ENG351 Contemporary Writing: What Happens Next?

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Focus: Technological changes impact

Title: Looking at the impact of Instagram on contemporary poetry, specifically focusing the writing of Rupi Kaur

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Technological changes in literary culture has had a massive impact on how and why audiences engage with the literature they do. Make an argument concerning the influence of technology on literary form and readership, focusing on one or two texts from the module.

Looking at the impact of Instagram on contemporary poetry, specifically focusing the writing of Rupi Kaur

After decades of decline and critics bemoaning its apparent death, poetry has seen an upswing of popularity. It has hit record sales in the UK, growing by 12% from last year to sales of £12.3m, with two thirds of buyers being under the age of 34, and the majority of those being women.[1] The advent of social media has had a profound effect on contemporary poetry. This growing market is dominated by poets who originated on social media, social- or insta-poets, as they're commonly known. In 2017, twelve of the top twenty bestselling poets were insta-poets.[2] Leading the charge of these social poets is 25-year-old Rupi Kaur, the Indian-Canadian poet whose debut collection, *milk and honey* (2014), was an international best-seller and poetry phenomenon.[3] Kaur's success would not have been possible without the social media platform Instagram, which has affected almost every aspect of the contemporary poetry world, from its readers to the writing's form and style, and has placed the insta-poet front-and-centre of the current poetry conversation.

The term 'insta-poet' is difficult to precisely define because it is used as a descriptor for a variety of poets and practices. While the name itself suggests that an insta-poet is a poet who works primarily on Instagram, it is also used to describe poets who write on other social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube, as well as young contemporary poets whose work isn't published primarily on social media. Poets such as Hollie McNish and Hera

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[1] Donna Ferguson, 'Poetry Sales Soar as Political Millennials Search for Clarity', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2019, section Books <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/21/poetry-sales-soar-as-political-millennials-search-for-clarity> [accessed 25 March 2019].

[2] John Maher, 'Can Instagram Make Poems Sell Again?', *Publishers Weekly*, 2018 <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/75976-can-instagram-make-poems-sell-again.html> [accessed 25 March 2019].

[3] Faith Hill Yuan Karen, 'How Instagram Saved Poetry', *The Atlantic*, 2018 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/rupi-kaur-instagram-poet-entrepreneur/572746/> [accessed 25 March 2019].

Lindsay Bird, for example, are frequently labelled as insta-poets despite the fact that they do not post their work primarily on Instagram, and instead found success through YouTube and traditional poetry magazine publishing, respectively.[4] The term has transformed into a catch-all to describe young, contemporary poets, many of whom are women or from marginalised groups, regardless of whether they use social media or not. Regardless, this essay will focus on Instagram specifically as a platform to publish poetry, and Kaur as an insta-poet in particular.

The functionality of Instagram in the way that it operates and is used, specifically with its hashtag tool, is a major factor in the rise of Instagram poetry and the community around it. Founded in 2010 as a photo-sharing platform, Instagram is one of the biggest social networking sites in the world, with over a billion monthly active users.[5][6] While users primarily see posts from other users that they follow, they can also discover new posts by searching through hashtags. These hashtags tend to be key words that relate to an area of interest, such as #fitness or #makeup, and function as a form of metadata that 'characterize topics and discussions'.[7] By searching for a specific hashtag, Instagram users can find content posted by other people relating to certain subjects, and therefore find other users whose interests align with theirs. This is one of the primary motivations for people who use the platform, who wish specifically to 'seek out social relationships with other users who share similar interests'.[8] Instagram poetry has flourished inside these hashtag communities; at the time of writing, '#poem' on Instagram has over 12 million posts, and '#instapoet' over 2 million.[9][10] These hashtags allow insta-poets to find and connect with their audience quickly and with ease, increasing their reach dramatically.

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[4] Anna Leszkiewicz, 'Why Are We so Worried about "Instapoetry"?', *The New Statesman*, 2019 <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/03/instapoetry-rupi-kaur-genre-rm-drake-rh-sin-atticus-hollie-mcnish> [accessed 19 April 2019].

