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Happy Objects and Bloom Spaces: Investigating the Potential of Rupi Kaur's Poetry

Miguel Vega

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HAPPY OBJECTS AND BLOOM SPACES: INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL
OF RUPI KAUR'S POETRY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English and Writing Studies

by
Miguel Angel Vega
December 2022

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

In response to the movement of what is considered and labeled as “Instagram poetry,” poet and critic Rebecca Watts argues that to consider “artless” poetry as “poetry” we are denigrating the artform. This project centers around Watts’ claim that “the reader is dead” due to their encounter with such poetry. This project acts as a conversation that seeks to understand why certain forms of art are considered a “threat” to those who engage with them, as well as to their respective fields. Using affect theory (specifically the theory of the happy object) we can begin to understand why we gravitate towards certain objects, and how those objects act as a “bloom space” – a site of “becoming.” By framing a book of Instagram poetry (like Rupi Kaur’s *milk and honey*) as a happy object, or an object capable of orienting bodies towards certain possibilities, we can talk against hierarchical notions of art and literature that lead to these distinctions between “high” and “low” art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mom, who helped comfort me while assembling this manuscript, and to whom I owe the world to.

Special thanks to my readers, Professors David Marshall and Jessica Luck for agreeing to oversee this project; being a student over COVID felt impossible—thank you for working with me through a pandemic, writer’s block, health concerns and everything else that came my way.

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I would also like to offer my thanks to my family, friends and coworkers for their constant support and understanding while I went through this tiresome, yet amazing endeavor. I couldn’t have done this without everyone’s support and understanding. Special thanks to the most awesome accountabilibuddie a guy could ask for: Amber Guarena. Those writing sessions really got us through the finish line didn’t they!?

Finally, at the risk of sounding selfish, I would like to thank myself: one day I will look back at this project, at Fall 2022 and smile, and I would like to smile back. So this is me smiling back: You did it! And you can do so much more.

Again, thank you, all of you, for acting as my bloom space.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to anyone who was ever told, as Elizabeth Acevedo once said, that your story is too small, or too ugly or too different for “high” art.

My friend, who else is more deserving of poetry?

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JOURNAL ARTICLE:

HAPPY OBJECTS AND BLOOM SPACES: INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL OF RUPI KAUR'S POETRY

Introduction

Death of the Market: the Extinction of Poetry

Chain restaurants, napkins, department stores, American Cheese, it is no surprise that young people are (once again) attributed with “killing” yet another Western classic – in this case – not just poetry, but the very readers who consume it. Seemingly sidelined from popular media in favor of television, video games, cellular applications and other forms of entertainment and literature (such as the novel), poetry was long believed to be a dying market. In conducting research for the renewed interest poetry has been receiving this last decade, I came across a 2015 *Washington Post* article by Christopher Ingraham titled “Poetry is going extinct, government data shows.” Ingraham summarizes the key findings from a study conducted by The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). The study revealed poetry to be less popular than other activities such as jazz, dance and only about half as popular as knitting or crochet (*The Washington Post*).

In response to Ingraham’s questions over the findings, Bonnie Bichols (a researcher for The National Endowment for the Arts, or NEA) stated that “[the findings provide an] opportunity for us to think about how we reach new

audiences.” To Bichols, the “extinction” of poetry seemed to be less about a dying market and more about how that market failed to reach an audience hyper-habituated in a modern, digital landscape. Yet, as Ingraham notes, while the Internet was able to digitize poems on leading poetry sites, like *The Poetry Foundation*, the number of people looking for poetry was not attracting nearly enough readers to make a difference (see Figure 1). In other words, even while “accessible,” poetry was not desirable. Ingraham ominously ends his article by stating “[poetry] readers have been taking their attention elsewhere — and not even the internet is making them come back,” to which I say, enter the “cult of the noble amateur” — specifically, Rupi Kaur.

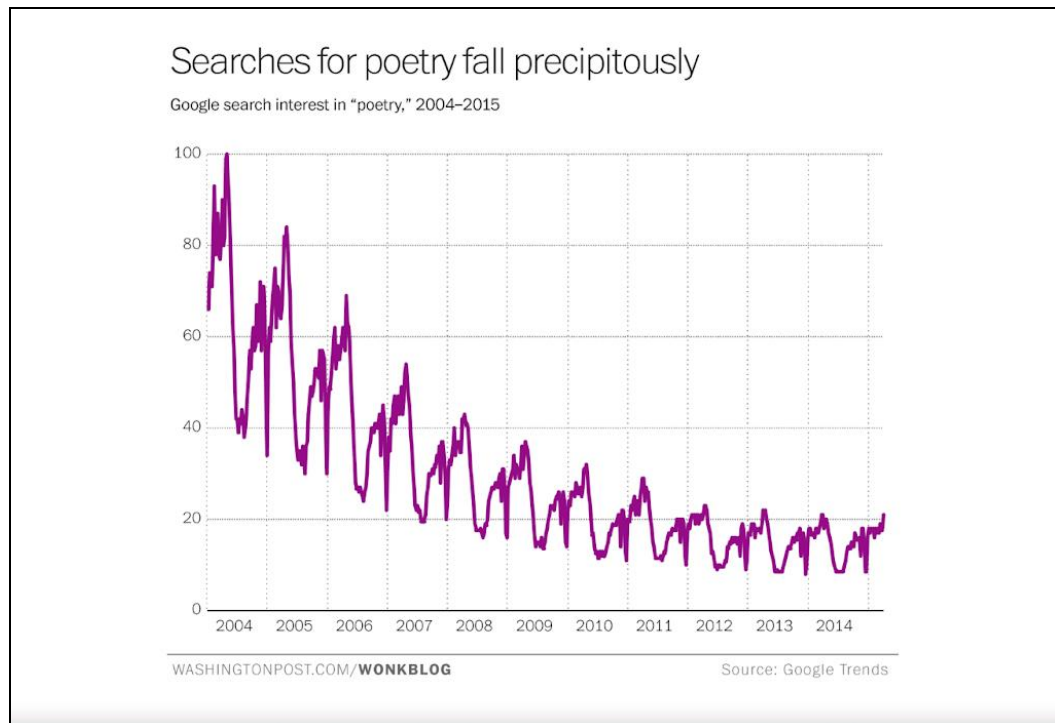


Figure 1: Searches for Poetry fall over a ten-year Period

After relocating to Canada from Punjab at the age of four, Kaur found herself unable to make friends due to significant language barriers and the constant feelings of displacement. To keep herself from feeling isolated in the new country, Kaur began to engage in the arts, ultimately enabling herself to perform spoken word poetry at the local open mics throughout high school (Rupi Kaur, *Healing Through Words*, 2022). Poetry about love, feminism, heartbreak, cultural heritage, sexual abuse, healing — these are the central topics of a Rupi Kaur poem and that which first amassed a crowd of devoted followers.

