POLITICAL POTENTIAL:

THE WOMEN OF *INSTAGRAM* POETRY

by

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Introduction

The historical canon of poetry is predominantly male. The historical domain of policy making and politics is predominantly male. In the digital age, however, where the means to share or publish one's thoughts and views is available to almost anyone, the strict gatekeeping of literature and political discourse is no longer upheld. The phenomenon of *instapoetry*, poetry published to *Instagram*, is an example of a social media platform being used by women to bring poetry into popular culture, and, by that means, address political issues surrounding womanhood. By addressing issues of female oppression, sexual assault, and race through poetry, female instapoets wield political power by raising awareness about these issues and influencing and mobilizing their young and female demographic to instigate social change. Rupi Kaur, a famous Canadian-Indian instapoet with 4 million *Instagram* followers, is an exemplar of the intersection of poetry, social media, and politics. Kaur's female-centred content reaches millions of people and speaks to healing by way of self-help. Through her words and illustrations, readers are encouraged to think about the politics of being a woman today.

This paper explores the political landscape of instapoetry. Drawing on Kaur as well as on other instapoets, some who have acquired book deals with mainstream publishers such as Andrews McMeel and Penguin, I argue that female instapoets are diversifying the historically male domain of poetry, publishing, and politics. Since many female instapoets with a high count of followers are from (racially) marginalized communities, this paper looks at themes of the Other in instapoems. Use of the term "woman" in this essay encapsulates anyone who so chooses to use the label. Offering accounts of different cultures, femininity, and backgrounds allows instapoetry to assume an intersectional place in popular culture: instapoetry shows that there is no one way to write an instapoem, just as there is no one way to be a woman. Drawing on Ariel

Bissett's 2018 documentary *#poetry*, I will contextualize instapoetry through the interviewed

instapoets. Using Lili Pâquet's 2019 article, "Selfie-Help: The Multimodal Appeal of Instagram

Poetry," I will address how instapoetry is a political tool that deals with issues surrounding

womanhood. Through Jennifer Rubin's 2013 article, "Why popular culture matters in politics," I

will tie the discussed threads together to establish the political potential of women who publish

Instagram poetry. Though this paper focuses on modern female instapoets, it is not intended to

discredit the work of female politicians, and traditional poets and writers. I aim to uncover this

new realm of activism within popular culture.

The Gendered History of Poetry

To contextualize the necessity and power of women's poetry, I must first outline a brief

history of the last fifty years leading up to instapoetry. "Our Bodies, Our Poems" by Jennifer

Ashton addresses the lack of women's poems within anthologies in the late sixties and seventies.

Ashton writes that the inclusion of poetry by women in mass market anthologies was an attempt

at "redressing the balance" of gender representation (162). As women gained more presence in

the general anthologies of the eighties, the issue of representation changed. It was no longer

enough to simply include women's voices in the broader landscape of published poetry; a more

necessary step was to create a space for gender-specific—female-centred—poetic content and

form. Referencing American poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Ashton notes that "no feminist subject

matter can alter the fact that existing poetic forms are fundamentally 'male-gendered'" (164).

Hence, the active agent in women's writing must look to form, to not only challenge what is

expected from the male-dominated sphere of poetry, but to claim a sub-domain for structures

dedicated to women. Ashton notes that for DuPlessis this was "substituting plural for singular

verb tenses […]—or rejecting the speaking 'I'" (165). Though these structural shifts are minor, they are certainly recognizable once one is aware of them. I posit that seemingly slight changes to structure, in the framework of women (re)claiming a space for themselves in the realm of poetry, sets up a consistent expectation of a sub-genre.

A complication that arose out of women's writing fifty years ago was a narrow perspective of 'the woman.' Ashton addresses this issue by drawing upon poet Kathleen Fraser's disenchantment with the sub-genre:

> "The women's movement came on strong," she writes, "and poetry was at the center of it. Finally, one imagined, there would be a warm room where the multiple styles of women's minds and bodies and poetic languages could flower." But according to Fraser this hopeful moment in the mid- to late 1960s turned rapidly into a "necessary but painful phase of feminism" in which, she says, "something else happened." There were indeed "political needs—raw, bottled-up feelings wanting out—and a call for the immediately accessible language of personal experience as a binding voice of women's strength."[15] But for Fraser and the other experimental poets she came to admire, the problem with the "accessible language of personal experience" that seventies feminism promoted was that it tended (unwittingly) to reproduce the highly problematic and limited identities for women available within the gendered status quo. (169)

Hence, a second wave of women's writing sought to highlight the intricacies of women's texts: "anthologies like Sloan's and Rankine and Spahr's, along with the poets whose work they promote, have explicitly celebrated masks as ways of pointing to the performative condition of any gendered situation" (Ashton 169). Ashton further adds that challenging these ideals led to "women's formal experiments partak[ing in] the distinctiveness of women's bodies" (170).

