reflects on Dr. Martin’s critique of her words—“if you should say this is something it is not, / then I grow weak” (15)—and her powerlessness because of his view of her. Her worth is determined by her relationship with the analyst, not her family, and she makes herself a spectacle because of this difference from other women.

“For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further” is, perhaps, the most important among these in understanding how Sexton sees her poems as fitting into the larger field of contemporary poetry. First of all, the poem was written in response to John Holmes’s inquiry to Sexton about why her poems mattered and even whether they were good poems or not. Sexton summed this up in an interview with Elaine Showalter: “He kept saying, no no, too personal, or you mustn’t, or anything. Everything he said about my poems was bad, almost altogether” (164-65). After a long wait, Holmes wrote Sexton a letter, telling her, “I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. . . . It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It’s all release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? . . . Don’t publish it in a book” (qtd. in Middlebrook 98). Holmes, the leader of a poetry workshop Sexton attended, was arguing that poetry must deal with more public issues set apart from the self in order to be relevant to poetry audiences and, additionally, that her disclosure of such personal matters would be embarrassing to her family and should be embarrassing to herself; the disclosure of these details horrified Holmes. Sexton vehemently disagreed and wrote this poem which offers this alternative to Holmes’s argument:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
………………………………………………….  
Not that it was beautiful,  
but that I found a certain sense of order there. (1-5, 33-34)
In addition to making order for herself out of her personal chaos, Sexton found these issues applicable to others’ lives, as well. To some degree, she agreed with Holmes that poetry should connect with audiences on a personal level for them; she believed additionally that this could be accomplished by conveying her own personal situation, not by focusing on public issues alone that are naturally and easily meaningful. Sexton refers to the shift that occurs with private poetry like her own:

At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.

[. . .] your fear is anyone’s fear,
like an invisible veil between us all . . .
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face. (21-24, 40-44)

The idea here is that the message about personal struggles applies to other people’s personal struggles through the medium of poetry. This, too, is the implication when one mother posts her struggles to a momblog; it suggests that the situation or emotion might be applicable to someone outside of herself (“more than myself”). If the situation were entirely personal, a paper diary might suffice. It is in the act of publishing, as I discussed in Chapter One, that the writer declares her own existence to the others like her and waits for the echo.

Sexton argues that fear is a common part of the human experience, and that, regardless of the subject matter, fear unites these struggles, so she can connect through that. Sexton’s choice to refer to the kitchen as the domestic space which is common to families is no coincidence since many of her personal struggles and fears were rooted in her marital and maternal problems, and the kitchen is the center of the house in so many ways. Caroline King Barnard Hall refers to Sexton’s attitude as one of “domestic ambivalence [. . .] toward her work and her role” (82-83). Hall argues that the consequence of this “ambivalence” results in poetry that is “flamboyant, irreverent, and subversive” and is linked to their “very defiance” (90). The kitchen, commonly associated with women and “women’s work,” is the place where the wife and mother provide for
their families. Linda Gray Sexton, her older daughter with whom she shared the work of writing, wrote in her memoir about her mother, *Searching for Mercy Street*, that the kitchen was where their writing workshops usually took place (97). The subject of the poem is the kitchen she could not be happy in unless she was writing, and when she says, “my kitchen, your kitchen,” she is referring to that fear which unites the women who are “her kind.” While the poem is addressed to John Holmes, it certainly applies to her larger audience, specifically those female readers she considers aligned with herself. This speaks to the purpose of poetry beyond therapy. It speaks to the nature of poetry that is inherently able to communicate and go beyond the self, to become “more than myself.” While both confessional poems and confessional blogs seem to be rooted, at least initially, in some form of therapy, what occurs after the initial ‘confession’—the editing of a poem, the decision to click post when finished writing a blog—reveals a difference between the two genres. While the act of getting the experience down on paper is cathartic, the necessary next steps to finishing the writing, the editing—or, in blogs sometimes, the decision not to edit—reveal something about the author’s intentions. What is gained, for example, when Sexton openly divulges her mother’s past aggressions towards her? What would motivate Sexton to write publicly about her affairs while still married to her husband? What can readers glean from the way Sexton chooses to write about her children with love, then ambivalence, and then with resentment? Similar questions emerge when confessional blogs ‘tell all’ as Sexton does. Sexton’s defense, if it can be called that, was that the writing had to occur because it was her experience, her truth. In short, because it was art, she could not lie. It was an experience she had to record and pass on, however callous she may have seemed to others. For bloggers, on the contrary, it does not seem to be about emotional truths; rather, it is more often a benign exercise of revenge, the idea that if I post the wrongs done to me then justice happens: we are even. In both cases, liberation seems to be common ground.

“For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further” suggests that she writes in pursuit of order.  

10 Linda Gray Sexton’s *Searching for Mercy Street* supports this reading of poetry as an alternative to the conventional domestic life Anne Sexton found so problematic and, at times, impossible for her:

As I began to write, I discovered what Mother had discovered: writing is magic because it harnesses the energy generated by the chaos within. Writing works

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10 This reaffirms, as well, the goal of Sexton’s therapy: to pursue order amidst the chaos.
better at cleaning up the mess than doing laundry or making beds. [...] I saw something else as well: success. My mother was a success in ways my father and my grandmother could never have begun to imagine. She was a success in ways my best friend’s mother, who loved to iron, would never be. She earned a lot of money; sometimes she could pay all our bills on her own. People respected her. My mother had power beyond the home. I wanted that, too. (95-96)

In her memoir, Linda Gray Sexton interestingly compares her mother’s writing to ordering the house even though one occurred in lieu of the other. Perhaps because of Anne Sexton’s use of domestic images and rejection of conventional domestic roles, Diana Hume George elects to use the language of the household to explain how Sexton fit into the scholarly critique of confessional poetry: “If the response of her contemporaries to confessional poetry was sometimes sharply negative, it was specially inflicted with contempt for ‘her kind.’ When Lowell confessed, at first we slapped his patrician hand and told him to shape up and put back the stiff in his upper lip. When Sexton confessed, we sharpened the knife and heated the pot” (90).

As within the mental institution, Sexton garnered a sense of belonging; poetry offered this to her as well. In an interview with Barbara Kelves, Sexton said,

When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn’t, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better—more real, sane. I felt, “These are my people.” Well, at the John Holmes class that I attended for two years, I found I belonged to the poets, that I was real there, and I had another “These are my people.” (87)

Anne Sexton’s reference to “my people” is very much in line with the way bloggers conceive of their audiences. Linda Gray Sexton quantified her mother’s success by her work’s connection to audience—they liked it and, as a result, paid and respected her for it. As with Anne Sexton’s impetus for writing poetry, it is this very desire to connect with others—to make the private public—that sustains blog writing as well.

The same seeming contradiction that John Holmes in his writing workshop anticipated with Anne Sexton’s poetry provokes questions about the nature of blog writing: Why would anyone want to read what is essentially a series of diary entries? Emily Nussbaum’s 2004 article, entitled “My So-called Blog,” speaks to this distinction between diary writing, such as the kind
of poetry content Holmes critiques, and the kind of writing done in blog communities. Nussbaum believes that blogs have an ironic appeal: “The linked journals also form a community, an intriguing, uncheckered experiment in silent group therapy -- a hive mind in which everyone commiserates about how it feels to be an outsider, in perfect choral unison” (2). Nussbaum emphasizes the catharsis achieved by writing as she invokes the image of “group therapy” taking place, implying that a safe haven exists online while overtly referring to the oxymoronic conscious move of outsiders to gather online in a blogging community wherein they become insiders talking about being outsiders. In both cases, whether these are exchanges within a multi-voiced community of writers or an author writing solo, the communication is to some degree performative, and it is necessarily so.

Nussbaum then refers to an anonymous blogger: “J.’s sense of private and public was filled with these kinds of contradictions: he wanted his posts to be read, and feared that people would read them, and hoped that people would read them, and didn’t care if people read them. He wanted to be included while priding himself on his outsider status” (2). Additionally, Nussbaum’s article is about J.’s experiences with depression to achieve a similar end as Sexton’s: “J. had had his Blurty journal for about a year. He called it ‘better than therapy,’ a way to get out his true feelings—all the emotions he thought might get him in trouble if he expressed them in school or at home. Online, he could blurt out confessions of loneliness and insecurity, worrying aloud about slights from friends” (2). In this sense, the author’s focus is liberation from the oppression of the physical space; in both cases, Sexton and J. are acting out by communicating their frustrations, whether or not they perceive their “oppressors” as being part of their audience.

While Sexton initially wrote only for Dr. Martin and herself, her enrollment in poetry classes quickly meant an audience of peers, her fellow poets, and a poetry teacher, whether that was John Holmes, W. D. Snodgrass, or Robert Lowell. This broadening of audience, perhaps, shaped the type of poetry she wrote. Her early poetry, such as that published in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, reflected cautious form and content centered on her hospitalizations and some family issues. As her audience grew, Sexton’s poetry became increasingly provocative and attention-getting. She began including more direct references to physicality and sexuality and her resistance to adhering to conventional gender roles, such as that of a good wife and mother.
Because the writing of her sophomore book of poetry, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), coincided with her parents’ deaths, only three months apart, Sexton focused primarily on parents and children’s inextricable link to parents and unavoidable heritage from them. Images of wives and mothers persist throughout *All My Pretty Ones*, and they are explored in relation to their homes.

In “The House” Sexton captures the image of a mother sitting in the home, adding up her riches:

Mother,  
with just the right gesture,  
kicks her shoes off,  
but is made all wrong,  
impossibly frumpy as she sits there  
in her alabaster dressing room  
sorting her diamonds like a bank teller  
to see if they add up. (39-46)

Sexton further establishes the relationship between the women and the physical objects of their homes in “Housewife,” which I will quote in its entirety because of its brevity:

Some women marry houses.  
It’s another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
faithfully washing herself down.  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
into their fleshy mothers.  
A woman is her mother.  
That’s the main thing. (1-10)

The image of a woman wedding a house is representative of Sexton’s general approach to domestic themes. She equates the relationship with the responsibilities of the relationship, particularly those revolving around the care of the husband, the feeding and care of the children, and the fixed location of the woman in the kitchen as a consequence of her role. She personifies
the house in “Housewife” as a living, breathing thing, yet it functions as an antagonist because it has been personified. “The walls are permanent and pink,” Sexton writes, as if to suggest that the tone of her home has been determined for her, and they are unchangeable. Sexton is not part of the “[s]ome women” she refers to because she uses third person to refer to the object of her poem: “See how she sits on her knees all day”—Sexton cannot be this woman; she is not subservient in these ways. She is powerless compared to the men in her household, as evidenced by the line, “Men enter by force.” When Sexton refers to the even exchange between daughters and mothers—“A woman is her mother”—she vilifies herself because of the content of the other poems in which her mother is the antagonist. Additionally, she vilifies herself because she is the mother.

Sexton explains part of her maternal failures on her successes as a writer. In “The Black Art,” she elaborates on the problems occurring as a consequence of her writing life:

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren’t enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warm the stars. (1-9)

This description fits Sexton’s biography perfectly, trances included. What is interesting is Sexton’s inability to translate such sensitivities from her writing life to her mothering life. When Sexton wasn’t estranged from her young daughters due to recurring hospitalizations, she was isolated within her own home, keeping her daughters downstairs to fend for themselves as she retreated to her writing room upstairs, door shut, and record player repeating the same song while she worked. Despite Linda and Joy’s desire to spend time with their mother, they knew also that the days like those described would be good ones because their mother was well enough to write. The writing was the thing keeping her alive, so Sexton clung to it.

