

The Queen and the Laureate: Social Media Poets and the Creation of Minor Literatures

by

HANNAH TAYLOR

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Texas Christian University
Fort Worth Texas

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Introduction

In late 2018, the National Endowment for the Arts reported that the number of poetry readers in the United States has almost doubled in the past five years. Young adults, in particular, have increased their reading of poetry. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, poetry reading has increased by two-fold. Nearly one-fifth of all 18-24 year-old Americans read poetry outside of the classroom in 2018. Amy Stolls, the NEA's Director of Literature stated that "[she] suspects social media has an influence," on the increase with young people, in particular¹.

As with nearly every other facet of modern life, social media creates an ease of access. All a person needs to interact with millions of others is an internet connection. The seeming shrinking of the world has also changed the way artists function—they are able to share and produce work with unprecedented reach and access. In many ways, poetry is perfectly suited for the social media turn—it is portable, mobile, highly shareable, and short both for creation and consumption. Stating that social media based poets have dramatically shifted the state of poetry publishing is not an understatement. 12 of the top 20 best-selling poets in 2017 started their careers on the web. Poetry sales in 2017 doubled from 2016². In 2010, Charles Harbach wrote two rival American literary cultures exist: the academic, M.F.A track and the New York publishing world³. It would seem that social media, and poets using the platform to create, fissures that dichotomy.

¹ For more information on the National Endowment for the Arts, and how the foundation has encouraged the development of poetry see: <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2018/taking-note-poetry-reading-%E2%80%94federal-survey-results>

² This article illuminates just how drastically the publishing world is being shifted by social media borne poetry <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/75976-can-instagram-make-poems-sell-again.html>

³ To read more on Harbach's analysis of the poetry world, see <https://slate.com/culture/2010/11/mfa-vs-nyc-america-now-has-two-distinct-literary-cultures-which-one-will-last.html>

This project came from a state of unease. I sat in the first of the two camps that Harbach mentions for all of my undergraduate career—convinced that success in poetry required an advanced degree and a deep respect for the craft and history of poetry. Like many critics, I saw Instagram poetry as an exercise in self-indulgence, lacking depth, and capitalizing on readers' identity insecurities to turn a profit. I recognize, now, that this opinion comes from a place of privilege. I am a white, heterosexual, middle class woman—a formal education was an expectation in my household. I had access to books from a young age, and was encouraged by my family to develop a love and respect for the arts. This project has complicated how I view poetry and art, particularly in how artists create and how audiences interact with their art. As I watched my peers and family read poetry when they previously swore they had no interest, I needed to reconsider the role that social media-based poetry plays in mainstream culture's interaction with literature. Ultimately poetry, like any art form, does not exist in a vacuum. Like the world around us, it changes and our reactions to it arise out of our past experiences. The form will be affected by the medium in which it is presented. It is time to take notice.

This thesis uses case studies of two major social media poets to explore how new media platforms impact access to poetry. How does social media democratize and complicate access to the creation of poetry? (How) are poets using various platforms to share their work, and create different and impactful types of poetry? I argue that social media allows poets who would otherwise not have a voice to create minor literatures and disrupt the hegemony of the dualistic poetry world that Harbach discusses.

To ground the study, I use Deleuze and Guatarri's *Minor Literatures* as a theoretical framework for the project. I foreground these two theorists because I find their framework to be incredibly clear and applicable to the work of social media poets; however, I aim to complicate

the work of two affluent, privileged men, particularly when it is addressing the work of minority groups. I then use two exemplars of minor literatures, not only to complicate the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, but also to establish a history of this theory within the genre of poetry. Edna St. Millay, an early 20th century lyric poet, creates a minor literature by using her public persona and writing to take an activist stance for a “New Kind of Woman.” Audre Lorde, the second exemplar, is a black, queer, feminist poet who used her writing to speak for her community and embody activism. Both women risked their safety and livelihood to write for people who had similar identities. They were warriors, advocates, and inspirations. I argue that Instagram poets can function in the same way.

The second chapter of this thesis examines poet Rupi Kaur and how her use of social media creates, complicates, and ultimately limits the creation of a minor literature. While Kaur is not the first Instapoet, a term created by the poets to connect them to their social media origins, she is certainly one of the most successful. Kaur is a 25-year old who outsold Homer’s *The Odyssey* in 2016 with her first collection, *milk and honey*. Kaur is far from beloved in most literary communities—she has been dubbed trite and much of her shorter, more inspirational verse has been mockingly called “Greeting Card Poetry.”⁴ Using a textual and paratextual analysis of Kaur’s work, as well as ethnographic data from a poetry reading, I argue that Kaur used social media to create a minor literature, one that is ultimately limited by the capitalistic nature of the platform.

The third chapter looks at the poet Warsan Shire and how her use of social media, and eventual abandonment of most new media platforms, creates a minor literature. Shire is a young,

⁴ For many scathing critiques of Kaur’s work, visit any of these links:
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaur-poetry> ,
<https://theconcourse.deadspin.com/instagram-poet-rupi-kaur-seems-utterly-uninterested-in-1819153164>
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/oct/04/rupi-kaur-instapoets-the-sun-and-her-flowers>

prolific poet who, unlike Kaur, has received both popular and critical acclaim for her emotional and raw prose. Shire represents a new kind of author—one who doesn't squarely fit in any singular definition or identity, who can properly speak to a generation of people who feel slightly out of place, who accept all races and creeds, connected by a shared transnational culture and tolerant of each other's differences. Using a textual and paratextual analysis of her poetry, Twitter, and interviews, I argue that Shire's work creates a minor literature that would have not been possible without the use of social and digital media to spread her work, and how her eventual exit from social media avoids some of the complications that Kaur faces.

As a result of the dissonance between pop culture poetry and academic poetry that I, myself, felt as a student, there is a gap in scholarship about new media poets, in this exact capacity. There is other research on multimodal composition, particular in comic books and literature more broadly. New media poetry is being used in fascinating and complicating ways, and is due the attention of the academic community. I believe that this work can establish a trend in poetic history, and illuminate how minor literatures are both developed and limited by poets who are publishing in non-traditional ways. As digital and social media continues to impact the shifting culture of art, it is important to take stock of potential expansion and implication to the artistic field.

Chapter One: A Minor History of Minor Literatures

One history of poetry can be traced through broad strokes of resistance and incorporation, both on the parts of the fringe poets and of the mainstream. The work of fringe and minority groups has expanded the scope of what is considered poetry since the beginning of versed writing as a genre. As in any discourse, there is a dominant mode of communication that is, by its nature, exclusionary. Minor literatures exist on margins the of this dominant discourse. Thus, as I will explain, while minor literature is concerned with institutionalized power structures and the manner in which these institutions work to define subjects of the state, and in this case discipline, it does not seek to offer a counter-ideology, but rather to “break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings” within dominant discourses (Deleuze and Guatarri 28). The framework of minor literatures not only allows for the examination of how a particular group of writing and writers resists the dominant body, but also how that resistance is incorporated into the mainstream. It is a push and pull of power that redefines the major and the minor through the continual loop of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

Minor literatures are often highly controversial works, as they are marked be deterritorialization, political identity, and collective agency. As defined by Deleuze and Guattari in their work on Kafka:

“A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. But the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization.”

Minor literatures are those writings that exist both within and outside of the dominant mode of creation. They work in the language of the major discourse to create ruptures. In this case territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization are defined as the creation and maintenance of a cultural space, the dissolution of that space, and its recreation. (Hurley, et al). The presence of deterritorialization, or in more concrete terms the dissolution of the minorities created cultural spaces, marks the advent of a minor literature. This dissolution is the effect of some impossibility—in the case of Deleuze and Guatarri’s exemplar of Kafka, it was the impossibility of writing at all in an oppressed state, writing in German (the dominant language) and writing in the non-dominant language. The Kafka example resulted in the deterritorialization of language for the Prague Jew’s, which both allowed the minor use of German and opened up the cultural space to dissolution (Deleuze, Guatarri, 17). Therefore, minor literatures are inextricably linked to the dominant discourse, not only because they must use its language to communicate, but also because this use allows for an entry point of incorporation into the mainstream.

The second defining characteristic of a minor literature is that everything uttered within them is political. In contrast, the individuals within major literatures are impacted by their social surroundings, surely, but they are not representative of their environment and background. Minor literatures operate in a different way. Because they “exist in a narrow space, every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political” (17). The minor literature creates a paradox in which the individual is both strengthened and ignored. An individual author or character is hyper-examined because they are made representative of a much larger social space;

in the example of Kafka, he is made to represent the whole of the Prague Jewish people. The individual is a political body, and in this politicization, the individual is erased. This can be true of not just authors, but also characters within minor literatures.