[5] Eunji Lee and others, 'Pictures Speak Louder than Words: Motivations for Using Instagram', *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, 18.9 (2015), pp. 552–56, p. 552 <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0157>.

[6] Instagram and TechCrunch, 'Instagram: Active Users 2018', *Statista* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/> [accessed 10 April 2019].

[7] Philipp Lorenz-Spreen and others, 'Tracking Online Topics over Time: Understanding Dynamic Hashtag Communities', *Computational Social Networks*, 5.1 (2018), 9 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40649-018-0058-6>.

[8] Lee and others, p. 555.

[9] '#poem', *Instagram* <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/poem/> [accessed 15 April 2019].

[10] '#instapoet', *Instagram* <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/instapoet/> [accessed 15 April 2019].

This has had a direct impact on the sales of contemporary poetry, as can be seen in the demographics of current poetry buyers. As stated in the introduction, last year two thirds of poetry buyers were under the age of 34; this matches up closely to the demographics of Instagram users, 71% of whom are under the age of 35, and 53% of under the age of 25.[11][12] This overlap in demographics suggests a correlation between Instagram users and poetry buyers, reinforced by Kaur's Instagram following; she has sold over 3.5 million copies of her debut poetry collection, *milk and honey*, which almost exactly matches her Instagram follower count of 3.6 million.[13] Though this is not to suggest that all of her followers bought a copy of *milk and honey*, it illustrates the direct impact Instagram has had on the popularization of poetry and allowed contemporary poets to reach a mass audience.

As a platform, Instagram also gives those who are often excluded from the more 'traditional' poetry scenes, such as women, poets of colour, and LGBTQ+ poets, the opportunity to publish their work. In the more traditional poetry world of print publishing and magazines, the majority of both writers and critics are white men from privileged backgrounds whose work is being judged and uplifted by those from backgrounds similar to theirs.[14] Those from marginalised backgrounds are facing 'systemic exclusion' from these publications because their work doesn't match the expectations of the publishing gatekeepers.[15] However, on Instagram there is no barrier for publication because 'in the digital world, anyone with a computer and a link to the internet can be a publisher, and writers can upload their work freely onto their chosen platform'.[16] This can be seen as a factor in the large number of women and non-white poets who upload their work onto Instagram, as they are free to publish their writing without having to gain the approval of a

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[11] Ferguson.

[12] Hootsuite, We Are Social, and DataReportal, 'Instagram: Age Distribution of Global Audiences 2019', *Statista* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/> [accessed 10 April 2019].

[13] Yuan.

[14] Alison Flood, 'Ode to Whiteness: British Poetry Scene Fails Diversity Test', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2018, section Books <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/24/british-poetry-scene-fails-diversity-test> [accessed 22 April 2019].

[15] Flood.

[16] Sidney E. Berger, 'The Future of Publishing in the Digital Age', in *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication*, ed. by Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys (New York, USA: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), pp. 147–58, p. 149.

pre-existing establishment.[17] Kaur, herself an immigrant woman of Indian heritage, has spoken in the past of her struggles to get her poetry published in literary magazines, and by bypassing literary gatekeepers, she was able to successfully publish her work online and find an audience outside of the typical poetry publishing spaces.[18]

That being said, this lack of a barrier to publication also means that there is no-one to edit the writing or judge the quality of work. This has sparked debate about the quality of the poetry on Instagram and the writing style in particular, which is seen by some as lacking skill and depth. Kaur's poetry, and subsequent popularity, has in particular drawn derision from the traditional poetry community. In a controversial review written for the PN Review, poet Rebecca Watts described the writing of Insta-poets, and Kaur in particular, as causing the 'denigration of intellectual engagement' and 'rejection of craft' in contemporary poetry.[19] Kaur's poetry is not difficult to understand, her work often plainly spelling out its themes and intent, such as in her untitled poem:

> it must hurt to know
>
> i am your most
>
> beautiful
>
> regret[20]

This four-line poem uses enjambment to break up a sentence which could be whole in a piece of prose, and is clearly addressing a previous relationship that went wrong. This plain and simple style, according to critics, means Kaur's poetry lacks sophistication and depth, and is therefore lesser and not 'proper' poetry.

