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## Between the Lines: Reflexive Misogyny and Remediated Forms in a Secret Online Group of Women Poets


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**BETWEEN THE LINES: REFLEXIVE MISOGYNY AND REMEDIATED FORMS IN A  
SECRET ONLINE GROUP OF WOMEN POETS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Rae Swan Snobl

December 2020

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# BETWEEN THE LINES: REFLEXIVE MISOGYNY AND REMEDIATED FORMS IN A SECRET ONLINE GROUP OF WOMEN POETS

English

Missouri State University, December 2020

Master of Arts

Rae Swan Snobl

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines an online, secret writing community for 1,800+ women-only poets called “The Retreat.” Analysis of two years of Facebook posts and interviews with group members revealed a noticeable membership split between those publishing through conventional literary venues, the “traditional poets,” and social media poets. These “Instapoets,” as labeled by popular media each had between 10,000 to 125,000+ followers on sites like Instagram and Facebook—significant numbers when seen in the context of readership and monetizing. Yet, their digital, snippet poems did not hold to the literary norms of poetry, both in form and publishing method. This led to a backlash from the traditional poets of The Retreat who deleted the Instapoetry posts and eventually drove the Instapoets out of the group. Although The Retreat’s original intent was to serve as a shelter from the hegemonic male gaze of the publishing world, it became what it originally tried to escape—an unsupportive and toxic environment. Utilizing the concept of George Gerbner’s *cultivation theory*, which observes the way misogyny in media perpetuates its existence, I highlight the way The Retreat’s traditional poets “cultivated” the tools of the patriarchal literary tradition to pass judgement upon the Instapoets, pushing them to the sidelines of discussions and credibility. The Retreat demonstrates how Gubar’s *feminist misogyny* is ingrained in women’s writing culture but may also spur new art forms. I demonstrate the ways Instapoetry exemplifies Bolter and Grusin’s theory of *remediation* which asserts digital technologies achieve cultural significance by paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning earlier media. Through close reading of Christine de Pizan’s early poems and an examination of the publishing and distribution methods of Medieval and Early Modern women writers, I argue Instapoetry is a remediation of women’s writing in themes, form, and audience cultivation. Though members of The Retreat disregarded it entirely, I explore the genre of Instapoetry and work of Rupi Kaur through a critical lens, interrogating problematic elements as well as exploring the potential for Instapoetry to be considered a legitimate literary form and significant genre of feminine protest literature.

**KEYWORDS:** poetry, media, Instagram, Facebook, women writers, Instapoetry, feminist misogyny, cultivation theory, remediation, feminism

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A Master's Thesis  
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December 2020

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Christine Nutting.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                      |         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Introduction                                                                         | Page 1  |
| Literature Review                                                                    | Page 5  |
| Literary Poetry vs. Instapoetry                                                      | Page 5  |
| Our Fathers' Tools: Assessing the Writing of Women                                   | Page 7  |
| Background on The Retreat                                                            | Page 11 |
| Methods                                                                              | Page 14 |
| Results                                                                              | Page 17 |
| Dual Poet Identity                                                                   | Page 17 |
| A Change in Administration                                                           | Page 21 |
| Implications                                                                         | Page 26 |
| "Cultivating" Feminist Misogyny                                                      | Page 26 |
| Old is New Again: Instapoetry and Remediation                                        | Page 29 |
| Instapoetry's Connection to Christine de Pizan and Early<br>Modern Women Writers     | Page 37 |
| The Potential and Pitfalls of Instapoetry: A Critique of Rupi<br>Kaur and her Poetry | Page 47 |
| Conclusion                                                                           | Page 58 |
| Building a "City" of Women Writers                                                   | Page 58 |
| A Case for Instapoetry                                                               | Page 61 |
| Works Cited                                                                          | Page 66 |
| Appendix Human Subjects IRB Approval                                                 | Page 73 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                                                                       |         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Figure 1: Instapoetry Samples from The Retreat                        | Page 18 |
| Figure 2: Acceptances, Instapoems by Date                             | Page 19 |
| Figure 3: Administrator Note about Self-Published Tuesdays            | Page 22 |
| Figure 4: Acceptances, Instapoems by Date Before/After 5/14/19        | Page 23 |
| Figure 5: Administrator Note About Deleting Self-Published Poetry     | Page 23 |
| Figure 6: Sample Instapoems                                           | Page 32 |
| Figure 7: “Easter Wings”                                              | Page 34 |
| Figure 8: Sample Activism Instapoem 1                                 | Page 35 |
| Figure 9: Sample Activism Instapoem 2                                 | Page 36 |
| Figure 10: Grief Instapoem                                            | Page 43 |
| Figure 11: Instapoetry Accompanying Text                              | Page 44 |
| Figure 12: Christine de Pizan Manuscript <i>The Book of the Queen</i> | Page 46 |
| Figure 13: <i>ode to ramond douillet’s a short tour and farewell</i>  | Page 48 |
| Figure 14: <i>progress</i>                                            | Page 49 |
| Figure 15: “Kaur’s Menstruation Photo”                                | Page 50 |
| Figure 16: “Untitled Period Poem”                                     | Page 51 |
| Figure 17: <i>to fathers with daughters</i>                           | Page 53 |
| Figures 18: Kaur’s Conflicting Image                                  | Page 55 |
| Figures 19: Oppression Retreat Instapoems                             | Page 63 |



## INTRODUCTION

“...all of you who love virtue glory and a fine reputation cannot be lodged in a great splinter inside its walls, not just women of the past but also those of the present and future, for the city has been founded in debt to accommodate all deserving women.”

- Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405)

“The old label you hung around  
my neck has become too  
heavy to bear, but it’s  
hard to cut the chords  
when they are made  
from concrete and steel.”

- Hanlie Roberts, Instaopoet, “Untitled Poem,” (2019)

When social media poet Hanlie Roberts posted a poem about “old labels” being “hung around (her) neck” in a secret Facebook group called The Retreat<sup>1</sup>, she was not only making a critical statement about the way women poets are judged by male publishers, she was also addressing her fellow group members. The Retreat formed on Facebook in 2018 with a clearly stated philosophy: to provide its 1,800+ women-identified poet members a “supportive” space to “grow poetic art in a loving and kind way.” However, during this two-year research period, I observed how the group turned on itself, leading to a mass exodus of its social media poet members, including Hanlie. I did not seek out feminist misogyny in this group. In fact, my goal was to look for evidence of the feminist principle of *ethic of care*—a commitment by the members to support each other per their proclaimed mission. The private nature of The Retreat

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<sup>1</sup> This group was observed as part of an IRB-approved human subjects study. The Retreat is a pseudonym given to the group to protect its identity. Posts and quotes are printed here with permission from specific members.

piqued the interest of my senior colleague, Dr. Lanette Cadle, and she wondered why, in this era of post-third wave feminism, a private group for women poets is necessary. A poet and member of The Retreat herself, Cadle witnessed the various ways groups like The Retreat offer publishing advice specifically for women and she decided to enlist my help to observe what was this group was saying in private that they could not say in a public forum. My original hypothesis was that members of The Retreat needed a safe space to share information about publishing roadblocks put forth by male publishers and how to circumvent those. Using ethnographic research methods, I coded posts into nine different categories based on content. Initially, I closely observed the content in the posts labeled “Cautionary” which warned of certain men, especially the gatekeepers, in the publishing world. Presumably, in an all-women writers group, there would be conversations about who was publishing women, and more importantly, who was not publishing them. Yet, as I began to collect the initial data, a different story unfolded.

Data from nearly two years of Facebook posts and interviews with group members revealed a noticeable membership split between those publishing through conventional literary venues, the “traditional poets,” and social media poets. Most of these “Instapoets,” as labeled by popular media, each had between 10,000 to 125,000+ followers, significant numbers when seen in the context of readership and monetizing from online sponsors. Their poems did not hold to the literary norms of poetry, which led to a backlash from the traditional poets. Eventually the group administrators created new rules which relegated the Instapoets to reserved threads out of the main feed.

My research focus evolved from wondering why these women needed to meet in private to examining how the standard for literary poetry written by women is rooted in misogyny and hegemonic masculinity. When faced with Instapoetry, The Retreat’s traditional poets

appropriated patriarchal literary prejudices in subtle and subversive ways. Though the group claimed to be accepting of all poets, in various stages of their career, the administrators isolated and excluded the digital Instapoets. George Gerbner's concept of *cultivation theory*, which observes how negative ideas like misogyny in film and television become internalized, is exemplified in the ways the traditional poets of The Retreat used their literary fathers' tools to pass judgement upon the other non-traditional poets of the group. This *feminist misogyny*, as defined by feminist theorist Susan Gubar, highlights the oppression that still exists even in a so-called safe space. However, the Instapoets of The Retreat demonstrated how women's writing culture has also used misogyny as an impetus for the artistic process, producing new art forms like Instapoetry.

Yet, the form, themes and methods of Instapoetry are nothing new. Bolter and Grusin's theory of *remediation* in writing, art, and film asserts digital technologies achieve cultural significance by paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning earlier media (15). Though they acknowledge that "remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital media," they argue that "what is in fact new is the particular way in which each innovation rearranges and reconstitutes the meaning of earlier elements...that (new media) promise(s) the new by remediating what has gone before" (11, 270). Instapoetry is a new digital media that remediates and blends textuality, poetry, art, and design. In form, Instapoetry is remediated from emblem books, visual poetry, and decorated manuscripts of the past. In theme, it follows the traditions of romance and anti-misogynistic poetry. In distribution, digital self-publishing is also a remediated method similar to medieval and Early Modern women securing patrons and writing for all-women coteries. Through a close reading of Christine de Pizan's early poems and a study of the publishing and distribution methods of medieval and Early Modern women writers, I explore the

way women writers have historically written for other women, followed themes of love and loss, used writing to argue against misogynistic texts, and pushed past traditional literary boundaries using proto-feminist rhetoric. These rhetorical traditions are now taking a new form online in Instapoetry. Christine's "City of Ladies" becomes a virtual city in the digital age while Æmelia's Lanyer's carefully curated all-woman audience mirrors the way Instapoets such as Rupi Kaur and Instapoets within The Retreat built their online female followers before landing publishing deals. I argue Instapoetry is another form of remediation of women's writing in themes, form and audience cultivation. Though members of The Retreat disregarded it entirely, I explore and attempt to define the genre of Instapoetry. I also examine the work of Rupi Kaur through multiple critical lenses, interrogating problematic elements of Instapoetry while exploring its potential as a legitimate literary form and significant genre of feminine protest literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Literary Poetry vs. Instapoetry

To better understand the competing philosophies of the two poet camps in *The Retreat*, it is important to define poetry, but doing so has always been a complicated process. Establishing what constitutes a poem is problematic, and the evolution of poetry has blurred the lines of “literary poetry.” Joseph Black, editor of the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature* admits that “even poets find it difficult to define a poem or poetry” (“Reading Poetry” 1760). Some poems rhyme and have a specific structure or meter, but not all. Some apply certain literary devices, imagery, symbolism and figures of speech, but some do not. In *A Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney asserts “there have been many excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets...” (1779). Some use elevated language but “since Wordsworth’s time, writers have been conscious of a need to narrow the apparent gap between ‘poetic’ language and the language of everyday life” (1762). Despite its language and form, what most scholars and critics can agree on is that poetry evokes emotion. This emotion creates a relationship with the reader and “stimulate(s) our imagination and arouse(s) our feelings” (1760). Most scholars and theorists agree that making a reader feel something is the core of poetry.

The term “literary” becomes even more complicated in the digital age of self-publishing. As elevated forms of the past gave way to free verse and even “conversation[al]” language, defining poetry has become even more slippery (Black “Reading Poetry” 1760). The rising trend of poetry on social media is sparking new discussions in the fields of literature and critical theory. Digital poems are still carving out their niche as a genre and have only been a source for

scholarly exploration in the past few years. Primarily created for Instagram and aptly dubbed “Instapoetry,” these bite-sized poems often blend snippets of text with images. They often evoke popular fiction genres, particularly romance, but are also now hedging into more substantive themes in the wake of the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements as well as COVID-19. Because poetry has generally been associated with more elite literature, the poetry posted on Instagram has garnered criticism for its lack of literary value. Emotions like love, loss, and resilience are common themes of Instapoems.

Instapoetry as a budding genre is covered more by mainstream journalism and media than scholarly journals. Clever headlines like: “Instapoetry Lacks Depth and Substance,” “How Instagram Saved Poetry,” and “Roll Your Eyes All You Like but Instagram Poets are Redefining the Genre for Millennials,” tell of the love/hate relationship contemporary culture has with Instapoetry (qtd. in Byager). Judith Palmer of The Poetry Society acknowledges the rising popularity of the new poetry form, stating: “It is not really about complex language; it is more about easily translatable universal emotions” (qtd. in Byager). In the past few years, Instagram has launched several new published poets into fame with best-selling books filled with poems that received their start on social media. For example, Rupi Kaur’s Instagram poetry has led to three print books so far. Her *New York Times* best-selling book *Milk and Honey* (2014) is now translated into forty languages with sales over 3.5 million, surpassing Homer’s *The Odyssey* as the best-selling poetry book of all time (Hill and Yuan). According to a poll in the *Washington Post*, reading fiction is at an all-time low and the number of “Americans who read for pleasure... (has) fallen by more than 30%” (Ingraham). However, in the past five years, European poetry sales have increased by 66% according to the *UK Nielsen BookScan* and in 2018, they brought in £12.3m (Onwuemezi). Instapoets may not be considered literary authors in the traditional sense,

but they know their audience and that audience is legion. An article in *The Atlantic* makes the assertion that “poetry has always been an art form, but it has rarely been a career even for the most legendary poets” (Hill and Yuan). Many of the Instapoets in *The Retreat* touted being able to quit their other jobs and write full time once they developed built-in buyers of their books on social media. Like it or not, Instagram has made being a full-time poet a possible career in the 21st Century.