Similarly, the final defining characteristic of a minor literature is that “everything has a collective value” (18). This is the case because, at least at the onset of creation, the narrow identity spaces these literatures exist in do not allow for many talents to blossom. In major literatures, there are enough writers so that masters of the craft can arise. They speak as highly individualized authors whose individual utterance is not intended to speak for the masses, but rather as a reflection of his/her (but mostly his) view of the world. In contrast, in minor literatures, “what the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political—even if others do not agree with him” (18). As a result of the deterritorialization and politicization discussed in the first and second characteristics, the limited nature of minor literatures creates a fragile community in which a single or small set of authors is able to represent and create a sense of solidarity. These authors become more than themselves, and what they create is not seen to be their cause or effect; rather, “there is no subject: there are only collective arrangements of utterance and literature expresses these arrangements, not as they are given on the outside, but only as diabolic powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed” (19). As a result of this revolutionary space, minor literatures are often highly contested and controversial works. They are speaking for a group, and in some cases against a group, and because of this are viewed as revolutionary.

Since Deleuze and Guatarri’s initial definition of minor literatures in 1975, there has been a push to redefine the theoretical framework to be more inclusive of groups where language has a more broad definition. When removed from strictly theorizing about language, minor literatures

have the ability to disrupt and “alter conventional literary hierarchies by fostering an appreciation for marginalized senses” and literatures (Baraber-Stetson 149). While Deleuze and Guattari claim that marginalized writers are most primed to create minor literature, that every writer has the potential to “[find] his own point of underdevelopment, his own patois, his own third world, his own desert” because “minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (17-18, emphasis in original). Therefore, it is easy to position certain popular culture texts within this framework because they are outside of a more strict academic canon—such as comics and digital literatures, which “rather than revisiting, resisting, and endeavoring to be liberated from the system of the major...they suggests a scholarly nomadism that houses the potential to ‘express another possible community and forge the means for another consciousness and sensibility’” (La Cour 88). Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the existence of minor literatures within and outside of academic settings. Academic discourse is a powerful institution that can act as a gatekeeper for certain works; how minor literatures operate within that structure could prove fruitful for study.

I use Deleuze and Guattari to ground the examination of social media poets because their theory is clear in its construction. However, neither man experienced the marginalization that they discuss and I believe it is important to incorporate those voices not only into theoretical framework, but also into analysis. Audre Lorde, who also creates a minor literature that I will discuss later, outlines similar ideas of disrupting hegemonic discourses. Lorde has an astute knowledge of the role she plays as a creator of minor literature and a deep understanding of the power of language. To outline Lorde’s belief in language as a movable force, and incorporate her into my theoretical framework, I will turn to a specific speech in which she defines and

expands upon what she believes her role to be as poet. I will also use her work as an exemplar later in this chapter. Throughout, Lorde is keenly aware of the political space she occupies, and sees importance in defining that space so that it can be used to create a resistant community. “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” a speech she gave about her work during the Modern Language Association’s “Literature and Language Panel,” and was later published in her book *Sister/Outsider*, speaks to the tenets of minor literatures with incredible clarity. In the speech, Lorde makes it clear that she understands the political power her work has to represent more than herself:

“But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences” (Lorde 41).

The “other women” Lorde speaks to here is who she represents through her work. She attends to their “differences” and still creates a larger collective to enact power. She is representing through her work a complex, political identity, that a larger group of women with differences can identify with. Lorde also speaks to the power of language:

“Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and the power of language, and to the reclaiming of the language which has been made to work against us” (Lorde 43).

In this, Lorde is addressing directly the theme of deterritorialization. Language has been used as a method of control against her community, and she is calling upon others to use that same language to resist. She remarks how her use of language has ruptured the collective silence of black women, but asks others to do the same; not only by speaking, but also by reading and

reciting the works of black, queer, female poets. This will create a collective utterance, a community enacting the language of the dominant group to rupture their control.

Near the end of her speech, Lorde calls upon the first three principles of Kwanza to act as a call to action. The first value she speaks of is “unity—the decision to strive for and maintain unity in self and community” the second, “the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves instead of being defined and spoken for by others” and lastly, “the decision to build ourselves and our communities together” (43).

These values of Kwanza, which Lorde likely invokes to reterritorialize her culture and call upon a common set of beliefs among the community she is representing, are remarkably similar to the ideas of minor literatures. The first value, unity, creates a community. It places Lorde as the speaker in harmony with the rest of the members, removing her identity as subject and creating a powerful, single voice. The second value, again, recognizes language as a powerful tool for deterritorialization. By “defining” and “speaking” for themselves, this collective is now speaking through the language of the colonizer, deterritorializing their identity and rupturing the hegemony of the dominant group. The final value speaks to the individual becoming political; by making the conscious choice to build communities together, these individuals are becoming a larger political force.

Including Lorde’s speech serves two purposes. First, it is important to include historically marginalized voices. Second, it captures the complicated nature of classifying minor literatures in the modern world. The Deleuze and Guattari definition is clear cut, but Lorde complicates it and expands upon it.

The three characteristics of minor literatures—deterritorialization, politicization of the individual, and collective identity—both make the works a strong cultural force and an

incredibly fragile one. The unity of the collective political voice has a distinct weight to it, and has the ability to redefine perceptions of a given community, their culture, and the relationship they have to the dominant institutions. However, the use of the dominant language to accomplish this opens them up to opportunities for dissolution of their community, which is often done by incorporation of these literatures into the dominant narratives. Even still, they are able to resist from within the structures by continuing to create for a minor community within a major one. This creates the constant loop of resistance and incorporation that is key to understanding minor literatures.

It is easier to explain the development of minor literatures through examples; I argue that the history of poetry can be measured through a series of these such literatures, from the incorporation of short form poetry to the works of the poets I will examine more closely in the following chapters.

Writers who become creators of minor literatures are plentiful. Particularly poets, who often write in search of capturing a universality, are deeply impacted by their personal identities and what that means for those who share similar social locations. Therefore, I took great care in selecting these few exemplars, while recognizing that there are many other poets who create minor literatures and represent their communities in powerful and impactful ways. I looked first to poets who were writing at times of great change in history. Broadly speaking, these poets needed to attend to a larger cultural and political shift through their work, be it a revolution, a war, or a high time for activism. Next, the poet needed to have a highly intersectional identity, and speak to that identity through their poetry. Lastly, they needed to be a figure who, upon later reflection, stood for their political time and identity. This system was by no means perfect but did allow me to find two poets who spoke profoundly to the ideals of minor literatures, Edna St.

Vincent Millay and Audre Lorde. I know there are many great artists who whose contributions will not be properly attended to here, but the two I have chosen will outline one history of poetic minor literatures—political representatives who create a collective utterance of their people through thoughtful work that destabilizes power through the use of language.

Edna St. Vincent Millay: A “New” Type of Woman

Edna St. Vincent Millay’s popularity as a poet had at least as much to do with her person as her skill. She was known for her performance, her politics, her portrayal of the sexuality spectrum, and her embodiment of the new kinds of femininity that arose at the beginning of the 20th century. As biographer Nancy Milford notes, Millay “became the herald of the New Woman” (23). The 1920s and post-war America was a time of great change for women—they were beginning to be formally educated, they could earn their own money and exist independently from their spouses and families in a new and unprecedented way. “Certain long-term social trends began to accelerate – divorce rates increased rapidly, fertility rates declined, approval of extramarital sex had reached its peak by the late 1920s” (Michailidou 68). Millay “was particularly well-positioned to have an impact on the politics of the twentieth-century because she stood for many as a prototype of the ‘modern woman,’” particularly in her want for independence of body, mind, and voice (Newcomb 262). Millay was “aware of the complex relationship between her physical appearance, gender, and poetic vocation” and allowed herself to be photographed often (Parker 382). This was a clever choice in that it made Millay a distinctly public figure. This notoriety allowed her to become a representative for women and likeminded people, her fame creating opportunities for public dissent that would not have otherwise been available.

Millay used her mind and body to exert her political consciousness. The catalyst of her direct politicization was her arrest in 1927 after protesting the wrongful conviction of two Italian immigrants. Later, after the violence of World War II jolted Millay's passivist paradigm, she began to write propaganda for the United States government. Millay "came to see one of the central social functions of poetry as that of protest and resistance against powerful forces" and "used her disillusionment to produce forceful, implicit expressions of protest against and in critique of social injustice" (Newcombe 262). In this, Millay saw herself as a representative for a larger political body. For example, after the governor of Massachusetts failed to do anything in the case of the Italians Sacco and Vanzetti wrongfully accused of murder, Millay penned a poem entitled "Justice Denied in Massachusetts." Ultimately, her stature allowed her to make a collective utterance for those in protest. Millay was a radical risk taker, and in doing so, broke the hegemony of the dominant discourse of the time.

In addition to her political activism, Millay represented a new age of sexually free women. She was a celebrated Greenwich Village bohemian, eager to experiment with unconventional sexual practices. Despite the fact that she married, Millay continued "experimentations throughout her marriage, and chose a husband who actively supported her career" (Michailidou 69). During a time when the poetry of women focused intensely on the personal, Edna St. Vincent Millay was able to create critical, political work that came to represent the type of women who did not give into the intense social pressure to maintain gendered status quo.

Based only on her biographical information alone it is clear that Millay embodies the latter tenets of a minor literature—politicization of the individual, and representation of a collective utterance. She viewed her poetry through the lens of a minor literature, as well, even

though she wouldn't have used that language. She saw her poetry is inherently political, that her place in the public eye offered her affordances to speak for others less likely to be heard. As a female poet, which is enough to put her in a narrow category at the time, who also believed in controversial ideologies, such as passivism and free sex, Millay was speaking not as an individual, but as a reflection of the collective. The deterritorialization of language, though, is more apparent in her form and style.