As this community began to grow, so did Kaur's interest in collecting her poetry as a physically bound book. However, Kaur was unable to find success (or access) through traditional publishing means — poetry magazines were constantly rejecting her work. Rather than conforming to traditional publishing norms, Kaur was able to utilize the skills she developed while studying design in school and used it to write, illustrate and edit what would become her first collection. On November 4, 2014, Kaur would self-publish *milk and honey* after what she considers a twenty-one year-period of writing and assembling the manuscript (xiii). Unbeknownst to her, *milk and honey* would end up becoming one of the most successful contemporary poetry books to date.

Defining “Instagram Poetry”

Whereas contemporary poetry centers on the idea of constant revision, craft, and the process of submitting to literary magazines for publication, poetry

written for the Instagram crowd seems to bypass the traditions set forth by the dominant culture of canonicity. A poem deemed ready for publication by an Instagram Poet, or “Insta Poet”¹ for short, is often short in length and width, leaving more than enough white space to surround the text. The words on the page are often joined with illustrations or photography provided by the authors themselves, or another artist. At times, the text itself is presented through standard computer font, at others, the text is presented as if typed straight from an old typewriter. Also, another staple of the style, would have to be its constant use of lowercase (even with “i”) and in some cases, the omission of a title. Here, the opening poem to Kaur’s *the sun and her flowers* [“on the last day of love,”]² is a good example of a poem that fills the corpus of Instagram’s writing (see Figure 2).

¹ While the term itself can be slippery, I use the phrase “Instagram Poet” to describe the specific type of writer that utilizes the style and aesthetic of writing designed for digital consumption and reproduction. In this case, an Instagram poet, or “Insta Poet” is a writer whose writing is designed for the online platform, in contrast to a writer who has simply been quoted via the online platform.

² Here, I borrow our method of referring to Emily Dickinson poems as several of Kaur’s poems go untitled. When they are, the title will appear after the poem itself—right around the space in the image above where her name appears.

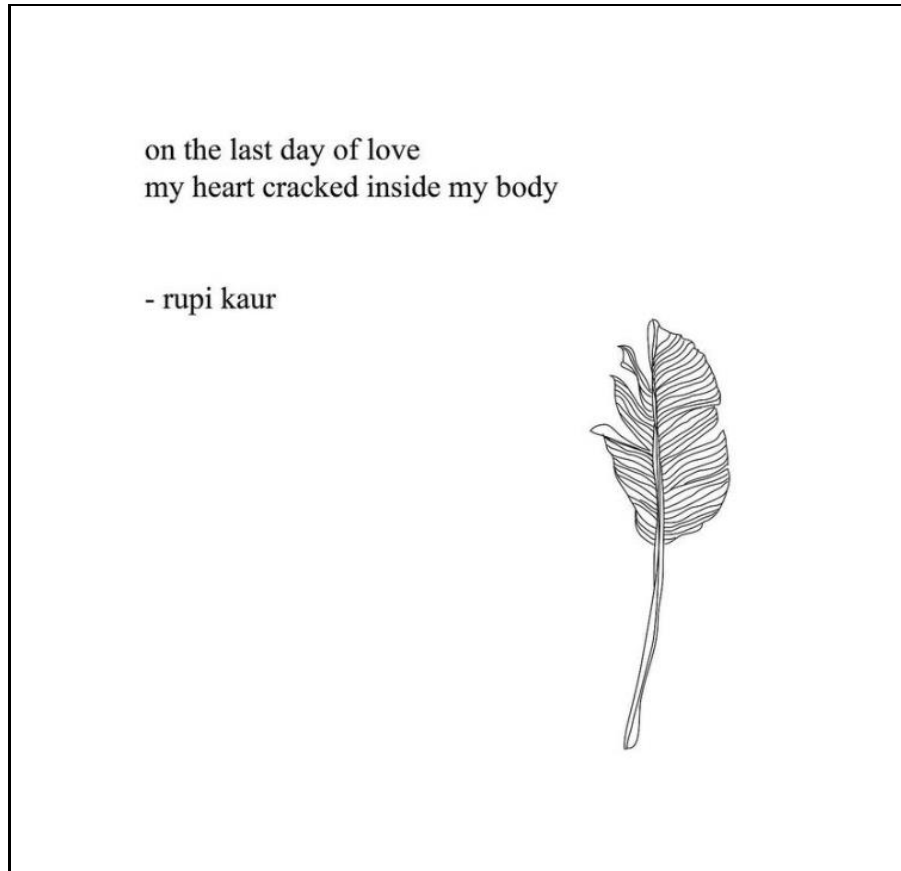


Figure 2: An Example of “Instagram Poetry” by Kaur

While the length of other “Instagram poems³” varies, I find this poem by Kaur to encapsulate the essence of Instagram poetry: short, sweet, to the point, dripping with melodrama, and with a restrained ease of language. In other words, Instagram poetry is accessible, both in its language, and in the space it occupies. But is this reincarnation of poetry desirable? As we will see later in the project,

³ Like “Insta Poet,” I use the phrase “Instagram poems” or “Instagram Poetry” to denote the specific style of poetry that has come to be associated with the “Instapoets.”

the success of Instagram poetry, both on and off Instagram (as a codex and an image) has led to what many consider to be an overall net positive for poetry. Yet, despite an overall positive reception, my project aims to talk back against notions of cognitive dissonance because of our encounters with Instagram poetry.

“The Reader is Dead”

Despite this seeming inclusion into the corpus of what we identify as “poetry,” Instagram poetry has received severe backlash and criticism towards its writers, readers, methods of publication and its content. *Deadspin’s* Lindsay Adler deemed Kaur a “hack” and a “dunce” in a 2017 article published a day after the release of Kaur’s second collection: *the sun and her flowers*. Danez Smith, an award-winning poet, publicly scrutinized Kaur on Twitter, stating “friends don’t let friends read Rupi Kaur unironically” (a Tweet since deleted), and in an article written for the *HuffPost*, Claire Fallon stated that the poetry of Atticus and other Instagram poets is “perfectly calibrated to attract fans: bland, generic, [and] aesthetically pleasing.” Where my project decides to comment on, however, is the direct ambivalence towards 1.) “popular” poetry and 2.) those who engage with it.

In an article published by the *PN Review* titled “The Cult of the Noble Amateur,” British poet and critic, Rebecca Watts, cites Instagram poetry as “the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft.” Seemingly

infuriated by the poetry world “pretending that poetry is not an art form,” Watts states

Of all the literary forms, we might have predicted that poetry had the best chance of escaping social media’s dumbing effect; its project, after all, has typically been to rid language of cliché. Yet in the redefinition of poetry as ‘short-form communication’ the floodgates have been opened. The reader is dead; long live consumer-driven content and the ‘instant gratification’ this affords (Cult of the Noble Amateur).