The appeal of Instapoetry to the masses as well as to new women poets appears to be tied to its visual attractiveness and online method of delivery. In the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Lili Pâquet writes “academics should consider Instagram poetry a significant subgenre because it is well suited to the medium and audience of Instagram and offers a self-help aesthetic that contrasts with the superficiality of the social networking site” (297). However, restricting the “significance” of Instapoetry to those works with self-help themes dilutes the broader social and feminist aspects of the art form. Sasha Krueger places Kaur—and Instapoetry as a genre—under the microscope of critical theory and explores the online space women are “claiming as their own” (1). Krueger notes these spaces parallel the “places where women have traditionally been relegated” but also illustrates the power of snapshot-style poetry to influence users on a global level. Thus, social media sites like Facebook and Instagram have become communities for women to write, share, and be heard. In this regard, Instapoetry is a by-product of technology and poetry—it is poetry for the future.

### **Our Fathers’ Tools: Assessing the Writing of Women**

A private group on Facebook seems like a natural location for women to share digital poems. However, in this day of post-third wave feminism, a women only group may seem like a

throwback to a feminist past. Is a private group necessary? And if it is, what functions does it serve? The history of misogyny for women authors is part of the answer, going as far back as Greek and Medieval writings to the VIDA Count, which tracks who is publishing women authors today. Misogynist literary texts throughout history focused on separating and classifying women as inferior and unequal to men (Grace, Greenblatt and Simpson, Ostriker, Ritchie and Ronald). In the second wave of feminism, when many women writers were recovered, the process for adding them to the literary canon was rooted in misogyny (Birns 148). Nicholas Birns notes that “many of the rescued women writers recovered were connected to powerful men,” one of the products of a long-standing patriarchal system that defines taste in literature (148). To attempt to interpret the term “literary” usually incites a debate among academic scholars over the “quality” of the “content and form of literature” (“Literary” *Oxford Dictionaries*). What constitutes “quality” continues to be subjective, but generally popular, or “fast-selling, “high-volume” works are not considered literary (Sutherland). Highly popular texts also tend to be written and read by women and historically have not been considered “high art” (Latane Jr. 208).

However, aligning women’s writing with “low-brow” work is not merely due to form and themes. There is a patriarchal structure that has been established in literary criticism. Throughout the medieval and Early Modern periods, women who wrote faced a barrage of misogynistic criticism from male writers (Grace, Greenblatt and Simpson, Ostriker, Ritchie and Ronald). During the Romantic period, the number of women poets increased significantly but they wrote “in a less stable and generally less hospitable environment, especially when they opted for subjects and forms traditionally associated with the male poetic tradition” (Behrendt and Linkin 2). The influx of women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries elevated the high/low art debate prompting male writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne to respond with these types of



attacks: “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed,” (Frederick 231). Hawthorn’s “scribbling women” set a tone and standard that continues to be perpetuated about and among women writers.

Today, women poets and authors still face an uphill battle to be taken seriously. According to several studies conducted over the last few years, the majority of the major publishing houses have “heavily male biased catalogs — around 30% or fewer of their books were written by women” (Cima). The 2018 VIDA Count found that only two publications in 2017 published 50% or more women (“VIDA Count”). In their distinction as feminine, texts by women writers have always been considered as separate, apart, and the other. Though second and third wave feminist theorists poked holes in the seemingly ironclad gendered structure of the patriarchy, gender division and designation continue to structure literary discovery and evaluation. While other feminist theorists argue that by calling out feminist texts as feminine the cycle gets perpetuated, there is still a reality that works by women are not as credible and do not get the same commercial and critical success as works by men. Medievalist Dianne Watt notes that because “women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, their relationship to textuality and authority is itself necessarily distinct” (Watt 9). Critical theorist Sandra Gilbert also calls attention to the way a “female literary canon” is distinct from a “male literary canon” in that it often has a “conflicted consciousness of its own specialness” (4). She claims:

For better or worse...almost all the women writers who make up what we would consider a canon of literature by women are aware that they inhabit a canon (or ‘city’) of literary women, a corporate body about which they always have feelings—which may be positive or negative. In contrast, the supposedly mainstream canon of male-authored ‘masterpieces’ is not as a rule marked by such self-consciousness. (4)

Gilbert's nod to Christine de Pizan's proto-feminist work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), is fitting to highlight the way women have not only been judged from a gender perspective by other male writers for centuries but also the way "the canon of women's literature is thus a self-reflexive canon that continually attempts to theorize itself, a canon formed by a consciousness of its own vexed and often vexing canonicity" (5). Christine used reverse rhetorical tactics in her works, undermining her own authority as a writer to stage an argument against herself in order to reaffirm her anti-misogynist examples. Yet, she begins *The Book of the City of Ladies* in much the same way Woolf begins *A Room of One's Own*, distraught over the lack of regard for women in male writing and feeling as though they may be right. Christine reads so many texts that "say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways" that she is overcome with self-loathing (dePizan *The Book of the City of Ladies* 7). She writes: "This thought inspired such a great sense of disgust and sadness in me that I began to despise myself and the whole of my sex as an aberration in nature." Though Christine finds ways to argue on behalf of her own sex, she also demonstrates the type of internalized misogyny that has plagued women for centuries.

As the women writers continue to question themselves, the canon of women's writing remains in a problematic state and continues to be subordinate to its male counterpart. In her critical work on Chaucer, Carolyn Dinshaw describes the difference between "reading" a text "like a man" and reading like woman (28). For Dinshaw, "Reading like a man" is "symptomatic of a larger, more pervasive literary structure" which maintains "firm control" on "women and texts" (28). She argues: "This structure is the patriarchal structure of literary activity" marked by "patriarchal discourse" that is the "culturally pervasive, gendered understanding of literary activity" (28-29). Dinshaw acknowledges that reading like a woman involves what she calls "the

denaturalization of the masculine response” echoing deconstruction and feminist theories which assert that “the dominant perspective isn't given, natural, or universal and that there can therefore be other perspectives” (29). Yet, she shows through a close reading of two male critics that to “read like a man” is to stay within a “fixed hierarchical structure” (29). This “hierarchical structure” provides tools not only for male authority figures in the literary world to judge and sort women writers but has been appropriated in many ways by women writers as well—as witnessed in this study.

### **Background on The Retreat**

The Retreat is a women’s poet group that spun off a larger group which formed after the 2012 Presidential debates. Candidate Mitt Romney was asked about his commitment to hiring women on his cabinet and he referred to his past record as governor when he requested that his staff find women candidates. According to *CNN*, Romney famously replied, “I went to a number of women's groups and said, 'Can you help us find folks?’ and they brought us whole binders full of women” (qtd. in Cohen). The metaphor “binders full of women” went viral, and some claim it was a factor in his 2012 defeat. Romney’s unfortunate choice of words sparked a feminist backlash and led to the formation of the largest online secret group for women writers known as The Binders. The Binders and its sub-groups clearly define their objectives to discuss members’ writing and help each other with mentoring and networking. In the past, the group had an almost *Fight Club* mentality about secrecy. “What happens in Binders stays in Binders” is a common rule in the different sub-groups. However, given that BinderCon has been meeting annually since 2014, alternating between New York City and Los Angeles, the secrecy is more theoretical than actual. 37,000 women meeting in-person under huge BinderCon banners are not

that secret. Blogs and newspapers outed the organization early in 2015, including one of its own members, journalist Melody Joy Kramer.

Kramer published a list of secret groups of women writers on Poynter.org, and Binders was among them (Enders). The Binders groups are not able to be found in searches on Facebook, which means members of Binders must be nominated by another member and accepted by the administrators. Additionally, they must be woman-identified. The Binders stipulate that “women, genderqueer, and non-binary identifying writers are all welcome, but cis men are not” (Enders). The secrecy beyond that is more about not sharing posts outside the group. Kramer called The Binders out for its exclusivity and claimed it “requires an existing network to join—something many emerging writers don’t have” (qt. in Enders). She was immediately barred from The Binders group when the article hit. Regardless of whether Kramer violated the group’s rules of not speaking about it in public spaces, she touches on a critical point. These secret writing groups for women may have started as a place to escape and mobilize, but their internal struggles point to a larger issue surrounding exclusion and feminist misogyny.

The controversy surrounding The Binders was the impetus for this project. Since being outed, the Binders have been criticized for their “mean girls” attitude. Some members have fled, and others have formed new groups that strive to be more inclusive. The most prominent poet Binders group, called “PoetZ” within this study, has more than 4,500 members. Their page leads with a catchy feminist-centered photo and a group description that embodies an anti-patriarchal sentiment—following in the tradition of The Binders organization. The Retreat is a spin-off group from PoetZ that began when one of The Retreat administrators was banned from PoetZ. She formed The Retreat and brought other members with her. There was a fair amount of controversy surrounding the split regarding philosophical differences and secrecy issues.

The Retreat's philosophy and guidelines are a bit softer than PoetZ but the main rules are the same as all Binders groups—women-identified only and no discussing what goes on in the group outside of the group or identifying it in any way. Initially, The Retreat's attitude appeared more inclusionary. The inviting group description of “supporting” each other and “growing poetic art in loving and kind way” may be part of the reason why The Retreat attracted so many non-traditional poets. The original PoetZ group likely would have never even accepted the Instapoets as members as they tend to screen more carefully and only accept women poets who are actively publishing through traditional routes like literary journals. The Retreat, however, does not limit its description or member selection process to only professional traditional poets, but is technically open to all women poets regardless of their poetry form, specialty, or where they are in their poetic process.

## METHODS

The Retreat was observed as part of an IRB-approved human subjects study #IRB-FY2018-420 with an original approval date of November 28, 2017. (See Appendix). Using ethnographic research methods, I developed a system for identifying and categorizing daily posts made to the private page of The Retreat. Beginning with the inception of the group in Fall 2017, I logged each post through May, 2019 which yielded 19 months of daily postings. I read every post and entered it into a Microsoft Excel document with the date, time, and “x” as an indicator of the category. I also made notes regarding the post content including, if applicable, the number of comments. As I logged posts into Excel, I sorted them into specific categories and hyperlinked the original post for later reference. On average there were around 120 total posts per month in the main group feed of The Retreat and this number increased as the group size grew. I initially coded the categories for posts as: Acceptances, Rejections, Submission Calls, Vents, Cautionary, Professional Development, Requests for Professional Development, and Advice. I created notes next to posts, and in some cases included post content, and the number of comments and likes. For relevant discussions, I captured screen shots and saved them on a protected, closed hard drive. I also sent a survey to capture demographic information and conducted interviews with key members about the group’s purpose.

At the close of data collection, there were 1,630 members of the group, all who identify as female poets, down from around 1,800 at its peak during the data collection period. Despite great efforts to obtain more comprehensive demographic data on the group, the response rate to the survey was very low at .1%. Of those who did respond, 83% identified as white female, 11% as mixed-race, and 5.56% as Latina. The age of the group is surprisingly evenly dispersed. 16%

are in their 30s, 27% in their 40s, 22% in their 50s, 16% in their 60s, and 16% are 70 and above. This cross-section seems to accurately represent the group's general composition as it was observed in daily data collection except that there were more minority women, especially African American women, who were not represented in the survey results. The majority of the group were middle-aged, white women.

A few weeks into the data collection process, it became apparent there was a need for a new category for posts. At first, I labeled these posts: Vanity. The term “vanity” was supposed to capture every post where someone shared their own poetry to the group, usually in meme or digital form and often linked to the author’s online poetry page or blog. This name “vanity” was chosen by Cadle because, to a traditional poet, these posts appeared to be purely attention-seeking to promote the member’s work with no desire to ever publish in the traditional sense. A closer search of the names of the poets who regularly shared “vanity” poems revealed they were not traditional poets. I originally assumed they were amateur poets looking to workshop new poems within the confines of the group, soliciting feedback from more seasoned poets. However, as these posts grew in number, I conducted a separate search to trace the Vanity posts’ origins. The poems were a few lines of text usually overlaid on an image. They could be found on Facebook and Instagram and the women posting them had upwards of 10,000 – 120,000 followers online. These Vanity posts were the author’s way of sharing their “Instapoetry” across multiple platforms, to increase followers and visibility which made it a significant category in the study. I updated this category’s label to “Instapoems.” The reactions to these poems were also significant. Many of the screen shots I saved surrounded these posts and the discussions underneath them. Once it was apparent that Instapoetry would be the focus of this paper, I

crafted tailored interview questions which were sent to a few key members of the group privately through Facebook messenger. Screenshots and quotes were used with members' permissions.



## RESULTS

### Dual Poet Identity

After concluding the 19 months of data collection and reviewing results, the dual poet identity that arose in the group emerged as the most significant story to tell. Members of The Retreat could be divided into two camps: traditional poets and Instapoets. The traditional poets were typically affiliated with an academic institution because publishing poetry through journals is not a lucrative enough business to make a livable wage. The founding and early members of The Retreat were poets of this type and they all had similar goals in mind. The traditional poets adhered to the tried-and-true method of submitting their poems to literary journals. Sometimes a journal can hold on to a poem for up to a year before giving an answer, so the goal for the traditional poets was to have multiple poems or packets of poems out for submission at all times. It was a numbers game. It is important to note that, regardless of the original founding members' poet identity, they set out to supposedly create a group that was open to all poets. The Retreat does not specify the "type" of poets it accepts and states that "any level of poet is welcome (published or amateur)."

The primary categories of interest to the traditional poets were Acceptances and Rejections. These posts told multiple stories about which members were submitting, what journals were publishing, members who were being published and ultimately, who was working on poetry like it was their professional career. New members were accepted daily to The Retreat, and as the group grew, poets of all types began to join. Some were just getting started and looking for ways to break into the publishing world. Others were well established as social media poets or Instapoets. The traditional poets first assumed that the Instapoets were looking to

workshop unpublished poems within the confines of the group, soliciting feedback from more seasoned poets. However, the Instapoems could be found on Facebook and Instagram and the members posting them each had thousands of online followers. Posting to the group was simply another way of sharing their Instapoetry across multiple platforms, to increase followers and visibility. (See Figure 1).

