

# The Bodies We Inhabit: Reclaiming Power in the Poetry of Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood

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## Abstract

In this study I shall analyse *peluda* (2017) by Melissa Lozada-Oliva, and *New American Best Friend* (2017) and *Life of the Party* (2019) by Olivia Gatwood, focusing on how feminism and confessional poetry are used as means of empowerment and awareness for non-conforming identities. I shall analyse the most recurrent motifs and themes used by both poets in conjunction with feminist theory, highlighting the relationship between female identity and text. Furthermore, I shall describe how Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood reclaim their identity, language and discourse throughout the aforementioned books. Moreover, I shall also clarify why confessional poetry and the use of 'I' is a political act/choice for feminist poets. Without further ado, in this study I aim to showcase how the political and social issues influence the literary world, contributing to a more inclusive idea of a literary canon.

**Keywords:** *confessional poetry, feminism, feminist poets, gender identity, womanhood*

## Introduction

Melissa Lozada-Oliva is a Guatemalan-Colombian American poet, and in her book *peluda* (2017) she explores through a feminist perspective the intersections between Latina identity, gender, language, immigrant experience, beauty standards and what belonging means. The collection of poems showcases the danger of United States' political climate, and the meeting point between belonging and assimilation. Melissa Lozada-Oliva uses a confessional poetry to emphasize how personal experience is indeed a political aspect that should be taken into account.

Olivia Gatwood is an American poet, who focuses her writings on stories about womanhood, intimacy, the inherent inequity from American politics and culture, and she also raises awareness on issues like violence against women, women's murders, victim blaming and how American society tends to romanticize true crime stories and serial killers. *New American Best Friend* (2017) deconstructs patriarchal stereotypes about gender norms and female identity; the poems centre female identity from teenage years to adulthood and it explores gender issues, sexuality, violence and celebrations of the female body. In *Life of the Party* (2019), Olivia Gatwood writes about the American romanticization of violence against women, describing the fear and struggles women have to face in a patriarchal world.

Both poets explore the relation between female identity and poetry; their poems are confessional and are highlighting the complexity of womanhood. They criticize the objectification of female body, the male gaze, and how identities that are not

westernized, white and heteronormative are condemned and otherized by patriarchal society and culture. Their writings are reclaiming the voice and power of women, not only in the literary field, but in everyday life. They write about their personal experience in the process of becoming and reclaiming what being a woman means. In fact, I would like to hypothesize that through a feminist confessional poetry, identity could be (re)defined in terms that are more inclusive and broad.

Contemporary poetry could not be defined as a specific style or a certain aesthetics, because it has a wide range of influences, showcasing the complexity of today's society. Nevertheless, there is a change of perception, a sense of urgency and activism different from previous poetics. Even though, postmodernism is seen as a phenomenon of innovation, a conjunction of the high and the so-called mainstream culture, that 'gave birth to radical political, social, and cultural movements whose watchword was liberation, liberation from intellectual, social and sexual restraints',<sup>1</sup> it is also defined as a reaction 'against what was conceived as the general mood and the dominant notes of the Fifties: materialism, moralism, individualism, self-consciousness, domesticity, and privacy, depoliticization, anxiety, [...] it was a spirit of destruction that prevailed; its complement, the spirit of reconstruction'.<sup>2</sup>

Postmodernism is defined by pluralism, by destruction and reconstruction of meanings, but it also 'gives an impression of difficulties involved in the attempt to render the term meaningful not only for one field of activity, but for the social, cultural and artistic aspects of society in general'.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, postmodernism is a term that could not be fully defined, because 'as with modernity and modernities, we have postmodernity and postmodernities, [s]ome are here, some have gone, some never were, and some are yet to arrive'.<sup>4</sup> In the late twentieth century postmodernism mutated into post-postmodernism, which it can be defined as 'not difference in *kind* as much as it is a difference in *intensity* – or, more precisely, any difference in kind is only locatable through a difference in intensity'.<sup>5</sup> So if postmodernism questioned the objectivity of truth and reason, the power relations innate in our societies, the way language is used, and also mirroring the anxieties, the fury, the political struggles society had to face, then post-postmodernism could only enhance those reactions.

Confessional writings and the 'lyric I' were usually considered by traditional critics 'as emotive, personal, descriptive, nonintellectual',<sup>6</sup> but feminist criticism saw them as 'the link between poetic expression and social change'.<sup>7</sup> In confessional poetry the 'lyric I' is usually used as a form of self-expression, describing the most intimate and personal experiences, but for other poets the 'lyric I' could be 'defined by an escape from the ego or social self'.<sup>8</sup> Another important aspect of confessional writings is that it questions not only selfhood, identity and experience, subjectivity and authenticity, but also addresses issues like the lack of representation, and 'the foundational cluster of

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Hoffmann, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Matthewman and Douglas Hoey, 'What Happened to Postmodernism?', *Sociology* 40.3 (2006): 542.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), X.