Sexton acknowledges the disconnect that the writing life produces between her daughters and herself in the following stanza of “The Black Art,” wherein she hypothesizes what happens when two writers marry. This was not the case with Sexton’s marriage since Kayo worked as a travelling salesman, yet she had numerous affairs with men and at least one woman, and perhaps,
this stanza was a small justification for why she could never have an enduring, productive relationship with these others:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.} \\
\text{But when we marry,} \\
\text{the children leave in disgust.} \\
\text{There is too much food or no one left over} \\
\text{to eat up all the weird abundance.} (22-26)
\end{align*}
\]

Part of Sexton’s belief that two writers could not marry and manage children might stem from the knowledge that she, alone, could not raise her children. Sexton’s writing habits—the installation of a second phone line so that she could be in constant contact with fellow poet and best friend Maxine Kumin so that they could orally workshop throughout the day—are indicative of Sexton’s day-to-day activities, wherein she was wholly dependent upon others to take care of her. And, if we are reading Plath alongside Sexton, we might note that a key difference exists between them regarding their levels of dependence. While, as adults, both Sexton and Plath consistently sought out parental replacements, Plath kept up the guise that she was an independent, strong person as Sexton did the opposite. Peter Davison writes of Anne’s dependence upon others:

I don’t recall ever having been with Anne Sexton when she did not require someone to take care of her. The witnesses to her life all agree—and so do her own frequent and voluble letters and interviews and her biography by Diane Middlebrook—that in the usual round of daily life she was more than ordinarily helpless. Once she began writing in 1957, her husband and his mother helped her through her everyday doings, including housekeeping and child-tending; her poetic friends, especially Maxine Kumin, saw to it that Anne reached John Holmes’ classes, poetry readings, and other literary functions; and later, when Anne became well enough to strike out on her own, she usually found a friend, a lover, a fellow poet, or an amanuensis to steer her from place to place. [...] It seems that the only destination she could locate unaided was her psychiatrist’s office. (131-32)

One point of controversy surrounding Sexton’s biography was the extent of her mental illness and, for some, whether the manifestations of her illness, such as the trances she fell into during
her stays at her favorite hospital were in fact part of the Sexton performance like when she would exhibit new symptoms parroting those of other patients with whom she was left by Dr. Martin Orne. Two points that critics tend to agree upon are that Sexton’s poetry kept her alive for eighteen years and that Sexton defined herself and her success through her work (Levertov 61).

Linda Wagner-Martin writes that “Sexton had put her whole identity into becoming a poet” and that “surely the printed and verbal response to her art was of great importance to her, given her personal dependencies and the acculturation she had learned as an American woman at mid-century” (15). While some critics—such as Charles Gullans, who calls Sexton’s work “documents of modern psychiatry” (497) instead of poems, and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who classifies her confessions as “personal yelps rather than universal cries” (31)—fail to see how Sexton relates to the larger poetic conversation, I agree with Linda Wagner-Martin’s assessment of Sexton as a writer who “synthesizes and connects rather than separates into categories” (1). Lehmann-Haupt is considering only how the poetry functions as therapy, not those elements which occur after the initial confession occurs. In fact, as marginal as some of Sexton’s writing might seem to some readers, Wagner-Martin ironically points out that, just as some of Sexton’s critics, like Gullans and Lehmann-Haupt, no doubt, found her writing meaningless to them, that Sexton’s achievement through writing her poetry was making meaning of life and avoiding the sense of meaninglessness that plagued so many women like herself. Wagner-Martin makes an interesting point about this continuity with the mainstream: “Through her art, Sexton was brought back into the mainstream of human response and human interaction. Without it, she was voiceless—worse, without a language, her knowledge and understandings frustrated in not having a means of expression” (1).

Repeatedly, physicality is a common theme across Sexton’s body of work. Maternity and marriage coincide with her treatment of the physical body, especially in description of her mother, Mary Gray Harvey, who died of cancer after repeatedly being hospitalized. After suffering from metastatic cancer, Mary Gray was described by Sexton in “Mother and Jack and the Rain” as having “died using her own bones for crutches” (41), and the poem culminates with Sexton recounting her own life’s goal: survival—“to conjure / up my daily bread, to endure, somehow to endure” (49-51). Life is hard enough without putting other demands upon herself.

In “Consorting with Angels” Sexton recalls a dream during which she contemplates her role as a mother and wife. In the poem she imagines herself reduced to kitchen objects:
I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.
There were still men who sat at my table,
circled around the bowl I offered up.
………………………………………
But I was tired of the gender of things. (1-6, 10)

For Sexton, as indicated by the poem’s opening lines, “being a woman” is defined by her domestic duties, whether those are related to her jobs in the kitchen (“the spoons and the pots”), the bedroom (“my mouth and my breasts”), or on her husband’s arm (“the cosmetics and the silks”). The “bowl [she] offered up” seems to be herself, and everyone, the “men who sat at [her] table,” were coming to take their part of her. She has endured it long enough and is now “tired of the gender of things,” which suggests those definitions of behaviors and expectations put upon her because of her womanhood.

By the poem’s end, she concludes, “I am no more a woman / than Christ was a man,” suggesting that, even though they have the guise of gender upon them, they cannot be defined simply by their sex. They must be considered for the wholeness and fullness of who they are. Louise Bogan explains that, because of this completeness of Sexton’s understanding of women, that she writes, “from the center of feminine experience, with the direct and open feeling that women, always vulnerable, have been shy of expressing in recent years” (175). One such way that Sexton offers this critique of the “woman’s place” is her frequent juxtaposition of her home with that of a dollhouse; in doing so, she refers to the homemakers as dolls manipulated within the home. In “Those Times,” “Cinderella,” and “Live,” Sexton symbolizes the Suzy Homemaker figure with the doll in the dollhouse, offering a scathing critique of the domestic life she deemed unnatural.

In “Those Times” Sexton refers to “a graveyard full of dolls,” from the perspective of her six-year-old self. The doll symbolizes the perfect little girl, and Sexton, by recounting the torture she endured at the hand of her mother, illuminates why she cannot be one of these dolls. Because she—“[t]he me who refused to suck on breasts / [. . .] / the me whose body grew unsurely” (30-32)—fell short of the perfect doll standard, she grew clumsy and destructive, “step[ping] on the
noses of dolls / she couldn’t break” (33-34). She describes the appearance and origin of the dolls exactly:

I think of the dolls,
so well made,
so perfectly put together
as I pressed them against me,
kissing their little imaginary mouths.
I remember their smooth skin,
those newly delivered,
the pink skin and the serious China-blue eyes.
They came from a mysterious country
without the pang of birth,
born quietly and well. (35-45)

Sexton’s emphasis on their physical descriptions parallels how Mary Gray Harvey scrutinized her own daughter’s physical body. In Anne Sexton: A Biography, Diane Middlebrook points out that Mary Gray had Anne lie down with legs spread after each bath so that she could inspect to see that Anne had properly cleaned herself:

I did not question the bedtime ritual
where, on the cold bathroom tiles,
I was spread out daily
and examined for flaws. (95-98)

This invasion of privacy extended to Mary Gray’s insistence on knowing every detail of Anne’s bathroom visits. It is no wonder that Sexton became anxious about how she would deviate from the norm next; Mary Gray anticipated her falling short of the idealized standard every single day.

Also in “Those Times,” Sexton writes, “I planned my growth and my womanhood / as one choreographs a dance” (67-68), but the problem is that one cannot plan “growth” or “womanhood” as one can a dance. It is not a performance, not to mention the fact that dolls do not grow. Dolls are fixed in their perfection; for them to change means for them to no longer be dolls.

As the poem culminates, Sexton recalls those things she did not know about her future woman self at the age of six:
I did not know
that my bones,
those solids, those pieces of sculpture
would not splinter.

I did not know the woman I would be
nor that blood would bloom in me
each month like an exotic flower,
nor that children,
two monuments,
would break from between my legs
two cramped girls breathing carelessly,
each asleep in her tiny beauty.
I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother’s like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear
that unsaid more clearly. (99-117)

It turns out, “the woman [Sexton] would be” is the woman of her poetry, the identity Wagner-Martin says she sacrificed all else for and the identity that Levertov says kept her alive. The images of the doll graveyard and “the noses of dolls / she couldn’t break” come full circle by the end of the poem as Sexton is the one who has been “stepped on” by her mother and is finding out what she is made of. And it turns out that she, though she is “sculpture,” manipulated by her mother, no doubt, “would not splinter,” so she is stronger than she anticipated. Sexton refers to tiny miracles that happen within her body and describes them with visceral imagery. A trademark of Sexton’s writing is the use of taboo subjects like menstruation, and “Those Times” contains such a reference as she describes, “blood would bloom in me / each month like an exotic flower.” Sexton connects the spring imagery used to portray menstruation with additional “pieces of sculpture” that she creates through her pregnancies. She calls Linda and Joy “two
monuments,” seeming ambivalent towards the children, and tracks the labor process through her
diction, first violent and hostile, then peaceful: “break,” “cramped,” and “asleep in her tiny
beauty.” The ultimate miracle, at least for Sexton, is not in the birthing of her own children but in
the killing of the idea of her mother as the dominating force in the household. She wins when she
writes of her six-year-old self, “I did not know that my life, in the end, / would run over my
mother’s like a truck,” and by this, she suggests that the scope of her life, the experience of
living her life, has dwarfed her mother’s life, so the things Mary Gray Harvey condemned
Sexton for are eclipsed in retrospect by the life she had gotten to live, and she is left only with a
small deformity as a consequence—“a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot”—but even in those
things Sexton has overcome much. The impediments turn into blessings in disguise by the
poem’s end, as she regards them as gifts that she “might hear / that unsaid more clearly,” and so
she can, through her personal experience voice the concerns and struggles of a larger community
of women who might not be able to speak for themselves otherwise. In this way, Sexton lays the
groundwork for contemporary women to expose their own “deaf spot[s]” and talk candidly about
the deformities and imperfections in their lives.

In “Cinderella” Sexton invokes doll symbolism again to retell the happy ending of her
story in Transformations. In her over-the-top, popular-culture-laden reinvention of Grimm’s
fairytale, gruesome eye-pecking and all, Sexton closes the poem with an idealized ending
centered on the happy couple portrayed as two dolls:

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
ever arguing over the timing of an egg,
ever telling the same story twice,
ever getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story. (100-09)
The dolls kept under lock and key and on display, despite being happy in this poem, are similar
to the dolls in “Those Times,” inactive and positioned by another, sheltered and not necessarily
for the better, despite the appearance of perfection—“their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.”

As much as Sexton describes Cinderella and the prince living in this ideal state, the ending is equally tongue-in-cheek and satirical, as she interrupts her own retelling to interject, “they say,” as though she is hesitant to believe the perfection she is about to report. Additionally, the details spent describing the heavenly household Cinderella shares with her prince emphasize the negative things that don’t happen to the pair, not the positive things that do. It is also static and unchanging, dead, like Keats’s Grecian urn. For example, she alludes to the domestic duties which would typically be a point of contention in the household between man and wife, specifically, the children, replaced by “diapers”; the cleaning, replaced by “dust”; the cooking, replaced by “the timing of an egg”; the social obligations, replaced by “telling the same story twice”; and the wife’s responsibility of keeping her youthful beauty, replaced by “getting a middle-aged spread.” Because of these details piling up the way they do, readers see that Sexton is well acquainted with the other side of the story, that which Cinderella does not endure. It underscores the notion that “Cinderella” is just that: a fairy tale. Sexton’s life, like other women’s, is far from the story of Cinderella and the prince, and by emphasizing the negative and her interruption to insert, “they say,” readers are reminded of the all-too-common flipside to the Cinderella story, that which is not perfect.