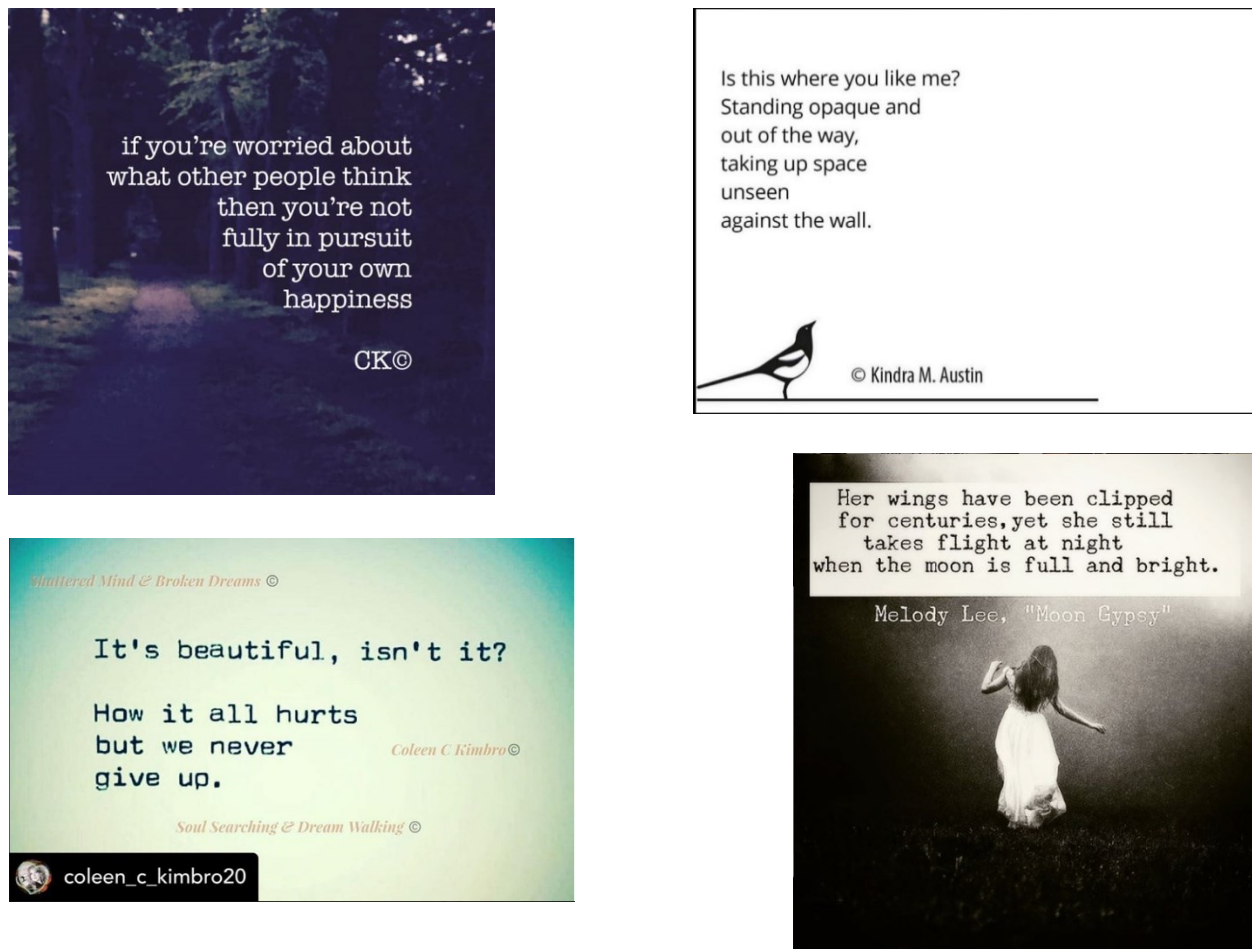


Figure 1. Instapoetry Samples from The Retreat. (Sources: Kinneban, Austin, Kimbro, Lee)

Acceptance posts were the way the traditional poets measured success and a great deal of importance was placed on these posts which seemed to prove the women were

“working” and getting published in journals. Accolades were given by other group members to those who touted their journal, anthology and (rarely) book publications. Likewise, Rejection posts were consistently encouraged and monthly group threads were created for the traditional poets to show they had been submitting. Acceptance posts per month consistently ranged from 30 – 50 for the first year. In contrast, there were only a handful, around 10-15 per month, of Instapoetry posts in the early months. These were not as prolific as the other professional development posts and nowhere near comparable to the Acceptances. Yet, around December 2018, there was a significant shift in membership. Within two months, the Instapoem posts increased exponentially, eventually outnumbering the Acceptance posts by almost fifty percent in February and March. (See Figure 2).

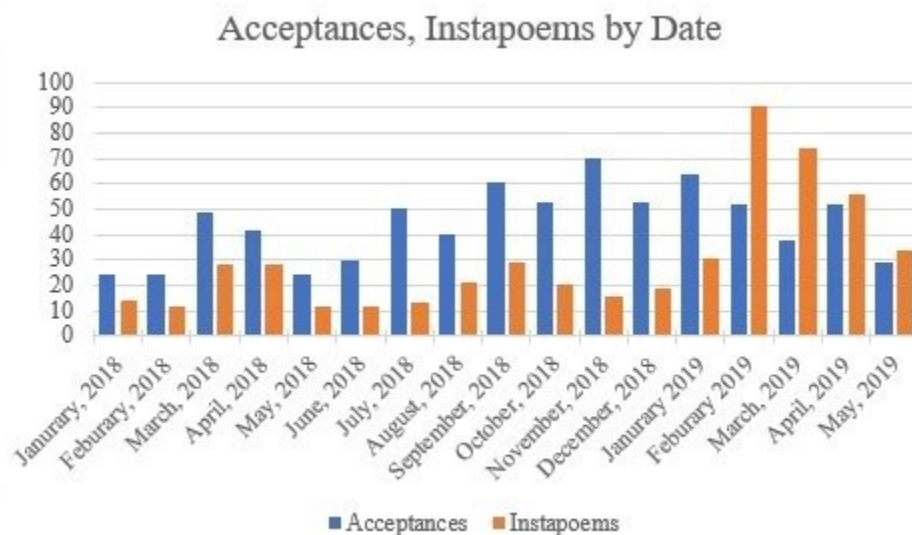


Figure 2. Acceptances, Instapoems by Date.

Immediately, group member identities became split between traditional poets and social media poets and the two camps rarely “liked” or commented on each other’s posts. This significant divide in philosophy became apparent when one day a traditional poet posted: “Just a

reminder to the wonderful young poets who put their lovely poems on this page. Poems appearing on websites are considered ‘published’ by editors, meaning you might not be able to publish them in chapbooks or enter them in contests later.” This recurring sentiment emerged in other traditional members’ posts repeatedly. The Instapoets were reminded every few days that if they were serious about publishing the traditional route, they should not be posting their unpublished poems online. Though perhaps well-meaning in their advice, the traditional poets’ language like “wonderful young poets” also put the Instapoets in their place with an air of condescension clouded in the guise of support. Due to the restrictions of the IRB guidelines, I cannot quote every single member who spoke out in the group against the Instapoetry, but the level of backlash that existed was prolific. There were multiple posts per week warning the Instapoets to take down their poems, telling them they shouldn't be online poets because it demeaned their credibility, and advising them to stop putting their poems online if they ever wanted to publish in journals. Some Instapoets responded, thanking the traditional poets for their concern but assured them that they had no intention of submitting these poems to traditional journals.

The traditional poets did not seem to fully comprehend that the Instapoets had their own plan for success as writers. The influx of Instapoets in The Retreat started in early 2019 and one poet was the origin of these new members. Labeled in the study as “IG-1,” she called herself a “visual poet.” After being invited to join by one of the administrators, IG-1 quickly started adding social media poets to the group. The Instapoets began adding each other and posting Instapoems regularly. IG-1 started her own publishing company and published several of the Instapoet members’ works. She also self-published a book of her poetry and started an independent poetry journal, promoting it in The Retreat through calls for submissions. Whether

or not the traditional poets submitted to this journal is unknown, but IG-1's entrepreneurial approach speaks to a larger implication. If these non-traditional poets had been previously rejected by traditional publishers, they created their own mediums through which to publish. Many claimed that for them, success was not about getting published in niche journals, but rather reaching a mass audience with their poetry.

Most Instapoet members of The Retreat had a minimum of 20,000 followers and several of them had hundreds of thousands. If numbers were a measure of success in this group, these numbers demonstrated a different type of success, but success, nonetheless. Their poetry may have been non-traditional, but in this age of social media and digital content sharing, these Instapoets chose to circumvent the submit-and-wait system and post directly to Facebook and Instagram in the hopes of getting discovered or building a following online first, before self-publishing through sites like *Amazon*. Self-publishing is generally frowned upon in the literary publishing world as it bypasses the peer-review or more rigorous publishing process, but since Instapoet Rupi Kaur is now outselling Homer, perhaps this did not seem like a far-fetched goal to the Instapoets. Many of them were making a living on their book sales alone and were happy to share this information with the group. None of the traditional poets could say the same.

### **A Change in Administration**

Though the Instapoets had become prominent members in the Retreat, their time in the group was short-lived. In early spring 2019, at the height of the membership divide, a new administrator took over and, on May 14, made an announcement that members could no longer post their unpublished, social media poems on the main group feed. (See Figure 3). These posts would only be allowed in a once-per-week thread called "Self-Published Tuesdays." This rule

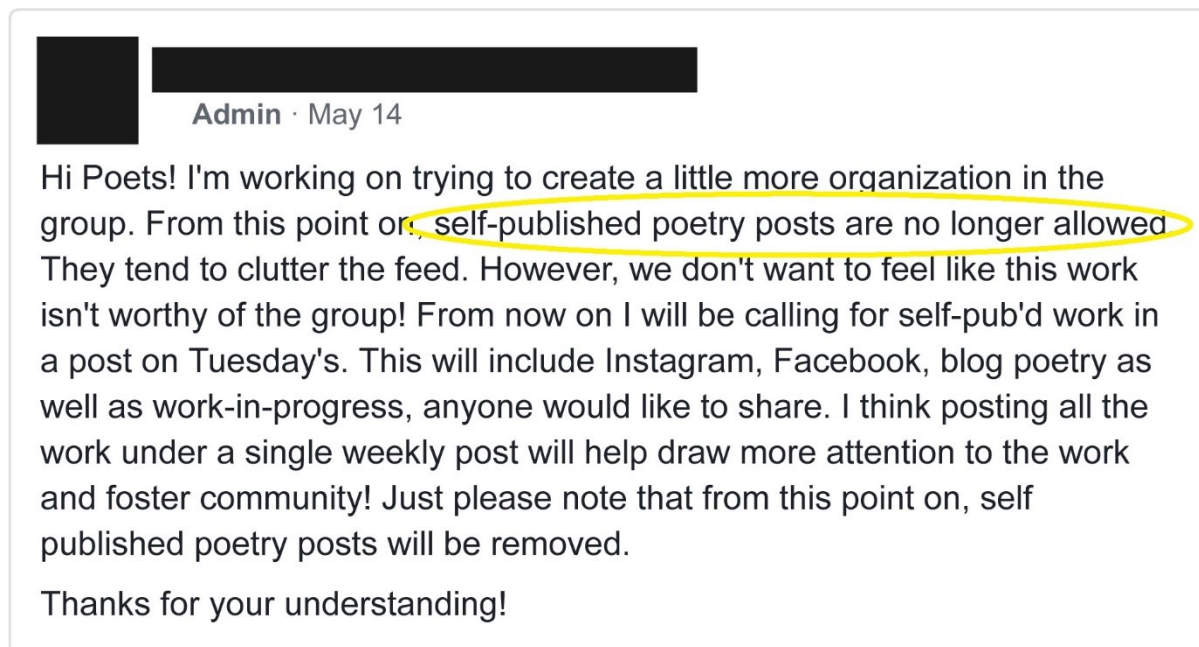


Figure 3. Administrator Note about Self-Published Tuesdays.

was a slap in the face to a significant portion of The Retreat's membership. The traditional poets were allowed to post their own poems any time they were accepted by a traditional publication, but they were intolerant of the Instapoems. It seemed that the administrator felt the Instapoetry was clogging the feed and only worth showcasing in a hidden thread. She claimed moving them would "foster community," but it had the opposite effect.

Within one day of implementing the new rule, the Instapoetry posts nearly vanished. Prior to May 14, there were thirty Instapoem posts made in the month. After being relinquished to the once per week feed, there were only four for the last half of May even in the Self-Published thread. (See Figure 4). With most of the Instapoets gone, the Self-Published Tuesday threads were sparse, and the administrator stopped posting them altogether after a few months. Yet, throughout this ordeal, the group philosophy never changed. So, inevitably new Instapoets would discover the group and start posting their poems. When this happened, the administrator

began deleting the Instapoems in the feed altogether and created another separate thread where they were told was the appropriate place to post them. (See Figure 5).

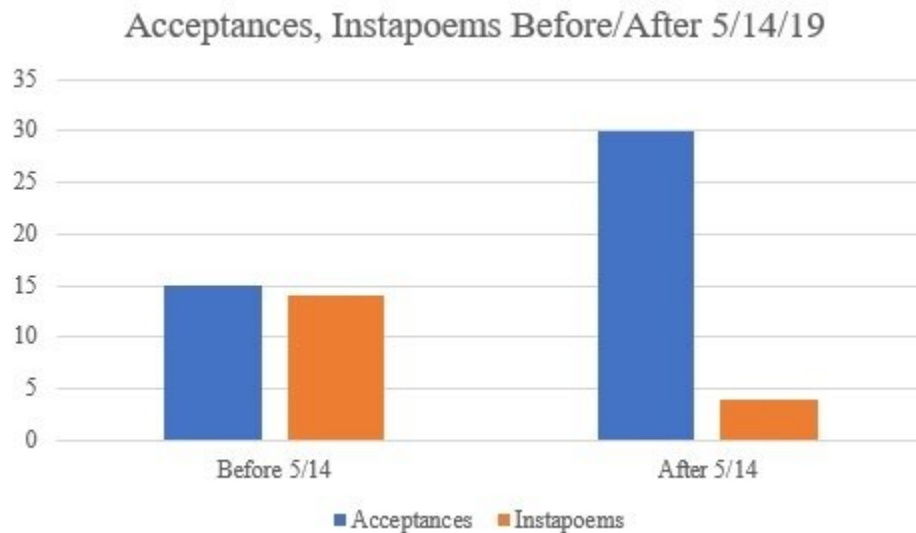


Figure 4. Acceptances, Instapoems by Date Before/After 5/14/19.