<sup>6</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kinnahan, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Roberts, 'The lyric "I" in Late-Twentieth-Century English Poetry', in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196.

gender narratives underlying the lyric'.<sup>9</sup> Rita Felski stated that feminist confessional literature 'explicitly seeks to disclose the most intimate and often traumatic details of the author's life and to elucidate their broader implications'.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, first-person types of discourse are also exposing identity, and all the performativity behind different types of sensibilities and subjectivities, creating 'a liberating form of self-expression'.<sup>11</sup> Robert Phillips mentions that confessional poetry has a therapeutic value because of its direct and candid way, so the confessional poet does not fear emotion but rather relishes it, linking mental health issues and confessional poetry. The critic also points out that the true intention of confessional poetry is to reflect on the experiences that are described and not to be shocked by them, mentioning another important aspect of the confessional poetry, its anti-establishment stance, and arguing that alienation is one of the recurring themes.<sup>12</sup>

Confessional writings are recurrent in any literary generation, but in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennia, poetry was facing a different crisis, especially the status of the lyric, as new forms of expression such as spoken-word, alt-lit, flarf and other forms of experimental literature were rising. The 'lyric I' faced many challenges, but today's literature has shown 'a renewed interest in exploring potential of the category of lyric to be turned new, and often more politically engaged, ends'.<sup>13</sup> If the era of postmodernism has ended, and post-postmodernism works as an enhancer of the same characteristics, then we can assume that contemporary poetry is strongly related to external political and social changes. In the following part of the study I shall analyse how poetry is influenced by political and social changes, and how confession is enhancing the sense of urgency promoted by feminism.

Selfhood could not be defined through an only-perspective, but through a pluralized one, as 'identity is constructed on this intertextuality or boundary between the unconscious drives and the social; self is thus a dialogic interaction of these two dispositions and produces a subject also "in process"'.<sup>14</sup> For Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood the female identity represents the core of their experiences and poems, intersecting with other characteristics that captures the complexity of female identity.

## Confessional Poetry and Feminism

The rise of the confessional poetry is attributed to the fifties in America, 'when the country first used its mass media to probe and lament the lack of cultural continuity',<sup>15</sup> or more precisely to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, 'the official beginning of the

<sup>9</sup> Kinnahan, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 88.

<sup>11</sup> Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 142.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 1-17.

<sup>13</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry*, ed. and intr. Timothy Yu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Molesworth, "'With Your Own Face On": The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry', *Twentieth Century Literature* 22.2 (1976): 163.

confessional poetry movement, ushering in the controversial self-disclosures'.<sup>16</sup> The fifties were marked by discontinuities, uncertainties, and by the ever-present threat of a nuclear war, resulting in 'a new understanding of mass man and his futilities: now it was a "post-industrial" prototype with such terms as "alienation", "the lonely crowd", and "inner-directed"'.<sup>17</sup> Confessional poetry was considered a response to its time, but it also raised questions about the sincerity and authenticity of the text, 'linking the reinstatement of 'sincerity' as a criterion with confessional poetry'.<sup>18</sup> There were different takes on what confessional poetry is and when it had appeared, for example Donald Davie did not link confessional poetry specifically to the fifties, and the horrors of the twentieth century, but to the *Lyrical Ballads*<sup>19</sup> (1798), but A. Alvarez considered confessional poetry a 'breakthrough', seeing 'this group of poets as essentially modern, as extending the territory of poetry in a way that is only possible for the alienated consciousness of those who live in the age of conurbations, psychoanalysis and concentration camps'.<sup>20</sup> So, through these two perspectives, confessional poetry could be seen as a product of Romanticism, as the poet's sensitivity becomes the core, and by re-using forms of romantic poetry it gives a sort of 'personal vindication'.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, confessional poetry from the fifties is interested in the political and personal aspects of life, it fuels itself from day-to-day life experience and the feelings of instability that marked the twentieth century. On the other hand, the romantic use of the 'lyric I' could be described as a form of escapism and also as a subject of many poems, rather than a practice or an autobiographical writing about one's most intimate feelings and experiences. Even though the authors were using a confessional manner of writing, Miranda Sherwin notes that 'the confessional poets despised and resisted the label' because for them the act of confession was 'nominally autobiographical'<sup>22</sup> and not a mere style of writing. Confessional poetry is strongly related to identity politics, exploring and (re)defining the spectrum of identity, and Sherwin highlights that the personal is political and that the political is always personal.<sup>23</sup>

Feminist literature is strongly related to postmodernity and the use of personal experiences in creating different narratives, as the second-wave feminism popularized the idea 'the personal is political', aspects such as privilege, biases, discrimination, oppression became important in Arts in general. Writing about your personal experience, about one's identity, becomes important in the process of (re)defining and reclaiming identity. In many cases identity is considered an abstract concept, a mythical being, but identity must be rather understood as a matter of *becoming*, than of *being*.<sup>24</sup> There is a contradiction between the identity created by the societal norms, and the one that truly and wholly represents one's identity. Selfhood is shaped by two things: '(a)

<sup>16</sup> Marsha Bryant, 'The Confessional Other: Identity, Form, and Origins in Confessional Poetry', in *Identity and Form in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Ana María Sánchez-Arce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 181.

<sup>17</sup> Molesworth, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Lerner, 'What Is Confessional Poetry', *Critical Quarterly* 29.2 (1987): 48.

<sup>19</sup> Lerner, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Lerner, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Molesworth, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Miranda Sherwin, *'Confessional' Writing and the Twentieth-century Literary Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Sherwin, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Docherty, 'Official Identity and Clandestine Experience', in *Identity and Form in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Ana María Sánchez-Arce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 24.

experience within the self; and (b) the expression – the putting outside of the self – of a version of that experience'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, using 'I' becomes an act of recognition, in which the author confesses their experience. Political freedom and experience are linked together, as the act of becoming, and that of being are usually normed by outside forces. There is an official identity, that one embodies in a society, but nonetheless, this identity is constructed, and in many cases could contradict our own perception of self.