Sexton also uses dolls to represent a woman with an immobilized will in “Live.” The poem borrows its title from Saul Bellow’s well known sentiment, “Live or die, but don’t poison everything,” and the poem is about a turning point for Sexton when she observes her domestic surroundings and decides what to do about them. The figure of the doll emerges in the second stanza of the poem as readers are introduced to the image of Sexton as a lifeless body:

I kept right on going on,
a sort of human statement,
lugging myself as if
I were a sawed-off body
in the trunk, the steamer trunk. (20-24)

She shifts to referring to herself in the third person as the doll object controlled by another person. Sexton depicts herself as being as helpless as a doll:

. . . even though I dressed the body
it was still naked, still killed.
It was caught
in the first place at birth,
like a fish.
But I played it, dressed it up,
dressed it up like somebody’s doll. (26-32)

Here, Sexton acts as the manipulator—“I dressed the body,”—but her actions are benign and ineffectual—“it was still naked, still killed.” She has been the disease and the failing remedy as long as she can remember—“at birth”—although she keeps trying to move past the frustrating cycle. This leads her to a key question that offers insight into Sexton’s larger commentary on women in domestic spaces: “Is life something you play? / And all the time wanting to get rid of it?” (33-34). In isolation from the rest of the poem, these lines suggest life as a harmless game with an unwilling player, but given the previous, violent imagery paired with the doll and “sawed-off body” references, readers may interpret the line more solemnly, for Sexton not only functions as the ineffectual, stumbling player but the pawn as well. She is fixed on the board and silenced by the other players, those who created the game and those more powerful than she who now “play” alongside her.

The complicated decision to live or die is paired with the complicated reading of the domestic sphere, as Sexton, despite supposing life a game in the second stanza and referring to herself as an unwilling player and pawn, turns in the third stanza to a more hopeful voice and interpretation, albeit momentary. She writes, “Today life opened inside me like an egg” (44), and within this egg an “answer” is found for what keeps people playing the game of life:

. . . It’s a dream,
lovers sprouting in the yard
like celery stalks
and better,
a husband straight as a redwood,
two daughters, two sea urchins,
picking roses off my hackles. (57-63)

The inclusion of family in the poem is a natural next step because the doll is associated with children and child’s play as much as the ideal, childlike woman. The husband is likened to a tree, the redwood seeming to be as unmovable as he is strong. The daughters are initially portrayed as
a playful pair, and while this lightheartedness persists throughout the poem, it becomes an antagonizing element of Sexton’s surroundings quickly, as the subsequent lines read,

If I’m on fire they dance around it
and cook marshmallows.
And if I’m ice
they simply skate on me
in little ballet costumes. (64-68)

The children are innocent and unassuming despite Sexton’s personal extremes. She portrays herself here as being two polar opposites, fire and ice, and both dangerous ones at that. Her children transform her despair into their fun. They make the most of her messes. As the poem draws to a close, she refers back to “Her Kind” and the witchy version of herself, that otherworldly being with which others cannot sympathize—“The witch comes on / and you paint her pink” (86-87)—and readers see that life continues along its trajectory despite her mood swings, and Sexton cannot shape the environment around her. Yet those who read Linda Gray Sexton’s memoir would think otherwise, as she, as part of that environment was most certainly impacted by her mother’s illness, manifested as the fire, the ice, and the witch.

“Live” concludes, as the title suggests, with Sexton’s decision to live. In its final stanza, “Live” contains a reference to “Those Times” and the woman the six-year-old self did not foresee existing, as she writes, “I am not what I expected” (109), and leaves readers with the final reason for her decision to survive despite the poison inside her:

So I won’t hang around in my hospital shift,
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.
I say Live, Live because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift. (110-14).

This was only a momentary fluctuation of Sexton’s lingering malaise, however, because eight years later in October of 1974 she ended her life dressed in her mother’s furs with hand-me-down rings in her pockets, with a glass of vodka in one hand and a cigarette in the other as she waited in a neighbor’s closed garage, car running.

While the inability to cope with domestic duties may well have been as much a symptom of Sexton’s perpetual mental illness as the cause of it, readers would be remiss to ignore the emphasis Sexton places on maternal and marital imagery in her body of work and the
conclusions she draws about the incompatibility of the demands of the household and conventional wifely and motherly roles with some women like herself. She asks questions in her poems, directly addresses the reader, that kind listener, for whom telephone-workshopper, best friend, and resident caretaker Maxine Kumin might only have been a stand in. Her poems anticipate and foster an intimacy with a sympathetic and participatory reader in ways akin to online in blog communities, where members exchange words about domestic battles on the frontlines of the household—that ‘us versus them’ model in which mothers ally with other mothers to “outwit, outplay, outlast” the enemy children in the twenty-first century Survivor paradigm of the American domestic space.

Thus far, I have explored Anne Sexton’s body of work as a critique of conventional domestic spaces which anticipated a participatory reader, first, by exploring her biography to explain how it lent itself to the creation of her poetry and, second, by drawing on several examples of her poems about these domestic spaces, her use of the doll image to delve into societal expectations put upon wives and mothers, and the conflicting messages sent between her words, “Live,” and her eventual suicide. Working from Linda Wagner-Martin’s argument, contrary to other critics’ opinions, I would argue that Sexton’s writing strives to create order from chaos, yet this is not to say that Sexton was a good mother by her contemporaries’ standards; in fact, the damage she did to her daughters has been told and retold countless times in Middlebrook’s definitive biography and Linda Gray Sexton’s memoir. It is no longer a secret that Sexton was a needy, violent, pill-popping, chain-smoking alcoholic who habitually cheated on her husband and molested her eldest daughter, Linda. But, as Sexton scholars will argue, the subtler ways in which Sexton could not adjust to the role of mother and wife did foreshadow the feminist movement’s rejection of the conventional, gendered homemaking roles to the point where some argued that it was unnatural for women to limit themselves to the domestic sphere.

While the ongoing conversations about the woman’s place in the domestic sphere are certainly not new, I argue that we see them manifest in newer, bolder, more participatory ways as a direct result of Web 2.0 where blogs make their home.  

On a site devoted to reporting on the state of mommyblogging, aptly named Mommybloggers.com, Jenn Satterwhite writes candidly about the shift this type of blog writing

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11 We might read Sexton as a next step after Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949), psychologist D. W. Winnicott’s coining of the term the “good enough mother” (1953) and an antecedent to Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963).
has undergone in the past few years. Satterwhite begins with the inception of the mommyblogging conversation in 2005 at the first BlogHer conference (BlogHer is an online community for female bloggers, usually writing about women’s issues):

... back then mommybloggers were at the very bottom of the blogging food chain. We were just moms writing as a "little hobby." We were not taken seriously. We were not respected. We were the frivolous bloggers who would go away soon enough. During that session, the room was filled to capacity. Not only were other mom bloggers present, but tech bloggers, literary agents, a reporter and others who were just curious to see what we had to say. The main topic of conversation that first year at the first BlogHer during their first mommyblogging session was the phrase "mommyblogger" itself. Was it derogatory? Was it demeaning? Do you we fight it or embrace it? Many opinions were shared that day but the bottom line came down if "they" were going to call us mommybloggers, we were going to make it a phrase to be proud of when we were labeled with it. Many women that day did not want to be labeled at all. Especially not labeled a mommyblogger. At that time it was "uncool" to be a mommyblogger. We did not have respect. We did not have the "power" that other kinds of bloggers had. In fact, it was almost a joke to be called a mommyblogger. We did not have the media clamoring to talk to us about our blogs. There were not agents knocking on our doors for book deals. We certainly did not have marketing representatives or PR professionals coming to us for our opinions.

All that soon changed according to Satterwhite. Commercial promotion of mommyblogging resulted in those writing to blogs to get attention from marketing representatives, PR professionals, media attention, and in many cases, money accrued from placing parenting ads on the blogs. Because of the struggle to be recognized and given power, Satterwhite writes about the original few who began mommyblogging as members of an elite community:

We did it with pride, openness and quality. We told the stories of our lives. We shared stories about motherhood honestly and without apology. We took back the term "mommyblogger" and made it synonymous with power, integrity and respect. We worked hard to gain that respect. We fought for it. We earned it. And even those who did not want to be labeled at all could be proud when referred to
as a "mommyblogger" because we all made that happen. Together. Individually with our own blogs. Yet together.

The consequence of mommyblogging becoming in vogue was the bandwagon effect, which Satterwhite explains as those seeking money or notoriety without paying their dues as other mommybloggers had done before them. Satterwhite offers a critical look at the market these outsiders encroached upon:

Many women who are a part of this new breed of mommybloggers have come to the scene heralding with much pomp and circumstance a sense of entitlement. They feel they are owed something. They feel just by slapping the label mommyblogger on their blog (blogs where they barely if ever write about their [personal] lives or families at all), they have earned the same respect as those who are writing quality stories that engage their readers.

Satterwhite explains that the consequence of this “new breed” has been a shunning of the label mommyblogger, as some of the original group now avoid being associated with the term altogether because of the greed and superficiality it now denotes. The bandwagon effect confessional poetry was similarly problematic with people confusing the poetry with a rant or freewriting exercise. The irony here is that with blogs, in the ‘anyone-can-post-anything’ model, gatekeepers still exist. They are bloggers policing bloggers.

Some examples of blogs written by well known mombloggers are Three Kid Circus, I’m A Bloggin’, Finslippy, The Mom Slant, Motherhood Uncensored, Busy Mom (The Original), and Mom 101. Each of these blogs invites women to continue the conversation about the domestic role of women that Sexton and other feminist authors began years ago. The range of voices evidenced by each of these blogs demonstrates the myriad versions of “Her Kind” in households across America.

At BusyMom.net readers will find the entries from one of the mommyblogging pioneers, known only by Busy Mom. She is identified on the site as a forty-four-year-old wife of Busy Dad and mother of three: Busy Boy (14), Busy Girl (12), and Busy D. (7). Her blog contains consistently posted entries dating back to April 2003, mostly comprised of very brief vignettes of

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12 I agree with Satterwhite in her assessment of the current state of mommyblogging. Because of this sharp distinction between the original group of mommybloggers and the “new breed,” my argument about the connections between Sexton’s writing about domestic issues and mommyblogging pertain solely to the earlier blogs that emerged as cutting edge and radical, not those motivated by advertising.
the life of a busy mother, ranging from her rage at her husband’s inability to smoothly order food at the McDonald’s drive-thru, her weekly excursions to her children’s extracurricular activities, and humorous things her children say and she hears about motherhood. Satterwhite describes her as “one of the most mellow, no[n]-judgmental” mommybloggers, and what strikes me most about it is how mild the subject matter is. The blog seems only to have been born out of a desire to log events, vent anonymously, and post harmless musings rather than to connect on a deeper level about maternal issues. This might be likened to Sexton’s more tender memories of her daughters’ childhoods, as captured in “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman.”