Figure 5. Administrator Note about Deleting Self-Published Poetry

On the day after Self-Published Tuesdays were introduced, IG-1 posted that she and three other Instapoet members were starting a new group for those who did not submit poems the traditional way. She called specifically for social media poets but also, for anyone else who wanted to join. After this, none of the major Instapoet authors could be found in the member list of The Retreat. All but IG-1 had left the group entirely. Just as The Retreat had broken from PoetZ two years prior, the Instapoets also broke away and the cycle of “retreating” continued. It appeared that the measures taken to correct the issue of the Instapoets cluttering the newsfeed were successful. When asked about The Retreat and the Self-Published Tuesdays threads, IG-1 responded:

Honestly, I can’t quite figure out who I am supposed to be there. It is clearly not a group to share our writing (except on Tuesdays, and only as a comment on a weekly post), it feels too formal to vent and share about our frustrations and challenges as women poets, nor does it seem like an information exchange about how to self-publish or get published more traditionally—my impression is that it is primarily for folks to brag and get patted on the back for their publications. I am happy to do this, but I would invest more if I was getting more out of the group.

The group strained to uphold its original goal of supporting one another in the wake of Instapoetry. Perhaps this “support” was only intended for those poets who all have the same end goal of trying to publish the traditional route, but the group never specified this in its guidelines. Rather, they policed its members through discrimination once they joined. The administrator reiterated sentiments of inclusion when asked about the purpose of the group in an interview. However, when directly questioned about the Instapoets, she stated that she “did not know what to do with them.” She confirmed that “many members of the group can’t stand the Instapoets, Facebook poets and the like clogging the feed” and admitted that traditional poet members were



reporting the posts. She added: “And I don’t blame them. There is no way for a group to operate efficiently if we all posted our own unpublished work all the time. And the Instapoets can be extremely prolific.” She also speculated as to why “Self-Published Tuesday” was not well received or ignored entirely, admitting that those poets may “feel like their work is being funneled into an unfair corner.” She claimed: “I really don’t want to have this genre feel inferior or that they don’t have a place in the group. It just has to make sense.” What was never quite clear was what “efficiency” in the group was supposed to look like. While the supportive sentiment was stated, the words “make sense” indicated that, to the traditional poets, the Instapoets were viewed as nonsensical and by barring them from posting in the same place traditional poets could, they were treated as inferior.

## IMPLICATIONS

### "Cultivating" Feminist Misogyny

Though the origin of The Retreat stemmed from a need for these women poets to unite and convene in a safe space out of the hegemonic male gaze, that hegemonic gaze turned inward as time progressed. This analysis demonstrates that although the group's formation was originally a shelter, it soon became exactly what it originally set out to escape—a toxic environment for its members. The new rule that led to the end of the Instapoets in The Retreat calls into question the very nature of the group's founding ethic of care principles. "Ethic of Care," initially defined by psychologist Carol Gilligan in her 1982 book *A Different Voice*, states that the "ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (62). She also contends that this involves "treating" others with "equal worth...despite differences in power" so that "everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left out or hurt" (63). The notion of a feminist *ethic of care* became a prominent part of the second wave of feminism and asserts that women have a moral obligation to stick together, to lift each other up, and to not let patriarchal notions divide this solidarity. The Retreat ascribed to this philosophy through its group description and claim of acceptance of poet members of all types to "support" one another "in a loving and kind way." Yet, the traditional poets demonstrated that there is a limit to the *ethic of care*, even in a seemingly supportive space. By relegating the Instapoets to a specific thread, singling them out, and alienating current and potential future members, The Retreat became exclusionary—the very thing that Kramer warned about when outing the Binders.

If one of the reasons for women-only writing support groups is to escape online

harassment and misogyny, The Retreat did not provide a different experience for all its members. Further, the false sense of security and passive platform of online discourse made it easier to deploy exclusionary devices. There was no room in this group's confines for growth and change, even in a digital-based climate where poems can be found by the millions in any given Instagram feed. Perhaps the traditional poets felt threatened, as they had been publishing one way for so long that it did not seem fair for these new "wonderful young poets" to publish in a new way. However, a deeper-seated issue seems to be that they were simply holding these poems and their authors to a standard rooted in misogyny that has been in place for women authors for centuries. Instapoetry is new, different, popular, and largely dominated by women all of which make it an easy misogynistic target.

George Gerbner's *cultivation theory* provides a way to understand how this type of reflexive misogyny occurs amongst women writers. Gerbner conducted human subjects studies and asserts that television tropes perpetuate "social control" through a "demonstration of power" over marginalized groups (qtd. in Melody 21). He suggests that by "seeing, watching or hearing content repeatedly, we inherently start to take these claims as truth" and, in turn, they become ingrained in our culture (qtd. in Melody 21). Other scholars have drawn the connection between *cultivation theory* and misogyny on television, the internet and video games (Custers and Van den Bulck, McCullough et. al). In this same way, misogyny has also been "cultivated" in the literary world and was "cultivated" in The Retreat.

As addressed earlier in the Literature Review, Dinshaw and Gubar acknowledge there is an ingrained patriarchal tradition of judging and excluding women's writing. Gubar asserts that even women utilize it reflexively, as demonstrated within the confines of The Retreat. She warns against this "Feminist Misogyny" and asks women writers the following: "When strutting our

stuff with each other, among ourselves..., have we lost sight of the ways in which unsympathetic outsiders or hostile institutions can appropriate or co-opt our internal debates, transforming self-critiques into assaults against our larger project?" (468) The traditional poets were initially meeting in secret to overcome not getting published due to male gatekeepers, but they "lost sight" of their "unsympathetic outsiders" and turned on their own members. They became gatekeepers themselves, the very thing they set out to protect each other from. While "strutting their stuff" within the confines of this supposedly safe space, the traditional poets participated in a cycle of misogyny that was appropriated from centuries of exclusionary behavior towards women writers. From the dismissal of "sentimental" writing by women in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, to Hawthorn's "scribbling women" in the 19<sup>th</sup>, to the masculine reinforcement of the New Critics who established a limited, mostly male canon in the early 20<sup>th</sup>, a precedent was set for qualifying works written by women.

This precedent has been "cultivated" by women in the writing community as well. Through this cultivation of misogynist judgement, The Retreat was "assaulting" the "larger project" of inclusion and development for all its members. Gubar also shows through *feminist misogyny* that women have gained "yet another label to brand each other," and she cautions that women should be "sensitive to the proliferation of sexual ideologies, to the significance of who is deploying these ideologies and with what political effect" (469). Drucilla Cornell argues that due to the "patriarchal system of gender" that existed for centuries, the "metaphysical idea of 'woman' functions not only to obscure individual women but also to set off women in competition with each other, as each is trying to incarnate the unattainable ideal designed by men" (qtd. in Birns 148-49). The Retreat exemplifies Gubar's *feminist misogyny* as well as Cornell's woman-on-woman competitions, not merely through its existence as a separate

women-only private group, but also in the way it internalized judgement upon its members and measured their literary works, questioning their validity and quality.

Imposter syndrome may be another part of the reason The Retreat was unable to overcome its internal struggles. Gubar ties internalized misogyny to an “‘anxiety of authorship’ that continually puts the whole female literary project in question” (5). Every member was trying to succeed in their own right as a poet, and when the traditional publishing methods failed, they were called into question by the social media poets’ behaviors. The traditional poets subsequently projected their own insecurity onto a seemingly easy target by not only judging the form and quality of Instapoetry, but also its method of publication. Though arguments can be made about Instapoetry’s lack of literary quality, the women in The Retreat made no distinction as to which Instapoems they deleted and criticized. Instead, there was blanket rejection of the medium as a whole based on the long-standing principles of patriarchal judgement of new, popular, and unfamiliar texts written by women. The power of the patriarchy surfaced in the overt attitudes of the women who have struggled against it as professional poets and became reified.

### **Old is New Again: Instapoetry and Remediation**

The rejection of Instapoetry in The Retreat points to some form of “anxiety” from the Traditional Poets. Whether the anxiety is a backlash to its literary quality, to its method of delivery, or to its form, or whether it is a compulsory reaction to reject any new form of writing by women, there is more to consider beyond these internalized ideals and exclusionary practices. Bolter and Grusin’s theory of *remediation* states “new digital media are not external agents that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture. They emerge from within cultural contexts, and they

refashion other media, which are embedded in the same or similar contexts” (19). When viewing Instapoetry through this lens, it is not radical or wrong, but merely a blending of past forms on a digital forum. Digital mediums, though they ensure rapid delivery of art to a much larger platform, are merely a reimagining of a mode and method of writing that has been used for centuries. *Remediation* is exemplified in Instapoetry as it simultaneously reinvents and pays homage to women writers’ distribution methods from the Middle Ages and Early Modern era when writers formed coteries of readership. It also offers another possible cause for the reluctance to accept it within *The Retreat*. Bolter and Grusin assert that: “Older electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture as digital media challenge that status” (5). While new forms emerge, original forms push back. The traditional poets followed this pattern.

The theory is not groundbreaking, but it offers a critical point for comparison when considering the question “what is literary?” If Instapoetry was shunned and shut out in *The Retreat*, why was it hated so much and is there room for it as a legitimate literary genre? Cultural studies exploded the notion of what defines a “text,” so does Instapoetry still not qualify as one? Is it not merely a blending of visual and linguistic art forms? *Remediation* provides some answers to these questions. Bolter and Grusin review several remediated art forms from digital art to computer games, Virtual Reality and film and link them to their predecessors:

No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media (15).

Instapoetry form favors remediation's reliance on what Bolter and Grusin call "immediacy"—the attempt of art or texts to put the audience "in the same space as the objects viewed" (11). Though Instapoems exist in a modern digital space, they are very similar to poetry of the past in form, theme, and techniques for developing audience.

As I discussed in the Literature Review, there is not yet a universal acceptance of this genre as literary, yet there are characteristics of Instapoetry that make it distinct from other poems. There have been a few minor attempts at generalizing its form and themes, but no major scholarly journal formally acknowledges it as its own significant genre. Yet with Kaur's success and the success of the members of The Retreat who are financially supporting themselves through their poetry, I believe there is value in looking more deeply at the implications of Instapoetry, if for nothing else than to see its potential. After studying Instapoetry for the past two years, teaching a unit on Instapoetry, and observing the way this form has rapidly evolved, I have noticed some common features. I will outline these and link Instapoetry to past women writers, specifically Christine de Pizan, Æmelia Lanyer and Katherine Phillips.

Instapoetry is digital art. In form, it is a combination of visual art and text. The poetic text is short or truncated like a haiku, sonnet or limerick, but often without a uniform rhyme or meter. Longer poems do not read well in the square-sized space on Instagram nor do they placate an audience who wants a quick read as they scroll through their feed. Ten lines or fewer is the general norm, but some push this limit and some only offer one line or a few words. What sets Instapoems apart from memes or quotes is they tend to rely on poetic themes and they are complete. In other words, I propose that a true Instapoem is not a pull quote from a longer poem or quote from a larger text, but rather stands on its own. Sometimes text is merely on a black or white background, but many Instapoems involve the juxtaposition of text with some type of

image. The image could vary from a graphic design or a photo to a hand drawn sketch. Material art is common with the use of tangible objects photographed as backgrounds to create layered textures under or around text. Handwritten or typed poems may be written on paper and photographed. Black, sharpie-scrawled lettering might run across a person's hand or back. The dynamic result allows for multiple interpretations as all of these images add another layer of meaning to the words. (See Figure 6).



Figure 6. Sample Instapoems. (Sources: Frayne, Lotus)

This form mirrors Instapoetry's contemporary media, like graphic novels, but is also reminiscent of decorated medieval manuscripts from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries and shape poems like George Herbert's "Easter Wings" (1633). In visual poetry, images serve as an additional, significant, and necessary voice in serving a text's larger intention. The power lies in the



combination of images and words. Often, the image relays meaning that the text cannot relay alone, and vice versa. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (literally) illustrates the way graphic novels can do more than a straight text, thus furthering themes through both form and content. McCloud defines “closure” as the “phenomenon of observing the parts about perceiving the whole” and says that “in our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (62). In comics, closure forwards the narrative in one frame. In Instapoetry and any visual poem, this closure happens when a text and image combine to further the author’s intended message.

The visual text form is clearly remediated with Instapoetry, regenerated from past models, yet slightly modified to fit a new medium and audience. The juxtaposition of art and text is seen in multiple artforms. In literature, medieval manuscripts employ this same technique with intricate, hand drawn illustrations that enhance both the significance and aesthetic of the text. Bolter and Grusin point out that “in medieval manuscripts, the large initial capital letters may be elaborately decorated, but they still constitute part of text and image. In many multimedia applications, icons and graphics perform the same dual role, in which the images peek out at us through the word (s)” (13). The “dual role” Bolter and Grusin mention is also used in film through a technique known as dynamic editing when an on-screen visual coupled with a juxtaposing sound bite implies an underlying meaning. White space in advertising forces the eye where the author intends it to go. Instapoetry experiments with all these techniques. It even remediates the concept of shape poetry. In George Herbert’s 1633 poem, “Easter Wings,” the form of the text is printed in a patterned shape to look like wings, which not only reflects its title, but, according to some scholars “affects the meanings inherent in the words and lines” (Poch 475). The text, at first glance appears to be in the shape of wings itself, yet John Poch asserts that

it also “makes a ‘triple hieroglyph’ of crosses, wings, and hourglasses” which “communicate theologically complex principles” (477). As with Instapoetry, the visual becomes another voice along with the text. (See Figure 7).