Confessional poetry was seen as a double-edged sword; it could bring: salvation or annihilation.<sup>26</sup> For example, the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton describe with an openness what being a woman means, they write about sex, childbirth, female experience, and their poems provide plenty of biographical details, describing the struggles they face and the inadequacy they feel in a world ruled by men, as they also showcase this immediate choice to 'either become God or resign consciousness altogether'.<sup>27</sup> As Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton became symbols for the women's movement, feminist critics started to analyse how confessional poetry is linked to experience and identity, how it influences life and how many readers of confessional poets will emphasize and identify themselves in those texts. In many cases, confessional poetry is linked to autobiography, and biographical details, through the use of the 'lyric I' and its attribution to identity politics. The women's movement is strongly related in "personalizing" the literary text by emphasizing its autobiographical dimension'.<sup>28</sup> Discussing feminist confessional writings, or discussing confessional poets through a feminist perspective, shifts the paradigms of cultural identity, changes our perception of female identity and experience, and it alters the perspective *being woman/writing as a woman* turns into a central subject.

Confessional poetry explores taboo themes, by exploring and bringing into public the most intimately and private experiences, that tend to make one shameful for disclosing them,<sup>29</sup> and that is the reason why confessional poetry could easily have a political agenda, because it could be used as means of empowerment and emancipation, especially for women and non-heteronormative writers. The 'lyric I' brings the reader to a revelation, as the experience becomes universal, it could easily describe something familiar. Even though confessional poetry and the 'lyric I' are not new to poetry, the fifties mark a change of perception, a different approach to what personal problems represent and how they are intrinsically linked to life. Feminist confessional poetry explores 'the disingenuous stance of objective authority'<sup>30</sup> and 'the way it dramatizes the *struggle* between 'I' and 'it', between rhetorical subjectivity and critical attention to its very construction'.<sup>31</sup> Susan David Bernstein mentions another aspect that is usually discussed in relation with confessional poetry is the correlation between identity and experience, where the 'I' does not only showcase the personal experience, but also the political identity of women, defining a double process of representation and self-representation, three types of feminist confession: the *expressionist confession*, inspired by the motto 'the personal is the political', and which values the liberating gesture; the *exhibitionist confession* that uses personal disclosure and exhibitionism for shock-value;

<sup>25</sup> Docherty, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Molesworth, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Molesworth, 167.

<sup>28</sup> Felski, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Lerner, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Susan David Bernstein, 'Confessing Feminist Theory: What's "I" Got to Do with It?', *Hypathia* 7.2 (1992): 120.

<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, 120.

and the *hypertheorized confession* that values more the political input, defined by theoretical and intellectual approaches.<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary poetry recycles and renews different forms of poetry, and confessional poetry is also one of them, as the ‘lyric I’ is now completely and wholly related to a political movement, it also echoes the needs and struggles faced by many marginalized groups. Confessional poetry is usually seen as a ‘the culmination of the oversensitized ego, the final statement of the exacerbated sensibility’,<sup>33</sup> but that is only a limitation of what confessional poetry could achieve. In the following part I shall analyse how Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood use confessional poetry to describe their personal struggles, that represent many aspects of what being a woman in America and all around the world means.

### *peluda*

*peluda* is a testimony of what it means to be a brown woman in America and how these feelings of longing and belonging interfere in daily life; the poems are confessional and personal, exploring aspects that are considered taboo, such as body hair or the female body. Nevertheless, the collection of poems showcases the complexity of female identity, and also the duality of identity that many people face. If identity is defined by difference, it should be celebrated for this, but in a society that is still governed by biases and stereotypes, then difference is defined as a disturbance to order/norms.

*peluda* translates as hairy or hairy beast, but it could have a double meaning: (1) it showcases how white people perceived people of colour as the Other; and (2) an affective note, an act of empowerment (‘with the top down to the prettiest place / in the world, mi peluda’).<sup>34</sup> Some of the most recurrent questions that follow the book are – how do we define our identity, femininity, what is socially acceptable or not, and the dilemma that marginal identities must face: they either get assimilated or rejected by white society. Melissa Lozada-Oliva deconstructs beauty standards, biases and she addresses in a political manner what being the daughter of immigrants mean in United States.

In ‘Origin Regimen’ Lozada-Oliva tries to reconstruct how her parents met, and how they both chose America for a better future for their family, but not only were the dreams shutter by the reality of America, also by the conflicting feeling that they will never really belong there. For example, she writes:

before there were legs, bikini lines, eyebrows, upper lips,  
underarms, forearms, labias, assholes, chins,  
or the waxing table there were houses  
& two immigrants who cleaned them. [...],  
before the beauty  
business there was a hot homeland  
[...]- *noise, basta, joo are old*  
*enough, joo can do dis by jorself now, every week*  
*joo should do dis, joo don’t need*  
*my help* (p, 3),

<sup>32</sup> Bernstein, 124-5.

<sup>33</sup> Molesworth, 178.

<sup>34</sup> Melissa Lozada-Oliva, *peluda* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2017), 5; hereafter referred to parenthetically as *p*, with page references in the text.

describing the feeling further:

you have no name  
 but you have nails & hair  
 like your father's, thick & dark  
 from an origin with ships,  
 origin he never really traced. (p, 4)

Those feelings of inadequacy, of trying to fit in, just to live a better life are dominant in *peluda*. The misuse of language, the nuances she captures, are relevant to many readers, and it also highlights the authenticity of the experience.