Millay's earlier work is noted for using 19th century language, which can be read as an act of deterritorialization. Like other poets of the time, most notably Robert Frost, Millay wrote sonnets. She is not only employing the Standard English and form that was once inaccessible to women, but in her most successful works, a heightened level of embitterment that was usually relegated to a masculine sphere. These more embittered pieces start after her arrest. Poems like "Wine from these Grapes," "Justice Denied," and her essay "Fear," use allegory and reconfiguring of the eucharist narrative to display her radical disgust and desire to speak of social justice and mimics the use of 19th century poets (Newcombe 267). "Hangman's Oak", whose title refers to the social injustice of lynching, is the culmination of those rhetorical tactics. Together, they allow Millay to deterritorialize the language of the oppressive society, which was deeply concerned with religion in this time period. In religion, Millay saw hypocrisy—a group of preaching individuals who sought to limit sexual freedom for women because it was "sinful," while simultaneously remaining silent about other injustices (Newcombe 269). Her appropriation of this valorized image is deeply subversive, and disrupts the dominant discourse's narrative of justice.

In the first stanza, the speaker is a wine-presser charged with spreading knowledge, symbolized in the form grapes. She is turning knowledge, or grapes, into action, or wine. The

speaker addresses the reader, calling to them to engage in this action. In contrast to the story of the Wedding in Cana, where Christ creates wine miraculously, this speaker stomps grapes into wine through human labor. She appropriates this miracle to convey a sense of disillusionment:

If you would speak with me on any matter,
At any time, come where these grapes are grown;
And you will find me treading them to must.
Lean then above me sagely, lest I spatter
Drops of the wine I tread from grapes and dust.

This shifting of the eucharistic narrative is one example of how Millay deterritorializes the language of the dominant discourse of religious imagery. She begins with direct address, to hail the attention of the reader. The grapes throughout the poem represent knowledge, as well as an altering of the Wedding in Cana. Whereas wine in the religious narrative is meant to represent hope and faith, Millay distorts the image to embody injustice and wrongdoing. The use of the word “must” here is layered, representing both the smell of fermentation and the moral imperative the speaker feels to communicate this knowledge. Her anger is present in how she invites discussion, in this case debate, but warns the reader that she will “spatter drops of wine,” or illuminate the truth.

The second stanza shows the speaker dying. In it, she is stained with the knowledge she has pressed at the beginning of the poem, and nothing can separate her from it. Death, her “black lover” is reduced to a “fumbling” cuckold. There has been one before him in his bed:

Stained with these grapes I shall lie down to die.
Three women come to wash me clean
Shall not erase this stain.
Nor leave me lying purely,
Awaiting the black lover.

Death, fumbling to uncover
My body in his bed,
Shall know
There has been one
Before him.

In cuckholding death, the speaker is able to represent the subversion of oppression through speaking truth. Like the wine will keep death from fully owning the speaker, knowledge and speaking truth of injustice will keep someone free someone from oppression.

“Hangman’s Oak,” exemplifies Millay’s use of deterritorialization to create outspoken poetry of progressive political critique using the language of the people oppressing her and those who identified with her. By appropriating the image of eucharist, Millay creates a disruption in a dominant discourse. This cause was of such great importance to her that she, like the speaker, would claim it until her death.

The work of Edna St. Vincent Millay fell out of favor in the popular sphere with its increasing politicization. This recovery of her work is another reason Millay is an ideal exemplar for a minor literature—she has become a representative of a larger movement when viewed in retrospect. Despite her social presence and notability during the time she was writing, Millay’s work had been underexamined until the rise of feminist scholars in the 1990s. Modernists like T.S Eliot, William Carlos William, and W.H Auden assumed great importance and the works of more radical women, represented by Millay, were largely ignored. However, the inherent politicization of her person through her later works was very attractive to 2nd wave feminists coming to academia. We now read her as a woman who used her individual voice to create a collective utterance for other women. More contemporary viewed her as an inspiration, including

Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. Her use of language has politicized her individual figure so much so that it has lost subjectivity, becoming a minor literature.

Audre Lorde: Warrior Poet

Audre Lorde is a poet who self-identifies in many ways—as a Black woman, a lesbian, woman, a feminist woman. She calls herself a warrior first, poet second. This set of identities links her to her work and the people who read it in profound ways. She was an activist and the paradigm seeped through to the themes of her poetry. Lorde was creating in a politically wrought time. After graduating from Columbia University in 1961 with a Masters in Library Science, she published her first collection *First Cities*, to mild acclaim. She wrote five collections of poetry and two essays before dying from cancer in 1992. As a Black woman, Lorde concerned herself with writing about civil rights, not just for her race, but for woman and sexuality, as well.

Within the context of civil rights, Lorde used her poetry to create social change and connect a broader audience. She saw “poetry as the way [people] help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” and that the struggles of her life could be spoken through verse. Poetry was a space for expression for everyone and “these places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness” (Lorde 36). Poetry could help an individual find their power, and saw “the woman’s place of power as neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (37). She saw the struggles of her people and felt the community within that pain stating “there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power.” In her descriptions of poetry, it is clear that Lorde felt the form wielded a power

unparalleled to both recognize that oppression a group faces, and unite under that oppression to create change.

Lorde spoke to the many facets of her identity through her verse, both in content and in form. Her poem “For Each of You” speaks to the political and collective qualities indicative of a minor literature. Throughout the poem, Lorde offers directives to her audience. In the following excerpts from the poem, we can see how she crafts an audience that is not a universal one, but one made of those who see themselves in her. The first stanza establishes the use of the second person as a call to all others who share Lorde’s struggle:

Be who you are and will be
learn to cherish
that boisterous Black Angel that drives you
up one day and down another
protecting the place where your power rises
running like hot blood
from the same source
as your pain.

Lorde also calls to the Black identity, both as a source of pain and of power. The “running like hot blood” implies an intrinsic quality to this pain/power duality. It is within everyone who identifies with the “you” of the poem. The language begins to create a sense of the collective. Word choices like “cherish,” “protecting,” and “same source” engender a sense of warmth and unity. Additionally, the phrase “boisterous Black Angel” creates a vivid image for the reader to connect to. The repeated hard “b” sounds literally disrupts the process of speaking the poem, using the tongue to deterritorialize the mouth.

In the next stanza, the line breaks force the reader to slow down the reading to consider the small parts that constitute the whole, the head, hands, eyes, and heart, all individual pieces contributing to the experience of the body.

Do not let you head deny
your hands
any memory of what passes through them
not your eyes
nor your heart
everything can be used
except what is wasteful

The word “enough” in its own line invokes a call to finality—enough loneliness, enough hate, enough time of not seizing the power: The truncated line is another disruption in the flow of language, forcing the reader to pause and consider

If you do not learn to hate
you will never be lonely
enough
to love easily
nor will you always be brave
although it does not grow any easier

In the final stanza she speaks to a history of the people. Her command to “speak proudly” is one that attends to the language of minor literatures. The “tell them” an urging to use the power of language to develop pride in their identity. Again, she uses short lines to alter the pacing of reading the poem. The word “slaves” following the words “children,” “them,” and “them” at the end of the lines is a fissure in the sonic pattern of the poems. Read these lines out loud and feel how that word sticks on the tongue:

Speak proudly to your children
where ever you may find them
tell them
you are offspring of slaves
and your mother was
a princess
in darkness.

The repetition of the hard “s” sound doubles down on the disruption. Lorde plays with line break and sonic quality to force the reader to pause and think. Through her work, she is able to create a community, acknowledge the struggle and potential power of that community and command they use the power to destabilize institutions. This poem, like many of hers, are embodying the ideas of a minor literature.

Like most participants in minor literatures, upon reflection, Lorde’s work has taken up a meaning greater than an individual subject, and has become a representative, collective utterance for a political body. Through that meaning, the community has embraced her, as they must for an individual’s work to become more than the writings of a solitary master. For example, Bettina Aptheker wrote about how she used Lorde’s essays and poems in a class on feminism, taught through and intersectional analysis of gender, race, class and sexuality. She remarks that “using Lorde, as an exemplar of method, we worked to show students how to *connect* their experiences to a larger schema that would allow for political and theoretical analysis.” (292). Lorde’s essays and poems are being taught as representative of a time and place, as a collective utterance for a group of people.

Most interestingly, Lorde’s poetry has become somewhat canonical. It is widely read, not just by people who identify with her poems, and in some ways is viewed in the mainstream.

Even within its role in the larger academic scheme, her work is continuing to resist the oppressive structures it opposed at its first writing. Lorde's poetry has entered the recursive process of incorporation and resistance, each move strengthening the other as she becomes more and more representative as an individual figure, and less of a subject within a much larger community of people as her work matures. It is in this that Lorde becomes an exemplar for minor literatures—her language has ruptured a hegemonic space only to the point that she remains the representative of a larger group.