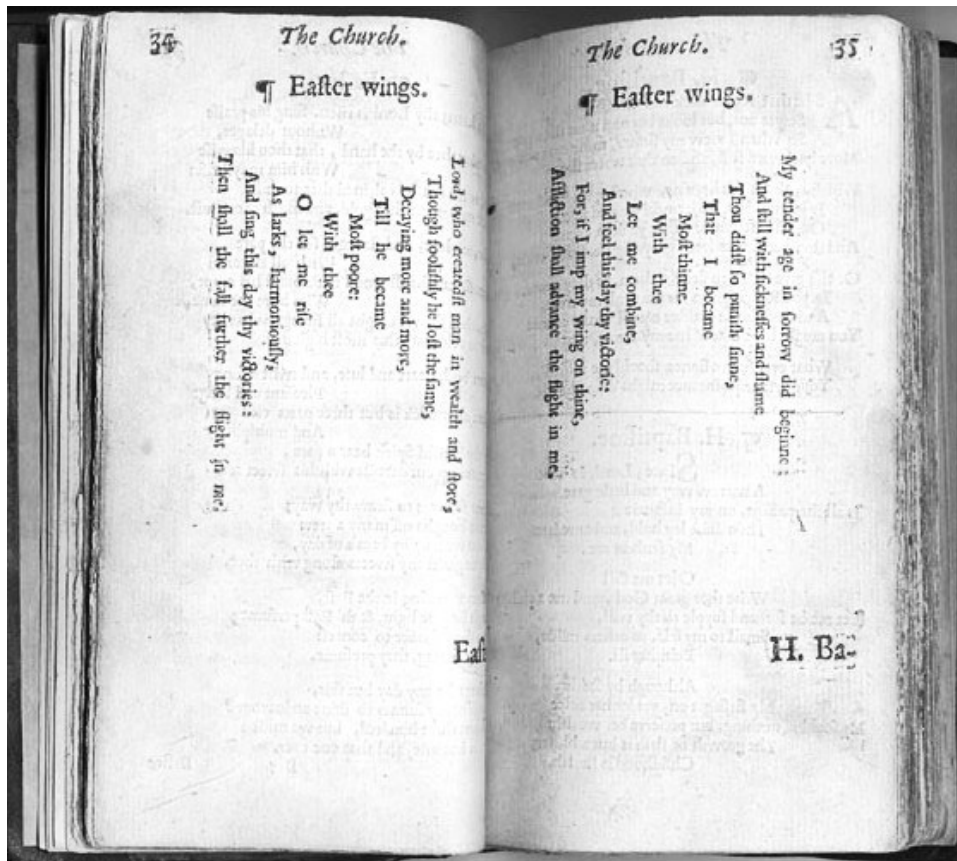


Figure 7. “Easter Wings.” (Source: Herbert)

Early Instapoetry themes were more romantic in nature and the language more simplistic or conversational, but it has evolved over the years. Its goal has remained the same though, to evoke emotion. Like the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, Merriam Webster’s definition of poetry links it to “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through

meaning, sound, and rhythm” (“Poetry.”). With its prolific lines and images on love, loss, fear, hope and death, emotions are essential to Instapoems. Yet, themes have also evolved. Kaur’s poetry often follows feminist ideology and now, in 2020, Instapoem themes are rapidly progressing to include protest and pandemic poetry. The posts for #metoo poetry, #blmpoetry, and #pandemicpoetry rise every day. The digital format and global connection of the internet provide a unique platform on Instagram as a place to share information and organize movements. For Instapoetry, it provides fertile ground for the immediate creation of art in reaction to culturally significant events. Though romantic love remains an important theme that defines Instapoetry, themes are evolving to incorporate feminist, queer, and racial issues and emotions. (See Figure 8).



Figure 8: Sample Activism Instapoem 1. (Source: Peony Poetry 1122)

There is also an extra layer to the text beyond the square image of the Instapoem—the text in the accompanying post. This text adds to the poem in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is simply a title, or a few words about the theme, and other times, it is a full paragraph or two elaborating on the author’s thoughts, emotions and motivations behind the poem. This adds authorial intent in real time juxtaposed with the poem. Though it may explain the impetus behind a poem, this text can also provide more information on social issues, directing the reader to corresponding accounts and links for activism. The remediation from traditional poems (whether about love or political protest) make Instapoems a unique genre as both a literary text and a cultural site for action in the real world. Whereas poetry and social activism in the past may have shared a theme but remained separate, now they can cross-over in one place and direct readers to ways to become part of a larger platform on issues like racial and gender inequality. (See Figure 9).

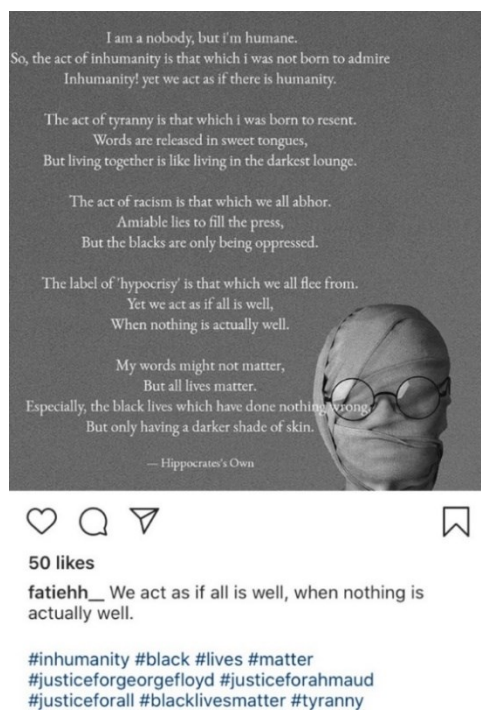


Figure 9. Sample Activism Instapoem 2. (Source: Hippocrate’s Own)

Because digital poems can be shared simultaneously across multiple platforms at once, building an audience can happen quickly. Instapoets must be both a poet and a social media marketer. Once they develop a rhythm of posting and sharing, they focus efforts on cultivating readers. This was a function of The Retreat for the Instapoets and perhaps contributed to the way they seemed to populate the feed in the group. As seen in the results, they posted their poetry prolifically and linked it back to their sites where they likely hoped to gain followers. Instapoets use their followers in two ways: to prove to a potential publisher that there are ready-made buyers for a book of poetry if one were to be produced and also to develop an audience of potential buyers if they decide to self-publish, which many of them do. Many of the digital poets from The Retreat touted and promoted their self-published books in the group. Several also said they were making a livable wage from their writing alone, which none of the Traditional Poets could say.

### **Instapoetry's Connection to Christine de Pizan and Early Modern Women Writers**

I have briefly mentioned the way Instapoetry form, themes and audience cultivation have been remediated from the past. More specifically, the literary lives of medieval and early modern women writers show striking similarities to Instapoet authors and their work. Women's influence on the literary world over the past several centuries is still being unraveled and the impact was much larger than originally thought. Dianne Watt points out the various ways women affected literacy in the Middle Ages: "It is imperative that women's literary history should take into consideration, alongside the figure of the woman writer, the female patron or book commissioner, the female beneficiary of book patronage, the female subject and, crucially, the woman as audience and reader" (Watt 18). Themes of medieval women writers were

religious/devotional but also rhetorical, and romantic. Not only do the themes and forms of Instapoetry mirror the romantic and proto-feminist works of some medieval and Early Modern women poets, the reliance on women readers and building a following as a means to earning money from writing was the method women used prior to and after the invention of the printing press.

The cultivation of Instapoetry subscribers and followers mirrors the way women made a plea for patrons and developed coteries of readers in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era. Like Instapoets, they drew upon their connections and circles of friends and acquaintances to build up a following hoping to monetize their writing. It has been suggested that women readers in the Middle Ages had a great impact on the types of literature that were produced from not only women writers, but prominent male writers like Chaucer as well simply by being influential readers and patrons (Greenblatt and Simpson 13). This relationship between woman writer and woman reader is just as essential today as it was six hundred years ago. Instapoem readers can now demand to see certain themes and styles from writers as well and Instapoets look to likes on their individual poems to gauge what works and what does not. This instant feedback is similar to the way medieval and Early Modern patrons asked to be written into poems or paid for poetry to be written about a loved one. Sometimes, women wrote for a coterie of female patrons, but "all of them, religious or secular, are aware of themselves as women and speak to women in their audience" (Ferrante). Thus, when considering women poets throughout history and today, we must acknowledge the power structures of gender that govern not only their writing, but also the role women play as their own readers and audience. "The term women's literary culture is here defined broadly, then, to include not only women's writing but also women's roles as patrons, readers, and subjects of texts" (McAvoy and Watt). Medieval women were not just writers of

texts but were intricately involved in influencing the themes of poetry. This holds true for Instapoetry as well when feedback can be directly given via a comment, like or direct message to the creator and poets can cultivate readers based on their requests and responses. Peter Dronke argues that women medieval writers' "motivations" are "rarely predominantly literary" stating that their writing has a quality of "immediacy" and is "often more urgently serious than is common among men writers..." (x). Instapoetry has been accused of rarely being literary and favors immediacy as well, not only in the heartfelt emotional response to complications in love, but in its reaction to cultural and social events and calls to action.

The early forms, themes and audience development efforts of Christine de Pizan provide an exemplary direct connection to the conventions of Instapoetry as a remediated genre. Christine was the first known woman to support herself entirely by writing and is considered one of the "pioneers in women's rhetorical history" (Ronald and Richie 32). This makes her especially relevant to remediation in relation to self-publishing one's work through poetry. Christine's more famous writings like *The Book of the City of Ladies* and her treatise on *The Romance of the Rose* used religious rhetoric to argue against misogynist claims by male writers. However, it was her poetry on loss and romance that launched her career and provided her with a paying audience who eventually supported her later, political works.

As a non-aristocratic female in late 14<sup>th</sup> Century France, Christine was not given a formal education<sup>1</sup>. Christine's father worked for Charles V at French court and encouraged Christine to read and learn. She was self-taught and well-read in French and some Latin. At the age of fifteen, she was married to Etienne de Castel, a royal secretary and notary for the court. They had three children and she writes in her autobiographical work *Christine's Vision* that they had a happy

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<sup>1</sup> Information in this section on Christine's biography was compiled from the following sources: Brown-Grant, Blumenfeld-Kosinski, and Willard.

marriage. However, within 10 years several unfortunate events happened to Christine which changed her life significantly. Charles V died, leaving her family cast out from the court. Then her father and her husband died as well. Instead of getting her husband's property, it was reclaimed by the court though she was still responsible for payments. Christine recalls lamenting the way wives were not privy to their husband's "financial matters" and argues it "does not make any sense at all when a woman is not stupid but prudent and wise in her dealings" ("From *Christine's Vision*"<sup>10</sup>). In addition to her three young children, Christine was also caring for her elderly mother and niece. Widows during the Middle Ages typically needed to find a new husband for financial stability. However, Christine refused to remarry, holding fast to her marriage vows. With no financial prospects, she did something many creative women do when facing a crisis—she turned to art as an emotional outlet and began to write. She recalls this moment in *Christine's Vision*: "One day, discouraged and disconsolate, I composed this ballad through my tears: Alas! Where shall they find solace,/ Poor widows who have lost all?" (14). The ballad continues about her widow's plight in short lines of desperation:

...In France  
They find only  
Empty hopes,  
Deadly counsel,  
Treacherous words  
Prodding them to damnation...  
-Untitled Ballad, "From *Christine's Vision*" (14)

Through writing poetry, Christine rekindled her love of learning that began in childhood and devoted herself to studying history, science and literature. All the while, she felt something building in her, pulling her to write: "Nature willed that from my studies and experience there be



born new works and commanded: ‘Take up your tools and hammer out on the anvil the material I shall give you, as lasting as iron and impervious to fire and everything else, and forge objects of delight’ (“From *Christine’s Vision*” 17). She was greatly influenced by Eustache Deschamps’ *Art de Dictier* (*The Art of Writing Poetry*) which led to her using some of his recommended “fixed forms” including the “ballade” in the style of 14<sup>th</sup> Century French poet, Guillaume Machaut (Willard 27). However, her early writing was, by her own admittance, “in a lighter vein” and over time she “perfect(ed)” her “technique by practicing” (“From *Christine’s Vision*” 17). These “lighter” poems followed a simple form with emotional sentiment just like Instapoetry.

Developing a patronage was a tedious process though and Christine was not immediately successful as a writer. Just like the members of The Retreat, Christine had to hustle constantly to make ends meet. Her methods were to seek specific audiences who could pay her for her works. Christine sent her writings to wealthy aristocrats and implored them to read her work. She capitalized on the novelty of being a women writer at the time. Nobles found her fascinating and she offered her poems up as gifts. This marketing tactic worked for Christine as the nobles in turn paid her for her poems. Christine touts that eventually her “writings became known and were read in many different lands,” but initially, she wrote what she knew would sell: poetry about love and loss (“From *Christine’s Vision*” 18).

In her early work entitled *One Hundred Ballads* her poems were lyrical ballads, typically written for specific patrons and thematically about love and relationships. Her first few ballads in this collection on widowhood are autobiographical. It is in these poems on her lost love where Christine’s work most closely follows the themes of some of the first and more popular poems online today. Here is an excerpt of one of Christine’s ballads about losing her husband:

Alone and in great suffering in this  
Deserted world full of sadness has my  
Sweet lover left me. He possessed my  
Heart, in greatest joy, without grief.  
Now he is dead; I'm weighed down by  
Grievous mourning and such sadness has  
Gripped my heart that I will always weep  
For his death.