Going on to claim that she turned down an opportunity to review Hollie McNish’s⁴ collection, *Plum* (2017), Watts argues that Instagram poetry is responsible for “dumbing” down the art of poetry and those who encounter it. In fact, Watts compares this gravitation towards the work concerning; something paralleling that of the mass gravitation towards (then) U.S. President, Donald Trump.

I do not find issue with Watts for what normally comes down to issues of personal taste. However, I do take issue with what I consider to be her biggest

⁴ McNish is a recipient of the Ted Hughes Award for poetry and uses Instagram to promote her work. Responding to Watts’ harsh criticism in the documentary *#poetry*, filmed by Youtuber Ariel Bissett, McNish states “I can see that sort of resentment: the idea of people sort of jumping on this art form to get followers, and...maybe there are some people that are doing that, but that’s always been the case in art. If Shakespeare was around today I’m pretty sure he’d be putting updates about all the plays that were on, on Instagram or Twitter...and I keep putting them up there just because, I think it’s just a nice a way to share your work...this idea that just because you put them in a certain space, rather than sending it to a publisher, or a more literary magazine it then deems it something that you haven’t spend time doing...Just because somebody finds poetry that they enjoy on Instagram and then follows someone, maybe in order to get updated with a poem every day: that makes them a follower rather than a “reader,” even though they are still reading poetry in the way that they would read if they’d gone to a bookshop and buy a book,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu215ixgitY&t=802s>).

claim: that “in the redefinition of poetry as ‘short-form communication’ the floodgates have been opened. The reader is dead.” What exactly does Watts mean when she claims that the reader is “dead,” when before this she recognizes Kaur’s sales of *milk and honey* in relation to the fifteen percent increase of annual book sales as reported by *The Bookseller*? If literature is a constant reshaping body of work that signifies the constant ebb-and-flow⁵ between text and consumer, is the increase of poetry book sales not a sign that the reader is not only alive and well, but interested / engaged? Clearly Watts is not referring to a physical death, nor can she really make a strong case for an economic one. What else is there? While a case for a complete, bodily death is not possible (is Rupi Kaur throwing hardback copies of her books to people’s heads?) I gravitated towards Watts’ usage of the word “diagnosis” in relation to this onslaught of “short-form communication.” By relating the language of contagion to the influx of readers purchasing *milk and honey*, it is not hard to see what Watts suggests the “death” of the reader to be: the death of the reader’s capacity to think critically about “high” art.

⁵ I borrow this general definition of literature from Marjorie Garber’s book *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011) where she states that “the uses of literature themselves grow and change as cultures and technologies grow and change,” (29).

Therefore, for this project, I chose not to focus on whether Instagram poetry is “good” or “bad” poetry, at least not in terms of personal taste, per say, but instead on its salient capabilities as a “happy object,” or an object suggesting chance, enabling opportunity. To do this I frame Watts’ drastic idea that Instagram poetry is somehow at fault for the cognitive defects of its audience as “the death of the reader,” or the mere exaggeration that serve to mourn literary tradition. The texts selected for this discussion relate to the theory of affect – or what Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth define as “the capacities to act and be acted upon,” or “proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations,” (*The Affect Theory Reader*,1). It is from them where I also borrow the term “bloom space” which refers to a specific site enabling a body to become or un-become based on the capacities of its force-relations (2, 9).

I argue that the “death” Watts and other critics associate with “lower” forms of art and literature (like Instagram poetry) is instead anxiety over the shedding of tradition, a reformation of what we consider to be “high” art. In other words, I am focusing on texts that provide frameworks for how the relationship between art/objects (such as Instagram poetry) and those who consume it (fan or critic) offers the possibility of inclusion into the larger literary traditions. To do this, I implement Sara Ahmed’s theory of the “happy object” as well as Gregg and Seigworth’s notion of the “bloom space” to demonstrate how Instagram poetry

moves the reader away from the suspended state of death towards a more optimistic future. “Understanding Happiness as Affect” will help provide context for how affect, framed through happiness, helps orient the body towards more optimistic futures as opposed to more negative outcomes. “The Death of the Reader” will act as a work of cartography: tracing the reader from the moment Instagram poetry is positioned as a threat up until that threat is proven to be inherently neutral. “Investigating the Potential of Rupi Kaur’s Poetry” will analyze Kaur’s *milk and honey* as a “happy object” to demonstrate how readers of several of these works are oriented towards a state of healing and away from one of destruction. Is Instagram poetry a culturally valuable form of art, and is it acting as a promise or a threat towards the reader?

Understanding Happiness as Potential

Towards Happiness

You might be wondering: *why happiness?* As in, out of all the theories that could have proved a much better point (or developed my point much better), why go with happiness as the qualifier for an area of literary study? First and foremost, I am writing from the vantage point of a student, as someone who has to be in touch with his cognitive abilities to be able to go through his educational career. At the same time, being a student / scholar does not negate the fact that we are still readers in our day-to-day lives – and not just in an academic sense. I believe that, as bodies operating in the twenty-first century, we encounter text

and language through screens: through video games, televisions, text messages, PDF's etc. and that our encounter with these forms of language cannot be entirely discounted as anything other than "reading." I believe there is especially something to be said about the forms of language we encounter outside of the classroom that bring us joy – language that orients us *back* into those very classrooms to learn more about what spawned delight in us to begin with. What I am *not* proposing is that all forms of delight must orient us back towards academia, but instead that forms of delight have added benefits aside from assigning pleasure. As the texts selected for this project will demonstrate, happiness includes a looking forward as well as a looking back: as being oriented towards the arrival of happiness through promise, but also being aware of happiness as something that "unbecomes" – a state we often leave behind. As Gregg and Seigworth state: to focus on affect is to focus on the experiences that "provide a [bodies] with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm," (7). To my project, I analyze these "potentials" as a source of promise. By understanding happiness as this "history of associations" we can understand how Instagram poetry, as a happy object, is valuable in defining who we consider to be a "reader" – and therefore broadening the scope of who we allow to participate in the greater discussion of "literature."

While I originally began looking at Instagram poetry's potential to splinter what we refer to as the "Western / literary canon" into "personal canons"⁶ back in 2017, the focus on affect (especially happiness) did not occur to me until 2021, when I had the opportunity to serve as a TA at California State University, San Bernardino for English 3230: a Chicana Literature course that met (optionally) through Zoom for fourteen weeks. Inspired by Gloria Anzaldua's definition of borders as that of a space where "two or more cultures edge each other...where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy," I focused my ethnographic research on how it was that students used (positive) personal experiences (such as memory, testimony, and humor) to traverse beyond what I saw as the "borders" of the Zoom call (18). A more accurate reading of Anzaldua would have seen a focus on the more racial, sexual, and psychological aspects of the border, yet I was fascinated with the ways different people used Zoom's interface (such as the reaction emoji, and the chat box) to "shrink" the social limitations of distance-learning brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. With that particular project, I concluded that students predominantly used personal experiences to *become* students outside of the linear, or "normal," modes of production.