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[17] Camilla Forte, 'How Instagram Poetry Became a Wolf in Sheep's Clothing', *Study Breaks*, 2019 <https://studybreaks.com/thoughts/instagram-poetry-legacy/> [accessed 23 April 2019].

[18] Rebecca Szkutak, 'How Rupi Kaur Used Instagram to Transform Poetry', *Interview Magazine*, 2017 <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/how-rupi-kaur-used-instagram-to-transform-poetry> [accessed 20 April 2019].

[19] Rebecca Watts, 'The Cult of the Noble Amateur', *PN Review*, January 2018 <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10090> [accessed 14 April 2019].

[20] Rupi Kaur, *Milk and Honey* (Missouri, USA: Andrews McMeel, 2015), p. 84.

However, this is not a view shared by the entire traditional poetry world. William Sieghart, founder of the Forward Prizes for Poetry, defended the accessibility of so-called 'simpler' poems in a talk at the London Book Fair, saying that 'accessibility and excellence should be hand-in-hand, not mutually exclusive', and Instagram has 'changed the game' by allowing a greater range of diverse voices in poetry.[21] The more 'difficult' poetry, while being apparently skillful, is marred by an innate elitism whereby it is only understood by those who have either the time or educational background to analyse it. This elitist barrier that surrounds the world of traditional poetry is almost a point of pride in Watt's essay, where she states that 'elitism is not considered an evil in itself' in other professions such as medicine, and therefore argues that it is a perfectly natural thing to occur in the world of high-class poetry.[22] This, of course, is completely ignoring the barriers people from marginalised groups face reaching the elite levels of art and higher education in the first place, though that is a wider debate in itself. What is undeniable is that Instagram and the poetry published on there is providing greater access of poetry to a wider audience; Kaur herself has said that she believes 'art should be accessible to the masses', which is one of the reasons why her writing is so accessible and easy to read.[23]

However, it must also be said that Instagram has had a massive impact of the form of contemporary poetry, almost to the point of homogeny, largely due to the platform's basic infrastructure. Most of the major, bestselling insta-poets write in a short, free-form style. This includes Kaur, who frequently posts brief poems onto her Instagram, such as an untitled poem posted in February 2019:

> fall
> in love
> with your solitude[24]

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[21] William Sieghart, *In Poetry, Truth: Why Poetry is Good for the Soul,* London Book Fair, 2019.
[22] Watts.
[23] Alyssa Edes, Jacob Conrad, and Petra Mayer, 'Poet Rupi Kaur: "Art Should Be Accessible To The Masses"', *NPR,* 2019 <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/09/554561078/poet-rupi-kaur-art-should-be-accessible-to-the-masses> [accessed 21 March 2019].
[24] Rupi Kaur, 'Untitled', *Instagram,* 2019 <https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/> [accessed 14 April 2019].

These three lines are easy to digest while reading at a glance; the reader can pick out the keywords of 'love' and 'solitude', and comprehend the meaning of the poem with ease.[25] This can be attributed almost directly to social media sites such as Instagram. Writers have to adapt to fit their work onto Instagram's image size, which favours shorter work. The shorter the work, the bigger the font the poet can publish in, and the clearer the text is to the reader. This is especially the case with Instagram as it is such a fast-paced social media platform where users can scroll through tens of posts in a matter of seconds, with Kaur's publisher, Kirsty Melville, commenting that 'the medium of poetry reflects our age, where short-form communication is something people find easier to digest or connect with'.[26] This impact can be seen in other insta-poets such as bestselling writer Amanda Lovelace, who writes poems such as:

repeat after me:

you owe

no one

your

forgiveness.

