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"#does this count as poetry?": A genre analysis of Tumblr poetry

Selena Cotte

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“#does this count as poetry?”:

A Genre Analysis of Tumblr Poetry

by

Selena Cotte, B.A.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of DePaul University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Dedication

To every amateur poet making the internet work for them:

Thank you, and keep going.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be possible without the work of David Karp, founder and former CEO of Tumblr, whose principal invention enabled my adolescent curiosity about both poetry and digital community overall, leading me to this precise point. More important, however, has been the invaluable guidance of my two advisors, Dr. Paul Booth and Dr. Samantha Close. Thank you both for pushing me to *go further* with every hesitant strand of thought I presented to you. My first drafts are nearly unrecognizable, and I could not have gotten to this stage without your support and feedback. A number of other professors at DePaul were also instrumental in my knowledge and growth, so my thanks extends to the entire Communication department, as well.

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Abstract

“#does this count as poetry?”:

A Genre Analysis of Tumblr Poetry

By Selena Cotte, B.A.

DePaul University, 2020

Thesis Advisor: Paul Booth

Committee: Samantha Close

This thesis canonizes “Tumblr poetry” as a distinct and separate genre of poetry, closely related to other digital poetry movements but ultimately its own phenomenon. Through historical analysis, the criticism against Tumblr poetry and digital poetry as a whole become familiar in a cycle of negative reactions to changing poets and changing audiences. Through textual analysis of poems found on Tumblr, common attributes and style changes are identified and contrasted with more traditional contemporary poetry, signifying a distinct formal shift. Finally, through a platform analysis, poetry communities on Reddit and Instagram are similarly analyzed and contrasted with Tumblr poetry to showcase the effects that platform has on the communities that form, and why “Tumblr poetry” is not the same as “internet poetry.” Through these three different analyses, a more rounded image of Tumblr poetry as a phenomenon becomes apparent, further contributing to research about how community and art creation interact, and how digital culture and “mainstream” culture are becoming more ubiquitous.

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Introduction

Many consider poetry a memory of their youth, a particularly grueling unit in their middle and high school English classes where they had to dissect works by Robert Frost and Edgar Allan Poe. In some cases, students had to attempt their own highly-structured poems, such as sonnets or haikus, but the skill was quickly discarded once they were no longer required to entertain the art form for school. Poetry's unpopularity in the United States was a given up until very recently, backed by studies that showed a general disengagement (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012), and a pervasive attitude that poetry was unexciting and "neutered" of its capability for excitement (Stein, 2010, p. 189). Even renowned poets, who beat the odds and found a career in the form, lamented it at times—Marianne Moore began a poem aptly titled "Poetry" with the line "I too, dislike it; there are things that are / important beyond the fiddle," using the poem as an attempt to reconcile her interest with "contempt" (1920). The artform, classified as "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm" by Merriam Webster, was culturally seen as "unworthy" of attention (Stein, 2010).

American disengagement with poetry can be quantified by the results from a frequent survey about "public participation in the arts," conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts. The reported data shows a decline even in recent years: in 1992, 17% of survey takers had read at least a work of poetry in the year prior. In 2012, it was 6.7% (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012). This was the biggest drop of any literary arts engagement in that time period, prompting many to speculate that the art form was outdated and therefore did not align with contemporary sensibilities. "Poetry is dead" was already a tired cliché at the time, but some were convinced that for better or for worse, it still held true. In 2013, Washington Post columnist

Alexandra Petri sadly proclaimed in an article “I think the medium might not be loud enough any longer. There are about six people who buy new poetry, but they are not feeling very well” (2013).

In that same time period, the so-called digital age was born with the invention of social media and smartphones that engaged billions of people worldwide. The shift from print culture to digital culture was well-documented, and with it “an emerging set of values, practices, and expectations” (Deuze 2006). Many associate this shift with shortened attention spans and less value placed on things that require effort and focus—things that poetry is notoriously derided for (Maybin, 2017; Stein, 2010). And yet, instead of a continued downward trend of poetry engagement, quite the opposite occurred: In 2018, poetry book sales rose 66% from the year prior, with 1.3 million copies sold (Ferguson, 2019). Poetry appears to be more popular than it has been in a while, and the shift to a digital age is not merely coincidental in this development, but instrumental.