That being said, one aspect of the daily life of motherhood includes serious issues and days when reflection is a necessary part of the writing process. When Busy Mom’s life includes the funeral of a grandparent, her blog reflects it. When the dog’s health fails and needs to be taken to the veterinary emergency clinic for euthanizing, she writes about it. Sexton writes about similar mothering struggles, like in “Pain for a Daughter” which is filled with graphic details about watching Linda (her elder daughter) get cleaned up after having her foot stood on by one of her horses. In the blog, the immediate response from other mothers having endured the same struggles seem helpful; Busy Mom posts about Busy D.’s fever staying at 104 degrees. Sexton refers to daughter Joy’s fever in “A Little Uncomplicated Hymn”:

where your fever stuck at 104 for two weeks,
where you slept, head on the window sill,
lips as dry as old erasers, your thirst
shimmering and heavy as I spooned water in,
your eyes shut on the thumping June bugs,
the lips moving, mumbling,
sending letters to the stars. (19-25)

While BusyMom posts, perhaps seeking out help from other mothers, Sexton uses the daughter’s pain to fuel her poetic description. What kind of mother, one might ask, would let a daughter’s fever stay at 104 degrees for two whole weeks?

One especially pensive post from December 4, 2003, that returned my thoughts again to Sexton and her reflections on her own family was entitled, “Getting Older.” It reads,
As the years go by, you marvel at how fast your kids are growing. Growth is measured by the normal milestones, sitting, crawling, walking, going to school, etc.

Every now and then, something will happen that you don't expect that makes you realize how quickly they advance. Busy Girl has just gotten into listening to the radio, especially at night. She is a big Delilah fan [she links to the band’s website]. Tonight she was telling me that she wanted to be sure to tune in early to hear her favorite song (I'm still not sure what it is), but that it made her cry.

What a developmental milestone to be able to listen to the meaning of a song and be emotionally moved by it! It's just that I didn't see this one in the child care book and it surprised me.

In the post, Busy Mom taps into a key theme in Sexton’s work, which I discussed earlier, false expectations. As in the line from “Those Times,” when Sexton writes, “I am not what I expected,” so does her daughter surprise her through their own developments (109). In “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman,” Sexton begins, “My daughter, at eleven / (almost twelve), is like a garden,” invoking springtime imagery to convey her transition into adolescence (1-2). The reflective refrain goes like this:

Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat. (27-31, 83-87)

It seems, in passages like this, that Sexton was not so isolated from the mainstream, but in fact, dwelled on the love for her children in much the same way that pioneer mommyblogger Busy Mom does in her posts. One thing challenges our understanding of Sexton as being an effectual though imperfect mother like Busy Mom: Sexton turned the daughter’s pain, not her own, into art. One only has to think of the physical self-consciousness and embarrassment that comes with adolescence. Most preteens endure this in private; Sexton turned what must have been a private embarrassment for her daughter into a poem to be consumed by all.
Just as Sexton’s poetry covers a range of material experiences, so do the blogs emerging in the twenty-first century. Some mommybloggers offer a more formal approach than Busy Mom. Alice of Finslippy is one example. A buzzword on the site is “Momversation,” and the blog, albeit personal, offers article-style entries with regular embedded video with help for mothers with more serious issues than the day-to-day ones plaguing them. Examples of the topics covered on Alice’s blog are mothers dealing with miscarriage and mothers dealing with depression. Aside from her perpetual mental illnesses spurred on by an initial postpartum depression following the birth of her second daughter, Sexton wrote about personal loss and sadness as a consequence akin to these Momversations taking place on Finslippy.

Shortly after Joy was born and before Sexton began taking care of her children in a fuller capacity while Kayo’s mother watched the girls, Anne Sexton became pregnant once more. Unable to take care of the two young children she’d already had and continuing to face additional hospitalizations because of her illness, her mother-in-law helped her get an abortion. Although Sexton wanted to have the abortion, she wrote in “The Abortion” of the loss of “this baby that I bleed” (27) as though it were through miscarriage, some unavoidable circumstance beyond her power, repeating the refrain, “Somebody who should have been born / is gone” (1-2, 12-13, 23-24).

One common theme across Sexton’s body of poetry and running through mommyblogs is a point-blank honesty that cuts through the doll’s facade. Some of these blogs resonate with readers because they acknowledge personal imperfection. Perhaps this is also why Sexton drew the initial crowds she did; she offered a perspective and voice the audiences had not heard before. Her refusal to hide the ugliness must have been appealing in a way similar to these bloggers.’

Jenny writes Three Kid Circus, and while a common theme is Jenny’s reporting on teeth coming in and falling out, her repulsion by loose teeth turned sideways and her inability to ignore the dangling teeth heavily guarded by their owners, she opens up from time to time about being the kind of mother D. W. Winnicott would call the “good enough mother.”

The “good enough mother,” to Winnicott’s mind, is the type of mother who is not entirely at the beck and call of the children. Because of this, when the child cries, the “good enough mother” may not attend to the child immediately like the “perfect mother” does. The child, consequently, must wait, and Winnicott, as a psychologist, does not see this as a
particularly bad thing. Rather, he argues that it makes for better adjusted children who can then adjust into the real world where they are not the center of the universe and the mother’s only focus.

Jenny of *Three Kid Circus* is quite open about her “failings” as a mother. She writes of them lightheartedly and in a humorous way. In an August 13, 2007 post, entitled “Domestic Immaturity,” she writes,

Today, my kids broke the ironing board. [...] I’d like to say that I was paying attention to them when it happened. In fact, I’d like to pretend that they were helpfully ironing my lovely linens. Yes, let's pretend that is exactly what was happening, instead of the reality where my kids thought they could use the ironing board as a bridge, or a surfboard, or some other plank-shaped object, and managed to collapse the legs and bend the board in half.

I’d also like to say that I’m angry about it. But honestly, when I looked at that bent up ironing board, it made me laugh and think "Oh well! No more ironing! Too bad, so sad! Tra la laaaa."

This attitude is radically different from those which Sexton was born into. Three things of note happen here. First, Jenny admits that she is shirking her childcare responsibilities. Second, Jenny admits that chaos is ruling her house, and her children seem to have taken over and are now destructive. Third, Jenny reacts happily that her laundering duties are absolved as a consequence of that chaos. A unabashedly direct post like Jenny’s suggests that this household chaos is not something she endures alone. This was just the type of chaotic circumstance that would, in previous generations such as Sexton’s, determine the woman’s worth and success. This transition from self-awareness and embarrassment over one’s failures to control a household and one’s children into acceptance of the imperfections and willingness to share those flaws with others—and in a public forum—has been enabled in some ways by confessional writing, in which Anne Sexton and her generation of poets divulged their secrets and shattered taboos which enabled other women in subsequent generations to talk about sensitive, gendered issues.

Jenny’s March 28, 2007, post, entitled “Clearly Neglected” indicates that this is not the first time she’s been only a “good enough mother”: “First of all, my youngest had a party at preschool today, with an egg hunt and cupcakes and treat bags. Most of the other parents showed up to take pictures and fawn over their adorable offspring. Me? I forgot there was even a party,
and showed up at the appointed pickup time.” Readers do not need this blog to remind them of the serious shifts that have occurred with regard to how a mother manages her domestic responsibilities. The law of the happy home would have the wife’s attention solely devoted to housekeeping and childcare duties, but Jenny seems clearly distracted and virtually unaware of her responsibilities for the day. While Sexton’s poetry about motherhood elicited a controversial response, Jenny’s post has not. Since the 1950s emergence of confessional poetry, there has been a definite shift in how people divulge these kinds of “deviant” behaviors. The dual meaning of the post’s title, “Clearly Neglected,” suggests both that she neglected to remember the preschool party but also that it could be read as a form of child neglect, even if not seriously. Jenny goes a step further not only by telling friends in confidence about falling short of the perfect mother model but posts it publically for the world to see.

Elements of Sexton’s poetry which were deemed radical at the time of their publication seem less so in twenty-first century blogs. This is supported by the prevalence of comments by these “good enough” mothers who are unafraid of sharing publically how they cannot live up to the ideal standard of motherhood set by generations before them. For some, it is as much a fiction as “Cinderella” itself.

The various motherly voices are becoming increasingly loud and emboldened, partly because of the celebrity Satterwhite refers to and partly because of the anonymity and pseudonymity afforded by the blog medium in Web 2.0. One of the more radical mommybloggers is Meghan who writes *My Dog Harriet*. Her blog is appropriately subtitled, “Putting the ‘mo’ in mofo since 2004.” *My Dog Harriet*, obviously originally named for her dog, offers blunt, profanity-laden accounts of her day-to-day domestic duties as a wife and mother. Here is one example wherein she records a private exchange between her and her husband in a very public forum:

We alternated from [seeing the baby] wiggling and crying in bed and standing and wailing in the crib for approximately 4 hours. Around 4:30 a.m. Jim became so frustrated he plopped her in her crib, exclaimed "I can't take it anymore [sic]!" and without another word, walked out of the room [sic] to sleep on the couch. I stared at the closed door, speechless. My head was pounding from the pale ale. Could he just DO THAT? WALK OUT THE DOOR AND LEAVE ME IN THE SEVENTH LEVEL OF DANTE’S INFERNAL HELL? I nearly shouted through
the door "GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR DIVORCE ASSHOLE!" but mustered up the strength to restrain myself.

Meghan holds back nothing in the blog, sharing even the most private of exchanges in her household, and she garners much attention for it. Like Sexton did in so many of her poems, she portrays herself as the one who loses control yet paints the others as the villains, those who ignore her plight and sit idly by while she suffers.

To sum this up, it seems that female confessional poets opened the floodgates, and Anne Sexton seems to be at the fore of these works which deal with the fallacy of domestic bliss rooted in the American commercial pitches of the 1950s. The commodification of the happy household seems to have been necessarily rejected by Sexton because of her inability to fit into the mold which had been prepared for her by her mother, Mary Gray Harvey and so many before her.

Liz from *Mom 101* says it best in the subtitle to her blog: “I don’t know what I’m doing either” paired with an art deco representation of a ‘50s woman winking. This typifies what has happened in the bleed over from confessional poetry about women’s issues from the 1960s and 1970s into the mommyblogging we have seen in the past decade. Mothering is a trial and error job, and every woman who has a child responds differently to that experience. With the growing acceptance of a variety of mothering styles paired with the increased awareness of psychological disorders as a real threat to mental health and personal wellbeing, we are finding in the twenty-first century more women share their struggles even to be a “good enough mother,” and they are doing so in the safe space of Web 2.0 within blog communities and parenting forums and moving the private happenings of the home to the public space of the homepage.

Readers should recognize contemporary mommyblogging’s debt to Sexton and her generation of writers. The way in which Sexton delves unashamedly into domestic subjects, such as marriage, motherhood, postpartum depression, miscarriage, abortion, and menstruation has profoundly affected the way we communicate about these subjects. Sexton’s dealings with these taboo subjects in her confessional poetry corresponds with contemporary mommybloggers’ willingness to share their own personal struggles and admit that they, too, are “her kind.”

The aspects of her poetry that reflect the complexities of a woman’s relation to the home through autobiographical details may be read as foreshadowing those similar features in contemporary blogging discourses. The examples of mommyblogs serve to reaffirm in a
confessional genre women’s active discarding of the unattainable ideals of womanhood in contemporary culture.