⁶ I borrow the term "personal canons" from Alastair Fowlers article, "Genre and the Literary Canon" where he claims that every individual has their own "personal canon" that is separate from that of the "Official Canon," (98).

While it was this ethnographic study that prompted me to find more literature on how personal experiences define / shape bodies, I should note that back then, I had no specific word or overarching theory to describe the methods the students were using to “cross” the digital borders of the Zoom call; my inclusion of Anzaldua’s work was more so inspired by the thin black strips of space, a no-mans-land I saw as a “digital border,” running through each user-screen while operating on Zoom. It wasn’t until one of the readers for this project recommended affect theory that I was able to formally conduct research and recognize the proximity my interest in literature and digital media had to this theory of “becoming.” Upon encountering Gregg and Seigworth’s *The Affect Theory Reader*, I was introduced to an excerpt titled “Happy Objects” from an even larger project: Sara Ahmed’s book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and her overall theory supporting an object’s (potential) influence over the body it encounters.

Tracing the origins of happiness to its Middle English roots: “hap,” meaning “chance,” Ahmed defines happiness as a method of encounter, a way of shaping the world around us by turning us towards certain objects and outcomes (2; 21). Ahmed claims that gravitating towards these objects in search of happiness forces us to acknowledge happiness as being *outside* the body (21). In other words, to be “made happy” by something is to acknowledge that happiness arrives through our proximity with the outer world, with the very nature

of our encounters. My interest with Ahmed's theory of happiness, however, has less to do with mere giddy feelings, and more to do with the ways these feelings manifest themselves as potential that can then shift a body's trajectory. In their introductory essay for *The Affect Theory Reader*, "An Inventory of Shimmers," Gregg and Seigworth propose that the study of affect is a study of a body's "yet-ness" – its capacity to become or be moved towards a new becoming (2-3). The end results are purposely vague; basing their own work off the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, they propose that this "yet-ness" may never fully become a body's "now-ness," — they state that "affect's 'not-yet' was never really supposed to find any ultimate resolution," (3). I work along these lines, using Ahmed's theory of happiness to view a body's potential of becoming / unbecoming through its encounters with Instagram poetry.

Happy Objects: an Orientation towards Promise

If happiness is merely a state that can "become" or "unbecome" then how is it of any tangible value towards orienting ourselves for the future? More specifically, how can happiness help demonstrate that Instagram poetry helps disprove notions of death towards those that consume it? Here, Ahmed begins to form my argument by providing me with the framework of the "happy objects." According to Ahmed, if happiness "creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods," (21). In other words, the objects we encounter retain an imprint of our feelings towards that object: if you were to have had positive feelings towards a book or a video

game, and then decide to let someone borrow that object on the premise that it is very “good” because it has made you happy, that object then has accumulated positive affective value (28). We can see a myriad of happy objects in our day-to-day life, from the tangible (books, for instance), to the digital, such as blog posts, tik toks and memes that are sent our way with the promise of a “good” time, or at the very least a warm-hearted chuckle.

The recognition of delight can orient us towards other like objects to replicate those feelings we received from the previous object. Even media and technology has caught on to the market of happiness; the advent of a “related” page or something like Amazon’s “More items to consider” is meant to orient us towards objects that are likely to bring us joy. is happiness, then, capitalistic? The ties between happy objects and consumerism are closely linked: we value things that make us happy — and things that make us happy often cost money. If we look back at Watts’ criticism towards Instagram poetry, we can see the argument being formed here being closely tied to the idea that popular forms of art are often popular because they are marketable — to critics like Watts, we prioritize aesthetic pleasure over traditional, linguistic merit. I focus on how happy objects help orient us towards these positive futures (near or distant) through our force-relations. Ahmed states that “The desire for happiness sends happy objects forth, creating lines and pathways in their trail,” (160).

Ahmed never goes into too specific details about what qualifies as a happy object. She simply states, “When something causes pleasure or delight, it is good for us...Happy objects could [therefore] be described simply as those objects that affect us in the best way,” (22). As I will state in the upcoming chapter: Instagram poetry, either as an object interacted with online or at a bookstore, is *not* inherently a happy object. Based on Ahmed’s description, for that object to be a “happy object,” it must affect us / change something in us. My project borrows Ahmed’s theory of happy objects merely to qualify those who have encountered Instagram poetry (something considered to be “low art”) and have considered themselves to be “readers.” Instagram poetry, as any neutral object, will act upon certain bodies, but it is not a guarantee that it will leave the same impression on everybody it encounters. While an inherently neutral object like Instagram poetry has the potential to cause delight as well as disappointment, my project frames Instagram poetry as an orientation towards this more positive outcome; I do not ignore the fact that Instagram poetry seemingly dilutes language, or does away with tradition, but I am suggesting that the overall positives outweigh the negatives. By doing this I hope to highlight the affective potential of that which is normally considered a “lower” form of art and expression – thereby denouncing drastic conclusions, like the death of the reader, as the anxiety of threat.

Death of the Reader

“Opening the Floodgates”

For better or worse, poetry has always been seen as “higher” art, a space for the most prestigious of artists, academics, and scholars. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined a poet as not only one who can imitate “things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be,” but he who specifically imitates “men in action,” (5, 85). Because this imitation must reproduce men as they were, are, or should be, Aristotle argued that poetry, therefore, must be written through concrete imagery and metaphors – that which he considers to be “the vehicle of language,” (85). While it should be noted that Aristotle’s definition of poetry mostly refers to Tragedy and Comedy (the forms of poetry popular during his time), it is this hyper-precision and focus on craft which I believe Watts refers to when she calls on all poets to “safeguard language,” stating that “If we are to foster the kind of intelligent critical culture required to combat the effects of populism in politics, we must stop celebrating amateurism and ignorance in our poetry.” But isn’t this opening of the “floodgates” and being less stern on language the main reason for this renewed interest in poetry?

In his article, “Can Instagram Make Poems Sell Again?” (2018) John H. Maher notes the positive influence Instagram poetry has on more traditional

forms of poetry by citing figures such as Jill Bialosky (Norton v-p and executive director) who would go on to say

One benefit of the success of Rupi kaur's *Milk and Honey* is that it has allowed booksellers to heighten their attention to poetry, because there is more demand for poetry titles from the consumer. We've seen demand increase for classic poetry such as that by Rita Dove and Audre Lorde, and we were also thrilled with the response to a new translation of the *Odyssey* by Emily Wilson, the first woman to do an English translation of that epic poem (Maher, 2).