'Ode to Brown Girls With Bangs' is an ode that raises awareness on how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) are forced to either accept that they will never be white enough, or good enough for the American society, or to accept assimilation:

you, not riot grrrl, but rolling all of your R's.  
 less betty paige, more betty la fea.  
 less zoey deschanel, more chilindrina.  
 not trying to be more white – just more loved. (p, 8)

Identity is usually defined as something that you are, as a *being*, but to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, you are not born woman, you become, this logic works in every aspect of our identity. Identity is a social construct, and in the white culture, every other form of identity is rejected, or considered inferior.

Moreover, *peluda* address the concept of transnationality, while the diasporic identity is 'at the junction of interlingualism, interculturalism, and transnationalism'.<sup>35</sup> Lozada-Oliva explores the anxiety and the validation she seeks, moreover she seeks to belong in both spaces equally, without having to compromise her differences. David A. Colón describes the concept of *transnational*:

as a quantifiable category that can be combined and recombined, hybridized even – the movement indicated in *trans* – is between states; [t]he concept of transnationality denotes travel or movement of transgression between such discrete political entities, or at the very least denotes simultaneous membership in two or more polities<sup>36</sup>

'You Know How to Say Arroz con Pollo but Not What You Are' addresses the struggle to recognize and to embrace the plurality that defines one's identity. It also indicates the stereotypes that white societies enforce on marginalized groups, the trauma it inflicts: 'my Spanish asks you why it is always being compared/ to food/ spicy, hot, sizzle/ my Spanish tells you it is not something/ to be eaten and shit out' (p, 15) or 'my Spanish is wondering when my parents will be American/ asks me if I'm white/ yet' (p, 15-16). There are two types of anxiety and trauma that are explored, one is fuelled by the need of fitting in and the other by the need of preserving the personal perception of oneself, as it is described in 'My Hair Stays on Your Pillow Like a Question Mark', a poem criticising how white women perceive women of colour. She is not only

<sup>35</sup> David A. Colón, 'Locations of Contemporary Latina/o Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry*, ed. and intr. Timothy Yu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 49.

<sup>36</sup> Colón, 49.

describing how white women otherize people of colour, but how they often see them as monsters, being grossed out by their appearance, or in other cases exoticizing their bodies, trying to emulate them. The poem showcases the linguistic stereotypes women are often thought, to speak non-assertive, or rude, but by trying to convey a state of worry and even care for their interlocutor.<sup>37</sup> What is also revealed in this poem is the rejection that many marginalized people face, and the microaggressions and the insensitivity that they are more likely to experience in America.

Melissa Lozada-Oliva writes in a confessional manner, emphasizing the political aspect of her discourse, and she also ‘creates a fascinating meeting point of immigration, assimilation, and gender roles; [b]y highlighting the many areas which can be potentially waxed, Lozada-Oliva foregrounds women’s bodies and the expectations placed on them early on’.<sup>38</sup> Beauty standards are also questioned and the beauty industry, that plays an important role in the lives of women – it represents a bond between women (family, friends, also clients), or it can symbolize the ownership over one’s body, the power of reclaiming, and empowering oneself, and also could be an homage to one of the labours that many BIPOC women have to practice, in order to sustain their families. Lozada-Oliva appreciates and values the work many immigrant parents had to take in order to give their children the best chances possible in achieving ‘the American dream’:

i don’t know who or what the ‘good immigrant’  
is, but I think my mother could never get away  
from being the cleaning lady. [...]  
so, instead of a white lady  
house it was a white lady body (p, 5)

In ‘I Shave My Sister’s Back Before Prom’ Melissa Lozada-Oliva writes ‘in our family we believe everything is inherited. / if hair is from our father then fear must be from our mother’ (p, 21). Hair is attributed to the male gender, and also to monstrosity, enforcing the patriarchal argument that women must present themselves a certain way, and mostly as a desired object by the male gaze. She also writes ‘our bodies have always made/ love to shame – so maybe this has always been about our/ parents & all the things we never told them & all the ways/ they made us different’ (p, 21). Shame is a strong instrument used by Patriarchy, along with guilt, inadequacy and the need to be accepted/assimilated as a ‘normal’ person. Feminist writers deconstruct patriarchal ideas about gender identity, body, identity in general and the ways we perform them. Female bodies are always seen as sexualized objects, and many women are thought to fear and shame their bodies, being forced to follow patriarchal gender norms. Hairy bodies were seen for a long period of time as unclean, dirty, as something to be grossed out, so women started to shave and modify their bodies in order to be desired by their male counterparts.

Understanding how we perform our identities, is also understanding that ‘the body is enculturated by habits of comportment’<sup>39</sup> and that ‘each person is a distinctive body,

<sup>37</sup> Robin T. Lakoff, ‘Talking Like a Lady’, in *Language and Woman’s Place*, ed. Mary Bucholtz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Gianni Ponce, ‘Monstrous Woman: *peluda* by Melissa Lozada-Oliva’; <https://kenyonreview.org/reviews/peluda-by-melissa-lozada-oliva-738439/> [accessed 10 February 2022].

<sup>39</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.



with specific features, capacities, and desires that are similar to or different from those of others in determinate respects'.<sup>40</sup> Our identities are defined by class, race, age, ethnicity, gender and they are constrained by heteronormativity,<sup>41</sup> and in a patriarchal society men are thought they have the power over other gender identities and other forms of expression. Feminists address the woman's place in a patriarchal society, drawing attention to how female identity, and also non-binary identities are defined according to Patriarchy as Other, both being denied their subjectivity, autonomy and freedom of expressing their identities.<sup>42</sup> Identity is defined by difference, but correlating identity to the body, Iris Marion Young states that 'the body is the first locus of intentionality, as pure presence to the world and openness upon its possibilities; [t]he most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings',<sup>43</sup> so identity could also be seen as a transcendence, a matter of *becoming*, rather than *being* something. Female identity and non-binary identities are closer to the idea of transcendence, while they are always subjected to different stereotypes, as they 'exist as *looked at and acted upon*'.<sup>44</sup> This type of perception accentuates the contradictory feeling, and this constant search of a place where to fit in and *truly* belong.