-*except perhaps yourself*.[27]

Similarly to Kaur, Lovelace writes short, freeform poems that make heavy use of enjambment, and her similar success shows how wide the influence of Instagram is on the form of insta-poetry. It is a form that is easily replicated, and as a result invites parody and mockery. A notable parody is the bestselling humour-poetry collection *Milk and Vine* (2017).[28] The collection takes quotes from popular videos from the now-defunct video-sharing website Vine, and puts them into poems in the same form as Kaur, for example:

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[25] Kaur, 'Untitled'.
[26] Anisee Goss, 'How To Sell Nearly a Half-Million Copies of a Poetry Book', *Publishers Weekly*, 2016 <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/71353-how-to-sell-nearly-a-half-million-copies-of-a-poetry-book.html> [accessed 24 April 2019].
[27] Amanda Lovelace, *The Princess Saves Herself in This One* (Missouri, USA: Andrew McMeel, 2016), p. 182.
[28] Paris Martineau, 'How a Bizarre Poetry Book of Vines Became a No. 1 Amazon Best Seller', *Intelligencer*, 2017 <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/11/how-a-bizarre-vine-poetry-book-became-an-amazon-best-seller.html> [accessed 28 February 2019].

Get to del taco

They got a new thing

Called freesha-

freeshavacado[29]

This is a quote taken from a famous 2016 Vine posted by user Gasoleen, where a woman humorously mispronounces a Del Taco sign advertising fresh avocado.[30] This collection in some way exemplifies a lot of the criticism levelled against Kaur, namely that her writing is simplistic and lacks poetic skill, in that it is still recognizably Kaur's style of writing even when the content is a humorous quote.

On the other hand, Instagram as a platform has also given poets the tools to distinguish themselves in an increasingly crowded market by placing the poet in a place of increased importance whereby the poet is as much of a draw as the poetry itself. This is showcased most obviously through Kaur's Instagram feed; as can be seen in Figure One, every other picture that Kaur posts is a photo of herself or some photo related to her, a theme she has kept to since she first started posting poetry on Instagram in 2013.[31] This has clearly been carefully curated so that her followers are seeing as much of her

Figure One

as they are her writing, and is an example of personal branding. In modern terms, a 'brand' can largely be defined as 'the attachment of a name and reputation to something or someone, primarily to distinguish it' from others who may be similar.[32] In Kaur's case, her 'reputation' is heavily linked to her identity as a South Asian woman and immigrant, and the
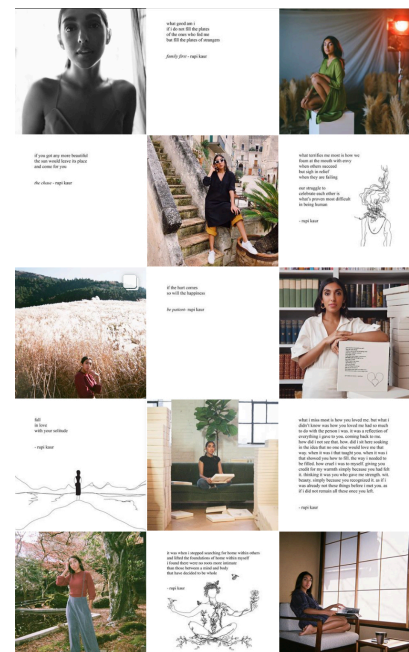
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[29] Adam Gasiewski and Emily Beck, *Milk and Vine* (United States: Independently Published, 2017), p. 12.
[30] Ari Spool, '#FreshAvocado / Fresh Avocado', *Know Your Meme* <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/freshavocado-fresh-avocado> [accessed 15 April 2019].
[31] Rupi Kaur, 'Rupi Kaur (@rupikaur_)', *Instagram* <https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/> [accessed 20 April 2019].
[32] Catharine Slade-Brooking, *Creating a Brand Identity: A Guide for Designers* (London, UK: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), p. 12.

confessional nature of her poetry, which focus on a wide-range of topics from heartbreak to sexual assault.[33] In fact, Kaur initially gained fame not through her poetry, but from a letter she wrote criticising Instagram for removing a picture showing menstrual blood, which went viral online.[34] Instagram, and social media platforms in general, encourage the development of parasocial relationships, a 'one-sided quasi-relationship between a viewer and a media figure', by emphasising the sharing of personal information to a mass audience.[35] This results in followers becoming heavily invested in the lives of these insta-poets and, as a result, being more likely to read and invest in their work.