Sarah Gzemeski, managing editor of the poetry press, Noemi, agrees, stating that students who have "come in and have read *Milk and Honey*...gives the professors a starting point to recommend more authors who have the subject matter the students relate to," (2). In other words, Kaur's *milk and honey* has "[operated] almost as a gateway [or "bloom space"] to other poetry," (2). So, if the positive net-effects of Instagram poetry are so widely felt by readers, publishers, and more traditional poets whose books are being sought after by poetry newcomers, why is our openness in accepting it so polarizing for someone such as Watts?

At this point, I took a step back and turned to American critic and author, Harold Bloom, whose writings on the purpose of poetry, literature, and the Western Canon have made him an equally polarizing figure to those striving to move away from hierarchical notions of art. Bloom, in his landmark book, *The Western Canon: The Books and School for the Ages* (1994), defines "canon" as what is "authoritative" or that which demonstrates elements of "strangeness, a

mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange,” (Bloom, 3). To highlight what preserves the Canon, Bloom isolates the qualities of twenty-six different authors (such as Shakespeare, Joyce and Whitman) and what it is that made them canonical / worth preserving. I cite Bloom, not for random umbrella notes on the status of the Western Canon, but for context as to how something like the Western Canon is lost or diminished – and what becomes of the reader at that point. As seen with his analysis on Shakespeare (whom, along with Dante, Bloom considers to be the “center of the canon”), such qualities that define a work as “canonical” include “cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention,” – or any combination of the three that “fuse in an ontological passion that is a capacity for joy,” (43).

Like Watts, Bloom prioritizes a more dominant, western hegemony to determine what writers and texts are deemed worth encountering; even more like Watts, Bloom believes that allowing more open inclusion only dilutes the body of literature as a whole. He states, “nothing will ever be the same because the art and passion of reading well and deeply, which was the foundation for our enterprise, depended upon people who were fanatical when they were still small children,” (16). With this framework, we can see that it is up to the reader to maintain tradition and read “deeply,” something Bloom feels is diminishing as we continue to expand towards more inclusive ontologies. Bloom claims, “Things have however fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the

process of being unleashed upon what used to be the 'learned world,'" (Bloom, 1). For Bloom, modern and progressive critiques of the Western canon by those he considers to be "The School of Resentment" (cultural materialists, New Historicists, Feminists) are responsible for shifting universities and readers away from "high" art, instead focusing more on work that is "idealist" – work that advances "their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change" and that offers "no strangeness and no originality in such resentment" and thereby, offering no "heirs" to that of Yahwist, Dante, Shakespeare, etc. (4, 6-7). The reader, should they choose to expand the canon (official or personal) without being selective as to what qualifies, then participates in the "death" of that canon, and in the sacrifice of their own status as a "reader."

Defining "Death of the Reader"

Based on our previous texts, if "opening the floodgates," or expanding the perimeters of what we consider to be poetry, has any consequences, it's more than just sacrificing poetic tradition to successfully sell that which is "artless." While I do not argue against claims that there seems to be an emergence of writing that sacrifices lyrical, concrete language in favor of too-simplistic styles of communication, I argue against notions that affective encounters with Instagram poetry (or any "low art" for that matter) causes any form or equivalent of death. As Gregg and Seigworth define the bloom space as a site of either promise or threat, I would like to understand the fulfillment of threat through the phrase: "death of the reader." The following texts I found to be imperative in

understanding 1.) that “death” in a literary sense means to be devoid of what makes a reader a “serious” reader” but 2.) also that the ambivalence towards Instagram poetry may be a smaller issue in the overall ambivalence towards the idea of literature and technology.

In the same year as Bloom’s publication of *The Western Canon*, Sven Birkerts published *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994). Throughout the book, Birkerts laments the fate of literary culture with the development of digital media. In particular, he is concerned with what is to be made of the book should our attentions drift elsewhere. He argues that “our era has seen an escalation of the rate of change so drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short circuited,” (Birkerts, 15). This short circuitry, he claims, is owed to the developing distractions brought on by technology, distracting us and forcing us to “sacrifice in the way of depth,” (26). In the 2006 edition of his *Elegies*, Birkerts notes how in the twelve years of the book’s initial release, more people “write” and “read” more than they ever have,” but that the seriousness of literature, our “weight of literary expression” is fading away and will continue to do so (xii). For Birkerts, our reliance on technology causes us to sacrifice more of our individuality in exchange for instant access to texts.

Similarly, Nicholas Carr in a 2008 article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” relates his (then) changing reading habits to the rise of the digital age.

Considering these changes to be diminishment, specifically, Carr claims that “someone, or something, has been tinkering with [his] brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory,” (Carr, 2). The exact change that Carr feels is a direct result from his neural reprogramming is this: his inability to “read deeply.” He claims:

I can feel the [reprogramming] most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spent hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come so naturally to me has become a struggle.

Carr argues that the very nature of digitized texts is scrambled – that one cannot enjoy the pleasures of deep reading if the text is going to offer distractions through hyperlinks and easy to open web pages. To Carr, his mind “swiftly moving [in a] stream of particles” is but one casualty of what he considers to be an even bigger problem: disengagement from “the kind of deep reading that emerged when an earlier technology, the printing press, made long and complex works of prose commonplace,” (Carr, 5). Like Birkerts, Carr expresses fear over our encounters with technology, believing that these encounters are diminishing our abilities to deep read. Both argue against the use of technology in general, citing it as the point where the reader begins to sacrifice their critical thinking and deep reading skills in favor of a lateral type of encounter: easy access and instant satisfaction.

Birkerts and Carr wrote the *Elegies* and “Is Google Making Us Stupid” quite a while before Watts expressed disappointment over a reader’s encounter with Instagram poetry, yet they are imperative in understanding the ambivalence against digital technologies. According to these critics, literature that is published on any form of technology poses this risk: a decentralizing of reading’s “seriousness” or validity. In a response to Carr, Clay Shirky notes that Carr’s message against the use of technology would not have been made possible without the use of technology – “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” was electronically published by *The Atlantic*. Highlighting Carr’s lamentation over readers no longer engaging with longer, more literary works such as *War and Peace*, Shirky points out that technologies have helped bring reading back to a popular activity, and that Carr’s main concern is less with “thinking, or reading, but culture,” (“Why Abundance is Good: A Response to Nick Carr”).