In 'The Women in My Family Are Bitches' Melissa Lozada-Oliva reclaims the word 'bitch', and repurposes it to symbolize the power of those women, the solidarity and sisterhood, and how they fight for each other and protect one another. She also addresses the violence women face in a patriarchal society, the fear and shame, but it showcases nonetheless how strong and resilient women really are. Language is influenced by gender norms and patriarchal stereotypes, by using stronger means of expression, or a language that emulates a state of rage, creating a discomfort, women are judged for not being 'lady-like' and not taken seriously. In a patriarchal society, men are allowed, and it is also expected from them, to act in a more assertive way, to be direct, and also to demand to be listened to, further reinforcing men's power over women.<sup>45</sup> Not only are women forced to behave or talk in certain way, but also men, because when society labels their language or behaviour as 'feminine' they are presumably 'out of power'.

In 'Wolf Girl Suite' Melissa Lozada-Oliva addresses the violence, the monstrosity attributed to BIPOC by white people in America, the oppression and the discrimination they face on a daily basis. The suite is composed of five poems, exploring 'the hybridity of and monstrosity facing beautified, racialized, feared women':<sup>46</sup> 'the male gaze waits with popcorn in their hand/ the male gaze waits with dicks in their hand/ if we can't see us then we can't see them' (p, 25). Lozada-Oliva also criticizes how women must conform to gender norms: 'i love him because that is what it says i should do in the script & i follow the script / [...] Hairless boy doesn't care about my problems, i mean, *if* i have problems' (p, 27). This suite of poems addresses the constant state of fear that women face in a patriarchal society, and how often they are

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<sup>40</sup> Young, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Young, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Young, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Young, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Young, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Lakoff, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ponce.

constrained to act and behave a certain way, and by refusing to do so, they *must* end up tragically: ‘they killed her. that’s it. move one’ (p, 29).

In ‘Mami Says You Have Been Crying’ Melissa Lozada-Oliva addresses how depressing the feeling of rejection and not being good enough good could be, and how often women and especially BIPOC are subjected to a stereotypical perception about how they should present themselves:

my sister says it’s just my makeup/ mami says you look tan/ my  
sister says i’m just hairy [...] / shhh, basta. there are worst things to cry  
about/ mami says if you are crying you need to let me/ know/ all  
depression is an american thing/ americans need a name for  
everything & I changed/ mine before they could butcher it (p, 32)

The poem also discusses the stigma around mental health issues, and how depression is seen as a ‘selfish’ act, and not as an illness: ‘melissa. you’re so selfish for your/ sadness. you don’t know pain. don’t talk to me about pain’ (p, 32). The relationship between mother and daughter is also explored, and how the mother could not understand why her daughter is depressed, she asks of her daughter to internalize her feelings, doubling what society asks likewise of her.

‘Yosra Strings Off My Moustache Two Days After the Election in a Harvard Square Bathroom’ describes the political climate in Donald Trump’s America, raising awareness on how BIPOC were perceived during his presidency. Yosra, her friend, is a Muslim woman in America, that faces similar forms of discrimination:

before this, yosra jokes  
about lining her hijab with safety pins  
while we waited for the white family  
to clean up their table, the white father  
stared at yosra for too long (p, 42)

Melissa Lozada-Oliva describes how often BIPOC are put in a vulnerable position, how fighting against their oppressor is dangerous, especially in a world guided by patriarchal and racist values. The poem is also representative for the resilience and the strength of BIPOC women in America:

we tell him,  
*don’t even worry about it*, because we have done  
all of the worrying for them our entire lives  
because we have learned to forgive  
every space we enter (p, 42)

Lozada-Oliva writes about how identity is defined by the intersections of different characteristics, and she also describes how American society perceives BIPOC women unequally to white women: ‘maybe one day, i’ll actually be chill/ like the white girls, the ones who don’t shave/ for political reasons’ (p, 43). The poem also accentuates how white feminism fails to provide a voice for women of colour, and a real understanding of their struggles:

*you are crazy,*  
*it’s all in your head why don’t you just love yourself more,*  
*i don’t even see it what are you talking about!*

the tragedy is everyone is trying to be nice  
while denying the emergency that bloomed  
around us (p, 43)

She describes the sisterhood with Yosra, the strong bond between those two girls that help each other out, and understand one another completely, because they know *where to look*:

yosra sees the hair because she knows  
where to look. [...]  
i think about the most womanly thing  
we've ever done & it's live anyway.  
this isn't oppression. this is, *i got you.*  
*i believe you. it hurts but what else are we going to do*  
*it aches but we have no other choice do we.* (p, 43)

Melissa Lozada-Oliva explores in a confessional manner every aspect of being and becoming visible in America, from womanhood to immigration and the different struggles BIPOC face on a daily basis, the fear that has real-life implications. *peluda* is deconstructing the stereotypes brown women face in America, by describing their stories, their feelings and everyday activities, addressing issues like class, race, gender.