Conclusion

There are many commonalities between the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Audre Lorde, even though they were writing with different identities for difference people during different time periods. What links them is their embodiment of minor literatures—they used the language of their oppressors to create a political identity devoid of subject for the purpose of collective utterance. The most important similarity between the women is that they spoke about their work in the same way I am outlining it—they spoke of using their language to they viewed their poetic task as political, they saw themselves as representative for a greater collective. Additionally, both are viewed more favorably now than in the time they were writing, signifying their incorporation into the dominant discourse. Even still, their work is constantly resisting these major literatures through the use of language. Minor literatures are reflexive, always cycling back, always resisting and incorporating.

What these women have in common, they also share with Rupi Kaur and Warsan Shire. The following two chapter will outline how both use(d) social media to consciously embody the tenets of minor literatures, and create political, collect utterances through use of deterritorizlized

language. Unlike Millay and Lorde, these literatures are still being rejected, resisting more than incorporating, not yet fully enclosed in the cycle.

The Queen and her Critics: Rupi Kaur as a Minor Literature

Her name is projected on the back drop of the stage, her signature lowercase print a bright spot in the otherwise dark stage. There is a microphone at center encircled by red flowers. A song by Drake is blaring over the speakers, and the packed auditorium nods along. I am shocked at the sheer number of people there. The Dallas Majestic theater is sold out, nearly 1,700 people waiting for the Instagram poet to arrive on stage.

The mood in the room is shifting from anticipation to impatience—Rupi Kaur is almost 45 minutes late to her own show. The young women around me, as the audience is almost entirely comprised of young women, are buzzing with excitement to see their favorite poet. The two women on my right ask me, “how did you start reading her?” I stumble through an explanation of this project, “I am writing about her for my thesis. I just think she is an interesting figure.”

They look confused. “What about you?” I respond. “Oh! We both started reading her on Pinterest years ago. I just love how she writes about break ups, it’s like I get it. Sometimes it’s just so cathartic to hear that someone else experiences it.”

Though these young women came to Kaur through Pinterest, she is primarily an Instagram poet. Instagram is a social media site that began in 2008 and allows users to post pictures for followers to see. Since the advent of Instagram, a new host of microcelebrities have gained notoriety through posting everything from fitness plans and food, to art and music. These users often become sponsored when they gain enough followers.

Rupi Kaur is one of these Instagram influencers, and to date she 3.2 million Instagram followers. Dubbed the “Queen of the Instapoets,” Kaur has garnered incredible attention and success, as well critique, for her poetry that speaks to a diverse and empowered group of women.

As described by the reigning monarch, Instapoets are “A group of many, many writers using Instagram as a platform to share their poetry... they brought poetry into the mainstream” (CBS). A wave of poets that grew up with social and new media technologies seek to rectify this perception of poetry, aiming to present honest, simple work to a larger audience through digital sites. The tactic of honesty used by these new media poets is rejected by critics as the generation’s unnecessary, constant expression of what one feels, and their focus on accessibility as the complete rejection of complexity, subtlety, eloquence. In some ways, the Insta-poets believe that this public display of artistry is reversing debates on the narcissism of their generation—that the depth of engagement that a poem allows negates arguments of millennial shallowness.

Agree or disagree, Kaur’s social media borne poetry has furthered her popularity past what most, more traditional, poets can claim. Her success, however, is not just in the digital world. Her first collection *milk and honey* sold nearly 3 million copies and has been translated into more than 30 languages. Her second, *the sun and her flowers* has almost 1 million copies sold worldwide. Currently, she is touring North America—I was able to attend her Dallas show, and speak briefly with her regarding social media, audience, and writing process.

Something difficult in analyzing Kaur’s work and presence as a minor literature is the sheer amount of controversy that surrounds her persona. In fact, the controversy that follows her work, no matter the success, is what drew me to studying social-media based poets in the first place. She is accused of everything from the appropriation of trauma and plagiarism, to just plain bad writing. In digging deeper at these points of conflict, the contact zones between author, audience, and critic, it is clear that the critiques volleyed at Kaur are exactly what could make

her work a minor literature—a deterritorialization of language, the individual becoming a political representative, and a collective utterance.

Deterritorializing Language

Of all of the critiques written about Rupi Kaur, the most common complaint mentions her style. The assertion by *PNR* critic Rebecca Watts is that the young women’s work is nothing but consumer-driven content” that audiences flock to because of the “instant gratification’ the form affords” is a common one. She, like other critics, believe that through this focus on accessible content, the craft itself is being lost. However, Kaur argues that art of all forms should be accessible, that her tailoring of prose to the masses does not make her a bad poet, just an audience-conscious one (Edes, Martin).

Much like the original minor literature of Kafka, and Lorde and Millay after, Kaur has focused on using the language of the dominant to express the story and experiences of a marginalized group. Kaur honors her native language of Punjabi by only using lower case letters in her poem, and maintaining a simple style. Kaur states that this is a very conscious choice.

Well it is simple, and simplistic, and that is very purposeful from my end. I want readers to be able to open up this book and start this poem. From beginning to end I want the reading experience to be simple. But when they finish that poem, I want their stomach to churn, and then I want them to sit with that emotion... (CBS).

This accomplishes two tasks—first it only furthers the re/deterritorialization of language by blending the English with Punjabi, and creates an accessibility for both writer and reader.

For Kaur, simplicity is key in poetry. The choice is not a result of lack of training, as many skeptics would say, but a conscious choice to use a dominant language and honor a minor one. She has stated in multiple interviews that the use of lowercase letters and minimalist punctuation pays homage to her native language, Punjabi. For example, the following poem is one of her most liked on Instagram, and uses distinctly simple diction.

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

women of colour - rupi kaur



Noticeably, there is no capitalization or punctuation, no rhyme pattern. The line breaks are not particularly artful, but instead create a very natural flow of reading. The multiple meanings of the word “spine” is what the poem hinges on—a single metaphor reinforced by the image. The poem is not complicated to understand; the language used is pedestrian. It is relatively safe to say that anyone reading this for this first time could easily understand the

moves Kaur is making to convey emotion. It is the central feature of the poem, and reinforced by an image.

Many choices by the author works to disrupt traditional poetic conventions. All of Kaur's poems are accompanied by a hand-sketched or digitally created image. In the above poem, the image of a woman's back reinforces the central metaphor—the shoulders are pinched together, and the line marking the spine is most distinct. The image helps the reader focus further on the main ideas of the poem. Even placing the title of the poem at the end works to disrupt the reader's experience of reading. While the title, "women of colour," is undeniably broad, based on context, it is easier to imagine that Kaur is speaking to women like her. The use of the plural first person "our" demonstrates that the speaker of the poem is extending her experiencing outward. The simple use of language follows that rhetorical strategy. Kaur is using English not to speak to other primary English speakers, but to women who are not as familiar with English. Language is used here not just to communicate a message, but to disrupt hegemony of the dominant discourse.

The choice to use simple diction is not only a tactic by the poet to blend languages, but also a method of creating accessibility. While some critics have stated that the "tell it like it is" simplicity of the Instagram poets is not something to applaud, the accessibility of language has made it so most people can read and write this style of poetry. In an interview with NPR, Kaur reinforces this view of her work, stating

Art should be accessible to the masses, and when we start to tailor it in a way that keeps people out, then there's an issue with that. Like, who are we really creating art for? And so I think about who I was creating art for from the beginning — it was for myself, and for people that didn't have access to certain types of English language. I couldn't speak

English until I was way into elementary school, and so my choice of diction, all the accessible choices that I make, it's to make sure that it's tailored to the person that I was when I was growing up (Edes and Martin).

As Kaur mentions above, she is not just creating art for herself, but for people who share her identity. To do this, primarily, she focuses on language. To get other people to read her, particularly people who would be excluded by traditional linguistic and poetic discourses, she focuses on deterritorializing the language. This point is even more poignant given who Kaur's primary audience is—immigrants and South Asian women. These populations have actually been subject to colonization of language. By seizing English, reinscribing patterns of native languages, and presenting it accessibly, Kaur's work makes steps to deterritorialization.

Kaur is able to create deterritorialization and access through the use social media. Without social media, it would be relatively impossible for Kaur to achieve the reach she does. The insertion of text onto an otherwise image based platform is another disruption of a dominant discourse. Publishing digitally disrupts the traditional print-based method of publishing, and allows readers to access her work with no more than an internet connection. Without the power of Instagram, Kaur could not employ language in the way that she does.

Social media not only creates access to poetry for the reader, but also for the author. Kaur has no formal poetry training, and self-published her first book. Without social media, it is unlikely that Kaur would have had a platform to share her work or an ability to interact with readers. Instagram is not just her platform, but the primary site and tool of her deterritorialization. The blending of the poet and reader created by increased accessibility to reading and authoring allows a poet like Kaur to stand for more. With thousands of comments behind her, each poem becomes a political body, more than an individual text.

Representing a Political

I am sitting across from Rupi Kaur, draped in a rose-colored dress. Her frame is more relaxed in private, and save her gown, you could never tell that she had just existed a stage of screaming fans. I know we are pressed for time, and I dive right into a question: “How do you view social media in your rise to success? What do you primarily use it for?” (Kaur).