Looking at Sexton’s poetry as a precursor to modern-day confessional blogs enables us to see the lasting impact her work has made, not only on poetry, but on the culture of motherhood. Reading Sexton’s poetry alongside mommyblogs sheds light on their dual purposes: to serve as therapy and to forge a connection with other, likeminded women. Conversely, reading mommyblogs alongside Sexton’s poetry illuminates the ways the culture of women’s life writing has changed over the past sixty years. Together, these confessional genres serve as important cultural artifacts that encapsulate an ongoing conversation about what it means to be a woman in American society. Scholars might interpret the blogs as a collective response to Sexton’s implicit call to action, “Who’s with me?” and determine that more women than not classify themselves as being “her kind.”
CHAPTER 4

“MY BARBARIC YAWP” AND THE VOICE OF THE SELF:
READING CONFESSIONAL BLOGS AS AN AMERICAN LITERARY GENRE

Personal blogs sometimes contain overt references to confessional poets, affirming the common thread uniting them—the culture of confession in America. Of course, the idea of writing about the self is hardly an American invention, but American literature and culture have long found their most potent force in an intense preoccupation with questions about the nature of the individual in relation to groups and communities and society as a whole, which one can still see reverberating both in print and online. Some personal blogs recognize this link between the confessional blogger and the confessional poets that came before them, as writers and thinkers take advantage of the ease of digital self-publishing that Web 2.0 affords.

One Live Journal blogger named Cris writes, “today i am anne sexton. as soon as i finish this poem i will get absurdly drunk. my legs grow wild (and so, good, and free) out of my body, a sea i can no longer restrain” (“Today”). Cris’s metaphorical embodiment of Sexton suggests a liberation that occurs from the writing process. Like Sexton, Cris writes about the freedom embraced by the writing of a poem and believes herself empowered because of it.

Another Live Journal blogger named Nobu feels a connection to John Berryman in the sense that they both struggle to be taken seriously by the writing communities around them. Nobu questions, “they’ll either like it or they won’t, right? Somehow i have to prove ‘unmistakable literary promise’ and that is pretty much the concept i’ve been questioning ever since i started writing i am john berryman’s disappointment. sigh. . . .” (Nobu’s Ravings). Nobu’s blog entry pinpoints some of the same struggles Berryman faced while trying to write honestly but, as an academic, also desiring to be accepted by the established literary communities.

The most common parallels drawn between confessional poets and the bloggers regard the confessional cult icon Sylvia Plath. One Blogger writer who goes by the pseudonym “Ashes” writes, “Saby thinks that i am Sylvia Plath reincarnated. He [of] course wasn’t hinting at writing
talent but the inclination of self-destruction” (*Mellon Collie*). Here a blogger borrows from readers’ understanding of Plath to inform us about how she feels. It is our familiarity with Plath and Plath’s story that we are able to understand who Ashes is.

In *Close Calls with Nonsense*, published in 2009, Stephen Burt offers an entryway to contemporary poets’ works by discussing how they correspond with more familiar, established poets. Burt hypothesizes that there is a human endeavor called lyric poetry, one that changes, of course, as history changes all things, but that also reflects a continuity of human relations (relations among human beings, and relations between us and our language) since at least Sir Thomas Wyatt and Shakespeare, if not indeed since the Vedas and the psalms. Lyric poetry in this view consists in short pieces of language (spoken, or sung, or written, or all three) in which the psyche finds the language and the sounds to fit its own internal states; through the language we can imagine that we know what it is like to be a particular person, or kind of person, or else what it is like to be ourselves. (x-xi)

To be clear, Burt prefaces his collection of essays by distilling the commonality among the works he will discuss. He contextualizes these new poets and their poems within the established canon of lyric poetry. He pinpoints their common theme (“a continuity of human relations”) and concludes that they each share a common style (“short pieces of language”) and achievement (“the language and the sounds to fit”). In sum, Burt builds upon an established view of literature as a way to access emerging voices within an existent literary genre.

In this chapter on the causes and consequences of confession, I am borrowing Burt’s methodology to synthesize the first three chapters on Berryman, Plath, and Sexton with what we might observe about contemporary confessional blogging practices. The problem Burt addresses is the inability of modern readers’ to engage with emerging poets; he does this by fostering a connection between emerging poets’ works and established poets’ works, the link being the genre of poetry. The problem I address is scholars’ resistance to classifying blogs as a literary genre; I do this by looking specifically at one type of blog, the confessional blog, and demonstrating how it runs parallel to other confessional writing, such as confessional poetry written by Berryman, Plath, and Sexton. In short, where Burt offers a way to deal with a newer form of poetry by referring to an older form of poetry, I am offering a way to deal with a newer
form of confessional writing by borrowing from the critical language surrounding an older form of confessional writing.

I argue that we might classify confessional blogs as a literary genre based on its shared characteristics with earlier forms of confessional writing, and to justify this, I have drawn on elements of confessional poems by Berryman, Plath, and Sexton. Web 2.0 has opened up immense opportunities for self-publishing, albeit without the conventional gatekeepers sifting through the good and the bad. That being said, personal blogs should not be dismissed simply because the good ones are harder to find. In the introduction, I likened blog research to an archaeological dig. I see the potential benefits of engaging in such a digital excavation of being vast. The benefits from taking confessional blogs seriously as a literary genre may translate into myriad changes in the English classroom. Content from older works can be taught alongside contemporary blogs to demonstrate how a theme transcends time. This provides a concrete example of remixing and re-mediation for students. They might study how genre shapes meaning as a story is told in fragments instead of a single, lengthy narrative in a novel. A better understanding of blog culture might offer us insight into the way contemporary authors conceive of audiences as being more intimately connected with works because of the interactivity afforded—and expected by members of an online community—in Web 2.0.

Once we understand how to classify blogs as a literary genre, we are able to situate the blog genre into the larger category of autobiographical writing and, consequently, study it. Through its classification into a convenient category, it is legitimizes as a worthwhile subject of analysis. As previously noted, I am chiefly interested here in the ways that blogs function as a confessional form of writing; that is, the way they facilitate autobiographical confession which elicits response from an anticipated but often undefined audience. This is not, however, how they have been typically dealt with in ongoing scholarship. What we find instead is that scholars discuss blogs in one of three ways: (1) blogs as a teaching tool, such as those students can participate in to learn about another non-blog-oriented subject, (2) blogs as a democratized, subversive alternative to mainstream media, specifically in the arena of politics, and (3) blogs as a conversation. And in most cases, this third discussion about blogs as an online conversation largely reduces blogs to their structure and format, not their content.

13 Richard Rogers combines these discussions of blogs. See “Old and New Media: Competition and Political Space” for a synthesis of two blog treatments: blogs as a political force and blogs as a conversation (Rogers).
As scholars of literature and of culture, we should address blogs as though they are a modern reinvention of earlier confessional forms of writing. Blog writing should be conceived of as an extension of print forms of life writing and should be categorized in such a way that a study of blogs can occur alongside the study of traditional forms of literature so that overlaps between the two can be readily identified and discussed.

Confessional blog writing owes a debt to a long tradition stretching back to Whitman (“I sound my barbaric yawp”) and through the mid-century confessionals (“my kitchen, your kitchen”), as well as the broader turn to the self, memoir, and autobiography that has dominated the past few decades: the end point of a long evolution of a culture of confession and autobiography.

Although many differences between blog writing and poetry writing are clear, such as the care with which the writing is undertaken and the work to shape a final, overall product versus less thoughtful, chronological post additions, blogs are in some ways, quite similar to earlier forms of expression and are re-mediations of older, established forms. Some of those ways are the use of pseudonymity through an alternate persona, or avatar, performative elements in response to an audience, and the willingness to explore taboo subjects.

That being said, the technological changes occurring within Web 2.0 have clearly made a difference in the flexible, liberated ways in which we communicate, and those should not be ignored. For example, blogs feature anonymity, which has enabled much more democratic access to forms of expression than the old model of poetry. The use of blogs instead of poetry means some differences in the way that the audience relates to the author; the audience has immediate access to directly respond to the writer, and the awareness of this necessarily shapes what is written, whether the author adjusts to avoid or elicit a response. Finally, different criteria for success occur in blogs. Unlike the standards which define the value of conventional literary texts, a blog’s worth may be determined by how many “hits” it receives, the size of its readership, or its literary quality—all things that depart from traditional, print-based benchmarks like sales and good reviews.

In her introduction to *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*, Rebecca Blood explores how everyday bloggers emerged, helping to explain the breadth of blog topics on the Web:
Since the earliest weblogs had required at least a rudimentary level of coding skill, the people who made them tended to be computer programmers and Web designers. All of them could be described as ‘power users’ when it came to the Web, and for them, the Web was inherently interesting. But for those who required a tool to update their weblog, this was not always the case. Once literally anyone could make a weblog, literally anyone did. (x)

Because these bloggers were created by those other than Web designers, their interests shifted away from writing about the medium of blogging within the blog to all other topics: “The new webbloggers, instead of focusing on the Web itself, used the Web to create social alliances and to broadcast tidbits of their days to those who were interested in reading them. People from all backgrounds and with all levels of technical skill began making weblogs; for them, the Web was a medium, not a passion” (Blood x).\textsuperscript{14} To dissuade critics from focusing on blogging tools, Blood shifts to a discussion the blog form: “Despite what you may have heard, the power of the weblog is in its form, not in the tool used to create it” (x). What Blood refers to as the “form” of blogging, that which fosters a democratized publishing model, one which invites participants to contribute and add to the content, suggests that the blog is indeed a genre of its own kind, that it goes beyond simply a kind of digital writing and may be examined independently as something akin to other print genres.

While blogs uniquely offer a post and reply format, this distinguishes them little from the telephone lines or the webcam. It is after we look at specific kinds of blogs (genres within the genre) that we begin to realize other distinguishing traits that set the blog medium apart from its antecedents.

In “The Transom: You Can’t Spill Mustard on a Blog” William W. Savage, Jr., touts the publication possibilities and poetic license afforded by the blogosphere but does not ignore the implications of work appearing in a venue with no gatekeeper. To this effect, he asks a series of questions:

\begin{itemize}
\item Does it have a place in the arena of learned discourse? Probably. Is it an acceptable alternative to traditional academic publishing? Probably not. [. . . .] \textsuperscript{14}
\item Blogging suggests the absence of rigour and does not inspire confidence. The blogosphere absorbs whatever is posted. But then, as Lenin [. . .] said, paper will
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{14} Mike Butcher agrees with Blood’s assessment here when he writes, “Blogging is a conversation, not a code.”
put up anything that’s put on it, so what is the difference? [. . . .] The blogosphere has no such entry requirement, and for some of us that is a barrier to acceptance. (Savage 49)

The question Savage asks about how we situate blogs within the literary arena is one I will answer in this chapter. My premise is this: If we view, interpret, or read new and emerging genres as deeply rooted in existing genres, much like what Stephen Burt does in Close Calls with Nonsense, it provides us with a familiar language with which to deal with these new forms of writing. In the first three chapters, I argued that confessional poets John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton each in some way anticipated the contemporary blog culture through their writing, and that, because of this, we can apply some of the same approaches to studying their works to the study of confessional blogs in an effort to locate them within the age of autobiography. I agree with Savage’s caveat that, while blogs do have “a place in the arena of learned discourse” that they are not replacing or displacing established forms of literature in the process.