-“Ballad 14” “From *One Hundred Ballads* and Other Ballads”

Christine’s self-proclaimed “lighter” themed ballads do not use elevated language, but the themes are heavy with mourning. One line proclaims: “I cannot write sweet things. Whether I/ want to or not, I must complain bitterly/ about the evil which I must bemoan” (“From *One Hundred Ballads* and Other Ballads”). Though she admits to formulating her love poetry after other classical poets, she followed no model for her poetry on being a widow (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 5). The words are simple yet express her pain clearly and with heart-felt sentiment. Though the ballads on widowhood are not quips, or truncated, they are not elaborate in meter or rhyme-scheme either, and they are relatively short at around 25 lines each. Christine’s theme of loss and her simple language is remediated in Instapoetry. Poetry forms change through time, but writing one’s emotions is a universal theme of poetry. Christine’s grief transcends the years and plays out in new digital forms like this poem below. (See Figure 10).

Just as Instapoets build their online following to eventually have enough “patrons” to warrant publishing a book, Christine essentially self-published until she created a following large enough to demand her works. Once Christine began to write more and establish a following, she found she wanted to address more serious themes, and had the influence to do so. She says she



Figure 10. Grief Instapoem. (Source: Wattney Poetry)

“refined (her) style with greater subtleness and the use of nobler material” (“From *Christine’s Vision*” 18). After moving on from Ballads, she wrote political texts for men in power and sharpened her rhetorical techniques over the years to address a number of issues, especially in the defense of misogynistic claims against women. In Christine’s *Vision*, she notes that the turning point came with *The Letter From Othea*, a text written as a “mirror for princes” that addresses ancient mythological figures. This piece that Christine considers a departure from her earlier work also offers some comparative features to Instapoetry. In the *Letter*, each entry is a famous mythological figure with three parts: a four-line, succinct description followed by a gloss or explanation and then an allegory addressing the lessons to be learned from the figure.

Chapter 98: Circe  
 You should avoid the port of Circe  
 Where Ulysses’s knights  
 Were changed into pigs.  
 Remember her ways.  
 -*The Letter From Othea*

The brief poem is followed with a gloss about Circe and then an interpretation of her in the allegory. In the allegory, Christine uses authorial rhetoric alongside her short poem and suggests which morals and lessons a leader should take from each character. The succinct lines are similar to a typical Instapoem and the gloss and allegory mirror the explanatory post the author makes about the poem. (See Figure 11).

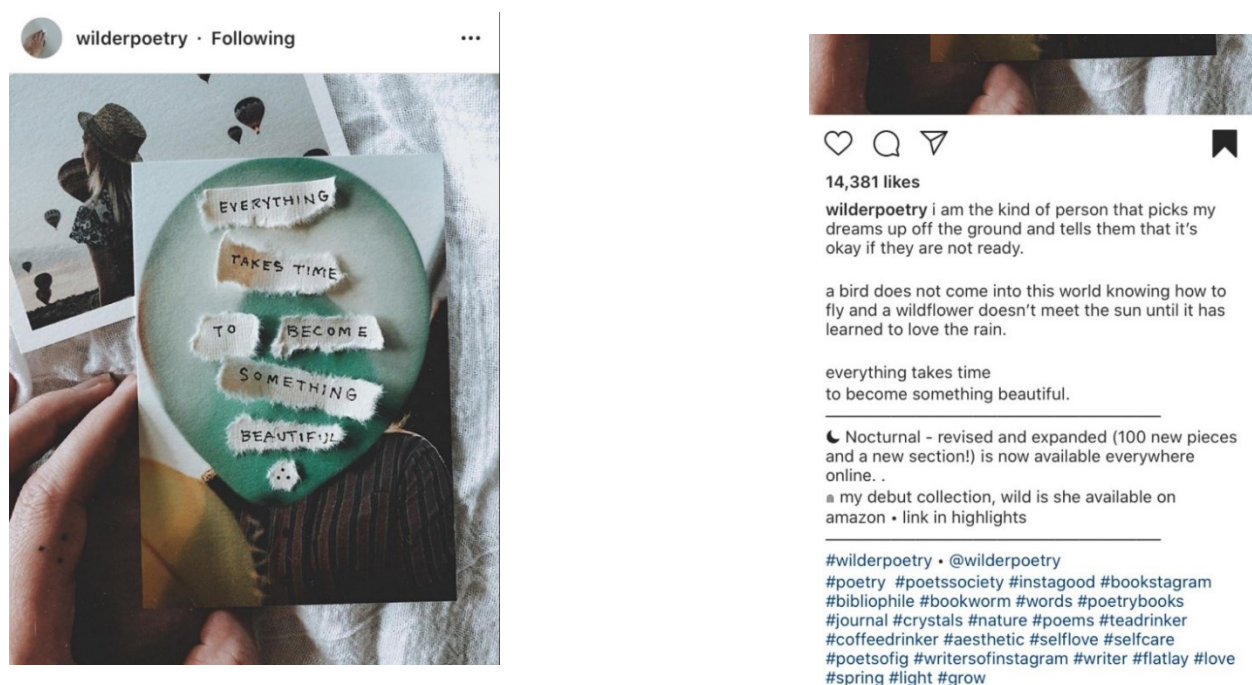


Figure 11. Instapoetry Accompanying Text. (Source: Wilder Poetry)

When reading Christine's translated poetry today, it is often printed in plain type on a white page of a collection of her works, but it is crucial to recall that medieval manuscripts were works of art themselves, often decorated intricately by hand by a talented artist. Christine's manuscripts are no exception. Additionally, Christine worked alongside her illustrators and bookmakers and had a "direct hand in their entire composition" dictating "how they would be

arranged, what would be included or excluded, including the types of images” (“Portraits of Christine de Pizan...”). Christine was not the artist who drew or painted the images that accompanied her texts like Rupi Kaur, but she collaborated closely with a woman artist named Anastaise to illustrate her manuscripts and even pays tribute to her in *The Book of the City of Ladies* as an example of a worthy woman living in her time (Willard xi). Christine understood the power in conveying messages through the combination of art and text. The juxtaposition of the images she chose for her manuscripts “help us to learn what types of messages and ideas she hoped to convey to her readers” (“Portraits of Christine de Pizan...” *Khan Academy*). A portrait of Christine writing in her study appears alongside the *One Hundred Ballades of a Lover and His Lady* in a manuscript she presented to Isabeau de Bavière, Queen of France around 1402. The decorated manuscript became known as *The Book of the Queen*, and though she was not the first woman to be depicted writing in a portrait, this was a rare image. By choosing to portray herself in this way, Christine sends a message along with her text. She positions herself as a scholar or a medieval scribe, who were also often depicted writing. She “draws on this long heritage of images of educated authors” and immediately builds her ethos with her audience (“Portraits of Christine de Pizan...”). It is a subtle use of imagery, but an effective and clever way to claim her rightful place as a writer at this time. This marriage of image and text transcends the meaning behind the text alone. Like Instapoetry, a dynamic third meaning is implied and speaks subtly to the reader. (See Figure 12).

Other women writers throughout history made a living writing poetry as well, and with the invention of the printing press, many were able to gain a following quickly. However, many still relied on patrons as readers. Æmelia Lanyer, an Early Modern woman writer and contemporary of Shakespeare, also called upon female patrons and wrote her poetry for a small



Figure 12. Christine de Pizan Manuscript *The Book of the Queen* (Source: “Portrait of Christine de Pizan in *The Queen’s Manuscript* from BL Harley 4431, f. 4 (Image).” *picryl* Public Domain)

group of all women coteries (Black “Æmelia Lanyer” 804). In 1611, at the age of forty-two, she was one of the first middle-class women to self-publish. Though her poetry was written in an elevated style in iambic pentameter, her method of publication and distribution was similar to Christine and present-day Instapoets. Lanyer also used her poetry as a form of protest as she very openly addresses themes of misogyny in the Bible and dedicates her poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* (Hail, God, King of the Jews), to “all virtuous ladies and gentlewomen of this kingdom” (Lanyer 5). Æmelia goes on to directly address several wealthy and aristocratic women beginning with Queen Elizabeth I and working her way down to “all virtuous Ladies in generall” (Lanyer 48). Marshall Grossman points out: “Lanyer's volume as a whole is conceived as a Book of Good Women, imagining a female community sharply distinguished from male society and its evils, that reaches from Eve to the contemporary Jacobean patronesses, with virtue and learning descending from mothers to daughters” (28). A few years after Æmelia,

Katherine Phillips (1632 – 1664) also created her own “female community” of readers and close friends whom she called her “Society of Friendship” (Black “Katherine Phillips” 987). As the first English woman writer to gain fame in her lifetime, Katherine additionally crafted an alter ego for herself by writing under the *nom de plume* “Orinda.” Æmelia’s “imagined female community” is made real today with Instapoet followers and online groups like The Binders and The Retreat. Katherine’s “society” and alter ego are also both remediated on Instagram through the Instapoet’s following and curated image. Though Instapoetry may seem new and unusual to today’s traditional poets, it is critical to draw these connections to the past and recall the way women have struggled for centuries to get their works read. Instapoetry has drawn upon centuries-old tactics and remediated them for a global platform where women can be both writer and patron and cultivate their own digital coteries.

### **The Potential and Pitfalls of Instapoetry: A Critique of Rupi Kaur and her Poetry**

It is no secret that the Instapoets of The Retreat were looking to Rupi Kaur as a model for success. Kaur’s themes have been recognized as portraying feminist attitudes, and with more than 4 million followers, she seems to be making good use of the internet as way to project her voice. Though Kaur’s poetic themes and drawings are sometimes more reminiscent of second wave feminism, she brings to life the image of Donna Haraway’s techno-feminist cyborg by hedging into *cyberfeminism*. “Cyberfeminism is neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda. Rather, ‘cyberfeminism’ refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture” (Daniels 102). Kaur’s techno-pen emits lines of feminine energy coupled with feminine hand-drawn images which makes her feminist sentiments at times feel a bit antiquated. A poem featuring a line sketch of a woman’s body, legs spread, depicts children exiting down a path that starts between

the woman's legs. The lines read: "When my daughter is living in my belly/ I will speak to her like/ She's already changed the world" (Kaur *ode to ramond douillet's a short tour and farewell*). Another poem shows women climbing a mountain and says, "our work should equip/ the next generation of women/ to outdo us in every field/ this is the legacy we'll leave behind" (Kaur *progress*). Kaur's poems create a vision of a future where women have perhaps transcended forms of oppression they continue to experience today, even after three waves of feminism. (See Figures 13 and 14).

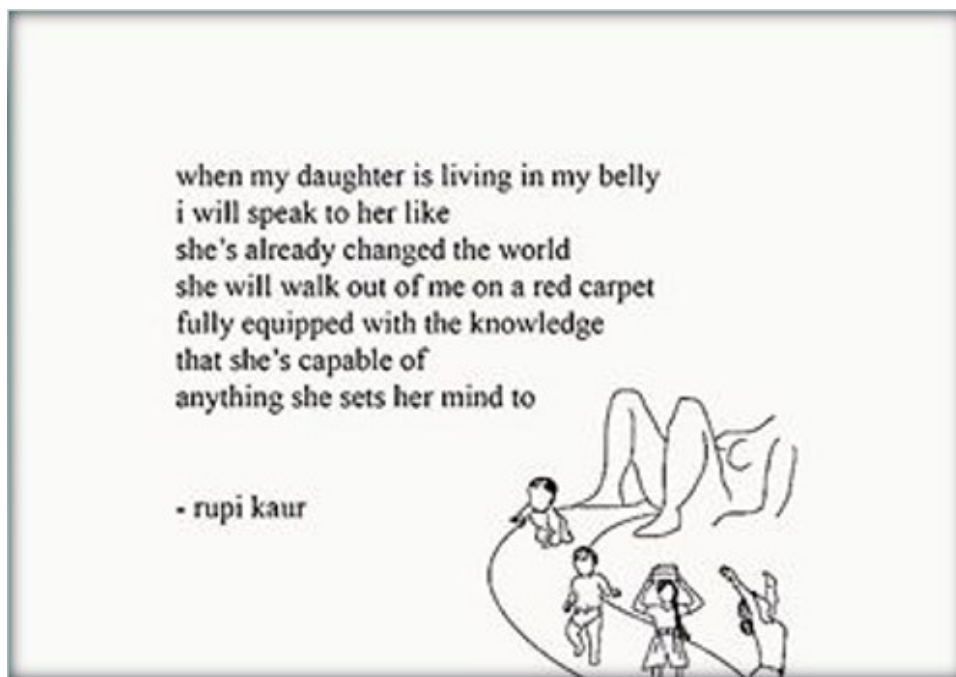


Figure 13. *ode to ramond douillet's a short tour and farewell* (Source: Kaur)

Kaur's poems and imagery have also been known to push boundaries. An incident occurred with her account in 2015 when Instagram removed a series of photos she posted of herself menstruating, fully clothed. (See Figure 15). Before the photos were deleted, numerous





Figure 14. *progress*. (Source: Kaur)

anti-feminist comments accumulated in Kaur's feed. The censorship prompted Kaur to write a series of posts and poems in response stating, "It wasn't just a project for my school course any more, it felt like a personal attack on my humanity" (quoted in Faust 164). Kaur continued to post the photos and they were removed within 24 hours. She accused Instagram of perpetuating the stigma that women on their periods are shunned saying, "Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is leaking. We will not be censored" (Faust 164). Today, one photo remains on Kaur's site along with a condensed version of the story. So far, Instagram has let it remain. In her menstruation photography project, under the one remaining photo of her lying in bed with blood stains on her pants she says, "I bleed each month to help make humankind a possibility. My womb is home to the divine, a source of life for our species, whether I choose to create or not.