Popular contemporary poets include Lang Leav, Tyler Knott Gregson, and Rupi Kaur. The group, among others on bestsellers lists in the past three years, starkly contrast the elite poets of recent years, in identity, style, and platform. Their success symbolizes a new age of poetry, for a new audience. These poets, and many others in similar positions, all have at least one thing in common: they began their poetry careers through the social networking and microblogging website Tumblr. Many have shifted over to Instagram, the image-sharing social networking site (Bakdash, 2017), as Tumblr's popularity has waned, but a strong amateur community still exists on the former, posting daily and using tags like #poetry and #spilledink to connect with other writers.

However, there is little scholarship about the robust poetry community that proliferates on Tumblr, despite the direct link to a mainstream trend. Colloquially, there is an understanding of “Tumblr poetry” as a genre in and of itself, with connotations both positive and negative. These poets are among the best-selling writers in the U.S. and the U.K., but they face harsh criticism from academics, poets, and consumers alike for what is considered a watering down of the genre with little concern for artistry (Bakdash, 2017; Khaira-Hanks, 2017; Fysudeen, 2019). Most criticism specifically attacks the form of the poems, not the medium they are shared on, although plenty of debate has arisen questioning what counts as “published” and legitimate, which can be seen as a platform issue. However, there has been a greater shift in poetry that concerns more than just a platform change.

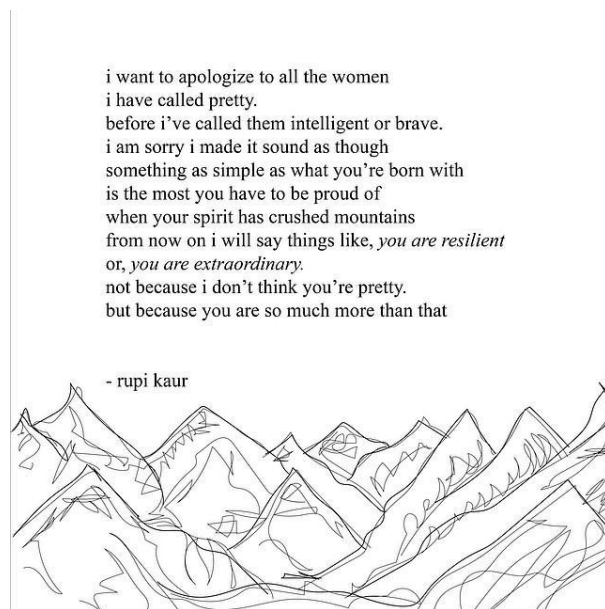


Illustration I.1: A Rupi Kaur poem that was published and shared on social media.

Rupi Kaur, the much-parodied poet who has become synonymous with this particular style, is known for her simple illustrations alongside viral images of her poems. Her first book, *milk and honey*, was published with many of these poems in 2014, and quickly rose to the top of

the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Her poems often deal with themes relevant to young women, wrestling with self-esteem and encouraging positivity, as is seen in illustration I.1. She is just one example of a Tumblr poet gone mainstream, but critics refer to her as a poster child of the movement, and will often use her as an example signifying the rest of the genre (Church, 2018).

Characterizing this rise in popularity as just another wave in poetry's ebb and flow would be missing a major source of this shift. The rise of social media and digital society actually strengthens and rejuvenates poetry, going against conventional wisdom. In order to close this gap in scholarship, I have performed a broader genre analysis of so-called "Tumblr poetry" to understand the thematic, structural, and formal elements of a Tumblr poem, and determine what this style adds to the vast history of poetry. To do this, I will perform three separate tasks, through the next three chapters: A historical analysis of the "death of poetry," following this particular criticism of change throughout poetry's long lifetime, and how it relates to poets' and audiences' identities; a textual analysis of amateur "Tumblr poems" published on the platform, in order to define the genre as different from prior schools of poetry (and from other digital poetry); and a platform analysis of other social networking sites that host their own unique styles of digital poetry, such as the humorous rhyme-centric poetry on Reddit's *r/ilikthebred* and *r/boottoobig* and the visually-focused continuation of Tumblr poetry's aesthetic on Instagram.