In fact, “literary quality” can be interpreted differently in discussions of confessional poetry versus blog culture. While poetic devices at work or its adherence to a desirable form might better measure a confessional poem’s worth, the surface and appearance traits of a blog would not hold up to this standard of evaluation. When I refer to “literary quality” in discussions of blogging practices, I am referring mostly to its core content, the author’s unique treatment of that subject—usually indicated by an uncanny openness or willingness to make the private public—the author’s awareness of or adjustment to the audience, and the impact of the blog’s fragmented form on the audience’s reading experience.

It seems obvious that there are clear differences between the artistry and aesthetic merit embodied in the poetry discussed and the general lack of those qualities in most confessional blogs by so-called “ordinary” people, but I would argue that a work can withstand cultural criticism and have literary merit because it captures something about the way we live and the way our world works; these two elements seem to be at the heart of the study of literature. In other words, to dismiss confessional blogs simply because of their form seems to be ignoring an essential part of our literary history in the making which is not adequately represented—or represented at all—in print books.
When I think about issues such as how blogs fit into American literature the only place to start is Walt Whitman. Two elements of Whitman’s work are innovation and authenticity. Whitman’s bold use of a first-person narrative in “Song of Myself” stood apart from works before it, as it offered a speaker who stood in for the common man, not a distant, polished figure. Whitman’s work was met with controversy for its unapologetic treatment of sexuality, and Whitman’s own sexuality became part of the controversy. Because of this autobiographical bent to his writing and the resistance for mainstream audiences to accept it, a natural next step is to read Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” as foreshadowing the confessional literary culture which emerged with the Beats and Boston poets.

In short, Whitman’s direct treatment of sexuality and physicality seem to anticipate the honest and controversial treatment of these subjects in the poetry of Berryman, Plath, and Sexton. I will turn now to those poets to recap their ‘confessions’ and how their categorization as “American” poets goes beyond simple geographical location.

The common ground among the three poets might be best identified if we look at the causes and consequences of their confessions. In each of these cases, something uniquely “American” occurs with the writing and the reception of the writing. The content of confessional poems often reveals the cause of the confession, that is, the impetus for the author’s creation of the work, or their motivation. For all three poets, Berryman, Plath, and Sexton, some childhood trauma fueled their desire to write, to speak out about or get revenge on the one who had done them wrong, or died too soon.

For Berryman, the trauma was in his father’s suicide from a gunshot wound. While the primary focus of Berryman’s Dream Songs ends up being alcoholism, depression, suicide, and adulterous behaviors, all of these subjects, one would conclude, are tied to an innate desire to bring his father back (“I’ve made this awful pilgrimage to one / who cannot visit me, who tore his page / out: I come back for more….”). Berryman’s demons seem to be rooted in his dissatisfaction with the world and its inability to be merciful to him. He falls victim to his vices, and the poetry is birthed out of his struggle to overcome these indulgences, whether it is liquor or self-pity. Berryman’s inability to cope with the untimely loss of his father is evident even to the end of the Dream Songs when we see him so angry at another deceased person that he portrays Henry as digging deep to hack the body up into pieces (“Dream Song 29”). Berryman cannot let them rest.
Like Berryman, Plath lost her father during her childhood although it wasn’t because of a suicide. Otto Plath died from complications of diabetes, but based on Plath’s scathing vilification of him, one might think that he had killed himself as Berryman’s father did. Plath hardly stops short of unearthing her father with her writing, as she writes of trying to “get back” to her father who has gone before her: “At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do.” She writes about time having run out, that she has been unable to finish saying what she desired to say because he has died prematurely and left her: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time—.” Plath ends up juxtaposing the hatred for her father and her deep desire to have him back, if even for the selfish needs to tell him directly about the pain he caused her.

Unlike the other poets’ fathers, both Sexton’s parents lived until she reached adulthood. She reflected still on the traumas of being a girl in the Harvey household, the harsh memories of being examined nightly on the cold bathroom floor while her mother made sure she had bathed well enough and having to report to her mother all of her bathroom habits until she was satisfied that her daughters were healthy and normal: “I was spread out daily / and examined for flaws.” For Sexton, it was not a death but a birth which triggered the first wave of poetry. Her second daughter’s birth led her to a mental breakdown. After that she wrote as part of her therapy.

These causes, discussed as related to content, do differ from the poets’ motivations to write in the ways that they chose, to choose poetry as their form. For Berryman, an academic, his aim was to create artful, if controversial, literature. One could argue that Plath, despite her academic background and scholarly accolades, desired a reputation and legacy of the writer and the attention that came with it, perhaps more than art for art’s sake. Sexton, known for being a spectacle, desired fame in ways that, perhaps, Berryman and Plath did not. Far more than Berryman or Plath, Sexton participated in the culture of poetry as a celebrity. Getting and keeping the attention seemed to drive her.

In all three cases, the poets proved as polarizing as the confessional genre in which they participated. The consequences of their confessions have been no less polarizing. All three poets gained a significant reputation for their innovative styles, Plath even gaining a posthumous cult following. As noted in Chapter One, Berryman has become increasingly popular as of late in the indie music scene, and Sexton’s image resurfaces, though the focus is on her personality and
biography perhaps more than her poetry. The poets’ primary subject matters elicited responses from very specific audiences, typically, those with shared struggles.

One could argue that the impact of confessional poetry can primarily be measured by how it has resonated with its audiences, how it has communicated. I agree with Andrew Sullivan when he says, "A blog is in many ways a continuing conversation." A response to this might be that all literature functions as a continuing conversation, but the location of the blog within Web 2.0 means that it is a more democratized audience, that is, a conversation which directly invites the audience to respond to its contents and anticipates a location for its response.

French critic Viviane Serfaty has already laid some of the groundwork for discussions of how blogs might be situated into the larger literary conversation. In her 2004 article “Online Diaries: Towards a Structural Approach” Viviane Serfaty situates blogs within the larger genre of autobiographical writing and argues that these online diaries function as a keyhole through which to see modern-day Americans:

Their publication on the Internet may be seen as upholding a long tradition in self-representational writing even as information technology modifies the forms and functions of such texts. Studying online diaries from a literary standpoint may therefore shed light on the development of new forms of writing, and contribute to assessing the extent of this transformation and its meaning. (457)

I agree with Serfaty’s assessment of the role blog writing plays in the larger literary landscape and have argued in the first three chapters that the mid-twentieth century confessional poems of John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton can be read as earlier manifestations of the type of writing we have seen emerge in the past decade in confessional blogs. Serfaty’s reference to the “long tradition in self-representational writing” within the context of American literature suggests that the origin of online diary writing reaches back even farther in the history of American writing to Walt Whitman’s direct treatment of emotional, personal content in "Song of Myself" (1855). Like Serfaty, I believe that situating blogs within this tradition will enable additional new media scholarship and give us a better picture of how the digital age has ushered in a new era of autobiographical writing which began with Whitman and was amplified by the confessional poets. And while I agree that online diaries serve as a lens through which to make observations about American culture, my argument differs from Serfaty’s when she suggests that the common person is the subject of these blogs. Here is Serfaty's argument about who is being
[. . .] viewing online diaries as primary sources may afford insight into the mores of ordinary people in contemporary America. Focusing on anonymous American diarists makes it possible to explore how this contemporary social practice reflects the transformations of the heartland in present-day America, how ordinary women and men, average Americans, make sense of their society and can be seen as representative of American culture, while at the same time engaging in the most personal kind of writing. (457)

The prior three chapters should suffice to say that the poets I have chosen to study for this project are not "ordinary people in contemporary America"; rather, they are representative of anomalies in society that fascinate the "ordinary people." The poets are, in some cases, train wrecks we cannot turn our attention from. Their bad behavior, whether it is Berryman's or Sexton's limitless infidelities or alcoholism, or Plath's strange decision to kill herself by gas with the children only yards away, is explained—even excused by—their madness. Regardless of how many readers say they understand the poets' plights and talk about how their work resonates with them because of common ground they share, the work is set apart because they are the anomaly, not because they are the norm; this seems also true for online diaries as well. Consequently, the study of blogs can be beneficial to cultural, American, and literary studies because it gives scholars insight into the "representative" parts of "American culture."

Serfaty locates her argument, as her title suggests, in the structure of the blogs and defends their use in the academy by examining twelve different blogs she considers particularly 'American.' Her article accomplishes three important things: she "examine[s] the structural features of online diaries," "define[s] in what ways Internet diaries [. . .] are indeed a quintessentially American phenomenon," and "define[s] in what way online diaries renegotiate the public/private dichotomy" (458). Rather than focusing my attention on online diary examples, I have rooted my arguments in a look at the confessional literature which has seemed to inform the way we write about ourselves.

For much of this chapter, I want to continue building upon Serfaty's analysis of online diaries and linking it to a practical application in literary studies by using four key traits of blogs which she distills in her argument: (1) accumulation, (2) closure versus open-endedness, (3) self-reflexivity, and (4) co-production. This chapter will pick up where Serfaty's leaves off--locating
the online diary genre within literary studies. To do this, I will address two other issues Serfaty brings to the fore: (1) "The American Quest for Self" and (2) "Publicizing the Intimate: The Veil and the Looking Glass."

The first structural trait of blogs, according to Serfaty, is accumulation, about which she writes,

Eager as they are to disclose themselves to the full and aware at the same time of the Sisyphean impossibility of the task, they multiply the angles of approach and attempt all-inclusiveness. As a result, they keep accumulating details about an event or state of mind, coming back to the same point and trying to unravel its meaning, no matter how minute it might seem, piling up photographs upon drawings, using punctuation erratically in an attempt at enhancing its expressiveness. (460)

This passage begs for a comparison between Serfaty's representative blogger and confessional Berryman with the mention of "using punctuation erratically" for the sake of "expressiveness." Additionally, the sense of one's being "eager [. . .] to disclose" and the existence of "angles of approach" might dually resonate with Berryman scholars, as Dream Songs is, in part, a literary effort to reconcile Berryman's past with his present. The tragic suicide of his father emerges in the details of the songs, as Henry's past contains markers and signposts which cannot help but be compared with those of Berryman's life. The specific commonalities, the details of which are accounted for in Chapter One might be explained as an "attempt at all-inclusiveness," as Serfaty suggests. Additionally, Berryman's repeated mention of the loss of his father and the general conception of the world as a perpetual antagonist might be interpreted as Berryman "trying to unravel its meaning" and being unsuccessful at it.

If Serfaty is right that blogs, too, follow this pattern of repetition for the sake of figuring things out and reconciling the past with the present, it would follow that confessional blogs might have in common the writing purpose with confessional poetry: writing for the sake of sorting through life, to make sense of the world's chaos, to infuse order into it and make it manageable, livable—all of which are therapeutic activities. This is certainly what Berryman accomplishes through Dream Songs, even as he kills off Henry in an effort to exert control over an otherwise unruly text.