Thinking of the ways in which affect, reader’s attachments and encounters are valid, yet seen as anti-academy is a central theme to Rita Felski’s book, *Uses of Literature* (2011). According to Felski “The practice of close reading is tacitly viewed by many literary scholars as the mark of their tribe – as what sets them apart, in the last instance, from their like-minded colleagues in sociology or history,” (52). Enchantment, opposed to deep reading, centers the attachment between a body and an aesthetic object. In orienting oneself towards that which

is pleasing, delightful, or captivating, the body refutes their cognitive capabilities, any form of reason. Is it no surprise that this positioning of the body causes concern for many critics: enchantment denotes a sense of contagion. In other words, our affectual response to the object we are enchanted by is something we are rarely able to put into words; when we encounter something pleasurable it often corrupts the senses. Felski states that “Disoriented by the power of words, readers are no longer able to distinguish between reality and imagination; deprived of their reason, they act like mad persons or fools,” (53). She goes on to elaborate that “Enchantment is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter...Rather than having a sense of mastery of a text, you are at its mercy,” (54-55). I then propose that concerns over the “death of the reader” have less to do with the physical or socioeconomic well-being of a consumer of Instagram poetry, and more to do with the *type* of reader that is created. In other words, I believe that (at worst) an encounter with Instagram poetry (or any form of “lower” art) might not develop you as a better reader, but it certainly will not cause any irreparable harm.

The nature of Threat

If potentiality is the ability for a body to actualize a future different from the “now,” is it not possible for a body to move and be moved in a negative direction? To transition the reader away from the affective reality of death, we must confront the threat of these possible outcomes. I am aware that discussing this possibility

might seem counterintuitive for the purpose of my project, yet I believe that by exploring that “worse” futurity, the one where the reader has been harmed from their encounter with Instagram poetry, we begin to transition the body away from a realm of death and towards a happier future. To do this we have to understand that threat doesn’t always act against the body. Once a threat is enacted that very threat goes away; what we feared has come to pass, what is there left to fear? Instead, the “menacing” nature of threat is when it has the *potential* to act against the body. As we go through the following texts and their discussion on Instagram poetry, I would like to keep in mind both Brian Massumi and Lauren Berlant’s arguments for an object’s threatening, yet somehow neutral disposition.

In *The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat*, Massumi asks “How could the nonexistence of what has happened be more real than what is now observably over and done with?” (54). He is referring to the notion that threat, as a force capable of harm, is not only ongoing, but exists in the distant future as a body of motion that has yet to act. For example, throughout many of the following critics’ disdain towards Instagram poetry, there is a level of fear towards its influence over the bodies it encounters. Because threat “can be felt into being,” these threats, whether founded or not in fact, are indeed real. Threat is, after all, a “menace potential” that acts upon “innocent objects,” tainting them with fear as foreshadowing: threat’s “actual mode of

existence,” (53-54). In other words, just because the threat may not ever manifest itself as an active force doesn't mean that the threat has been done away with. As Massumi claims: “The future of threat is forever,” (53).

While Massumi's writing does not directly implicate Instagram poetry, I believe that his ideas on threat forces us to concede that the reader is always in constant threat of Instagram poetry's “numbing effects,” Berlant provides us some level of ease throughout *Cruel Optimism*. She states that the objects we gravitate to, “objects of desire,” are a “cluster of promises” that which “we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us,” (93).

Furthermore, she claims that these “objects of desire” or “cluster of promises”

allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation for our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much, In other words, all attachments are optimistic. (93)

Relating to my project, we can infer that while fear of the object creates threat (which is forever), the objects themselves remain neutral, behaving uniquely in relation to the specific body it encounters. The term “cruel optimism” then is the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss,” (94). For example, while Instagram poetry can provide a gateway for others into the world of poetry it can pose a threat to others. In other words, the promise of threat is that it lingers, and optimism cannot guarantee that a reader will walk

away from their encounter with a “problematic” object like Instagram poetry unscathed.

Yet, we still must answer: is Instagram poetry threatening to *anybody*? I personally do not think so. In his article, “On Instafame & Reading Rupi Kaur,” IKazim Ali states that Kaur’s success has helped usher in an age where poetry has begun resonating with an even wider audience, something poetry has seen in the last decade. However, while this new type of “pop-poetry” has allowed for Kaur to grow into a global phenomenon, Ali cannot ignore that “the language is plain, the observations not stunning or surprising.” For Ali, the main difference between Kaur’s poetry and that of someone like Lucille Clifton are elements of craft that Kaur opts out in favor of “hash-tagable metadata.” Making a similar point, in her article “Instagram Poets Make Me Ask: What is Good Poetry?” Emma Winters notes that while Instagram poetry tends to focus on topics that catches reader’s attention, such as “self-love, romantic love, heartbreak, and sexual violence,” the writing leaves more to be desired (Winters 1). She states that it is Instagram poetry’s overall simplicity and style that differentiates the art from more “canonical,” forms of poetry. Overall, the result is writing that comes off reading like an early draft, doing no favors for its authors or their creativity. It should be noted here that while Winters isn’t thrilled or excited by the style, or craft, which Instagram poetry attracts its followers, she doesn’t discredit the artform entirely, noting that “by virtue of being available for free on Instagram,

these poets are democratizing how poetry is shared and who can write it, bypassing literary journals and M.F.A. programs,” (Winters 1). This democratization is significant as it would imply that a platform, free of cost, is allowing for poetry to be consumed by those who would otherwise be unable to access it. that Winters’ main gripe with Instagram poetry is not the pull, but like Ali, the neglect of *craft*.

Both Ali and Winters refer to Instagram poetry as poetry still, however begrudgingly (Ali) and find the movement towards Instagram poetry to be relatively natural, noting its tendencies to be recognizable and easy enough to consume. As an object with the potential to either spawn delight or harm, both writer’s center Instagram poetry to be, as Berlant would agree, neutral. But as stated in my introduction, I was motivated to this project not because Instagram poetry was being criticized for its lack of craftsmanship, but because those who consumed and enjoyed elements of Instagram poetry were seen as less than others who consumed more traditional forms of poetry; worse, this consumer was considered “dead.”

Investigating the Potential of Rupi Kaur's Poetry

#PoetryIsTheNewPop: Chapter Preface

After its immense success, Andrew McMeel (a publisher originally known for puzzles and games) would republish *milk and honey* in the fall of 2015, which would end up leading to even more widespread public recognition, over three million books sold, and a world tour. In 2017, Kaur would appear on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* where she would equate the attention and praise her work (and poetry as a whole) has received as that of pop (or popular) music, stating “Poetry is the new Pop.” Not only is this comparison between pop(ular) music fascinating, but it got me thinking: is there any distinction between “serious” poetry, and “popular” poetry? If we were to look at more recent data, we can see much different results for public interest in poetry. In 2020, the National Endowment for the Arts published the full, detailed results from their 2017 SPPA – key findings that covered the difference in participation from five years prior. Amongst the key findings were statistics showing that in just that previous year, the number of adults who had read poetry was up an astonishing 12 percent – by around 28 million participants.