These analyses will help create a better understanding of poetry's function in communication, self-expression, and artistry, as well as social media's place as a community and a means of creating art. By adding to the storied history of poetry as a tool of communication, and thus the community of poets that was born on Tumblr, my thesis will add to established research on other types of Tumblr communities to further cement the value of Tumblr to its users, and the unique essence of the site versus other social networking sites. In addition, it

further the understanding of poetry's shifting use and appearance in the digital age, specifically in the form of how Tumblr users have shaped it to fit their specific needs. It also illuminates more ways where poetry can be the center of a community instead of just private, solitary expression.

Literature reviews

To approach this thesis, I examined several areas of scholarship, including research into Tumblr and its status as a community and poetry's role in communication as opposed to literary or linguistic fields. Understanding Tumblr as a home for various communities allowed me to understand how users might use poetry to help form a community. Looking at how poetry has been considered a tool of communication, versus one of artistic expression, further builds on this idea, as it highlights what might change about poetry's form and style when used in this particular way, as it is on Tumblr. The literature suggests that Tumblr is typically a home for communities that relate to one another through personal and private expressions that they would not feel comfortable sharing on many other social networking sites, and that poetry is an extension of personal and private expression, due to its emotional and subliminal content, that fits in nicely with other content types on the site.

Tumblr as community

Tumblr is a microblogging site established in 2009 with several hundreds of millions of users and billions of posts (Chang, Tang, Inagki, et al., 2014). Posts can take written, visual (image and video), and auditory form. Prior research on Tumblr has focused on the site as a hub for fandom and fan activity, following Henry Jenkins' notion of participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2013; Jenkins, 2016). The site is well-linked to communities of media fans, largely due to the

tagging system that allows users to find like-minded blogs to follow, share content from, and communicate with about their shared fandoms—something vital to the creation of fan communities that people are not able to do on other social networking sites (Bury, 2017).

However, studies of communities that relate to one another outside the realm of a fandom are not as plentiful, although they do exist. Research on the so-called “poetry community” would add to this idea of Tumblr as a community-building space without the reliance on fandom as an anchor.

Prior research shows that the people who use Tumblr often fall into the categories of what we might call marginalized groups (Byron & Robards, 2017; Cho; Kanai, 2015, 2017, & 2019; Pennington, 2018). Young women in the process of finding and shaping their identities are associated with the site, as it plays a formative role in the way they develop and place themselves in the world (Kanai 2015; 2017; 2019). Many LGBTQ people are also associated with the site, using it as a platform to be proud of their identities as opposed to ashamed and in hiding (Byron & Robards, 2017; Cho, 2018). Young Muslims seeking a “third space” to exist without judgment have also been documented as users of the site (Pennington, 2018).

Other research on Tumblr considers it as a place for “counterpublic” thoughts and ideas, as its optional (but much preferred) pseudonymity allows for users to share thoughts and ideas they would not feel comfortable communicating on other social networking sites that require a link to their real-world identity, like Facebook (Renninger, 2014). Specifically, people often use Tumblr to discuss taboo or “counterpublic” topics (Renninger, 2014), like eating disorders (Schott & Langan, 2015), gender and sexuality (Dame, 2016; Renninger, 2014), acts of self-harm (Seko & Lewis, 2016), and even for sharing naked selfies (Tiidenberg, 2016), in addition to more mainstream but still highly personal matters, like deciding what it means to be a woman (Kanai, 2015) or suffering from chronic illness (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2014).

The design and organization of the website facilitates the creation of communities that encourage its use in this way, both by creating a safe space for their honest selves to shine through, as the layer of pseudonymity can remove users from any direct consequences, and through peer pressure and groupthink, as content that rises to the top of tags is often highly shared and can give a false sense of uniformity among users. Original content is a strong portion of the site's output, but it is well-known for its ability to share others' content in the form of "reblogs" that enable the user to curate a selection of posts that they feel communicate something particular about their identity and their blog's identity (Alrajebah, 2017). The act of "reblogging" is also a means for Tumblr communities to form, and for people to discover groups they feel connected with. It also allows communities based on shared interests, like poetry, to form and share content with one another, thus allowing for certain posts to become more popular than others. Content is created with this in mind, which can allow for homogenous ideas to proliferate in order to be accessible to the biggest audience (Baptista Reis, 2016; Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2014; Vivienne, 2017; Kanai, 2015). This can explain the homogenous nature of "Tumblr poetry" as well, as many new writers wanting to be noticed by other users can craft poems to fit the popularized model in order to receive positive attention from their peers. Reblogging was also used by women who use the site to share nude pictures of themselves, usually as a sign of support and encouragement to members of their community (Bury, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2016). Thus, they seek reblogging of their own images for validation and often times cater their content, or continue to post naked images even when it is uncomfortable, to fit into the community (Tiidenberg, 2016). (The site disallowed adult content in December 2018, effectively removing these kinds of communities from the site.) Criticism of Tumblr poetry follows a similar pattern, as particular forms or subject matters are highly repeated and considered to be unoriginal,