Kaur's dedication to her Instagram theme illustrates the wider importance of the aesthetic on Instagram as a primarily image-focused platform which naturally prioritises the visual, especially in the online world of insta-poetry. The '"image first, text second" rule of Instagram creates strong visual-oriented culture' on the site.[36] Kaur is the most prominent example of this as she often draws illustrations to go alongside her poems. This can be seen in Figure Two, a poem called *women of colour* which show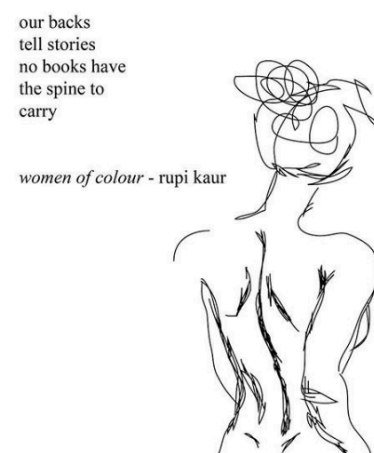s the drawing of a woman's back alongside the words 'our backs/tell stories/no books have/the spine to/carry'.[37] The complementary nature of the poem with the illustration is an example of intermedia art. Coined by the artist-composer Dick Higgins in the 1960s, intermedia art can be defined as 'works which fall conceptually between media that are already known', an example of which he gives being 'paintings which incorporate poems within their visual fields'.[38] The

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

women of colour - rupi kaur

Figure Two

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[33] Szkutak.

[34] Shannon Carlin, 'Meet Rupi Kaur, Queen of the "Instapoets"', *Rolling Stone*, 2017 <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/meet-rupi-kaur-queen-of-the-instapoets-129262/> [accessed 20 April 2019].

[35] Michael G. Blight, Erin K. Ruppel, and Kelsea V. Schoenbauer, 'Sense of Community on Twitter and Instagram: Exploring the Roles of Motives and Parasocial Relationships', *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, 20.5 (2017), pp. 314–19, p. 314 <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0505>.

[36] Lee and others, p. 552.

[37] Rupi Kaur, 'Women of Colour', *Instagram*, 2019 <https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/> [accessed 8 April 2019].

[38] Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', *Leonardo*, 34.1 (2001), 49–54.

intermingling of poetry with visual art has a long established history; Romantic poet William Blake created engravings alongside many of his poems, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote sonnets together with his paintings, as well as illustrating some of the writing of his sister, poet Christina Rossetti.[39][40] Instagram, therefore, seems like a natural fit for an insta-poet's intermedia art, which allows for both increased comprehension of the poem's meaning, and the potential for further artistic interpretation.

Even insta-poets who do not put illustrations besides their drawings still emphasise the aestheics of the poem in how it is presented as an image. Hessa A. Alghadeer writes in his article *Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts* that 'the aesthetic value of poetry, along with the interaction among its semantic, syntactic, phonetic and typographic components' is a part of the appeal of the genre for readers.[41] The poet known as wilderpoety on Instagram, for

Figure Three

example, presents their poems in unusual and artistic ways, generally with interesting typography or accompanying props. This can be seen in Figure Three, which features a three lined untitled poem, where the lines 'NEVER BE AFRAID/TO MAKE YOUR/OWN WAVES' are written with pen on the poet's hand and accompanied by sea shells.[42] These shells complement the poem with its use of 'waves', as well as helping to create a visually appealing image.[43] This falls in line with what academic Lori Emerson described in her book *Reading Writing Interfaces* (2014), where she says that the multimodal nature of online interfaces 'may erode traditional literary genres such that poetry could be visual art as much

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[39] Richard Garnett, *William Blake: Painter and Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 3 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/52300/52300-h/52300-h.htm> [accessed 19 April 2019].