Drawing upon a different artistic medium, the painting, Ashton calls attention to Warhol's "piss painting," noting that that "the stain" (in reference to stains resulting from menstruation) became the feminized counterpart (171). "Stain texts," as a medium, stipulated by a biological female body, was thus deemed a women's text.

However, one very acute and outstanding problem with this position is that not all women, biological or not, menstruate. Therefore, even this instance of using the female body to highlight women's voices is narrow and fails to recognize variation among those who identify as women. Ashton recognizes this by noting, "[i]n these examples—indeed in the wider field of women's poetry as it is currently being conceived—the so-called innovative necessity is nothing if not a profoundly essentialist turn in feminism and, for that matter, in the production and study of poetry" (173). Hence, innovation is not necessarily inclusive or progressive. Poets Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, editors of *A Megaphone,* agree with this assessment and note that:

> if there is anything we have learned from all this enacting, from this numbers trouble, it is that, as much as gender is performative, as much as sex is negotiable, so many—us included—are stuck performing scripts that reinforce this culturally created duality of women and men. It is an intense and entrenched duality, where even the wiliest, funniest, smartest, and perplexing actions designed to unsettle gender norms often get recuperated back into that duality. (29)

Spahr and Young therefore reiterate that the 'duality' of gender, which humankind has been interpellated into, is, seemingly, like a boomerang that finds its way back to those who challenge it. Thus, innovations such as "the stain" further push minority voices within women's writing to the margins. And this is where the intersectionality of instapoetry becomes significant. Though the examples that follow do not speak to *who* a woman is, they do highlight issues relevant to

women across various planes of social existence.

As instapoetry is relatively new and innovative, there may be some trouble placing it within the broader domain of poetry. Definitions of the avant-garde point to new, or otherwise innovative, works. An entry for the avant-garde in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* begs the question: "what does it take to be absolutely new?" (Buchanan). Considering the innovation that feminist writers were working with to popularize women's poetry within their communities, and, further, anthologies, are contemporary women's texts, such as instapoetry, new or avant-garde? "Avant-garde" could potentially be claimed for those arts deemed Other. Spahr and Young discuss their 2005 performance "Foulipo," written like an essay, in which they removed "the letter "r" in the unitalicized paragraphs […] These unitalicized paragraphs were those in which we said something about our own experience of having a female body" (15). They later reflect on this piece to add: "The question that motivated "Foulipo" was how we might claim the abstracted avant garde of Oulipo [a philosophy dedicated to writing with constraints] as feminists and how we might claim the feminist traditions of body art and durational performance as abstracted avant gardists" (16). Thus, women's writing presented in a way that challenges what writing, or 'potential literature,' has previously looked like implicates a necessary new-ness within the "avant-garde" scene. Spahr and Young's project could be considered as a restructuring of the scene of the avant-garde to make room for women's issues. Spahr and Young preface their work with the sentiment that they:

> are somewhat exhausted from wondering why what we call the experimental/
> postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry scene that so defines our lives continues—
> despite forty years of explicit feminist discourse in the US […] —to feel at moments
> weirdly aggressive towards anything that even suggests the possibility of a contemporary

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feminism, or the need for feminist activism now, or the possibility of a feminism that

isn't only historical. (13)

Taking issue with the "avant-garde" as a now seemingly reified dead end, I concur with Spahr

and Young that the label obstructs the successful creation of a 'contemporary feminism.' The

label, though at times romanticized, is damaging to the activist work that women perform

because the work is new, it is Other, and hence it is not prioritized.

Instapoetry is potentially seen as "avant-garde" from the outside because of its relative

new-ness and its formal differences from print-poetry. However, naming instapoetry "avant-

garde" is unsuitable since the label sometimes carries elitist tendencies. Part of the innovation in

instapoetry is the activism embedded into these texts. Thus, both when praised or ignored, a

whole history of women's efforts in creating a space to fight for their rights is subdued as the

medium gets acknowledged, but the message does not. Correspondingly, instapoetry may be

deemed low-culture or dismissed because of its popularity among women, but the combination

of the *Instagram* platform as essential to its poetics and the potential for activism can also be

looked at as a restructuring of the tradition to make room for contemporary issues. Though I do

not adhere to labels as a requirement of participation and enjoyment of a given form of

expression, a term that is relevant to instapoetry—and is avant-garde-adjacent, minus the

elitism—is "radically populist." Instapoetry inherently restructures poetry: female instapoets

advocate for change by appealing to contemporary tastes. After all, instapoets are ordinary

humans with an audience on *Instagram* who use their platform to speak to issues in their

respective communities.