uninspired, or otherwise unimpressive, especially in the context of the poems that surround them (Bakdash, 2017; Fysudeen, 2019).

Other features of the site that facilitate personal bonds that create community include the site's ability to host GIFs, well before sites like Facebook facilitated the medium. The moving images can express an individual's emotions better than language, which can create a closeness and interpersonal understanding sometimes thought to only exist in offline relationships (Gürsimsek, 2016). Typically, digital interactions are noted for their inability to convey context and tone that come through better in face-to-face interactions, but gifs circumvent this by showing visually how posts and comments should be interpreted beyond a textual level. Tumblr's built-in archiving feature also shapes how users create—and share—content on the site. Through these archives, large portions of content can be consumed at once, fast-tracking the way individual users come to know their peers on the site, which can create a sense of closeness (Powell & Heys, 2014).

One of the site's most useful features is a tagging mechanism that allows for natural communities to form over shared interests, as it uniformly collects posts that have self-identified as being about a particular subject and offers them to others looking up that subject. Tagging catalogues the site by topic and allows users to find like-minded individuals, or a community to seek validation from (Bury, 2017; Dame, 2016; Renninger, 2014). Although they technically violate the site's terms and services, communities practicing dangerous activities like self-harm or anorexia proliferate on Tumblr in this way, and sometimes encourage further dangerous behavior through peer pressure, because those engaging in the most dangerous behavior oftentimes get the most interactions (Schott & Langan, 2015; Seko & Lewis, 2016). However,

communities based on common interests, like fandoms, including those that might be considered embarrassing on other platforms, also build themselves this way (Bury, 2017).

Community hiveminds, created by a desire to fit in and be liked by others you feel similar to, can be harmful to various degrees: Self-harm and eating disorders aside, this environment can cause users to compartmentalize their own lives to fit in the structures built by fellow Tumblr users, affecting their real-life worldviews because of how they were encouraged to present their lives online (Kanai, 2015; 2017) The site serves as both a place of relief for people with mental health disorders, or even just every day growing pains, but it can also act as an enabling source for users who use the site as an echo chamber for their own problematic coping mechanisms, implying a groupthink problem that can exist in this kind of digital space.

Typical concerns with studying Tumblr come from its pseudonymous and thus somewhat secretive nature, as well as the site's lack of metadata, geo-spatial locations, and demographic information which have resulted in more studies of the site that focus more on conceptual issues as opposed to other social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (Attu & Terras, 2017).

Poetry and communication

Poetry is primarily thought of as an art form more so than a tool of communication; however, its emotional and subliminal effects have been documented in communication research (Camlot, 2012; Jocson, 2006; Lamarque, 2008). Like Tumblr, it has a long-documented use among marginalized communities as well and has been used to teach messages of social justice and overcoming struggle in a way that can inspire others (Ciardiello, 2010). It has a reputation as an inaccessible medium, on account of its cryptic nature and a perception of a cultural literacy and education to appreciate it; however, it has a simultaneous history as accessible to many

marginalized communities as an artform not requiring a formal knowledge of a language let alone tools for greater production, since one's own words and experiences are all that is needed to create poetry (Ciardiello, 2010; Croft, 2012; Hanauer, 2003; Jocson, 2006). The accessibility of poetry throughout history to many people of all different creeds is just another link to the documented accessibility of the internet, as the digital revolution is credited for giving more people than ever more access to information that can help them succeed.

Poetry is often noted as being as an emotional tool, something that communicates essence of being rather than literal representations of meaning (Newman, 1958). More emphasis on nuance and emotionality over rationality and literal reality are things that can be found on Tumblr as well, considering the site's function as a community between people who share their feelings and connect on a more sublime level. This is attributed to how it can explicate feelings in a more nuanced way than traditional prose usually can, and because of this has been considered a means of self-expression (Ashton, 2013), and as a form of private language (Lamarque, 2008). It also serves aesthetic function (Hurley, 2005) which is why it is often considered and dissected as an artwork alongside visual and auditory arts.