The second blog trait on Serfaty's list is closure versus open-endedness. She points out
that there are two distinct kinds of blogs in this regard, one representing each approach. Serfaty offers examples such as *Charlie's Daily Web* and Carolyn Burke's diary which were to be authored for a specific period of time, contrary to the majority of online diaries which are open-ended and, consequently, suspenseful for readers. I see these two forms of writing as comparable to the corpus of work by two confessional poets: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Although both poets ended their own lives, Plath's life was cut markedly shorter than Sexton's (Plath dying at thirty, Sexton dying at forty-five). Although both Plath and Sexton wrote significantly about their desire to die and bonded over this common ground, Sexton had far more experience with suicide attempts than Plath. Plath's two suicide attempts—the first one at ten, which may have been considered an accident more than a suicide attempt, the second one as a Smith College sophomore—were catalogued in "Lady Lazarus" and even for her third, successful attempt, Plath seemed certain she would survive it, planning it for a specific time when a visitor would arrive and leaving a note with her doctor's number on it. Sexton, on the other hand, dabbled in death no fewer than eleven times, usually overdosing on liquor and pills, always calling poet friend Maxine Kumin as soon as she had done it so that she could be rescued in time. Her final suicide attempt deviated from her normal, suicidal routines, this time involving gas instead of pills. She dressed the part, donning her mother's fur coat and piling up rings in her pockets before taking a glass of vodka and a final cigarette to the car she would start inside the closed garage. Unlike Plath, Sexton seemed sure no one would come for her this time; she had divorced Kayo, her husband, the year before, had been moderately estranged from her daughters, and was now living with friends. Because of the details of these poets' deaths, one would assume that their bodies of work would have matched in closure. This, however, was not the case. Because of Plath's short lifetime, her body of work is rather small. The majority of her work was published posthumously and under the guidance of Ted Hughes, her husband, whose reputation was clearly at stake in its publication. That being said, prior to Plath's death, she had written her best work in her final year and had conscientiously decided the order of the poems in *Ariel*. Some of these efforts were in vain because Hughes reordered the collection and omitted some poems entirely because their contents related to their personal life. Ultimately, Plath's body of work still maintained a definitive end unlike Sexton's because of Plath's careful editing eye and Hughes's work as an editor to shape the Plath we know.

Sexton's body of work, far larger because of her longer career as a poet, does not reflect
the same sense of a defined end to her life and life’s work as Plath’s. While we can read into Plath’s depression and suicidal tendencies in select poems contained in *Ariel*, all of Sexton’s work can be read psychopathographically as evidence of a woman spiraling out of control, deeper into madness and into alcoholism. Contemporaries of Sexton reflected, too, on the work being published toward the end of her life (1974) being of a far lesser quality than that of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Even though Sexton’s suicide offered her life a clearly defined end, her final poems did not offer a strong close to her body of work because, unlike Plath, Sexton’s life ended after a long period of alcoholism, during which she continued writing although her writing at this point was markedly weaker than her earlier published work. Regarding Plath, the opposite is true. And because of this disparity, one can argue that confessional literature, like the blogs Serfaty discusses, similarly falls into the two categories of closure versus open-endedness. Confessional poetry is written to forge an intimate connection with the audience in a public format, and in myriad ways, the goal of blogging is also to communicate with an audience. I will follow up on this definition of blogging as communication later in the chapter.

The third blog trait is self-reflexivity. Serfaty sees this as happening in two ways: either people are blogging about the internet or about diary writing. These metatexual references occur in confessional poetry as well. Berryman’s Henry works the same job he does; he is a writer and a teacher, so some songs turn to the subject of writing, as they are about Henry’s life and the creation of the poems is part of that life. Sexton, too, comments in her poems about the act of writing poetry, whether she is referring to the struggles or the catharsis of the writing process. Plath does this as well. For example, she writes self-consciously about her writing in “Lady Lazarus” and the show she puts on while composing. Some entries suggest an obsession with literary reputation and publication.

Serfaty establishes a connection between self-reflexivity and writers’ motives for writing: “Throughout the various diaries under examination, the writers all ask themselves why they have taken up diary writing. They feel the need to justify their involvement into this practice [. . .] Online diarists need to think about their writing even while they project themselves into it” (463). This justification happens in confessional poetry, as well, and we should read writers’ poems about poetry as reflecting on their reasons for writing, as certainly this is the case in works such as Sexton’s “Mother and Jack and the Rain,” a poem that refers back to Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own.”
The fourth and final blog trait is the element of co-production. This seems closely tied to the issues of audience awareness I explored in Chapter Two. Serfaty refers to the blog consumers as the bloggers’ *readership*, only mentioning the word *audience* in passing, but this seems to underemphasize the public nature of the blog genre. Because of the often intensely personal nature of the confessional blog, the consideration of the audience seems necessarily at the fore of the writers’ mind. If they were in the background, it seems that the writer might have alternately chosen a more private genre, such as a print diary, instead of publishing the work. One of Serfaty’s quotations from a blogger indicates this focus on the audience, as well. Blogger Terri writes in her introduction, “I crave feedback, I live for feedback . . .” (qtd. in Serfaty 465).

Serfaty discusses briefly what this shift from a private to a public genre means for the work: “[O]nline diaries explicitly search for an audience and in so doing, turn themselves into a collaborative project. The interactions between writer and audience turn the diary into a process of co-production and co-enunciation” (465-66). Even though online diaries are autobiographical works, the author sees them as overlapping with fictional forms of writing because of the impact audience makes. That is, because it is part of that which is watched, it is impossible for the subject to be completely authentic; it is necessarily shaped by the one who is watching. She observes, “The meaning takes the form of fictionalization of the self and of the events in the writer’s daily life. Diary writers create themselves as the central characters in a fictional theatre populated by a large supporting cast of minor characters and of readers” (Serfaty 466). A prime example of this is Berryman’s use of Henry in *Dream Songs*. Despite their similarities, some creative license makes Henry a person set apart from Berryman, and Berryman uses him as a prop to tell his own story. The factual details are inconsequential at times because the emotional truth Henry conveys shifts the audience’s focus elsewhere.

“The American Quest for Self” Serfaty refers to is intimately connected to Emerson’s 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance,” in which he asserts that writers must reject conformity in favor of carving out their own paths, their own voices. She begins the discussion by commenting on the overwhelmingly large number of American bloggers versus bloggers in other countries (the ratio is 36 to 1, she writes) and goes as far as to liken the blog to Transcendentalist writing:

A deeper set of causes, having to do with the American philosophical tradition, may underlie the rise of the blogging phenomenon which may be seen as a direct offshoot of Transcendentalism. Emerson’s philosophy of the individual has been
shown to be essential to the development and articulation of the American construct of national identity, turning Transcendentalism into the most far-reaching intellectual movement of the nineteenth century. (Serfaty 467)

This ties in with what I argued earlier in the chapter about the link between Whitman and the type of writing we see emerging in confessional blogs which incorporates innovation and an authentic American voice. Emerson’s Transcendentalist argument about resisting conformity and achieving authenticity and individuality by nonconformist behaviors is exemplified in Whitman’s poetry. This paradigm shift away from the Victorian literature model into Transcendentalism led to an unashamed exploitation of the self with the birth of Freudian psychology, becoming even more prominent with the advent of confessional poetry, as the divulgence of traditionally taboo topics became increasingly common. Whitman’s profound influence on subsequent American literature is perhaps most easily recognized in Beat poetry and confessional poetry because of their emphases on deviance from social norms. For Americans these works satisfy “[t]he contemporary appetite for intimate disclosure” (Serfaty 469). This is nothing that is necessarily unique to modern times, but the internet enables us to indulge in intimate disclosures with little risk, as she likens the screen to a veil or a looking glass. She points out the paradox: “The technological set-up required for Internet access includes a computer screen, operating as a paradoxical, twofold metaphor, that of a veil and that of a looking glass. The literal function of a screen is precisely to conceal and as a result of this perception, all kinds of highly controversial discourses are freely displayed on the Net” (Serfaty 470). The language used here reminds us of the topics explored freely in confessional poetry, these “highly controversial discourses” which emerge under the cover of poetry. While the art of writing poetry is certainly a different kind of cover or screen than writing an anonymous blog post from behind a computer screen, parallels can be easily drawn between the two for the liberation achieved through the pseudonymity the genres afford. A paradox similarly occurs within the poetry genre because the form of the poem and the persona through which the poet speaks function, as Serfaty says, as though a veil or a looking glass. The poem offers a sense of transparency though it serves as a separation between the author and the audience so that communication and identification take place at a safe distance, with the page (or the stage) separating them. In both cases, the writing becomes, as I argued in Chapter Two, a highly performative act.
In the previous chapters, I have argued that one of the goals of confessional blogging is catharsis and forging a relationship, however distant, with one’s readership. Serfaty’s article closes with a similar point about the way in which we interpret the screen’s function:

The screen thus plays the part of the Other, of the ideal Other, because it is, in and of itself, empty and can thus be endowed with a plurality of meanings. It does not demand reciprocity, but only functions as a mirror of the self. And it is through such a mirror that the private self can move beyond the limits imposed by social codes and connect with others in virtual space. The readers of the online diaries all become mirrors for diary writers, reflecting and commenting on their every thought, and hence providing a social space in which the private self can be deployed and reconnect with the social self. (471)

I agree with this argument that the “mirror” of the screen empowers those who use it although I read her screen references as a stand in for the more powerful avatar, or alternate online identity, since it, not the screen, is the medium through which the communication between author and audience occurs. As I argued in Chapter One, the pseudonymity is afforded by the avatar, not the screen, and rather than seeing the screen purely as a mirror, I consider the avatar’s masking effect to be the more significant source of author empowerment.

In sum, all of these discussions offer us a way to better situate confessional blogs within the larger scope of autobiographical writing and draw parallels between blogging and the literary form of confessional writing. I have argued in this chapter that blog writing’s roots in confessional poetry and, farther back, in Transcendentalist writing in which one’s own path is prized, establish it as a uniquely American form of writing, which offers a direct treatment of the self and typically taboo subject matters. By identifying confessional blogs as a part of American literature, it offers an entryway into scholarly discussions about the genre, as well as the culture of blogging communities.

Additionally, Americans have always created forums in which they can engage in public debate and voice their opposition to those in positions of power. Technology, through its quick publication methods and affordance of virtual anonymity, has simply given us a more effortless way into the conversations which have already been occurring. In his 2005 CCCC Chair’s Address, entitled “Who Owns Writing?,” Douglas Hesse posits how blogs correlate to conventional journalism. Hesse touches on writers’ motivations for writing, the causes of their
confessions:

Independence has costs, most substantially a preestablished readership and a source of income. But that seems little to hamper it. Blogs, like e-mails, like letters, like poems, like diaries, are self-sponsored activities. My goodness. That people will write even when not obliged! Blogs and other sites of civic discourse are not far removed, I suggest, from writing done for personal and bellettristic reasons, the welling desire to write oneself into the world by creating textual artifacts. (emphasis mine) (351)

Hesse’s language here, “to write oneself into the world,” reminds us of Michael Wesch’s first blog post in the viral video “Web 2.0” in which he announces “Hello World!” declaring his presence in the blogosphere in what might be likened to Whitman’s sounding of his “barbaric yawp upon the roofs of the world.” Hesse’s address describes new technologies, alluding to blog publishing software, saying they have “shifted the possibilities and the terms, not by exploding the media as the civic sphere but by fracturing it” (351).

A year earlier, David Graddol reflected on the fragmentation of language as a consequence of the new technologies Hesse addresses. In “The Future of Language” Graddol accounts for a consequence of new and emerging technologies—“the changing nature of texts” (1331). Without referring specifically to blogs, Graddol outlines their characteristic traits as he explores the ways in which digital writing influences our reading and understanding of language: “As texts become shorter, more fragmentary, and multimodal (using pictures, color, sound, kinetics as well as words), so strategies of interpretation and ways of reading will change” (1331). I agree with Graddol’s anticipation about what digital texts mean for the way we read and understand them, but additionally, I think the emergences of these texts will force us to decide what fits in and neglects to fit into our mold of what should be studied or considered worthy of scholarship. By lumping all of digital writing into a category all its own, we neglect to address the shades of differences within those digital texts and miss out on more significant academic conversations about their impact on writing and literacy. Because new media is just that—new—much of our dealings with it in the academy, especially when it comes to teaching with it or teaching about it, reflect our bumbling. We have, for example, myriad labels for those who study literature, but “new media studies” is supposed to account for all discussions of technology and literacy. If, as Graddol suggests, language is changing as a consequence of the
emergence of digital texts, such as blogs, perhaps it is time to start looking at them in the same
careful way that print literature has been evaluated in the past.