The Merits of *Instagram* for Women's Poetry

       One might ask why *Instagram* is a suitable platform for intersectional women's texts. The key factor in instapoetry's vast success is the sense of community within instapoets' networks. By communicating beliefs about women's (and human) rights, the instapoet lays out their social and political position on a given issue. Members of an instapoet's community (namely, their followers) can then interact with the presented literature. Community building through *Instagram* may seem abstract, but the affordances of hashtags promote this. Minority communities can seek out the content they wish to consume and the community they wish to be a part of. There are mountains of undiscovered instapoems relating to intersectional spheres of life: a current search for #lgbtqpoetry brings up over 4000 posts, and a search for #blackpoetsociety has nearly 25 000 posts. I highlight these hashtags to offer two sub-communities built through instapoetry, though other niche hashtags such as #lesbianpoetry and #blackwomenpoetry further highlight utterances of women's texts on an intersectional level. Hence, *Instagram*'s structural affordance (i.e. hashtags) makes the platform a suitable place for writing intersectional poetry, and finding it as well.

       One might then ask what differentiates instapoetry from, say, print-poetry or other forms of online poetry. Instapoetry specifically refers to poems published to *Instagram*; because *Instagram* was intended as a photo and video-sharing platform and only later became appropriated as a platform for image-based *text,* instapoetry has unique platform-specific aspects that makes it different from online poetry published to intentionally literary publishing platforms such as *Wattpad*. *Instagram* users are not necessarily on the platform to consume literature. Consequently, "explore" pages build potential for wider reach, and branded content (which includes instapoetry) is likely on many users' feeds. I argue that although Kaur's poetry may not

look or sound like the poetry that precedes her, she, and an onset of other instapoets, captured the interest of millions of young people. Kaur writes for *her* generation, those who depend on digital channels for content. These readers want to consume literature in a new, short, palatable way—use of social media platforms has trained the average consumer to look for quick reads. This led Kaur to be declared 'writer of the decade' by *New Republic* (Alam). Kaur's achievement highlights the fact that she 'revived' a tradition that some had begun to think of as dead, uninteresting, or otherwise not relatable.

Jelena Savić, interviewed by Spahr and Young, notes that: "To be a poetess in Serbia means that you are a woman with a diary, deeply embedded in gender, an emotional woman dealing with irrelevant concerns, not at all political, and also ready to be fucked all the time. You are a sexual object and you should be pretty, tender, and obedient" (26). This extremist belief of the female poet is prevalent across many cultures, which in turn perpetuates the ideology of women's texts as expendable. Female artists and writers have critiqued this belief of the apolitical woman: Adrienne Rich and Diana di Parma have been depicting their feminist values and highlighting their issues with the patriarchy through writing for decades. Hence, the poet-activist genre is not *new*—it is simply taking on a new, popular structure.

To begin outlining how the female instapoet can be political, I now highlight Upile Chisala, who describes herself as a "Malawian Storyteller." Chisala also speaks to how *Instagram* brings together the poetical, political, and the personal, she says that she is "taking advantage of social media and the platform that it has given us" (Bissett 00:22:05 – 00:22:10). Alternating between photos of herself and her poetry throughout her *Instagram* feed, Chisala keeps her page and poetry personal, noting that this way, "you can tell who's writing the poetry" (Bissett 00:21:21 – 00:21:30). Attaching a face to the words familiarizes readers to writers: who

they are, what spaces in the world they occupy, and the daily challenges that they may go through. This is incredibly important as female voices are identified and made unique; individualizing each instapoet releases them from being grouped into a category and remaining silenced. Speaking politically, this allows women to advance in society by relaying their truth to one another, and to give one another the power to step forth and combat the patriarchy. A poem on Chisala's page reads: "All the lovely women living in your blood/ are trying to teach you their soft magic,/ please pay attention to them" (Chisala). Chisala's instapoem uses the platform to urge fellow women to learn from their predecessors and use the tools that have gotten women thus far. She maintains over 60 000 followers, therefore her message is likely to resonate with a plethora of people. A post illustrative of this community action on Chisala's page reads:

> If you find yourself very black and very
>
> tired,
>
> Very tired and very black,
>
> Very woman and very black and very tired,
>
>
> Rest and mean it. (Chisala, "Deliverance")

In this post, the instapoet is giving advice to a very specific group of people: tired Black women. Though the advice is simple, it acts as a reminder of the strenuous emotional work these women do to fight for their rights. A comment under this post by user @glamdollchello reads: "This was me last week. Logging off of fb [*Facebook*] was my first step. I'd like to share and repost if I may…" Here, this user is identifying with the message of the poem, recognizing their own fatigue and noting how they adhered to Chisala's advice (before even seeing it). This user is also asking permission to share this poem with her own circle; this further creates community as the

message is shared with those who need to hear it. Hence, the reach that the platform enables makes for instant activism as the message of one person is heard by many.

Bissett mirrors this notion when, speaking of Kaur, she says: "I think she's writing for people like herself: women, young women, women of colour. People who, if we're honest, poetry hasn't specifically been for in the past" (00:41:40 – 00:41:50). Hence, as instapoets leverage this structure to create content intended for women, they not only make political statements about their own communities, but they also interpellate their readers into this activism. Ashton argues "the field of women's poetry has shifted focus from an emphasis on equal representation to an interest in what makes women's writing different from men's" (173). In the case of instapoetry, women dominate the genre; their poems speak to women's issues through a specific medium.

The importance of female centred re-structuring is present in the reiteration of Ashton's argument regarding the seventies and eighties: Bissett notes that women cannot simply fit into the mold of structures created for men, the structures must change. Though time has passed and women's writing has become more widely present and accepted, a problem unique to the contemporary world is the marginalization of print-poetry. This is not to say that poetry is superfluous, but to note the drop of its popularity. Bissett says, "I see this *Instagram* movement as a restructuring [of poetics] …the majority of *Instagram* users are women, and the vast majority of participants in the Instagram poetry community are also women" (00: 43:00 - 00:43:38). Thus, a platform like *Instagram*—not necessarily created for women, but popularly used by them—fosters the instapoetry movement, bringing together women of different races and socio-political backgrounds to converse about *their* issues. And the structure does not discriminate. Anyone with access to the internet can join this conversation. The current shift in

poetry to highlight women's texts is now signified by its platform, which in turn reflects a specific medium: the instapoem.

Jennifer Rubin notes in *The Washington Post* that "Politicians need to care about popular culture because it is one of the common bonds that tie increasingly segmented Americans together" (Rubin). Though the segmentation she speaks about is between political camps, I posit that women and their bodies are highly political as politicians try to police what women can do with their bodies, such as banning abortions, or denying birth control, under the guise of political values. This is where popular culture and instapoetry unite women. While educating one another on contemporary issues, women engage in politics to understand their rights, and potentially or eventually, fight for them. The online portion of this activism is key to participation within it. Janette Hughes argues in her essay that digital media is highly accessible, which further adds to Bissett's point that instapoetry holds great potential for engagement. In her article from 2008, Hughes notes that digital poetry has a "playful" quality. The digital format allows for a greater play with meaning through images and other forms of expression afforded by the digital realm, such as animation (Hughes 157). Though the marriage between words and illustration is not new to poetry, this format resonates with social media users as instapoetry becomes easily digestible, and can be read quickly, which reifies the diminishing attention span that results from activities like social media scrolling.

Thus, curating the instapoem necessitates unique attention paid to the target audience's needs on an emotional and physical level. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's discussion of *traditional context*, Bissett notes, "the way that you create a poem, if you think that someone is going to sit down with a book and read it, is going to be different than the way you write a poem, if all you know is that they're going to be scrolling through a photography-based app to see it"

(00:27:40 -00:27:57). As any content on *Instagram* is produced with potential for mass distribution, the context can change at any given moment. Bissett speculates that this may be why instapoems are short—and, I add, eye-catching—they need to function in any context, potentially severed from the page that they come from. The eye-catching and short characteristic of instapoems is exemplified through one of Kaur's poems:

you want to keep

the blood and the milk hidden

as if the womb and breast

never fed you (Kaur, Poem about women's rights to their bodies)