Sunil Lyengar, the NEA Director of Research of Analysis, at the time of the original survey's publication, highlighted five of the most notable findings: 1) Readership among young adults more than doubled, 2) Women showed a notable increase in participation, 3) The highest poetry reading rates came from

African Americans, Asian Americans, and other non-white and non-Hispanic groups, and 4) There was a sharp increase in poetry-reading rates amongst adults with only some college education (“Taking Note: Poetry Reading Is Up—Federal Survey Results,” 2018). While these statistics are compelling, I was not able to find any distinction/marker for “serious” vs. “popular” poetry; Kaur’s work (and that of the Instapoets) was simply considered “poetry.”

I then propose for us to delve deeper into the world of Instagram poetry. In this chapter I would like to explore Instagram poetry as a happy object. I am curious to find out if Instagram poetry is “valuable” or acts as a “bloom space” or if it indeed poses a threat to the body of those it encounters. Here, I continue to use the word “body” very openly – as Gregg and Seigworth claim bodies defined not by skin, but by “their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect,” (2). In the previous chapters, I believe to have made a case for Instagram poetry being a neutral object by default: its properties as “good” or “bad” do not affect the object itself until it has been acted upon. Even if the literary pendulum were to swing towards “bad” I believe i have also made a case for the fact that the worst futurity, “death,” is mostly a concern over the disregard for literary tradition, and not an actual “mal-practice” towards the body of the actual reader. While I am unable to completely correlate Kaur’s poetry with the popularity boom poetry has received this last decade, I would like to see the affects her poetry has on her audience. To do this I will first look at her debut

poetry collection, *milk and honey*, and analyze some of its poems as framing the overall narrative to be one directed towards happiness. By doing this I hope to frame those who encounter Instagram poetry as “readers” – their bodies oriented towards that futurity.

#milkandhoney

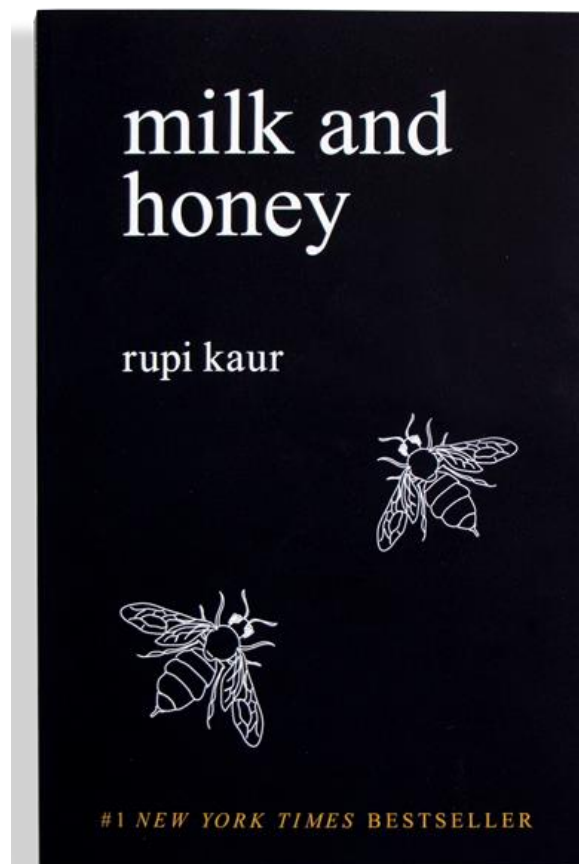


Figure 3: Paperback Cover for
Kaur's *milk and honey*

Split into four main chapters: The Hurting, The Loving, The Breaking and The Healing, *milk and honey* follows the experiences of a young female narrator going through heartbreak, trauma, sexual abuse, and love. As is the nature of Instagram poetry, the actual poems collected in the book are written in a very simple style and every other poem is paired with an accompanying image, drawn by Kaur herself. Throughout this project, I have suggested that Instagram poetry has the potential to act as a “bloom space” - an encounter that sets a positive trajectory for its reader. The overarching narrative of *milk and honey*, despite being quite dark, I feel is purposefully done to reach its full potential as an object whose aim it is to move its readers away from the darker themes.

The first chapter of the book, “The Hurting,” immediately delves into the much more harrowing themes of the book, including neglect, and sexual abuse. Yet, Kaur positions the Narrator⁷ as a survivor, someone who has gone through these events and managed not to break; we can see this from the very first poem in which, being asked by a male companion as to why she’s so kind, the narrator responds: “cause people have not / been kind to me,” (3). The rest of the book, specifically this first chapter, delves deeper into the narrator’s struggle with identity, self-love, and being a girl under the male gaze. In the very next poem,

⁷ I continue to phrase the speaker of the poems as “The narrator” to create distinction between Kaur and that who is speaking. Kaur has however gone on to state that these poems are personal, reflecting on personal experience. A future development for this project could therefore position “Instagram poetry” along the lines of “Confessional poetry.”

“[the first boy that kissed me],” Kaur paints a scene in which the Narrator is being sexually abused by a boy. The Narrator makes it a point to state that this boy inherited his behavior from his father, who is depicted as an abuser himself. While this poem itself is not very long, Kaur’s descriptions are very telling. She states that the boy held her down “like the handlebars of / the first bicycle / he ever rode,” (4). Here, the body of a five-year-old girl is objectified into an object symbolizing domination. The boy is described as having inherited his notions of masculinity from his father, who also (seemingly) sexually abused the boy’s mother. Here, domination and masculinity go together; the Narrator, at the age of five, learns that her body “was for giving to those that wanted / that [she] should feel anything / less than whole,” — the result: Kaur becomes another object, an empty shell, just like the abused mother figure. Masculinity, domination, objectification—these are portrayed as a culture of inheritance, almost a web. This theme is continued with poems such as “midweek sessions⁸” in which we receive the first instance of the narrator involving / connecting her family with the epidemic of rape culture. The poem centers around a girl in a midweek therapy session who is given a doll to accurately “point to where his hands were,” (7). The doll itself is described as “the size of girls / your uncles like touching,” while the speaker herself points “to the spot / between its legs the one / he fingered out of you / like a confession.” When asked how she is feeling, the speaker’s

⁸ A few of the poems are referred to without the brackets: these are the poems that arguably do have a title (usually at the end of the actual poem).

first/initial response is to say “fine,” — in this short poem, Kaur portrays trauma as a lingering feeling, but also one that is brushed aside. The way the speaker nonchalantly groups her uncles as abusers (to say the least - and to say it generally) is terrifying, but nonetheless, it is a sign of this normalization.