The new affordances of the internet and smartphones that allow for connectivity to happen anywhere and anytime, which adds an immediacy to the poetic process and can eliminate time for review or revision (Berry & Goodwin, 2013). This means that there is greater emphasis on intention and inspiration, rather than refinement or subtlety, which has been a criticism. Even social media posts in general are considered somewhat poetic, as they exist as short bursts of written information, often in honor of a special occasion, that is reminiscent of certain types of poetry (Camlot, 2012). Conversely, poems being written today sometimes read like a

stereotypical social media post or text message, using the conventions of “internet speak” like LOL or G2G in their language (Berry & Goodwin, 2013; Le Cor, 2018; Swiss & Hanna, 2004).

Methodology

By approaching this phenomenon from historical, textual, and platform-centric angles, I obtain a comprehensive look at what digital poetry is, why it is valuable and different than other styles of poetry, and what poetry's function is when it is at the center of a community. I define both Tumblr (and social networking sites in general) as a place of community and artistry and poetry's function as a tool of communication and digital art. Some of the specific questions I answer throughout this thesis are: what is poetry's place in communication; how does Tumblr encourage poetry communities to form; and how has Tumblr, alongside other digital platforms, transformed the style, form, and purpose of poetic communication? Ultimately, by answering these questions, Tumblr poetry is solidified as a distinct “genre” of poetry, a part of a larger school of social media poetry that is informed by its platform's aesthetics as well as the history of poetry innovation; and transforms the way social media platforms are used, and how poetry is considered as a literary art.

In chapter one, I perform a historical analysis of the “death” of poetry: To do this, I analyzed this thread of fatalist literary criticism, in which otherwise well-educated poets and readers mourn the loss of the artform when it has changed with the times, or been adapted by historically marginalized groups. This sentiment has been around, and defended against, since the dawn of poetry. Looking at poetry's developments through this context has allowed me to consider the condemnation of Tumblr poetry as part of a larger pattern instead of something actually dire. Criticisms of new technology and frameworks are almost ubiquitous with progress itself, and Tumblr poetry proves to be no exception; through this analysis, I find that it shares

many qualities of past works once deemed detrimental to the art form, but are now no longer derided by prestigious academics and critics.

In chapter two, I performed a textual analysis of “Tumblr poetry” by looking at top and recent posts on three of the major poetry-related tags on Tumblr: #poetry, #ocpoetry, and #spilledink. By sorting through 85 of these poems, collected in spring and summer of 2019, I identified common themes and style tools that were prominent among posts, both popular and not. This format is useful in getting at the heart of what a Tumblr poem actually consists of, so as to showcase the changes in the form that were beyond mere platform shifts. It also allows for a canonization of the genre as its own, grouped style, separate from poems on other digital platforms that may seem similar. This analysis allowed me to break down the thematic and structural elements that make up the style of poetry through textual analysis in order to differentiate it from prior styles. Furthermore, as a result of poetry’s overall comeback, and Tumblr’s undoubtable influence, by viewing these elements in isolation, the platform and its affordances can be further analyzed for their cultural influence.

In chapter three, I move outward and analyze other platforms that host different kinds of digital poetry, such as certain humorous forums on the social networking site Reddit, or the continuation and adaptation of Tumblr’s poetry aesthetic through photo form on Instagram. Through this, I further differentiate Tumblr poetry from digital poetry in general, and consider what value a specific digital platform has in facilitating different types of poetic communities. On Reddit, I looked at popular posts and site features on subreddits r/ilikthebred and r/boottoobig, which are meant to be funny poems based on images; and on Instagram, I looked at tags similar to Tumblr’s tags (#poetry) in order to compare and contrast these poems from Tumblr’s community, finding the subtle yet present differences between the two communities

that are often considered the same. Considering the recent purge of Tumblr users, as millions of users have quit the site in the first half of 2019, I ask if the community can replicate itself on other platforms, or if it is a place that can only exist on Tumblr with its unique affordances.