### ***New American Best Friend***

*New American Best Friend* is Olivia Gatwood's debut volume; a collection of poems exploring womanhood from childhood to maturity. The poems are almost chronologically written, showcasing various moments more or less autobiographical. Olivia Gatwood writes in a confessional manner, discussing taboos, stereotypes and other issues that many women have to face in their lives (from menstruation, love, unsatisfying sex, to topics about violence against women, the glorification of violence in American society, sexual harassment, the absurd beauty standards that women must conform to and so on).

In 'Jordan convinced me that pads are disgusting' Gatwood writes about menstruation, a usual activity for women, confronting the patriarchal stereotype that depicts menstruation as a disgusting subject. Moreover, she is describing the relationship women develop with each other around this topic, and around their bodies:

She said, *I'll do it for you*  
and yes, we had seen each other naked many times,  
[...]

So it wasn't unnatural, really, when I squatted on the  
toilet seat  
and she lay down on the floor  
like a mechanic investigating the underbelly of a car<sup>47</sup>

'The Autocross' explicitly describes how women are treated in a patriarchal society. Olivia Gatwood illustrates the male gaze and how often women are not even

<sup>47</sup> Olivia Gatwood, *New American Best Friend* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2017), 3; hereafter referred to parenthetically as *NABF*, with page references in the text.

perceived as living beings, but as objects that could easily fit in a man's trunk. The poem reveals the levels of sexism, sometimes subtle, but in many cases bluntly expressed:

The men at the autocross don't believe I know  
 The difference between a four cylinder and a V6 engine  
 [...]  
 They don't know my name but they call me cheater.  
 [...]

One man asks how I reach the pedals.  
 One man asks where my daddy is.  
 One man opens his trunk and says,  
*Bet you're small enough to fit* (NABF, 24)

She also addresses how patriarchal values are linked to women's lives, and how often they are normalized and internalized by many women, and men as well. In 'The Ritual', Gatwood details how men often consider sex as a given, and women as objects that could fulfil their needs and not as consensual partners that could also have needs and desires.

Gatwood's collection also deals with 'the manic pixie dream girl', a media trope that often depicts 'a type of female characters as whimsical, quirky, sometimes eccentric, fantasy woman who saves the male protagonist from himself',<sup>48</sup> setting impossible goals for women, failing to comprehend the complexity and diversity of female experience. The manic pixie dream girl is a 'useful beauty', she 'is tasked with the sole responsibility of bringing the male protagonist back to life, while appearing beautiful, comical, sexually experienced, and open to being rescued',<sup>49</sup> regardless of her needs and wants, imposing on women the same patriarchal stereotypes: '*The convenient thing about being a magical woman/ is that I can be gone as quickly as I came*' (NABF, 30-32). Thus, in 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl Says', Gatwood deconstructs this trope, giving the manic pixie dream girl a voice, and also the power to illustrate the negative impact this trope has on women's perception of themselves. In this poem the manic pixie dream girl knows how she is perceived by her male-counterpart:

*You wanna know my name?  
 You never call me by it anyway. [...]* (NABF, 30)

and she challenges his perception of her and her role in his life:

*But this isn't about me, this is about you  
 and your cubicle job, your white bedroom  
 your white Honda, your white mother.  
 Manic Pixie Dream Girls says I'm going to save you*  
  
*says, Don't worry, you are still the lead role* (NABF, 31)

<sup>48</sup> Alyssa Maio, 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl – A Eulogy for Character Trope'; <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/manic-pixie-dream-girl/> [accessed 10 February 2022].

<sup>49</sup> Nicole Vincet, 'Manic Pixie Dream Politics: A Focus on Postfeminist Muses', *CLA Journal* 8 (2020): 61.

In a patriarchal society women do not share the same privileges as men, and their existence is often limited to caregivers, and being submissive to their male-counterparts: ‘sex when you need it puppet when you’re bored, / let me build myself smaller than you/ let me apologize when I get caught acting bigger than you’ (NABF, 30-32). Olivia Gatwood deconstructs the idea of the manic pixie dream girl, challenging the way women see themselves, questioning how not only media, but also literature could undermine women’s selfhood and autonomy. The manic pixie dream girl is a dangerous trope both for women and men, because it enforces unrealistically standards about what being a woman means: ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl is too dream girl/ and you just woke up’ (NABF, 30-32). Patriarchal society is criticized, because it tends only to idealize women, not only in real life, but also in literature, so Olivia Gatwood emancipates the manic pixie dream girl from her muse state, reclaiming her identity and power.

The series of odes from *New American Best Friend* celebrates the strength and resilience of women. In ‘Ode to the Word Pussy’, Gatwood writes ‘I could devote my time to justifying/ your name by defending the feline’ (NABF, 38-39), continuing by showcasing the shame concerning the word ‘pussy’, but also ‘the audience’s’ interest around women’s genitalia: ‘they wonder if it will be pulse or pulverize/ they pray for pure’ (NABF, 38-39). Another reclaimed word is ‘bitch’ in the poem ‘Ode to my Bitch Face’, in which Olivia Gatwood writes ‘resting bitch face, they call you/ but there is nothing restful about you, no’ (NABF, 43-44). What is considered an insult, becomes for Gatwood a safe zone: ‘they tell you home is a safe zone/ no, bitch face is safe zone’ (NABF, 43-44).

‘Ode to the Women on Long Island’ ties together Olivia Gatwood’s debut to her next book *Life of the Party*. This ode celebrates the ways women learnt to protect themselves, relying on other women or only on their own to resist in a patriarchal world, where all the odds are stacked against them:

They called their sons [...]
   
If I ever, and I mean ever, so much as
   
make a woman feel uncomfortable
   
I will take you to the deli and put your
   
hand in the meat slicer, you think I won’t?
   