The poem is accompanied with a sexually and thoughtfully provocative illustration (appendix A). Hence, when users scroll through their feed, the shortness of the poem and the explicit image pull readers into the message of the poem, as seen through the instapoem's 310,000 likes. In this poem, Kaur is participating in a form of social activism against those who object to women breastfeeding in public. Although a natural and required process for babies, only recently has breastfeeding in public become legal in all fifty American states. I mention America because of its "progressive" reputation, yet the legalization speaks to how women continue to be sexualized and oppressed. Needless to say, there are politicians who push for such progress. However, Kaur evokes rage within her followers, with a potential outcome of action. A comment under this poem, written by user @gabi_the_moon_goddess, says, "People create wars and kill each other with no hesitation but we can't choose what to do with our bodies because it's murder" (Kaur, Poem about women's rights to their bodies). Though speaking to other ways in which women's bodies are policed, the comment shows critical engagement with the issue, which is the necessary first step to create action. Theorizing and understanding women's issues is what leads

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to tangible change, and instapoetry can be regarded as the source of such change. William Clapton writes:

> Popular culture has been conceived as a constellation of sites of representation and representational practice through which identities are constituted, meaning is constructed, power is produced and exercised, and where world politics, what we can know about it, and how we can know it, are constituted. In this way, popular culture is imbricated in both the 'real-world' practices of world politics and their disciplinary study.

Hence, as more representation is given to women, meaning and identity are constructed for a collective power to be exercised within politics. As communities come together to send these messages to other women, instapoetry is used as a form of popular culture which contributes to political discourse.

A necessary question to address at this point is how or why instapoets have influence. Instapoets' curated "self" aid as a visual to explore the personalities attached to instapoetry. Lili Pâquet examines the function of selfies among instapoets. She writes, "Instagram poets can amass followers on their sites by branding themselves in certain ways, using not only poetry but also selfies" (297). Speaking to Chisala's ethos of keeping her page personal, selfies work as an expression of human-centred self-empowerment. Instapoets typically present themselves as everyday-women by sharing their extremely relatable journeys of healing, and thus, they gain credibility due to their non-celebrity status. Pâquet notes that this is what allows followers or readers to identify with the messages they send (309). Pâquet draws on Eagar and Dann, who write, "Self-help selfies claim a position of mastery over a field-specific social capital, and through demonstrations of this mastery they are able to build an audience. The self-help genre is characterized by thematic structures of mastery through using formal features of flattering

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images demonstrating self-achievement" (qtd. 298). Hence, the selfies of marginalized female

instapoets work to "prove" to readers that they are worthy of such discussions, that what they say

can be taken as truth—due to their lived experiences as shown through snapshots of the self.

These selfies also enable the consideration of instapoetry as radically populist as change-leaders

are (presented as) ordinary people.

The Poetry and Politics of Rupi Kaur

Kaur's *Instagram* profile, which alternates between a poem and a photo of herself

performing, writing, or simply living, runs parallel with the ethos of mastery. This type of

branding could be regarded as a marketing technique to gain popularity and build an audience.

However, this move is inherently political as it paints a meta-narrative of the healing woman in a

society that has not allowed her to rise. Subverting the dominant image of how women should

behave, instapoets invoke perseverance not only through words, but selfies, too. Tying the

message of a poem to related selfies, I want to draw upon a poem on Kaur's page:

> to heal
>
> you have to
>
> get to the root
>
> of the wound
>
> and kiss it all the way up (Kaur, "Poem about healing")

Although Kaur is speaking about emotional wounds, this poem can be read politically. If one is

to address the policies that systematically put women in inferior positions, they must be fought

from the root, not the surface. Hence, I posit that instapoetry holds political value as famous

instapoets such as Kaur use their image and branding power to provide influential political statements.

Prior to the 2019 Canadian federal election, Kaur posted a photo of herself and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh (Appendix B). Though the Liberals won that election, Kaur deployed her influence and support by endorsing a political party. She stated that she supports the NDP, writing in her caption that Singh stood "for the rights you [Singh] believe all humans deserve" (Kaur, Photo with Jagmeet Singh). Therefore, not only does instapoetry work politically as it empowers women to take a stand, but instapoets like Kaur help align values with candidates. By doing so, Kaur tells her followers that the best way to follow and participate in her activism, and the best way to see change, would be to vote NDP. This example of a curated selfie illustrates Kaur's reliability when it comes to the topic of a healing journey—she shows that she went through the journey, healed herself, and is now helping other women do so through her words in addition to political alignment.