Other poems in the section continue in this manner, such as [“you”] in which the poem is paired alongside Kaur’s drawing of a naked female body with legs spread open. Kaur writes that women are taught that their “legs / are a pit stop for men.” (5). This, following the last poem about masculinity and inheritance, only doubles down on the idea that girls and women are taught how to feel about their bodies. Then, in “to fathers with daughters,” (figure 3) the narrator painted an image of a father being absent from his daughter’s life, with the men/boys that have taken his place subjecting her to violence/ rape culture. In this poem, Kaur writes that fathers who openly teach their daughters to take their abuse, they are teaching their daughters to “confuse / anger with kindness” resulting in the daughter growing up allowing herself to be hurt. This poem reminds me of “the first boy that kissed me” — the father in that poem was not Kaur’s, but the father of the boy who forced himself on her, treating her the way his father treated his mother. This poem deals with, not Kaur’s father directly, but fathers with daughters everywhere, who teach their daughters to become the objectified/abused object. Both poems deal with inheritance, and the ways in which men/fathers pass down to their children the ways in which bodies ought to

be treated and handled. Is Kaur building a larger narrative over rape culture? Is rape culture just the connections and interactions between the abused and the abuser, or the abused with the system that powers the abuser? Obviously the second, right? But how does this book/collection portray that? And how does Kaur attempt to communicate to the reader that they are not an object, but rather a process aimed towards completeness?



Figure 4: Kaur's "to fathers with daughters"

In the following chapters of the book, the narrator begins to reach the understanding that her own salvation and happiness is not at the mercy of men, but instead with the way she views herself as a woman. "The Loving," for instance, begins with the poem ["when my mother was pregnant"] in which Kaur paints a loving dynamic of a family: while the mother figure is pregnant, it is the father figure that "said the closest thing to god on this earth / is a woman's body" - for the daughter, hearing this from a "grown man" (father figure) allows for the daughter to see that "the entire universe / rested at my mother's feet." This is an interesting dynamic coming from the father figure, who (throughout the book) is usually portrayed as distant towards the mother and daughter. Here, he is the one who delivers to his daughter the importance of womanhood. In the later poems of this chapter, the narrator begins to strive for a sense of completeness, of finding a relationship that works for her as opposed to the ones that have been hurting her this entire time. We see this especially throughout "The Loving" with poems like "the type of lover I need" where she states, "the type of lover who hears me / even when i do not speak / is the type of understanding / i demand," (66). The narrator of these poems, having survived sexual abuse, heartbreak, trauma and family dysfunction begins to want better for herself.

The road to healing, however, is not perfect: the third chapter: "The Breaking" sees the Narrator return to those feelings of languish and torment after a failed relationship. This section also offers what I consider to be one of the

most interesting moments of self-reflection by Kaur / the Narrator. In the poem ["the woman who comes after me"] we see the Narrator speak negatively against another woman: the one her love interest left/will leave her for. She says,

the woman who comes after me will be a bootleg version of who i am. she will try to write poems for you to erase the ones i've left memorized on your lips but her lines could never punch you in the stomach the way mine did. she will then try to make love to your body. but she will never lick, caress, or suck like me. she will be a sad replacement of the woman you let slip. nothing she does will excite you and this will break her . . . (80).

While this poem comes across as anti-feminist, I propose the contrary: Kaur expertly places this poem in "The Breaking" to highlight what it is she has learned from many of the males in her past: to treat women as objects. The poems in this chapter are more self-aware than the poems with the rose-colored-lenses from the previous chapter ("the Loving"). By placing this poem in this section, Kaur signals to her readers that treating women as objects, even if you identify as a woman, is a form of rupture. In other words, we see how masculinity and domination have negatively affected the Narrator — abuse and trauma have manifested themselves as outward hate and jealousy towards other women. We see this level of self-awareness throughout the rest of this chapter, with poems like "if you want to know the type of man he is," telling the reader to move on from the relationship if "he can't help but / degrade other women / when they're not looking," (91). This progresses into the final chapter ("the Healing") in which the Narrator realizes that "we / foam at the mouth with envy / when others

succeed / but sigh in relief / when they are failing,” (193). We can see that to be “healed” is to have not only survived but recognized and rejected “toxic” social / masculine norms.

#milkandhoney: an affective Bloom Space?

Can Kaur’s debut poetry collection serve as a bloom space? The previous section analyzed some of the poems of the book as well as the overall narrative, which ending up leading to a “happy ending” – but is that enough to state that Kaur’s work (at least in this book) works as a promise towards the reader? Well, yes and no. I believe that the book, as a whole, helps orient the reader towards happiness, or towards this trajectory of being “healed.” One of Winters’ biggest problems with Instagram poetry (in this specific example she was referring to the poetry of Nikita Gill, another Instapoet) was that it offered very little creativity, but instead proposed several “thesis statements” (39). For people like Winters, or Watts (I, personally, would have loved to have seen Harold Bloom’s reactions — if any — towards Instagram poetry), this book and its poems will not allow for a “becoming” within the body of the reader. They will go unmoved upon further interactions (unless their feelings change⁹) and their skills as a “reader” will not go challenged. In other words, as “readers” — they will not develop. However, I do not propose that this “kills” the reader: we encounter unlyrical texts every day and do not lose our cognitive abilities.

⁹ In Ariel Bissett’s YouTube documentary: #poetry, Bissett claims Watts to have turned down an opportunity to be interviewed, stating she had said everything she felt she needed to (10:04).

Watts herself certainly did not lose her cognitive abilities after her encounter with Instagram poetry: while she declared that she turned down a review of McNish' book because reviewing it for a poetry journal would be to "it [take] it seriously as poetry," Watts has enough cognitive abilities left to go back on her word halfway through "Cult of the Noble Amateur" and review McNish's book. Of it she states, "The book is deliberately bad," and then continues reviewing it for another page or so (3). I argue that *milk and honey*, and Instagram poetry as a whole, is often deemed as "artless" for its simple style, but a lot more goes into it — and even if that's all there is, ask the millions of Rupi Kaur fans who have bought her books and thoroughly enjoyed them. Because they have read the work and it has affected them, this style of poetry does have the capacity to act as a bloom space.

Conclusions

As I was writing this thesis project, I noticed all the little turns we make towards that which brings us delight through affect; from what we wear, to how we behave — the other day I had scrolled onto Taylor Jenkins Reid's Goodreads page to add her newest book *Carrie Soto is Back* and noticed the "Readers also enjoyed" tab that proceeded the comments and user-reviews and said to myself "oh! like a happy object!" Affect is more than just orientation towards objects; it is the way we "unfold" into the world, how we make sense of the world around us. I believe that to deprive or lessen the impacts certain objects have towards certain people is to keep in line with outdated forms of tradition. In this every changing

field of literature, we will always be orienting ourselves towards certain styles. When it comes to the spread of poetry through the mainstream such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook, I understand where some of that hesitation comes from, but I do not believe that those who generally engage with this type of poetry should be shunned from calling themselves “readers.” My thesis aimed at entering the discussion surrounding a type of art where the writers, readers and medium were all undervalued in. I believe that by better understanding something like Instagram poetry, and its potentials, the better we can understand literature as a whole.

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