Overall, this genre analysis serves to cement Tumblr poetry's place in both poetry innovation and social media community formation. While there is much discussion on its value, its implications about culture, and its unique format, there is not much actual analysis that places into historical, textual, or platform-based context; there isn't even much to differentiate it from other kinds of digitally published poetry. This thesis shows that it is indeed a distinct genre, and it shows how it fits in the broader landscape of poetry and social media communities.

Chapter 1: The “death” of poetry and culture: A historical analysis of poetry criticism

Every so often, it seems like the same sentiment is repeated with slight variation in newspapers, lit mags, and blog posts alike: Poetry is dying, or is dead, or will die, and x, y, and z are why. A 1934 essay by literary critic Edmund Wilson pledged that verse was a dying technique (1934); writer Joseph Epstein published a 1988 commentary asking “Who Killed Poetry?” determining that more often than not, most of the new poetry being published was without universal value (1988). “Pressed to formulate this situation in a single sentence, I should write: contemporary poetry in the United States flourishes in a vacuum,” he said of the situation, going on to explain why he felt that it didn’t hold up to great works of the past (1988, p. 8).

Similarly, technology in general has historically had a “change and panic” response from critics, not entirely disconnected from this poetry phenomenon; There have been critics citing possible cultural and societal changes from the articulation of formal language to the invention of writing as a technology (Bell, 2010). While now, there is valid criticism to be made about technology’s damaging effect on our literal environment, the particular concerns I address in this chapter are less tangible, focused on how people communicate with one another and any customs gained or lost with new technology (Greenwood, 2019). Now, plenty who are apprehensive about the internet and social media have arguments that mirror these early concerns that have since been assuaged, but with bigger consequences. “[Technology] destroys our relationship with the natural world,” anti-technology activist Mark Boyle wrote in a 2016 essay for *The Guardian* (2016, para. 8) “It first separates us from nature, while simultaneously converting life into the cash that oils consumerist society... Social media [is] making us antisocial” (2016, paras. 8–10).

The ultimate culmination of these two concerns, at least in the late 21st century, is social media poetry, which exists on different platforms. This thesis is specifically about Tumblr

poetry, where the digital poetry movement got much of its start, but much criticism attacks all social media poetry as a whole, sometimes referring to Tumblr, sometimes Instagram, and sometimes even Twitter. However, many of the poets and poems criticized exist on multiple platforms, and many originated on Tumblr before moving to the others, including Rupi Kaur, who is often considered the voice of the whole movement.

This chapter specifically charts this line of “death,” or rather, exaggerated criticism of change throughout poetry and technology’s respective histories in order to illustrate the similarities Tumblr poetry has to other genre shifts before it. Through historical analysis, several case studies from select periods of time are compared, and illuminate recent attacks on Tumblr poetry as par for the course. The history examined is specifically from a Western perspective, as poetry and technology both have a rich and differing history in other regions of the world. While this limitation does not allow me to get at some of the roots of Tumblr poetry that come from Eastern tradition, given Tumblr poetry’s popularity and success in North America and Europe, focusing on these regions will streamline the historical analysis in a more manageable and still illuminating way.

For the purpose of this thesis, poetry is defined as works of writing that do not follow prosaic form. By prose, I mean holding to conventional grammar and sentence structure, as even poems which read like proper sentences are often broken up or otherwise signified as a poem through this distinction. Merriam-Webster defines the term as “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm.” It is a broad definition, allowing for the vast number of ways poetry as an artform has shifted throughout history.

There are common elements of poetry that have been seen in numerous generations and schools, including line breaks, rhyme, iambic pentameter, and the use of abstract metaphors and symbols over literal statements. However, some poems will contain little to none of these and are instead notated by their emotional content and brevity, or a lack of context. These parameters are intentionally broad, as nearly every other aspect of poetry has been tested and twisted throughout its illustrious history. In defining a poem, it is more important whether or not the creator intends something to be a poem than if it fits in any arbitrary structure or format. Webster further defines poetry as merely “the productions of a poet,” largely leaving the question “what is a poem” in the hands of whoever wrote the work in question.