You hear me? I will make a hero out of you (NABF, 45-48)

Olivia Gatwood captures the reality many women have to face; the choices they have to make in order to be safe:

Life comes fast. [...] I
   
kicked
   
and screamed my way through it, and so will you,
   
I can tell by the way you walk. One more thing
   
when they call you a bitch, say thank you,
   
say thank you, very much (NABF, 45-48)

### ***Life of the Party***

*Life of the Party* is based on American’s society obsession with serial killers and violence against women. In the ‘Author’s Note’ Olivia Gatwood explains the reasoning behind this collection as she was terrified by something very specific: ‘a man climbing through my first-floor apartment window, which realistically could have been popped

open with a butter knife, and strangling me in bed',<sup>50</sup> she also points out her obsession with true crime, that enhanced her phobias. She motivates that writing about those events and being influenced by true crime documentaries is a way: 'to look behind true crime to understand why I feel the way I do. I want to look at my own life, at the lives of women I love, women I've lost, women in my community and beyond to understand that the fear inside me is a product of simply being alive' (*LP*, xi). *Life of the Party* might be a book about true crimes, but through a confessional manner Olivia Gatwood depicts in an overwhelmingly way what being a woman means. *Life of the Party*, just like *New American Best Friend* is firstly a book about memory and womanhood.

In 'If a Girl Screams in The Middle of the Night' Olivia Gatwood describes the visceral fear that haunts most women, and how unsafe the world really is for most women. This poem also showcases the lack of interest and empathy went it comes to finding missing persons, especially women:

a small label  
will be placed on the box that says A SCREAM & each  
time a person cracks it open the girl's rattling  
tongue will shake loose into the store. this  
happens for months but no one wants to buy it, to  
take care of it. everyone wants (*LP*, 5)

Furthermore, Gatwood highlights the American glorification of violence:

to hear it once to feel something & then go  
back to their quiet homes, so the store will throw it in  
a dumpster out back [...] the scream will get buried in a landfill  
somewhere in new jersey & later the landfill will  
be coated in grass (*LP*, 6-7)

The poems in *Life of the Party* are illustrating the tragic fate of many women, even though many poems describe memories of becoming a woman, of understanding every social aspect of what becoming a woman means, celebrating the power and resilience of women, they also describe many violent events that unfortunately are linked to female experience. Olivia Gatwood is a feminist poet, so the political aspects are intrinsically relevant to her work.

'Murder of a Little Beauty' is written with lines from a 1997 *People Magazine* article about the murder of Jon Benet Ramsey, known at the time as: 'Little Miss Christmas dead in the basement' (*LP*, 33-34). Using true crime language, the poet also showcases not only how sexist and derogatory this type of narrative is, but also 'the missing white woman syndrome':

dab your eye, we know you like it gory only  
the blondes get a cover story  
girls go missing right around the corner but  
she needs a tiara to mourn her naturally  
attractive, exceptionally bright how many ways  
can we say the word *white* (*LP*, 33-4)

<sup>50</sup> Gatwood, 'Author's Note', in *Life of the Party* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), xi; hereafter referred to parenthetically as *LP*, with page references in the text.

The missing white woman syndrome is a ‘sensationalized news coverage of young white women and girls in peril’,<sup>51</sup> and it ‘typically involves round-the-clock coverage of disappeared young females who qualify as ‘damsels in distress’ by race, class, and other relevant social variables’.<sup>52</sup> When it comes to BIPOC and sex workers, they are dehumanized, hyper-sexualized, and their deaths are often depicted as a result of their social status, as if they are partly responsible of their deaths.<sup>53</sup> In America the mainstream media presents ‘the lives of certain young, white, well-off women as worthy of societal empathy’,<sup>54</sup> but from a patriarchal perspective, not really addressing the real issue, that women all around the world are murdered and subjected to acts of violence.

‘The Boy Says He Loves Ted Bundy but Doesn’t Laugh About It’ discusses another grim aspect of American society, namely the glorification of serial killers. Ted Bundy is one of the most notorious serial killers in American history, and with the media’s help during his trial, people were more interested in Ted Bundy than to hear the stories of his victims. Even women were finding him attractive, and did not really believe that he was capable of such atrocious murders, because the media painted him in a positive light, your average Joe, nothing special or extremely violent about him or his life and childhood, except the crimes he was trailed for.

The word ‘manslaughter’ could be broken into ‘man’s laughter’, so in the poem ‘Mans/laughter’ Gatwood addresses the signification of man’s laughter, describing acts of sexual harassment, among other things: ‘At the bakery where I work, my boss/ asks me to visit him in his office three times a/ day, where he details the things he would like/ to do to my teenage body’ (*LP*, 62) and how often women’s cries for help are ignored even by the Police: ‘Today, a policeman sits next to him./When my boss says, *I would fuck you against a/ wall*, the cop laughs so hard he has to hold on/ to his duty belt’ (*LP*, 62). The laughter symbolizes how most men ridicule women’s issues and struggles: ‘EXAMPLE: WHERE I GASP FOR AIR, THE MAN LAUGHS. / WHERE I BATER, THE MAN LAUGHS. / WHERE I SCREAM, THE MAN LAUGHS’ (*LP*, 62). She further writes: ‘They are laughing so hard/ they cannot ask me if I am okay. They/ cannot help me find my clothes’ (*LP*, 62). The poem ends by highlighting how distressful these situations are for women, and how most men continue to perpetuate toxic masculinity and patriarchal values that diminish women.