A poignant example of Kaur's activism is the advice in her post to amplify Black voices (appendix C) during the #BLACKLIVESMATTER protests brought on by the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020. This image, full of steps to call politicians, donate, and address police brutality resembles her other poems in writing style and structure. Kaur uses the lower case and short fragmented sentences in the title ("what can we do to center. amplify. and defend black lives?") to speak to her audience in a way they are familiar with. By expressing a call for political action in a form that looks like instapoetry, Kaur aligns her curated self with a value: that Black lives matter. She stands up, although behind a screen, against the injustices of this decade which mirror the last two centuries and she directs her followers to do the same. In this post, she does not simply say that her followers should care for Black lives, she calls for action.

Since this post structurally resembles Kaur's other poems, she makes the case that her page, *Instagram,* and instapoetry are a political space that one ought to be engaged with. The activism here may not be specific to women's issues, but rather, a woman is speaking to a political issue that influences the livelihood of both men and women who have been discriminated against by a system that supposedly protects. Of course, upon inspection, this post is not a poem; and at a time when many are calling for change, it seems appropriate that someone with a large following would speak to actionable steps through a structure (instapoetry) that has proven successful for them in the past. In this scenario, a female instapoet is asking for justice for a community she is not a part of, and directing other women to do so, too. I do not intend to glorify Kaur for a simple post, but to highlight the power of her platform and the people (mostly women) listening and acting at the behest of her posts.

Thus, instapoets work to create tangible change via their platforms. As noted earlier, many instapoets come from marginalized communities. Disadvantaged and typically silenced, these women live under hegemonic systems. Hence, educating one another builds the foundation to move forward. In a *Huffington Post* article Kaur discussed why she was motivated to speak out in the first place:

> What moved me to share was the idea that I was tired of being quiet. I felt like, for the first time ever, what I had to say was so much more powerful than my fear of what people might think. It was almost as though I had no choice. It seemed more important for me to express solidarity with women going through similar struggles than to continue being that "polite, shy, quiet girl." (qtd. Spencer)

Diverging from the ideological image of an immigrant woman who keeps her head down, Kaur subverts the norm while empowering others to do so as well. Her instapoems take this lead, too. She writes in the instapoem titled "women of colour" that:

> our backs
>
> tell stories
>
> no books have
>
> the spine to
>
> carry (Kaur)

Addressing the situation of marginalized women who find themselves in contexts that include being Othered, Kaur makes explicit the need for instapoetry by telling these stories *without* the spines of books. Instead, binding their words into popular culture, instapoets penetrate the political sphere through their refusal to be silenced. By daring to speak, instapoets amass followers by the thousands, which lead to eventual book deals with major publishers. I will return to the phenomenon of the instapoet's transition to print-poetry briefly after addressing *why* Kaur writes. Kaur was chosen to be on the *BBC 100 Women 2017,* a list dedicated to highlighting female talent to celebrate how they "have inspired others through their actions" ("BBC 100 Women 2017"). Other women on the list include politicians, entrepreneurs, astronauts, and activists. Associating Kaur with these women illustrates that she is influential enough to instigate social change. Though this change can be about how seriously women are beginning to be taken within instapoetry, it also speaks to leveraging positions of power and influence to speak out about issues that concern women and marginalized communities.

Further, on an episode of "The Cultural Frontline," a *BBC Sounds* podcast, Kaur explains that her poetry traces her family's journey of seeking refuge in Canada. She notes that the poems

she wrote for her second book resonate with the broader migration crisis as a "fire begun to burn in me" (Daheley 00:05:06 – 00:05:10) in reaction to Trump's words and promises of policies against refugees that would "make America great again." This sentiment is worth examining given that Kaur is Canadian. Insinuating that she, too, is involved in this "American" issue illuminates that the humanitarian violations that are occurring are everyone's concern, not just Americans'. Kaur says that she felt privileged when she heard news about refugees and the hardships they go through in seeking refuge, as she had the comfort of her home to rely on. Noting specifically the popularly distributed image of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian-Afghan boy who was found drowned on an Italian beach after the refugee ship carrying his family was sank, she wrote her poem "boat" to capture the heartbreak of these events (Daheley 00:05:22 – 00:06:00), and to tell her readers about this experience, to make them understand what being a refugee is like. An excerpt from the poem reads:

> hand over everything in your name
>
> for a ticket on the boat
>
> next to a hundred others like you
>
> packed like sardines
>
> you tell the woman beside you
>
> *this boat is not strong enough to carry*
>
> *this much sorrow to a shore* (Kaur, "boat")

As she takes up issues of migration and talks about the refugee experience, Kaur depicts her political potential. Working within the realm of popular culture, she reaches mass audiences to push boundaries and help others think about pressing matters. Poems such as "boat," can be markers of identification for other immigrants or refugees. However, they can also bring to light

what policies may be lacking: empathy. Taking a stance against inhumane laws that create such circumstances, Kaur and readers of the poem engage in activism to reject the world's inhumanity in denying asylum to seekers.