She pursed her lips, “I see it kind of how I do my tour. I like to meet my fans where they are at, you know? I can see their faces, hear them, um, and see what they like.” She views social media as “closing the gap” between her and her readers. Instagram allows her to create a “conversation with her fans” about her work and how they respond to it. Kaur likes to blur the boundary between audience and author, and in doing so, creates a representative body through her work. More specifically, her poetry and persona portray the collective nature of female trauma and gesture to a universal South Asian female experience. Kaur views herself not just as a poet, but as an activist who uses poetry as her form of protest.

Kaur’s poetry has been dubbed by many news sites, including the Huffington Post as “essential reading for women everywhere,” due to her focus on themes of equality, femininity and trauma. The positioning herself as a speaker for diverse and empowered women is intentional—Kaur is incredibly aware of her role and place as activist poet.

Kaur first gained notoriety not due to literary talent, but through her role as activist. Her name initially made headlines for a controversial Instagram post while she was still in school at the University of Waterloo in Canada. The image showed Kaur in bed, menstrual blood staining her pants and sheets. The image was picked up by most mainstream news source, including *The Huffington Post* and *Vice*. She was attempting to demystify the period through image. Kaur has

since said that she wishes she wouldn't have posted it, but is glad it has allowed her to write. "They came for the photo, but they stayed for the poetry" (Carlin). Simply, without social media and political beliefs, Kaur would not have been able to obtain a platform.

Kaur, like Millay and Lorde, is very conscious of her role. All three poets realize that they, as members of a minority group, were granted some platform to speak to their experience. In that, they recognize the responsibility that accompanies representing an entire group of people. Kaur makes symbolic gestures that tell as much, such as the design of her poetry collections. She has stated, "When I was designing *milk and honey* it was so important see the word Kaur right on the spine. I didn't even want my first name. Every Sikh woman has that name. I want a seven-year old to go into that bookstore and see her name on a book." In this example, Kaur sees herself not as an individual author, but as a voice for people like her. Her last name is no longer her own, but a representative of every Sikh woman who wanted to speak out and was unable to do so. Kaur's poetry, then, is the authored collectively, not individually.

Advocates of Kaur's work see her poetry working in similar ways, stating that "She's given voice to things that people may not have been able to articulate for themselves," (Carlin 2017). Despite many claims that Instapoets are focused primarily on self-indulgent individual experience, Kaur has collapsed herself into a larger, political body. Her poetry becomes, then, not an individual expression of feelings, but a collective utterance of a group of people.

Collective Utterance

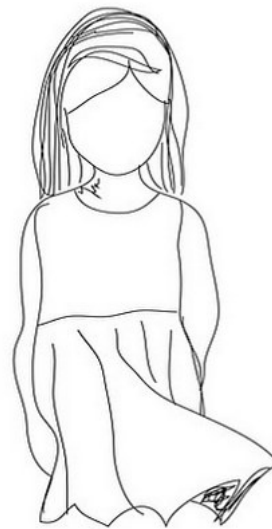
"I want to honor the women who came before me" she says, before launching into a poem, "I want to honor all of you." The lights dim further around her, as the backdrop begins to

illuminate with a thin script. Music is playing in the background, as the audience collectively holds its breath, waiting for Rupi to begin.

A breath of excitement spreads across the crowd when she says the first word. It sounds like everyone but me knows this poem—all the women around me scream and chant. Together, author and audience, poet and fans, recite the following poem in tandem.

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

to fathers with daughters - rupi kaur



Small dings in the music punctuate each line break. Behind Kaur, the image is being drawn on the screen in small strokes, a young girl whose face is featureless. It is as if the poet is beckoning us to see our own eyes in the blankness of the drawing's skin. The theater fills with the voices of thousands of women, speaking outward to the “you” of the poem. The overwhelming feeling ricocheting throughout is anger. The collective voice shakes the walls of the theater. I have never experienced anything like it—witnessing the power of a collective

utterance first hand will shift how you view a poet. This many people related enough to her poetry that they could chant it along with her. In doing so, Kaur's work was no longer her own. It belonged to everyone there who saw themselves in it.

However, this collective experience that so distinctly draws in readers is also a primary cause of criticism. Kaur's style is predicated on a minimalist form of short lines and lack of punctuation, which makes it nearly impossible to determine where inspiration and universality ends, and plagiarism begins. She has even been said to plagiarize the work of Warsan Shire, who I analyze in the next chapter. Other critics of similar identities have written that her poetry leans toward "the exploitation and commodification of those who experience the trauma" she writes about (Giovanni). While this generalization can create conflict, it is exactly how Kaur's work incites a collective utterance.

The goal of a poet is to attend to universality. It is poetry's goal to tap into some larger truth about the universe, about the human experience, about the wide expanse of emotions every person faces. Most poets, particularly ones who are trained through a more traditional process, attend to the universal through detail. Kaur, and many of the other Instapoets for that matter, use breadth to create universality. Anyone can see themselves in the work of Kaur, and, because of the reach that social media has granted her, anyone has the ability to find something in her work. The utterance may not be specific, but it is collective. The most common answer when I asked those around me what they like about Kaur's poetry was "I feel like she's speaking for me." As evidenced by my experience at her show, she is not only speaking for them, they are chanting in unison.

But is it a Minor Literature?

Rupi Kaur's poetry and persona have all of the making of a minor literature, but I am hesitant to call her a minor literature. Firstly, minor literatures are concerned with democratization and deterritorialization of an art form. By their nature, they disrupt hegemonic ideas of art and create a space for new and interesting voices through the work of a single author turned collective. Kaur's work is doing just that—disrupting. This is evidenced by the controversy surrounding her work. Much like the earlier poets I analyzed in the first chapter, critics are hesitant to allow new and diverse voices to enter the fray. In this way, Kaur's use of social media is revolutionary—she was able to entirely bypass the normative methods of publishing, create an audience, and spread her message and work. Social media allowed for her to consciously create a minor literature. However, does this curated identity undercut her efforts?

Depending on what view of minor literatures a person adopts, this conscious action may be part of the role. Deleuze and Guattari would emphatically say no. They believed that any individual, regardless of their awareness, could author a minor literature. Edna St. Vincent Millay and Audre Lorde were certainly aware of the role they were playing. The poets openly invited their work to stand for more than the individual. However, their attention was focused outward—they were women standing on a platform with innumerable women behind them. They were chanting outwards so that others would hear. Kaur's appears to be different. I see her standing on that stage, basking as the audience chanted her words back toward her.

The curation of her persona could come not from conscious development of a political self, but through the mere use of social media to gain fame. Instagram, by its nature, demands that the user curates a specific identity to present to the world. At some points, her overly intentional poetic identity slips, some fissure is shown, and it feels uncomfortably inauthentic.

Most of this feeling was illuminated during her reading/concert. She asked from the stage “how many of you have been to a poetry reading before? Raise your hands!” I lifted mine tentatively. I was alone—a smattering of hands lifted while most looked around chuckling.

“Well,” she continued, “for those of you who have been you know this. When you like something I am saying, what should you do?” A group of enthusiastic women start snapping. “Exactly! I want to hear you snap! When you like what I am saying, let me hear you!” Perhaps snapping occurs at some types of poetic performances, but it certainly does not happen at every poetry reading, or even most, that I have attended.

In our own private conversations, I asked her about her writing process, aiming primarily to discern how she crafted the poetry using social media, or what role digital media played in the composing process. She placed both of her hands on my knees and sighed loudly. “You would not believe. I swear when I wrote my second book, I moved into a new apartment and wrote 8 hours a day until it was done. Absolute immersion. I was like one of those classic writers!”

I have no reason to not believe that this is true—but some may doubt her work habit due to her rigorous touring schedule and appearances over the past few years. Instead, it seems like Kaur is trying to project a highly normative poetic persona. In fact, Lorde spoke to how poetry exists outside of these stereotypical expectations of authorship. Poetry can be written on a bus traveling from job to job, hidden behind doors, in the moments before going to sleep. The culmination of the above two experiences leads me to believe that Kaur is posturing herself as a Poet or Writer, in the stereotypical sense. This is not inherently a bad thing—she has been critiqued for her amateurism, so there is a chance that she is trying to legitimize herself by adopting a persona. It does ring false, though, and challenges to her authenticity and individuality undermine the hyper-personal work she produces.

The discomfort created by Kaur's sometimes shifting identity is compounded by the fact that her attention to audience can sometimes be more focused on her than what she and her "fans" can collectively say together. Kaur once said, after her first poetry reading, that "there was just something amazing that happened while I was on stage, and it was the way the mic picked up my voice, and how I had all of these eyes looking up at me, and I'd never felt that sort of exhilaration and those many people attentive towards an idea that I have." This gestures to a more inward sense of creating a collective than an outward one. Whereas Lorde, Millay, and Kafka are more focused on the attention being focused outward, author and audience collapsing to produce one strong voice, Kaur's relationship is stronger between her and the audience. It functions more to create an insular community that is speaking to each other. This is only reinforced by the use of social media. She stated earlier that she enjoyed both performing and using social media because it removes the barrier between her and her "fans." This may be true, but in both cases there is a very distinctive boundary. Kaur posts and her followers respond—there is no conversation back and forth. Her post may create a community, but it does not produce a collective utterance outward. At a performance, there is a clear boundary between audience and poet, marked by the stage. Again, the utterance produced is insular. The internally focused community crafted by Kaur is different from those literatures that Lorde and Millay created, engendering some dissonance in me to classify her writings as a minor literature.