Graddol establishes a connection between digital texts and postmodernity, a relationship I
find helpful in finding a gateway into discussions of confessional blogs as a literary genre. He
writes, “A struggle is brewing too between author and reader, the producer and consumer of
texts, which has many of the dimensions—political, economic, social, technological—that
characterize postmodernity” (Graddol 1331). By making this point, Graddol reminds us of the
combinations of antecedent genres in the remaking of new ones, a key point from Bolter and
Grusin’s Remediation, that is, the idea that all new media are remediations, reinventions, re-
creations of older ones, and they bear the reminiscent traits of those within the images and the
methodologies of the new.

While I disagree with Graddol when he writes that “[t]he linguistic resources required to
construct and interpret longer, unified texts—which collectively form institutionalized genres—
may be lost in all but specialized domains such as the scientific article,” since I liken this to a
death of the print book argument, I think Graddol’s assessments about the new skills required of
modern readers are wholly correct. When Graddol writes, “Readers will be left to make sense of
fragmentary, often contradictory information dispersed across different channels,” I am
particularly interested in his phrasing—“Readers will be left to make sense”—as though the
abandonment of older writing forms will leave audiences disoriented, needing guidance. In any
case, the shift Graddol discusses is an already ongoing one, and his primary point is that as these
forms change from print to digital, reading will also change. In this study, I have extended these
arguments to demonstrate that by seeing these digital writing forms, such as online diaries and
confessional blogs, as part of the ongoing American literary tradition, we then have an entryway
into the writing and can read it as what Hesse calls a “textual artifact” and engage in critical
cultural analysis.

Along this same vein, A. Michael Froomkin, in a 2003 article, points to the impact of
these new genres on audience accessibility, saying the “number of speakers [. . .] changes the
nature of online conversations” (859-60). This is not far from Graddol’s assessment of the Web’s
effect on its users, but where Hesse and Graddol emphasize fragmentation, Froomkin emphasizes
how audience awareness, as I discussed in Chapter Two, impacts the author’s ability to forge
unity among the blog users: “Although the stream-of-consciousness form of some Blogs may not
necessarily lend itself to reflection, some Blogs may not necessarily lend itself to reflection, some blogs are at least self-conscious about the nature of the ‘Blogosphere’” (860). Despite the liberties afforded by the pseudonymity of the Web, writers’ hesitancy to speak completely unedited is understandable, as the awareness of others necessarily makes most writers self-aware of the identity they are creating and presenting to an audience.

Froomkin sees this act of self-reflection alongside reflection on the fellow members of the blogosphere as having a serious long-term impact on the way that we find common ground with others on the Web:

The Blogosphere is young, but it shows some signs of potentially evolving into a miniature public sphere of its own, a sphere of shared interests rather than a shared geography. Conceivably, the rise of a Blog culture, even one composed primarily of nonpolitical, wholly personal diaries, may enrich the public sphere. The impulse to read some Blogs may not be that different from the impulse that brings viewers to soap operas, but the experience of regularly encountering another person’s diary, of following along in a stranger’s life, might have value. (860)

Froomkin points out, specifically, what that value might be:

If it encourages readers to identify with someone different from themselves, it encourages them to attempt ‘the intellectual exercise of viewing life from the perspective of others—to try to walk in each others’ shoes, to respect each other enough to engage in honest discourse, and to recognize in each other basic rights so as to create sufficient autonomy to make the discourse possible.’ (860)

These passages are rich with connections we might flesh out between the canon of American literature and discussions about confessional blogs. To begin, I wholly agree with Froomkin’s argument about the Web’s bridging gaps between people and, despite the separation some argue because of the digital medium (the interruption of person-to-person contact because of the separation of the computer as the mediator), bringing people closer through the technology. Facebook is a prime example of the complexity of this conversation. While some Luddite critics argue that Facebook is a pitiful stand-in for real-world interactions and is the reason the younger generation lacks interpersonal skills, others could justifiably argue that it enables us to connect more efficiently and more precisely with those we might not normally connect with. It is because
of the computer that we are able to connect with people, and even if the language used online is, as Graddol argued, “fragmented,” it appears in this form necessarily, for the sake of multitasking and communicating with many people with short bursts of information (hence Twitter). And for most, these communal venues, whether they are social networking sites, gaming sites, or political or confessional blogs, are a place to focus attention, not a distraction. The measure of its benefit is quite relative to how one uses the technology.

Next, Froomkin’s phrasing about blogs’ ability to “enrich the public sphere” also resonates with the arguments I have laid out earlier in this chapter. Borrowing again from Hesse’s language, we should view these works as “textual artifacts,” and they are productive when viewed as part of a larger conversation and the subject of cultural study, as Serfaty’s arguments suggested. To omit them from writing studied because of the medium through which it has been transmitted seems to unfairly dismiss confessional blogs’ content because of their form.

Finally, when Froomkin specifies the myriad benefits to our understanding one another through reading about strangers’ lives and reflecting on those as though they were related to our own, I am inclined to ask whether this might also be the goal of all print literature as well and how this helps to further situate blogs within conventional print forms.

While these arguments—first Hesse’s and Graddol’s about fragmentation and Froomkin’s about unification—may strike readers as contradictions of one another at first, I tend to read them as working in tandem with one another, as they can co-exist and do so sensibly. I view the fragmentation of conventional writing forms as a necessary departure from the old to establish an entryway into the new. It is not a fragmentation of meaning or a fragmentation of community; rather, it appears to me to be a fragmentation of an older form to build something newer and more useful to modern people, something akin to the breaking of one thing to build another, as in the case of a mosaic.

As the form of conventional linear narrative is broken in blog writing, so are the limitations imposed by taboo topics. One such taboo topic I have explored with regard to Berryman, Plath, and Sexton is the subject of suicide. In confessional poems, the subject of suicide is broached metaphorically or through the lens of a poetic persona, such as Henry; both conventions of poetry enable the poets to talk frankly about wanting to kill themselves. Blogs conventions enable a similar liberty. While the subject of suicide is always a sad and
uncomfortable one, there is something undeniably interesting about that which strangers will share with other strangers under the guise of anonymity or pseudonymity. One example of this liberation at work in the blogosphere is *The Broken Brain*, which is prefaced by its author’s intention: “This blog is my pressure valve. It’s about life in a big hospital, working day in, day out in the neurosurgery department.” But rather than a work blog, *The Broken Brain* is more accurately classified as a personal blog, as the subject is suicide and depression.

A post, which the blogger suggests is out of the ordinary for his posts, posits why people should not commit suicide. His question provokes 123 blog readers to post their thoughts on the topic, that “honest discourse” Froomkin alludes to. Rather than everyone simply posting reasons they should live, respondents offer up too-personal information about the reasons they need to die. One anonymous girl wrote, “I was raped 5 years ago and was never able to fully recover. [I] am an intensely private person and even though my family thinks they know me very well they probably don’t” (*The Broken Brain*). The blogger goes on to explain that her boyfriend, despite knowing she was two months pregnant with his child, married the person he was cheating on her with over the weekend. She asks, “Do I have a reason to go on? I think not” (*The Broken Brain*).

A blogger with the handle “Pitiful,” writes, “I wish I knew how without ruining the insurance money for my family. I only get sadder and no therapy helps, no drugs, nothing. So why bother? How many more years do you go on feeling like this?” (*The Broken Brain*).

Although an occasional respondent offers help with links to psychological organizations or religious passages, the majority simply offer up more personal stories that relate to others’ circumstances. A second anonymous blogger confesses, “My father feels me and my sisters up all the time, and mum doesn’t care cos he’s got money. So I have been thinking about suicide for a while. I think maybe I should go get help and then if I’m still bashing up the family’s puppy I might hang myself with a skipping rope” (*The Broken Brain*). Fellow blogger Jason writes back, “I have full intentions of killing myself on Sunday. I was laid off 9 months ago from a 90k year job, lost everything and am now living in a dumpster” (*The Broken Brain*).

Another anonymous blogger responds to the sensitive nature of the discussion, “Hey all, I had no idea people talked about this so freely.” And they do not. It is only because of the pseudonymity and safety afforded online that these people engage in such frank discussions about such a taboo topic. In a face-to-face setting, one would hardly admit to “bashing up the family’s puppy” or “living in a dumpster,” but little seems at risk in blogging communities. It is
because of the blog genre’s characteristic content typified by the exchange of controversial, personal experience that it sustains a closer, scholarly look, not because of its innovative form.

Ultimately, this dissertation has sought to legitimize a closer scholarly look at the culture surrounding blogs and the confessional blog as a genre. This by no means suggests that a look at the two genres translates into a simple, point-by-point equating of their traits. In fact, there are many differences scholars might explore in further studies of this subject, such as the key role revision plays in the creation of publishable poetry versus the impulsive publishing which happens online, or in other words, the way poetry is, at its core, an artful crafting of language, aside from being a cathartic act; the same might not be said about the writing of blogs. That being said, by understanding how blogs can be situated within the larger scope of American literature, a building upon antecedent genres, like stream-of-consciousness writing, confessional poetry, and autobiographical prose, blogs can become the subject of cultural analysis and offer readers a lens through which to view the members of blogging communities. My aim, then, is to begin a conversation which deals in the details of new media forms and its vast benefits and consequences, to resist the tendency to group all new technologies into a singular category of writing, and to look at blogs as a new genre of writing that owes a debt to the American literary tradition. In future studies of this subject, scholars might consider how the influx of confessional blogs may be connected to the disproportionate rise of first-person narratives in twenty-first century e-culture and whether this connects, as some critics have suggested, as being indicative of some nostalgia for the Romantic era.

Scholars might also begin to look at what causes the impulse—shared by both Plath and Berryman and Sexton and confessional bloggers—to document and share the details of our most intimate personal lives. We might continue this study by considering why this documentation of the self takes shape through acts of expression that are both therapeutic for the writer and at the same time, completely dependent on a readership, and are therefore self-consciously designed for an audience to read and relate to—and how consumer culture and blog sponsors affect the documentation of the self. All these things are important to the study of confessional blogs as an emerging American literary genre, as they serve as guideposts indicating a distinction from prevailing literary modes. This study, has sought to explore confessional blogs as a particularly American twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon, concludes with the idea that this extension of self-writing in online communities could be read as a good thing. The extension
signals a kind of continuity in the impulse to document one’s life into a more democratic
direction, which offers us both cathartic outlets and opportunities for better understanding one
another.

In the highly interactive, participative spirit of blog culture, I close with a quotation from
Ed Power who alludes to our innate desire to share our voice, our lives with others in the virtual
public square, the way confessional poets like Berryman, Plath, and Sexton did, in that
Whitmanian, barbaric yawp of yawps when he writes, “In the blogosphere, everyone’s voice
holds equal weight. Could it be that it’s your turn to stand on the roof-slates and scream your
lungs dry?”
REFERENCES


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