The Economics of (Self) Publishing

President of Andrews McMeel Publishing Kirsty Melville notes that she, like many other publishers, looks to publish work that resonates with others, and looks to see how it fits into the given milieu of the author (Bissett 00:44:00 – 00:44:15). Seeing how Kaur addresses political issues through popular culture, Andrews McMeel offered her a book deal. The preference for work that 'resonates' fits the mold of *Instagram* because of the platform's discussed affordances. Hence, marginalized women can begin to take back the historically male-dominated universe of poetry and publishing because of the communicative power of instapoetry. It is the rise of this new structure that creates market potential for authors who are marginalized and female. And, as their *Instagram* fan base has high engagement, sales ensue. In *The Sydney Morning Herald*, a journalist writes:

> She [Melville] believes the attraction of Instapoets is their "outsider" status, whether they be immigrant, gay, of colour or any other minority… "It's not an old white man writing modern poems…It's often a young woman of colour who is sick of being patronized and they're now kicking down the doors of traditional publishing." (qtd. Pitt)

Thus, it is the newly valued female voices with listening audiences that are sought after and published. This sentiment does not undervalue women who are already active participants in the writing community. However, as this new, highly accessible, career in writing and activism is

created, more women are drawn to tell their stories and encourage change within their societies internationally with a broader focus on women's rights and political issues.

This discussion of instapoetry and sales cannot be complete without mention of the economy in which it exists. Aarthi Vadde takes up *Wattpad*, a digital self-publishing platform, to discuss the matter. He writes, "*Wattpad* brings users into a sharing economy where they can access each other's stories without spending money or contributing much in the way of writing themselves. Still, the site is a user-generated forum, and thus relies on its unpaid writers" (36). Much like *Instagram*, the platform is free to use and holds publishing potential. Extending Vadde's argument to instapoetry, free online content gives audiences a taste of each instapoet's work and pushes poets to (self-)publish as it becomes a way to generate income as their followers are inclined to purchase physical copies of books after becoming avid readers of their poetry on *Instagram*. This is a political pushback as female instapoets gain success; to gain economic capital through instapoetry means that instapoets break the expectations placed onto women through ideological perceptions of poetry, publishing, and success. Since women and popular culture have a history of not being taken seriously, it is important to note the forces that try to frame these women and their platform as inferior.

Although many instapoets are successful in reinforcing values in their readers and challenging hegemonic ideologies, detractors of the genre still find ways to dismiss female instapoets. Even the vocabulary surrounding the phenomenon connotes a lack of merit in publishing efforts as the title "instapoet" implicates instapoetry as a low culture text—not fully a poet, but merely an *Instagram* poet. Instapoet Charly Cox discusses the term 'instapoetry' and notes, "I'm not embarrassed or ashamed that I post my work on *Instagram*, or that through posting my work on *Instagram*, I have managed my dream of getting a book deal. But I don't

like what comes with the term" (Bissett 00:07:02 – 00:07:19). The term is widely used to discredit the success of young, marginalized women using *Instagram* to garner large readerships. A headline that reads "Thought poetry was dead? The 'Instapoets' raking it in online would beg to differ" is accompanied by the deck: "Paterson, Poe, Plath – would they have resisted plugging their work on Instagram? Meet the Millennials sending their pop verse viral – and generating sales that prove poetry's demise has been exaggerated" (Pitt). Pitt intricately exposes the modern circumstances of poetry: with the platform acting as a sharing tool, had poets in the canon had access to it, who's to say that they would not have used it to their advantage? The negative tinge assigned to instapoetry seems to be imbued with oppression. I argue that this viewpoint is anchored to the fact that many participants in the community are those (women) who have been previously silenced and are now standing against traditionalist values. Hence, though instapoetry is ridiculed by elitists, it is a powerful tool that mobilizes the marginalized and breeds activism through the fact. Most significantly, the fact that real-life book deals come out of successful *Instagram* pages is a testament to the genre's dynamism.