All minor literatures walk the fine line between representation and appropriation. The discomfort that Kaur creates may be the result of her fondness of this line. While some may find it refreshing and important that an author that is a woman of color, and she is working to share a racialized, feminized experience, Kaur is ultimately profiting from her poetry. This capitalism and personal gain is another place of dissonance. For the other minor literatures I use as

exemplars, speaking out was a dangerous act. Millay eventually did lose much of her earlier acclaim and was erased from the cultural memory because of her choice to speak out against injustice. For Lorde, being Black, queer, and female during the 1960s was inherently dangerous. Kaur, however, is benefitting hugely from the attention. Every other post on her Instagram is sponsored content, which she makes money off of. She is constantly touring to sold out venues. Each ticket at the show I went to cost over 50 dollars. The fact that she is profiting off of collective trauma is problematic.

At this point I need to place a disclaimer of sorts. I don't want to fall into a trap of saying that Kaur shouldn't be making money for her work, or that presenting an authorial persona is inherently a bad thing. In fact, I am glad that Kaur is finding monetary success, particularly when women of color are often not able to break into primarily male artistic spaces and make a living out of it. Because her poetry speaks to a larger body of trauma, and she has spoken out specifically about representing a larger group of people, it feels appropriate to profit so greatly from it in when her persona slips—in the moments where it feels as if she is harnessing the stories of those she is representing for personal gain rather than for the betterment of the collective. It is in those times where her profiting creates discomfort, when the line between appropriation and representation is blurred beyond recognition. I don't want to represent an elitist stance of authenticity, but raise questions of how all of these complex factors effect Kaur's crafting of a minor literature.

I would not normally write disprove my own initial thesis, but I believe it is important to acknowledge both sides of the coin in this case. Social media both aided Kaur, but her continued use of Instagram raises question about her authenticity, audience attention, and personal gain. It may be that social media can be used to gain a platform, allow an author to become a politicized

body, and create a collective utterance, but the use of it could ultimately undermine the goals of the author. It may be that a minor literature cannot exist on Instagram. This is what I will analyze in the next chapter, using a poet who gained success through Tumblr, but has wiped most of her digital presence in favor of more traditional literary endeavors.

The Phantom Laureate: Warsan Shire as a Minor Literature

The last chapter discussed Instagram poet Rupi Kaur and her minor literature. Social media has the ability to help a poet create a minor literature where access would not otherwise be possible. The poet Warsan Shire both confirms and complicates this notion. If someone were to look at Warsan Shire's career as it stands now, she would look relatively indiscernible from other successful poets. For people who continually mourn the shrinking place of poetry within popular culture, poets like Shire may be the answer. Unlike Kaur, who used her social media platform to create popular and commercial success, Shire employed Tumblr to create a more traditional trajectory of success for herself.

Warsan Shire is a Kenyan-born, Somali poet and writer who grew up and studied in London. In her short career, thus far, the poet has been able to garner acclaim from both critics and popular culture. She initially began publishing poetry on her MySpace account, and moved to Tumblr. Despite her start on social media, and very unlike Rupi Kaur, Warsan Shire has always been well-loved by critics. Her first poetry pamphlet *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, published in 2011 by flipped eye has been translated into Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, as well as her native Somali language. Shire, like Kaur, has been lauded for her ability to create intense emotions around love, loss, and most profoundly, home.

She unanimously won the inaugural Brunel University African Poetry Prize in 2013 and was deemed an "emotional cartographer" by the judges who marveled at her ability to constellate experience and invoke intense emotional reaction. In 2014, she was appointed the first Young Poet Laureate of London and was recently elected to the Royal Society of Literature in its 40 under 40 initiative. Shire is considered to not just be a voice of the moment, but a prolific voice that will represent the experience of immigrants and women for years to come.

In addition to her critical success, Shire has become something of a pop culture icon. She initially became well known for her audio collection, *Warsan v. Melancholy*— a spoken word poetry collection posted to her Tumblr page. Two poems “For Women Who are Difficult to Love” and “The Unbearable Weight of Staying” went viral for their raw and unguarded nature. Shire reached peak popular success through her involvement with Beyonce’s visual album *Lemonade*. Shire adapted many of her most popular poems for the musician, and their collaboration earned both of the women a Peabody award.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, work from social media poets is often met with some vitriol. Instead of representing the shallow nature of her generation, Shire exemplifies “the writing life of a young, prolific poet whose poetry or poem-like offhand thoughts will surface in one of your social media feeds and often be exactly what you needed to read” (Okeowo). Why is Kaur being dismissed by critics, while Shire is being lauded as the voice of a generation? Both poets craft minor literatures, but through her choice to stay out of the spotlight, Shire is able to disappear into a work in a way that Kaur does not. To show this, I will first examine how Shire embodies a minor literature through her deterritorialization of language, creation of political body, and collective utterance.

Deterritorialization of Language

Similarly to Kaur, Shire is able to disrupt the hegemony of language through incorporating a minor language into a major one. Part of her process is originally writing the poems in Somali language, and then translating them into English. She does this because her native language offers more breadth than English. She stated that

Somali language is very rich. I could hear my mother say something and it's violent and dark and funny at the same time: that quality definitely doesn't exist in the English language. There's a natural humour and visceral way of describing love or beauty or terror, which is all in the same semantic field. That, again, doesn't exist in English (Reid)

Shire uses English to show the nuance and power of another language. She is using the major language to communicate the ideas and themes of the minor language. Even though she publishes in English, Shire has said that she “thinks in both the languages and I reference both languages” (Rasheed). The duality of language that Shire employs in the process of writing creates a disruption to the hegemony of the dominant language.

In discussing language, Shire also evokes Deleuze and Guattari through the process of speaking. The theorists state that “every language implies a deterritorialization—of the mouth, of the teeth, of the tongue” (Deleuze and Guattari, 19). Any use of language is a deterritorialization because the mouth, and all it contains, was initially used for eating. Any interruption of eating for speaking is a fast. Further uses of language to disrupt the function of the tongue are greater deterritorializations. Forcing the reader to become tongue tied, to trip over their speaking disrupts the experience of language and speaking, and forces fissures in the major language.

Shire is enacting this discourse, whether or not she is aware of it. One of her more popular poems implores the reader to “give your daughters difficult names. give your daughters names that command the full use of the tongue.” In a very conscious way, Shire not only deterritorializes language but is asking her audience to as well. This act creates a gap in the major language, not just metaphorically, but literally. The act of stumbling over words and names creates an actual sonic gap in the language where the tongue pauses over the unfamiliar words.

The hailing of her audience to the work through language is Shire's first step in becoming a minor literature. By creating a gap in the major, both through the use of multiple languages and in the tongue, Shire crafts a space for her experiences and others to be told.

Individual Becoming part of a Political Body

Shire has said that, as a child she "desperately wanted to read Somali poets," but they were all "much older, and male" (Reid). In order to see work that represented her culture, one that encapsulated the immigrant experience for a young female in an increasingly globalized world, she wrote for herself and others that could see themselves in their writing.

Deleuze and Guatarri noted that minor literatures are able to occupy their representative space due to a lack of masters. Kafka could ascend to their prominence because no one could encapsulate his experience in the way that he could. Shire recognizes that part of her drive to write and her ability to do so successfully comes from a place of her individuality. She has stated that, "just from the perspective that I'm coming from, there aren't many people from the same background as me doing what I'm doing" (Reid). As there are no masters, and limited ability to speak to her positionality, Shire can represent a larger political group. This is also evidenced by the fact that the promotion of her work largely focuses on her identity. In an early 2011 interview, Shire mentioned the attention to her racial and ethnic identities, stating that

If anything there's been a real focus on the fact that I'm Somali. Because even when I won the award, it was announced as "Somali wins award". I mean, East African people were really proud of it, Somali people were really proud of it, and neighboring countries – like Ethiopia – they were really proud of it! It brings people to you (Reid).

Shire is also able to create a greater political body her character driven poetry. She has previously stated that adopting a persona in her poetry allows her to “tell the stories of those people, especially refugees and immigrants, that otherwise wouldn’t be told, or they’ll be told really inaccurately” (Reid). As a poet with the ability to do so, she sees herself as responsible for telling the stories of others.

Shire has stated several times that she understands and is actively participating in the process of creating a political body through her work. She has said that “Sometimes [she is] telling other people’s stories to remove stigma and taboo, so that they don’t have to feel ashamed; sometimes you use yourself as an example,” (Reid). She has also stated that she has no problem with addressing more difficult issues because she is not doing it for herself—it is for those who are unable to. She has said that as long as her writing provides comfort for others, she will continue to write and “understands that anonymity can allow people to be vulnerable. Not everyone is okay with living like an open wound” (Rasheed). In seeing herself as able to speak for others so they don’t feel ashamed, and holding the burden of an open wound, Shire creates a greater political body out of her individual self.