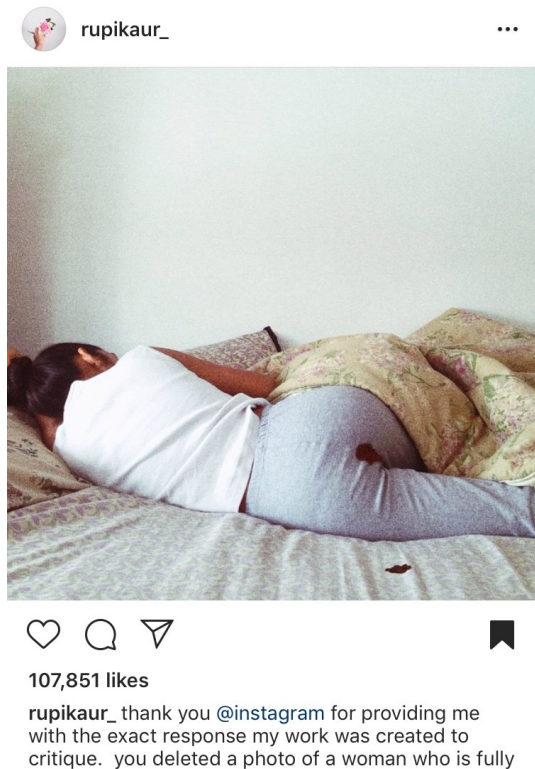


Figure 15. “Kaur’s Menstruation Photo on Instagram.” (Source: Kaur)

But very few times it is seen this way.” Kaur repeatedly uses the massive platform of Instagram to create a space for female identity and a celebration of the female body. She directly called out Instagram when they took the photos down and chastised them. She then created a poem with a sketch of branches and leaves in the shape of a woman’s vagina that addresses the “apparent ungracefulness” of “mentioning” her “period in public” (Kaur “Untitled Period Poem”). (See Figure 16).

Kaur's images and poetry about birth and menstruation recall the very basic level of female embodiment as one that still needs to be recognized as natural or acceptable by a hegemonic norm. Her poems invoke a recollection of feminist rhetoric from fifty years ago. In her book *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millet defined the term “politics” as the “power-

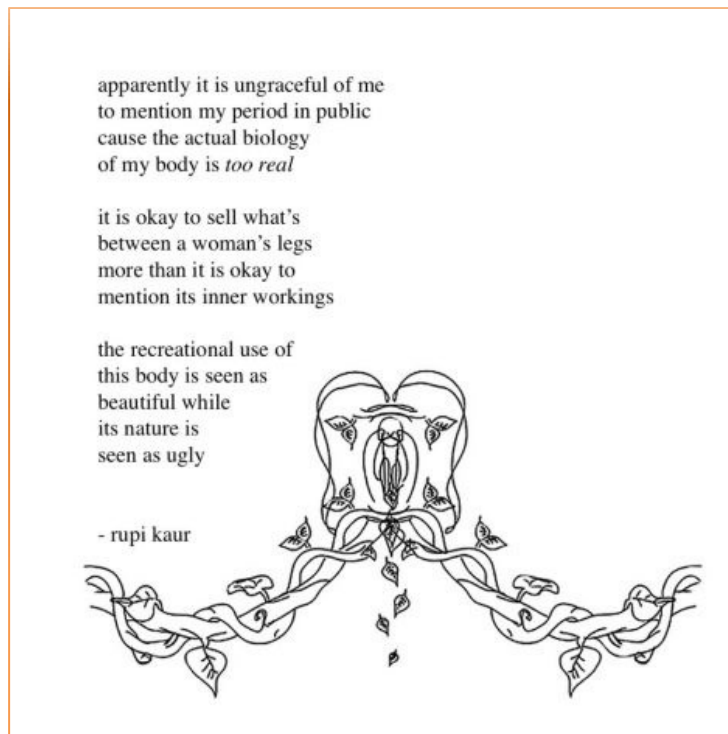


Figure 16. “Untitled Period Poem.” (Source: Kaur)

structured” relationships whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (Millet 23). She outlines the patriarchal system that has ruled as the hegemonic standard for centuries and notes the limitations placed on the “female” which “arrests her at the level of biological experience” (Millet 26). Kaur’s poems are an echoing response to a long-standing, compulsory, patriarchal system.

However, Kaur also uses her poetry to enact what Judith Butler refers to as “performativity” of her gender identity (xv). Butler draws a distinct contrast between the art of performing and “performativity” and asserts that gender is something one does repeatedly, a series of acts (xv). “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). On Instagram, quantity counts, and multiple poems

are posted by authors on a weekly basis to keep their accounts active and fresh. Each poem, in this sense, becomes a repeated performance of gender by Kaur. “Performativity” of gender relies heavily on the hegemonic cultural norms of a society. What gender performance looks like depends on the societal context. Kaur represents a cultural performance of the feminine, and one that I argue still seems to uphold a patriarchal view of society. At first, her poems appear to be feminist as she continuously calls out toxic masculine/feminine relationships. However, at times she portrays a fairly biological essentialist view of femininity, and she also seems to place power in the hands of male figures. In a poem entitled, *to fathers with daughters* she writes, “every time you/ tell your daughter/ you yell at her/ out of love/ you teach her to confuse anger with kindness/ which seems like a good idea till she grows up to/trust men who hurt her/ cause they look so much like you” (Kaur *to fathers with daughters*). (See Figure 17). Kaur insinuates that the idea of masculine hierarchy begins with father/daughter relationships and invites men to break the cycle of masculine aggression. Yet, in directly addressing fathers, she also acknowledges the hegemonic standard and perhaps in some ways continues to uphold it. She places the responsibility for how daughters learn to love in their father’s hands, thus normalizing the standard, and merely suggesting fathers handle their responsibility with care. Men still hold the power over women, they are just encouraged to use that power wisely.

If Kaur is striving to claim her feminist voice, perhaps these poems are just a stepping stone. She is, after all, flexing her feminist muscle within the constraints of a long-standing hierarchal system that is difficult for even the most feminist-forward thinkers to overcome. In his book, *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer writes, “the compulsory nature of gendered positions ensures that those subjected to the system (all of us) are catapulted into endless attempts to get it right – into repetitions (of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality) that, in their proliferation, ironically

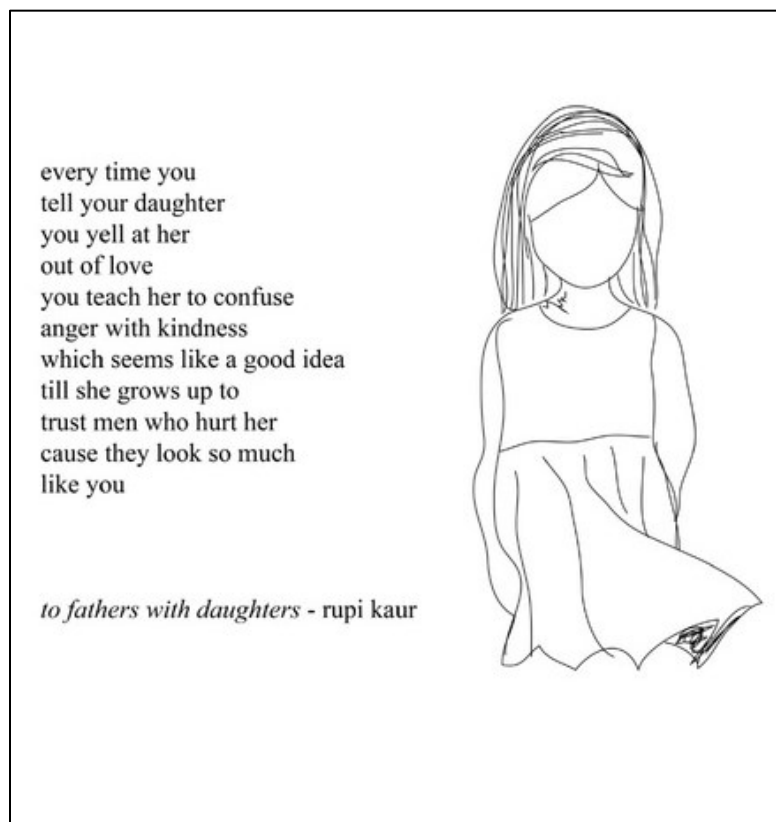


Figure 17. *to fathers with daughters*. (Source: Kaur)

threaten to destabilize the very identifications that any given performance would purport to fix” (McRuer 150). Kaur’s poetry represents these “endless attempts to get it right” and though she has not quite broken through the patriarchal boundaries, she continues to test their stability which is the first step toward asserting herself in the literary field.

The performativity of femininity by Kaur is also extremely cis-gendered and able-bodied. Kaur has referred to her online followers as a “sisterhood,” but it makes one wonder, what are the requirements to join the sisterhood (Kruger 1)? Are queer, lesbian or trans-gendered women able to find themselves in Kaur’s poems? In sifting through her vast body of work, there are not any other representations of women other than those who share Kaur’s cis-gendered, able-bodied

experience. Although Kaur positions her body as “natural” by mentioning stretch marks, menstruation, belly flab and hair that grows in places it “shouldn’t,” her Instagram page itself tells a different story. Each poem is alternated with a carefully crafted image of Kaur so that when scrolling through it looks like a checkerboard of photos and poems. Every image of Kaur, except the one of her menstruating, portrays her in a slick photograph with hair, makeup and outfit coordinated on a beautiful backdrop. This adds another dimension to the implications of dynamic meaning interpreted through text and image combinations. When women scroll Kaur’s page, they may read a poem with a slightly feminist sentiment, but they also see a woman who has built a highly marketable image around her beautiful, cis-gendered, able-body. This level of self promotion and marketing also seemed to be what the traditional poets of *The Retreat* grappled with. Instapoetry is not just about poetry but the entire package of online image, marketing, and accompanying text outside of the poem. So, in condemning the genre, the traditional poets were also condemning the peripheral implications associated with it. (See Figure 18).

Another issue the traditional poets of *The Retreat* could not overlook was publication copyrights. With the internet as their platform, Instapoets are in a unique position in terms of authorship and authority. An article on appropriation in the digital age states: “Much of what we mean by the internet is about appropriation, recontextualizing and simply copying” (Parkinson). Thus, Instapoems begin to take on a life of their own with or without their author. When fundamental questions of authorship collide with fundamental assumptions of the normative body, who is assumed to hold authorship of online poems endlessly redistributed as author-less orphans? This conundrum is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s essay “What is an author?” (1969). He says that eventually, “as our society changes,” the “author function will disappear”

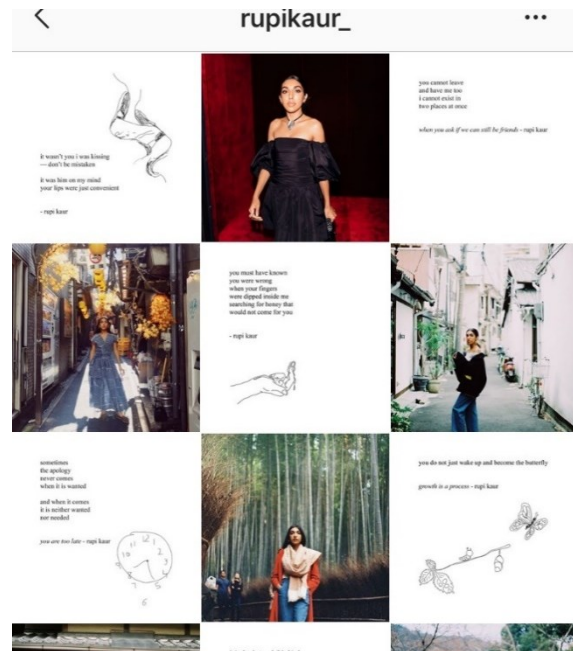


Figure 18. Kaur's Conflicting Image. (Source: Kaur "Untitled Stretch Marks Poem," "Screenshot of Kaur's Instagram Page")

(119). In many ways, Foucault predicted the internet authorship phenomenon. Instead of defining the author function, society may ask "what are the modes of discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself?" (120). These questions find a logical place with Instapoetry. Many of the Traditional Poet members of The Retreat were deeply concerned with the Instapoets lack of regard for sharing unpublished work and repeatedly expressed their concern over the fact that they would not be able to submit their work to journals because once put online, a poem is considered "published." Women have faced publishing challenges as long as the printing press has been around. Many women's works were re-printed without permission for a profit they never saw until copyright laws were put in place (Cowell 7). This did not happen in Britain until 1710 and then not for 80 more years in the U.S. What constitutes a text as being published was a constant source of debate in The Retreat discussions.

Instapoets watermark their images with their names, but that can be scrubbed. The bigger issue then becomes the appropriation and sharing of work across a global platform within a matter of seconds. Instapoets can become disassociated with their work and the Instagram poem and the platform itself ultimately become the locus for discussion because, as Foucault says, at this point, “What difference does it make who is speaking?” (120).

What difference does it make for women poets? Though traditional academic poetry publishing has centered around the ideal that a journal will only publish an otherwise unpublished poem, social media poets do not seem to have this goal in mind. By posting their poems on a public format, they have precluded their work from ever becoming part of the traditional literary canon as it currently stands. It seems instead, they would rather take the chance of becoming a Cinderella story like Kaur. Though some are more concerned with getting their work in front of as many potential followers as possible, the separation from the author and their work becomes problematic from multiple critical theory perspectives. When a poem can take on a life of its own, should Instagram poets, especially those with a reach as far as Kaur, take responsibility for the messaging that ultimately gets appropriated across the globe? The voices that are upholding a cis-gendered, able-bodied view of love and bodies, that only push feminism to a certain point, are easily redistributed, and appropriated by other cultures. In applying Haraway’s theory of techno-feminism to what she calls a “collective subject position” and “ongoing infinite embodiment” of online discourse, Instapoetry becomes authorless and infinitely appropriated (187).