Discussing the publishing potential of instapoets, Bissett notes, "There seems to be two types of self-publishing on *Instagram*. The first is the act of putting a post on *Instagram*… you are deciding, on your own, to share something with the public. But there is a second form; it's using the audience that you've garnered to self-publish a physical collection" (00:38:53 – 00:39:16). Thus, women who publish their poetry to *Instagram* (initially) forgo print-publishing to reach an audience and get their work heard. An important affordance of the platform is its real-time capacity to enable poets to respond to current news and events. Vadde uses Nick Leavy's term "post-press literature" to describe the literary landscape of today. He notes: "post-press literature designates those self-published works that, in becoming destigmatized, are

changing the form of contemporary fiction, the experience of reading it, and the business of publishing it" (35). Hence, as instapoetry becomes ever more popular, with writers accepting the term and their readers supporting them, instapoets challenge who can be published, placing themselves onto bookshelves amongst William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. I acknowledge that canonized women also appear on these shelves, but instapoets who self-publish push these boundaries even more; they show that publishers are not necessarily needed to get their words out into the public. Instapoet Indy Yelich says that she went the self-publishing route because she doesn't think her audience cares who publishes her book, they just want to press a button and get it (Amazon-)"primed" to their homes (Bissett 00:35:49 – 00:35:56). Handling the business side of publishing on their own, self-published instapoets show the world that they have something to say, and they're not afraid to speak out. However, the publishing of instapoets certainly exists on a spectrum. While some self-publish, others (like Kaur) publish with established publishers. Hence, as instapoets take up space in larger scale operations, they climb the ladder to financial security. But both small-scale and large-scale instapoet publications start at the same place: a post on *Instagram.*

Conclusion

Instapoems offer rich accounts of real stories—stories that have been ignored. By finding a place in mainstream online culture, instapoets ensures that the issues they discuss cannot be easily ignored. Making clear the political potential of instapoems, I retain my stance that women place themselves in conversations that are about them; demanding rights for themselves and Othered communities, instapoets work intersectionally to push for change and influence policy. Policy-makers may continue ignoring these voices, but with the millions of participants within

the instapoetry community, an uproar is sure to ensue. As more women join the conversation and educate one another on the systematic oppression placed on them and others, they defend themselves and fight back against those systems put in place to keep them in inferior positions.

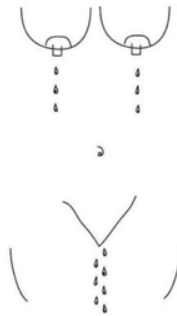Thus, as female instapoets influence female readers, instapoems inspire each woman to make a change collectively—they are more likely to be heard when many voices speak together.

List of Appendices

Appendix A

you want to keep
the blood and the milk hidden
as if the womb and breast
never fed you

- rupi kaur

Kaur, Rupi. Poem about healing. *Instagram,* 26 Sep. 2019,

https://www.instagram.com/p/B25JUtxBam4/

Appendix B

Kaur, Rupi. Photo with Jagmeet Singh. *Instagram,* 21 Oct. 2019,

https://www.instagram.com/p/B341pScBo8_/

Appendix C

what can we do to center. amplify. and defend black lives?

1. call DA mike freeman 612-348-5550 to charge and arrest ALL officers involved in murdering george floyd.

2. visit minnesotafreedomfund.org to donate and find out how you can support black led movements right now.

3. to ensure there are no cover-ups we must maintain pressure on all public officials in recent cases including ahmaud arbery. breonna taylor. george floyd. regis korchinski-paquet.

4. place pressure on the media to accurately represent what is happening.

5. talk to our non-black friends and family about fighting anti-black racism within our own communities.

6. to combat police brutality we ALL have to do our part in dismantling corrupt and oppressive power structures like the current police and prison systems. we have to be loud against the increased militarization of police and the relationships between capitalism and incarceration. we have to imagine and promote alternatives like abolition.

rupikaur_ ✔ • Following   •••

rupikaur_ ✔ #blacklivesmatter
3w

m.uofhe Simply saying you aren't racist isn't enough anymore. You have to act on it. Stand up against it. Nobody is more deserving of life than anybody else. Silence at this time is as good as betrayal. Stand up. Talk. Take up space. Use your platform. Don't just be non-racist, be ANTI-RACIST🙌

3w   100 likes   Reply

—— View replies (1)

kenshihayabusa Thank you for using your voice and your following

Liked by thelfox and 50,472 others

MAY 29

Add a comment...   Post

Kaur, Rupi. "what can we do to center. amplify. and defend black lives?"

Instagram, May 29 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyc32EBEgG/

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