This way of speaking political for others is incredibly moving in her poetry. One of her often cited poems “Home” speaks to this raw nature of encapsulating stories. In this piece, Shire shifts perspectives in order to make the speaker a representative for the individual experiences discussed throughout the piece. The poem begins with a striking image:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well.

The rhetorical move of switching from the third to second person allows the speaker to move the subject to a more central, tactical place for the reader. It is no longer any person, it is “you.” Shire uses the second person in other places within the piece as well, sometimes imploring the reader to see that people only leave when it is their only option. She is not speaking in the poem to a specific experience of one person, but to a group of people. Halfway through the piece, she begins to move quickly through experiences and identities, employing short lines and enjambed line breaks to slow the pace of reading:

no one skin would be tough enough
the go
home blacks
refugees
dirt immigrants
asylum seekers

This stanza explores the various identities of the people fleeing home. The truncated lines force the reader to consider each word slowly. It is unclear if they are meant to be taken separately or as one, but the line breaks force the reader to weigh them as both individuals and collectives. The identities are separated by lines, but the lack of punctuation blends them together. She then shifts perspectives again, embodying the plural first person to create an opposition to the you. The speaker is now the person using this language, not receiving it:

sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage

messed up their country and now
they mess ours up

Near the end of the poem, the speaker shifts to the first person. In doing this, Shire places all of the experiences and trauma outlined to the point in the poem upon the speaker. The “I” is not simply the speaker, but an embodiment of the collective experiences:

I want to go home
but home is the mouth of a shark

She returns to the first person in the final lines, finishing with the embodied perspective:

I don't know what I've become
but I know that anywhere
is safer than here.

Finishing the poem on the first person allows the speaker to fully inhabit the identities within the poem. The speaker is not an individual, but a larger presentative body for people fleeing home.

Through a lack of masters and character driven poetry, Warsan Shire is able to represent a larger political body through her work. It is precisely because her readers are able to see themselves so clearly within her poetry that they begin to feel ownership over it. The fabricated ownership is aided by social media and creates a collective utterance between author and audience.

Collective Utterance

In the fall of 2016, Shire attended a feminist collective in Johannesburg to give a reading. The poet has stated on multiple occasions that readings caused her a lot of anxiety. Nii Parkes, founder of flipped eye Publishing, organized the event. She has a quiet voice, many have said. She does not employ theatrics or perform for her audience, but people are enthralled. “Everyone in the audience started reciting with her as she read, as if we were fans at a music concert singing along to our favorite songs.” Parkes said of the event, “It was church” (Hess). In the case of this reading, Shire was able to create a literal collective utterance out of her poetry; not poet and audience separately, but all present speaking in tandem.

Shire replicates this effect online. Whereas Rupī Kaur’s social media presence was integral to the production of poetry and allowing her to become a political body, Shire’s social media allows her to create the collective utterance that is key to a minor literature. Her readers are able to repost and repurpose her work to function as their voice.

Twitter can also function as a medium for collective utterance. Twitter effectively eliminates much of the barrier between creator and audience. Through favorites and retweets, anyone with a Twitter account can co-opt someone else’s tweet and add it to their own feed. The function of retweeting allows the user to place another’s writing on their own timeline. As opposed to just favoriting, which shows support for the post, retweeting lets each individual user take posts onto their timeline as if the words were their own. It’s as if they are saying “I may have not written this, but I am behind it. You can see me in this, too.”

Warsan Shire posts a lot of literary references on her Twitter feed, everyone from Margaret Atwood to Yusef Komunyakaa. It’s almost as if she is encouraging a collective utterance through her poetry in using the work of other poets and writers on her timeline. She is

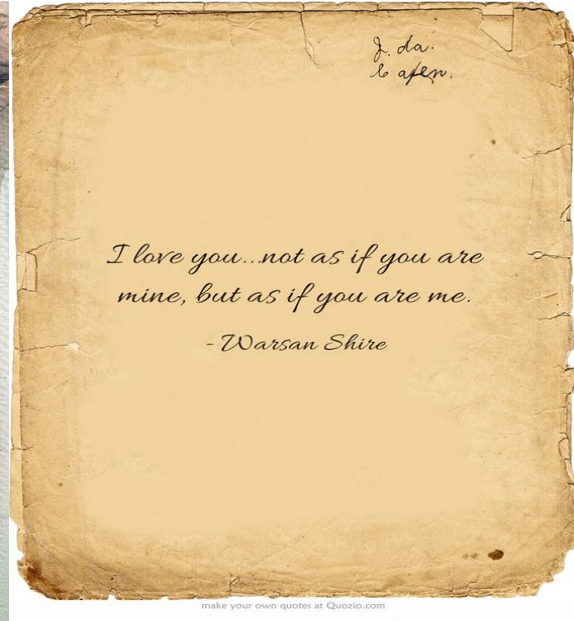
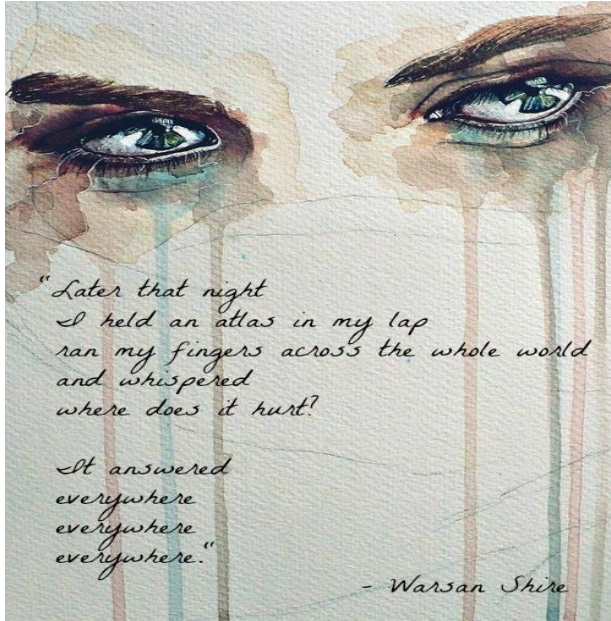
showing that their words can be hers as well, and that her words can be her readers. The words belong no more to her than anyone else.

Shire's original content garners the most attention on her Twitter. She doesn't have the same following as some of the more public social media poets, like Kaur, but several of her posts have gone viral. The two images below show posts that got substantial attention:



Through retweeting, users are able to make Shire's words their own, creating a collective utterance of language. This collective utterance is furthered through other social media platforms, like Instagram and Pinterest.

Following the release of *Lemonade*, the internet found her clear voice in the online cacophony of writing to be transformative. "In elite London poetry circles, the initial reception was underwhelming... but online, readers were enthralled" (Hess). Many readers took portions or lines from her poems and used them to create other images and texts. The following three images are from Pinterest in which users took verses from Shire's poetry and created something more out of them:



These images are an example of a collective utterance facilitated by social media. In almost all cases, the posts will feature a truncated version of Shire's poetry—cut in a way to appear similar to Kaur's poetry in many ways—and some accompanying image or multi-modal elements. The posters are able to assert their own authorial identity onto the poet's work,

effectively turning her words into their own. Users were able to see themselves so strongly in Shire's work that they took her voice and made it their own. Through this, they are speaking the words in tandem, with equal ownership and agency in them.

Take, for example, the image of the Shire's work embedded in the drawing of the eyes. There is an incredible amount of artistry in the painting, and the eyes feel reminiscent of the Great Gatsby. The image adds to the language in the poem. The colored tears communicate a sense of grief and longing, and as the poem discusses pain, the image reflects and enhances that. Even the creator writing Shire's words redefines the status of authorship. Her handwriting becomes the medium for communicating the language. The Pinterest artist is then able to share her work, coupled with Shire's to the internet. This process makes both poet and fan co-authors of the work.

Ultimately, social media creates a collective utterance of Warsan Shire's work. Users of Twitter, Instagram, and other sites like Pinterest are able to take her words and create their own posts and images out of them. She is aware of this move, and in the power of poetry once it is released publicly; she has noted that "Poetry can be such a powerful tool and once it's in the public domain you can't call it back in." (Twitter). Social media is integral to Shire's creation of a minor literature because it allows the deterritorialized language and political body to be spread and adopted by a larger group of people.

The Queen and the Laureate: What is the difference?

Warsan Shire has seemed to escape much of the harsh criticism that Kaur has endured, despite the fact that they function in very similar ways. What initially drew me to studying the social media poets is this very question: why are Kaur and Shire treated differently despite the

fact that they function so similarly? There are two marked difference between the poets—the craft and the persona. The former addresses the nature of the reception to her, but the latter is key to understanding how Shire creates a minor literature and how she differs from Kaur.

As I alluded to in the previous chapter, the poets attend to universality in starkly different ways. Kaur’s work allows her audience to see themselves in it because it lacks specificity. The feelings and emotions she portrays are accomplished through short, impactful statements. The tactic of breadth has caused controversy because it toes Kaur closer and closer to the realm of appropriating experience and trauma.