There are also poems about Aileen Wuornos, another American serial killer who murdered men, the case drawing attention to issues regarding women’s self-defence. Undeniably, Olivia Gatwood does not justify the murders of Wuornos, but she addresses a real issue – violence against women and also how quickly the media portrayed her as monster, saying that because of a traumatic childhood she became a murderer, when in the case of many other male serial killers, the media was doubting facts: ‘Men will commit to hurting you, but not to healing you’ (*LP*, 96-8), ‘I don’t want to talk about how self-defence/ doesn’t make you a serial killer, about how she/ said if a hundred men/ had tried to rape her/ she would have killed a hundred men’ (*LP*, 137-40). The poem ‘Aileen Wuornos isn’t my hero’ (*LP*, 115-18) addresses the fear she feels, and how the violence she experienced could shape her, or shift her perspective of life,

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Stillman, “‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism”, *Gender and Development* 15.3 (2007): 492.

<sup>52</sup> Stillman, 492.

<sup>53</sup> Stillman, 492.

<sup>54</sup> Stillman, 500.

so Wuornos becomes this image of a failed woman, failed by society, by her family, by the violence that transformed her in a monster.

Olivia Gatwood ends *Life of the Party* with the poem 'In the future, I love Nighttime' (*LP*, 144-50), in which Gatwood dreams of a safe world, fantasizing about a world without fear of the dark and the monsters that lie there and could potentially hurt women.

## Conclusion

When it comes to reading confessional poetry, or confessional writings in general, questions about authenticity, truthfulness, subjectivity and even the 'literary' status of the text are taken into account. It is important to note that for Melissa Lozada-Oliva and Olivia Gatwood, even though that the autobiographical aspect represents a central point, there are also fictionalized parts in their writings. For feminist writers, confession represents a way to discuss issues concerning women's experience, encouraging reader identification, as it showcases the intersection between autobiographical experiences and the feminist concern about representation.<sup>55</sup>

In *peluda*, Melissa Lozada-Oliva explores this true self, by exposing her vulnerabilities, and also exposing how the socialization of women according to a patriarchal perspective often subjects women to destructive effects. Confessional writings recurrently blur the lines between text and life, generating a co-dependent relationship between the writing self and the reader, asking 'upon the reader for validation, specifically the projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathize, and identify with the author's emotions and experiences'.<sup>56</sup> It is necessary to mention that *peluda* approaches identity from an intersectional point of view, taking into account the complexity of identity, and how identity is still defined by difference. Melissa Lozada-Oliva also discusses identity from a feminist perspective, so by using a confessional style of writing she reclaims parts of identity and experience, rewriting and also invoking the social and political function of her poems, regarding women's issues.

As well as in the case of Melissa Lozada-Oliva's poems, Olivia Gatwood's *New American Best Friend* and *Life of the Party*, is using confessional writing firstly as a political instrument, then as a writing style. In *New American Best Friend*, the poems are more centred around Olivia Gatwood's personal experience, describing different events from childhood to adulthood, but in *Life of the Party* she uses confession as an enhancer to reveal how Patriarchy affects all women's lives. Both *New American Best Friend* and *Life of the Party* are critiques of how Patriarchy divides and forces people to conform to its values, especially marginalized groups.

Taking all of this into account, the study showcased the fact that *peluda*, *New American Best Friend* and *Life of the Party* are prominent writings that challenge through a confessional manner the idea of patriarchal womanhood, exploring the female self and its many forms of representation. Nevertheless, upon analysing the texts, it resulted that there are similarities between feminist confessional writings, but also different ways of approaching female identity. If Melissa Lozada-Oliva is relying more on personal experience, then Olivia Gatwood gives a voice to different women that had an impact on her life, transforming their experiences into personal experience by using

<sup>55</sup> Felski, 93.

<sup>56</sup> Felski, 110.



the first-person perspective. The ‘lyric I’ is an important key in their poems, and in confessional writings in general, because it solidifies the relationship between the writer self and the reader. They use a confessional style of writing, continuing the tradition of poets like Sylvia Plath, Audre Lorde, or Anne Sexton, exposing their most intimate experiences and feelings regarding their identity and how they are perceived in the world, but in a more critical and direct manner. All things considered, today’s confessional poets are more engaged in the political sphere, especially feminist poets who use poetry as an instrument to question patriarchal values, its different stereotypes that women are subjected to, by reclaiming and redefining identity in terms that are more inclusive. And by also creating a type of poetry that generates a sense of reflection on different political and social issues.

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## **Corpurile în care locuim. Revendicarea puterii în poezia Melissei Lozada-Oliva și a Oliviei Gatwood**

În acest articol analizez *peluda* (2017) de Melissa Lozada-Oliva, *New American Best Friend* (2017) și *Life of the Party* (2019) de Olivia Gatwood, concentrându-mă pe modul în care feminismul și poezia confesională sunt folosite ca mijloace ale emancipării și a conștientizării identităților non-conformiste. Analizez motivele și teme recurente folosite de ambele poete în legătură cu teoria feministă, subliniind relația dintre identitatea feminină și text. Mai mult, descriu modul în care Melissa Lozada-Oliva și Olivia Gatwood își revendică identitatea, limba și discursul prin aceste volume. De asemenea, clarifică de ce poezia confesională și folosirea persoanei întâi singular este un act / o opțiune politică pentru poetele feministe. Fără alte formalități, în acest studiu intenționez să expun modul în care diverse chestiuni politice și sociale influențează lumea literară, contribuind la o idee mai inclusivă a canonului literar.