[40] Frances Dickey, *The Modern Portrait Poem: From Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound* (Charlottesville, UNITED STATES: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 1 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/falmouth-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3444043> [accessed 19 April 2019].

[41] Hessa A. Alghadeer, 'Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts', *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3.2 (2014), pp. 87–96, p. 87 <https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v3i2.354>.

[42] wilderpoetry, 'Untitled', *Instagram*, 2019 <https://www.instagram.com/wilderpoetry/> [accessed 19 April 2019].

[43] wilderpoetry.

as it could be fiction and vice versa'.[44] The idea of boundaries between image and word is almost irrelevant on a platform like Instagram because everything is an image, and the growth of intermedia art on the platform is simply a natural reaction to this.

Instagram, however, does have its limitations; because posts are displayed singularly and unconnected from one-another, it places the focus on individual poems and doesn't easily support longer stories or connected bodies of work. This can be seen in the physical poetry collections that insta-poets such as Kaur produce alongside their work online. In her book *English for Tomorrow* (1997), Sally Tweddle writes that "exploring and experimenting (...) in a new medium can offer insights into and shifts of meaning"; which this 'new medium' was traditionally thought of as print to digital, Kaur did this the other way around.[45] Her collection *milk and honey* is split into four sections according to theme; 'the hurting', 'the loving', 'the breaking' and 'the healing'.[46] By collecting her poetry together into a print book, she gives it additional context and a narrative that it lacks as singular posts on Instagram. Another successful example of this is the non-fiction book *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary* (2015). First published as a zine by the radical zine collective *Research and Destroy*, the book is a collection of tweets from the 2015 Baltimore protests that stemmed from

Figure Four

the murder of Freddie Gray, a young African American man who died in police custody.[47] As can be seen in Figure Four, the book is made up of screenshots of
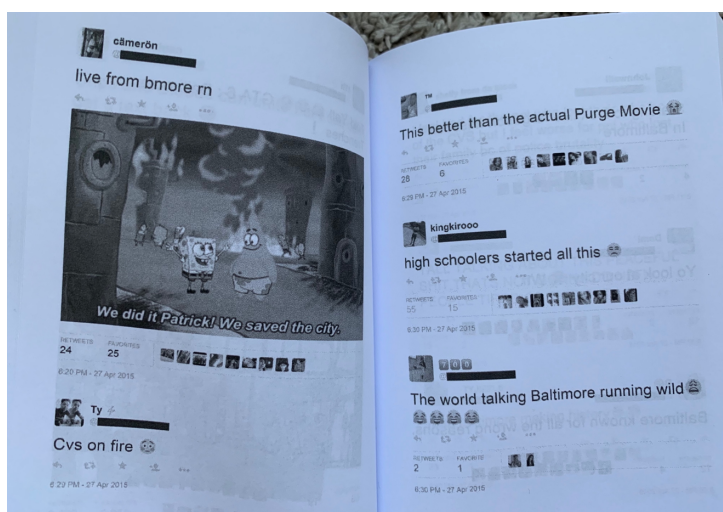
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tweets and memes from young people who were living in Baltimore and experiencing the protests at the time.[48] While these tweets can all be viewed online for free, by putting them together in book form it has created a narrative that disconnected tweets otherwise lack. While Instagram is widening the possibilities of contemporary poetry, physical printed poetry is still a valuable form that has not been made obsolete by the current digital age.

Overall, Instagram has had a massive impact on the world of contemporary poetry. From the boost in sales and widening demographics of both poetry readers and writers, to the shift in form and increased emphasis on multimedia, the platform has defined the current generation poetry. Whether the focus will remain on digital poetry, or if reactionary forces will result in a return to traditional poetry magazines and printing, has yet to be seen, but either way, the impact of Instagram on poetry is undeniable and should be felt for a long time.

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[48] Various, *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary* (Baltimore, USA: Research and Destroy, 2015) p. 48.

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