I believe that Shire has received greater critical attention because she attends to universality through detail. Though this may seem counterintuitive—trying to illicit universal feelings through illuminating experiences that the readers have likely not experienced—but it allows her to situate herself within a positionality that is clear and based on her own experience. For example, take the opening lines from her poem “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”:

you are a horse running alone
and he tries to tame you
compares you to an impossible highway
to a burning house
says you are blinding him

The images here are specific to the speaker’s experience. The speaker of the poem, represented by the second person perspective, is being compared to cliché metaphors, but they illicit this feeling of misunderstanding in the reader. Even outside of that relationship, a reader can empathize with this feeling of being misunderstood by someone they love. It is both specific and universal. “The simultaneous specificity and breadth of her appeal, across gender, race, and nationality based on her self-professed fans, is remarkable,” (Okeowo). On a personal level, I

find her poetry to be more emotionally poignant for the way it attends to detail. Even though I, a white heterosexual woman, couldn't place myself within her poetry, the power of the details in her poetry is magnetic.

Her mastery of language was pulled to the forefront of popular culture during the release of *Lemonade*, and the impact of those words have lasted since the 2016 release. Many people likely know the verses that Shire has penned, but not her name. She has truly fallen into her work; her individual personhood is not as important as the poetry she is writing. Shire represents a new kind of author—one who doesn't squarely fit in any singular definition or identity, who can properly speak to a generation of people who feel slightly out of place, who accept all races and creeds, connected by a shared transnational culture and tolerant of each other's differences. Her identity feels representative, not curated.

Unlike Kaur who has become a very public figure and is profiting off of it, Shire's persona is not as important to her success or her creation of a minor literature. For example, before *Lemonade* was released, Shire never alluded to her involvement—no posts, no promotions, only a brief tweet. She has not granted a single interview since *Lemonade*, and has altogether fallen out of the spotlight. Therefore, many of the concerns that arise out of the work of Rupi Kaur are not present—she is not lacking for authenticity, and she is not profiting from her work in the same way that Kaur is. Social media plays a role in her audience's ownership and replication of the work, and in the creation of a persona, albeit one very different than Kaur's.

Shire's social media interaction with her audience is to establish her poetic persona. Kaur, in the previous chapter, did this by employing Instagram to curate an archetypal writerly identity. To do this same work, Shire employs the work of canonized authors and poets

throughout her Twitter feed, providing her nearly 87 thousand followers with a digital library of other artists to engage with. She quotes writer Margaret Atwood frequently, renown poet Yusef Komunyakaa, Sandra Cisneros, James Baldwin and others to demonstrate her knowledge of craft. A common critique made against this group of new media poets, particularly Kaur, is that they have little to no respect for the art of poetry, and, instead opt for the “open denigration of intellectual engagement and craft” (Watts). The lament that new media poetry is created by thoughtless consumer driven, amateurs is completely ignoring the lengths that artists like Warsan Shire go to legitimize their place in the poetic world. Shire is rhetorically placing herself within the context of other art forms, and establishing herself as a knowledgeable poet. She is utilizing Twitter as a legitimizing force, showcasing her competency in the history of poetry. In doing so, she is also enlightening her audience to other artists. She is not denigrating those who came before her; rather, she is praising them.

However, very little has been heard from her since 2016. It could have been easy for Shire to capitalize on her new found stardom, but she further removed herself from the spotlight. Shortly after her success, Shire deleted Tumblr and MySpace entirely. There are very few interviews in which Shire is actually speaking about her writing. She does not accept many reading engagements, and most of her work with others is done privately through workshops. She teaches, she writes.

One difficulty that arises from her lack of social media presence is that she seemingly lacks the brazen political embodiment that can be seen in other examples of minor literatures. Edna St. Vincent Milay and Audre Lorde were warriors and risk takers. They had an incredible amount to lose from writing in the way that they did. Lorde, in particular, viewed activism central to her identity and spoke out about the importance of her work for women. There is less

danger in what Shire is doing, though she is writing about trauma and violence. Shire's shyness in the public sphere, may feel less impactful than the more outspoken counterparts. Her writing still packs a punch—not a scream, but an echo.

Still, her words float around the internet, feeling purposeful in their disembodiment. Every so often, a video of hers pops up on one of my timelines, and she is reading “The Unbearable Weight of Staying,” or I revisit Lemonade and her words tumble out of Beyonce's mouth, melodic and strong. She is not attached to her work in the way Kaur is, or even in the way Lorde is, but that is perhaps what makes her a truly compelling example of a minor literature—the culture has taken up her work so fully that her individual personhood has fallen away. She is not the warrior that Audre Lorde was, outspoken and active, the lawbreaker that Edna St. Vincent Milay was, but her own type of minor literature. Her ghostly presence on social media is also indicative of this. She is the phantom poet, a minor literature solidified by her lack of physical presence, hidden so that the words can stand on their own.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to put Rupi Kaur and Warsan Shire in conversation with each other, as the poets share a lot of traits. They are young women who may not have had access to success through writing if not for their social media origins. They are immigrants who work to embody multiple cultures through their poetry. Many of the topics they address are similar—race, femininity, love, heartbreak, and self-empowerment. Kaur has even been accused of plagiarizing Shire, though this is difficult to prove. In the world of social media, where sharing represents respect and support, it is second-nature to be derivative.

At the beginning of this project, I mentioned this exploration and analysis was born out of a sense of unease, of wanting to understand why the quick rise of social media poets engendered such criticism. The unease I feel surrounding these issues hasn't been fully resolved, merely shifted as I increased my understanding of these women and their work. Part of me recognizes that this pitting against each other comes from the limited space open for women, and particularly women of color, in the mainstream literature world. It would be unethical of me to not mention that, historically, poetry has been a male space. This is why the work of minor literatures, like Millay, Lorde, Shire, and potentially Kaur, are so compelling. Their mere presence disrupts the hegemony of the male poetic cannon. This is not to say that poets like Kaur don't often cross the threshold between representation and appropriation of trauma, but that the unending comparison between female poets of color in every piece that I read is indictive of the tiny space we have allowed for female voices.

As I reflect on this project, I still prefer Shire's work to Kaur's—but I also prefer William Carlos Williams over Wordsworth. Preference should not determine the worth of a piece of art, particularly when those preferences are deeply influenced by racist and sexist institutions. Art

and the academy can be incredibly elitist spaces, and I found myself pausing throughout this process of discovery and writing to check my privilege. What has changed is the value I put in these poets' work. Through offering new found access to the creation of poetry and showing what a driven, motivated author can do with new technologies, I am hopeful for what new art will be created because of their bravery. I am hopeful that their minor literatures will carve out space for future writers to come.

It is important for people passionate about literature, particularly in academia, to notice and credit minor literatures. The longer critics and academics dismiss the work of social media poets, the longer we will ignore the curative potentials of new media platforms. Because of both presentation and reception, social media makes for a casual vessel for art. The accessibility of social media has become a way for people to discover and connect to poetry in a form that is digestible and familiar to their everyday life. This means that more people are reading and writing poetry, people who have not been typically given a space to create. Minor literatures create gaps, force fissures in the hegemony of dominant discourses. These fissure can then be filled with new and divers voices—offering the opportunity for better, more interesting art for everyone. We should do better at acknowledging the minor literatures as they occur, rather than years after the fact. In doing so, we can aide others in seizing and expanding the space that their minor literatures have created.

What I haven't been able to address in this project, and what I believe deserves substantial attention as I continue to research the role social media plays in creating assess to art, are the instances of digital poetry that were out of the scope of this study. There are many other areas of platform poetry and digital-borne poetry that embody minor literatures. Groups like the Button Poets—marginalized writers who post their spoken word performances on to YouTube.

Many of the Button Poets have gone on to publish collection, and deserve greater attention. Digital literature also presents new opportunities for the creation of minor literatures. The accessibility to creation and information provided by new technologies has the potential to allow new and distinct voices to emerge. These, and other, spaces for the creation of art warrant further examination,

Poetry is and always has been a form of art that invites a healthy discourse. While critique is vital for the improvement of poetry, so is noticing the importance of art in the digital age and the ways it will differ from dominant discourses. Social media can create access to the creation and reading of poetry in ways that are very exciting. In examining how social media poets write minor literatures, we can see new and empowering ways that previously marginalized art can emerge.

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VITA

Personal Background

Hannah Rose Taylor
Born December 5th, 1995
Daughter of Tim and Suzanne Taylor

Education

Diploma, Vista Ridge High School, Cedar Park, TX
2014
Bachelor of Arts, Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, 2018

Experience

Editor, The Boller Review 2016-2019
Teaching Assistantship, Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, 2018-2019
Research Assistantship, Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, 2018-2019

Professional Memberships

Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society
Pop Culture Association

ABSTRACT

THE QUEEN AND THE LAUREATE: SOCIAL MEDIA POETS AND THE CREATION OF MINOR LITERATURES

by Hannah Taylor, M.A., 2019
Department of English
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jason Helms, Associate Professor of English

This thesis works to answer the question: how does social media work to democratize poetry? What is the limitation of social and digital media to create a space where any poet can succeed? The work uses Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literatures to frame the work of social media poets. Using a case study analysis, focused on two poets in particular, the work illuminates the effects of social media on how they create art. This thesis will examine the larger cultural implication of fringe art as is incorporated into dominant literature discourses and resists appropriation.