Hinging upon this fact, a final critical point of Instapoetry emerges surrounding the settler colonialism effect. As a concept, settler colonialism has been around for centuries and centers around the premise that the “interlocking forms of oppression, including racism, white



supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism” infiltrate other cultures through “Eurocentric” ideals, “assuming that European values” are “moral, superior, inevitable and natural” (Cox). Just as settler colonial culture has become somewhat pervasive through tangible/physical contact, it can also be perpetuated digitally through pop-culture on a global level through Gerbner’s *cultivation theory*. In some countries, where feminism is still in the first or second wave, struggling to gain momentum, messaging that is counter-feminist could delay progress.

The question remains, is the voice of Instapoetry, with its “network of connections” really staring back at the hegemonic norms, or has it become a tool of the corporate world to appropriate and perpetuate certain cultural norms worldwide? I argue that the answer lies within the messages. There are some poems that will be a tool for theoretical discourse, resistance and push-back against neo-liberal views and others that will merely act as a cultural extension of the systems that dictate stereotypical, hegemonic, heteronormative behavior. The bigger question may be then, which messages are not only heard the loudest but extend the furthest reach? From a mathematical perspective, money talks, and voices like Kaur with millions of followers, books translated in multiple languages worldwide, and now merchandise featuring poems and quotes, are garnering the most attention and reaching the furthest.

## CONCLUSION

### Building a “City” of Women Writers

Perhaps for reasons listed above, Kaur has yet to fully be accepted by other literary women writers. In *The Retreat*, one thread called for a “take down” of all of Kaur’s poems and an academic friend of mine who owns a local bookstore refuses to sell Kaur’s poetry books. This backlash to Kaur is likely somewhat rooted in the simplicity of her poetry and the issues of sustaining themes of gender performance and patriarchal structures. Perhaps it is the nature of the genre of Instapoetry itself that is also the issue. While more literary themes start to push boundaries outside of cultural norms, Instapoetry falls more into a category of pop-culture where hegemonic norms continue to be what sells. Capitalist economics appears to be an underlying motivation of Instapoets’ works, regardless of their messaging. Feminism doesn’t sell unless it fits within the current, comfortable boxes of mainstream ideals. Kaur pushes the norms just enough while still fitting in the space deemed acceptable by consumers. Instagram poets are not only using the social media platform for art but also as a marketing tool. In a recent interview in *The Atlantic*, Kaur called herself an “entrepreneur” (qtd. in Hill and Yuan). She promotes her poems with the driving idea to gain followers and make a living. It seems that when applied to Instapoetry, Neo-liberal consumerism may only tolerate a certain view of feminine subjects, ones that come in marketable packages and still fit a somewhat dominant standard.

However, Gubar’s feminist misogyny cannot be discounted as a factor in the outright lack of acceptance of Kaur too. She falls in the other “camp” from traditional poets and speaks to a larger issue of whether or not there can be one, unified “city of ladies” when it comes to writing and poetry. When Virginia Woolf wrote that women need a “room of their own to write” she

may not have been thinking of a virtual room, but in today's world of online journals and digital self-publishing platforms these "rooms" fulfill a part of what Woolf purported as a necessity for women writers (*A Room of One's Own*). Christine's "City of Ladies" becomes a virtual city made tangible in the digital age. Yet, when looking at The Retreat and backlash to Instapoetry and Kaur, parts of the city are still closed. As Christine purports, only "deserving women" may enter the "city" (*The Book of the City of Ladies* 237).

This perpetuated exclusion can also be viewed through the lens of remediation. Not only are texts and art forms remediated, but so is the method of judging them. Part of women having to defend themselves throughout history through rhetoric and writing is that they have had to develop their own exclusivity as well so as not to seem like they are advocating for all women who are not somehow qualified in the eyes of men. Whether it be through displaying piety, demonstrating certain elevated styles of writing, or fitting in an acceptably range of marketable feminism, it is still a justification rather than acceptance of all women. It is a display for the hegemonic male gatekeepers to show that women writers have done their due diligence. They have vetted themselves and each other and, of course, not all women are welcome—only certain types. In Christine's time, her rhetoric was a huge step but when viewed anachronistically it appears much less impactful. Many people today see her anti-misogynistic rhetoric as mild in comparison to second and third wave feminism. Christine wrote to plant the seed and begin to persuade readers of all genders to start thinking of long-held misogynistic beliefs in a different way. However, she could not be too radical. She could not make the giant leap. Christine writes "all of you who love virtue glory and a fine reputation cannot be lodged in a great splinter inside its walls, not just women of the past but also those of the present and future, for the city has been founded in debt to accommodate all deserving women." (*The Book of the City of Ladies* 237)

Words like “all who love virtual glory” and “deserving” set the standard for the city the same way The Retreat set a standard. Some are “deserving” to be a member but those who publish online or share their Instapoetry are not.

Thus, a pattern has been set that any time a woman speaks up for herself through writing and defending women there is still hesitancy to claim all women are worthy to be included in the city. This is still happening after 700 years in this women poets group. Women writers still don’t have, or rather claim, the authority to accept all women writers and their differences. The city is still closed to some women and the patriarchal hierarchy still is mimicked and perpetuated. In “Modern Fiction” Virginia Woolf states that there should not be any true form in writing but rather the writer should feel compelled to write how they want and what they want stating: “If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (2432). She argues that “any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express” (2433). However, I wonder if Woolf were a member of The Retreat, would she have advocated on behalf of the Instapoets or would she have criticized them and excluded them from participating in the group? Would she have seen Instapoetry as women writing “what they chose, not what (they) must?” Could she recognize the potential as both a literary genre and a way for women to make their voices heard across a larger platform the same way she saw the potential in Modernism? Would the Instapoets have been considered “deserving women” by Christine’s standards, “virtuous ladies” by Æmelia’s or included in Katherine’s “Society of Friendship?” Even though these women writers have made arguments on behalf of women, their writing still suggests there would be rules for making it into the canon, into the city, into the private group. Some may argue

that Instapoetry is merely being held to a standard of not being a “difficult text” and this immediately disqualifies it as literary. For the traditional women poets in *The Retreat* however, it seemed more than merely a lack of meeting literary standards. It seems that part of being a women writer means being excluded and this exclusion is so ingrained in their psyche that they feel they need to do it to themselves.

Part of remediation is rejecting the past but also rejecting the new forms. Bolter and Grusin state: “It is possible to claim that a new medium makes a good thing even better, but this seldom seems to suit the rhetoric of remediation and is certainly not the case for digital media. Each new medium is justified because it fills a lack or repairs a fault in its predecessor, because it fulfills an unkept promise of an older medium” (60). The “unkept promise” to the traditional poets is the constant struggle they face getting published and the inability to make a lucrative wage as a poet. This led to a remediated form—one that allows for a woman to be a full time poet again, like Christine.

### **A Case for Instapoetry**

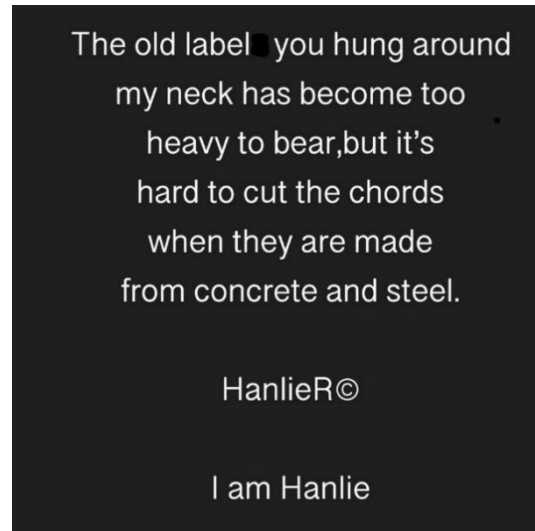
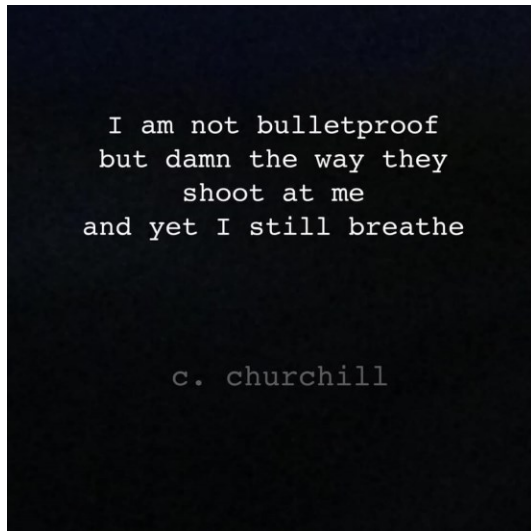
I assert that Instapoetry is in its transitional phase and will be seen as a more legitimate literary genre in the next few years as more (even traditional) poets find an audience in the online community. I argue there is a way to create literary Instapoetry and that it is already being done. In *The Retreat*, the traditional poet members made blatant attempts to hide and delete the Instapoetry posts in order to “reaffirm their status” as the right way of producing poetry. However, Instapoetry, provides an opportunity to accept and remediate literary poetry to a digital format. Instapoetry and self-publishing do not need to be viewed through a narrow lens and condemned for not fitting a certain form or method. Perhaps there is an opportunity for literary

audiences and authors, especially fellow women writers, to view it differently. There might not be a secret or safe place online for women writers where all are included. The silencing of women who write is perhaps too ingrained in writing culture to stop the cycle, even amongst women. Yet, as women writers reach out to gain support, is the end goal truly a safe, supportive space? Or is it a place to share art regardless of the reaction amongst group members?

There may be a different purpose for these secret groups and perhaps a greater purpose to Instapoetry that was overlooked by the traditional poets. Writers can retreat from the outside world, but the outside world is always with them. Thus, there is no complete shelter from the hegemonic gaze, but that is also what drives art to evolve. Without resistance, art becomes complacent and mundane. Women use art to not only spur “activism” but also in response to “cultural forms of oppression” through “a rich variety of media and approaches” (Agerstoun and Auther vii). We are now, arguably, in the height of the fourth wave of feminism where the internet is not only a platform for mobilizing protest, but a means to further both overt and behind-the-scenes discourse. Donna Haraway somewhat predicted the feminist power of the internet in 1991 when she wrote, “we do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities” (187). Just as the pen became a tool for women, the internet is now a well-established extension of the pen—it is the ultimate cyborg feminist tool.

Perhaps being in The Retreat was an impetus for the Instapoet members to move away from what Christine calls “lighter” themes. Many of the poems written and shared by the Instapoets of The Retreat expressed feminist sentiments and talked of resistance, power and change. Some of these poems, whether intentionally or not, spoke back to the kind of oppression they faced within the group like Hanlie’s poem at the beginning of this essay and these lines

from another Instapoet member: “I am not bulletproof/ but damn the way they/ shoot at me/ and yet I still breathe” (Churchill). (See Figure 19). Eleanor Spencer-Regan, digital



Figures 19. Oppression Retreat Instapoems. (Sources: Churchill, Roberts)

director of the Institute of Poetry and Poetics at Durham University argues: “(Instapoetry) is a radically democratic method of publishing that is giving opportunities to many women, people of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people who publicly disclose mental illnesses...These people are rejecting the old rules of a literary world that they feel may have rejected them” (qtd. in Byager). Historically, this notion does not make Instapoetry that different from the way writing has been used throughout the centuries as a platform for marginalized groups, including women. Just as medieval and Early Modern women writers found an audience in the form of a coterie and financial support from patrons, print allowed women to address wider audiences and make a living writing as well. Instapoetry is just the latest incarnation of writing for a specific audience or coterie.

I propose that there is a place for a literary Instapoetry in form and theme. When this research project first began, I had no idea that it would lead to my discovery of a new poetic form. Now, in the height of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and a resurgence of the Black Lives Matters movement, this poetry has emerged as a significant cultural genre. Though some of it is wrought with catchy sayings, overripe clichés, and heartfelt emotion—whether Instapoetry is different-good or different-bad depends on who is doing the assessing. In the traditional literary sense, yes, some of it is bad. However, using a truly feminist lens, why is it bad? And who says so? Perhaps there is an opportunity for literary audiences and authors, especially fellow women writers, to view it differently, and more importantly contribute to the genre themselves to carve out a more literary form for digital distribution. If women limit themselves to their fathers’ tools in their fathers’ houses, they will only produce work that mimics the patriarchal constructs of literature’s past. As a medium for marginalized writers and those who have been historically barred from participating in the literary circle, Instapoetry may be the newest form of poetic rebellion.

I also propose that as the genre of Instapoetry continues to grow, it might take an introspective look at its own implications of appropriating oppression, anti-feminist views, racism and re-stabilizing the patriarchy. It is not the form but rather the implied message that gets murky with the internet as a powerful vehicle of dissemination. An intersectional, critical approach is necessary to see what these messages are conveying, and more critics should consider looking past an antiquated view of traditional literature to digital applications. These poets of the future may also take care to create art that transcends what sells and instead continue to challenge hegemonic norms, utilizing the platform to bring readers to a new level of inclusion and understanding.



Finally, as followers and readers of Instapoets, we too have a responsibility to support and distribute messages and poets who do inclusionary work on this global platform, avoiding the colonial settler effect that traps cultures in an endless cycle of retrograde ideology. As for secret writing groups for women, an attempt to remove all negative outside influences only results in its internal incarnation, as seen in *The Retreat*. However, the turmoil spurred newly created art forms, like Instapoetry, demonstrating that a secret group may still be necessary today—not necessarily as a “retreat” but as an incubation space for art.

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## APPENDIX HUMAN SUBJECTS IRB APPROVAL

Date: 10-1-2020

IRB #: IRB-FY2018-420

Title: Writing in Secret: Technofeminism and the Scholar-Creator

Creation Date: 11-28-2017

End Date: 11-2-2020

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Lanette Cadle Review Board: MSU Sponsor:

### Study History

|                 |              |                       |          |          |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------|----------|
| Submission Type | Initial      | Review Type Expedited | Decision | Approved |
| Submission Type | Renewal      | Review Type Expedited | Decision | Approved |
| Submission Type | Modification | Review Type Exempt    | Decision | Approved |
| Submission Type | Renewal      | Review Type Expedited | Decision | Approved |

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