Whether or not a poem is “good” is irrelevant to this analysis, but that many are so concerned with this question is relevant to the purpose of this analysis: digital poetry, in being both different than previous generations of poetic styles and similar in its core purpose of self-expression through language, is “terrible” (Hodgkinson, 2019). “Clichéd, banal, derivative, portentous, repetitive and manipulative,” Thomas W. Hodgkinson continued to describe it in a *Spectator U.K.* editorial (2019, para. 7). Poetry, through this shift online, has died yet again. And yet there is the paradox: if it has died so many times before, how could anyone be so sure that this time, it’s for real?

Methodology

This chapter is a historical analysis of both poetic and technological changes throughout the Western world, as well as the mainstream reactions to them. In the Western world, where Tumblr poetry is most popular, I have tracked the harsh criticism of poetic shifts, beginning with Ancient Greek poetry and culminating in Tumblr poetry. I have also tracked criticisms to technological progress, from the very technology of writing itself through the rise of social

media. Doing this has allowed me to contextualize the arguments surrounding Tumblr poetry's validity as a genre of poetry, as well its undeniable success both online and in traditional book sales. For the purpose of this thesis as a whole, this chapter showcases Tumblr poetry's place in the historical literary canon, as a debated genre not too dissimilar to debated genres before it.

The death of poetry

The concept of "death" of poetry is one that has become tossed around enough to become both cliché and a common talking point for poets and literary critics alike. In addition from my two examples from the introduction, there are a number of takes on poetry's changing form that address this death in a number of manners: In the 1993 book *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*, Vernon L. Shetley attempts to reconcile this pronounced death by detailing the ways it might be possible for American poetry to recover, stating that "the public's interest in poetry ha[s] only intensified" in recent decades, and "it's hard to imagine that the process of change will be slowed, much less reversed" (1993, 28). A 1994 book written by former Poet Laureate Donald Hall as a defense of contemporary poetry with the tongue-in-cheek title *Death to the Death of Poetry* further alludes to the trope that poetry is constantly dying, pointing out commonly cited reasons for the statement such as only poets read poetry—meaning it is no longer appealing to the masses—and that the form has become useless and outdated, no longer applying to modern life in the same way that other forms of art such as film or fiction do.

However, he ultimately argues "our trouble is not with poetry but with the public perception of poetry," illustrating his point by noting a dip in poetry reviews or even in publishing—magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper's Bazaar* once had strong poetry sections, now replaced by lifestyle or science articles (1994, p. 24). However, he argues that it is actually because poetry has been made accessible to the masses that it appears to no longer have

the sacred status it once did, rejecting the notion that general readers don't read it (1994, p. 21). Given that Tumblr poetry is also considered an artform for the masses, given its presence and popularity in chain bookstores, the point he was making in the mid-90s finds itself still relevant today, as it could be argued that critical contention with the genre has more to do with its accessibility and ubiquity in modern bookstores instead of actually with its form and literary value.

Considering the plethora of criticism being written in recent years, it is safe to say that Hall's defense did not do much to dissuade critics. While not labeled a death, a 1999 academic article by John Spaulding tracked the decline of mainstream poetry in mass market magazines (such as those Hall mentioned), newspapers, and on radio shows since the early 20th century, showing that poetry no longer had a place alongside other pop culture staples, even when certain media outlets continued to publish short fiction or memoir essays (1999). A decade later, Newsweek revisited the idea of "death" after readership of the genre hit a 16-year low, and the *Washington Post* called it an "extinction" in 2015 (Newsweek Staff, 2009; Ingraham, 2015).

True to form, these periods were followed by a renewed interest and revitalization of the poetry form, even written about in the same publications that published the form's obituaries (Ramanathan, 2018). This jump from dead-to-thriving is at its most obvious when comparing a 1922 *Time* magazine article condemning T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" to the same magazine's March 6, 1950 cover featuring the poet, specifically celebrating the same once-maligned poem. Similar changes in interpretation include that of the Beat Generation poets—Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and "Kaddish" are now considered staples in the American poetry canon but many critics at the time derided the group's nihilism, Buddhism, and anti-intellectualism as a disgrace to the literary community (Podhoretz, 1958). When considering the way that these interpretations

have changed, it is no surprise that Tumblr poetry is considered such a detriment to the art form, as it represents a similar shift toward more general audiences and writers with even less formal training than before.

www.washingtonpost.com › news › wonk › 2015/04/24 › poetry-is-g... ▼

Poetry is going extinct, government data show - The ...

Apr 24, 2015 - America's no longer a land of **poets**. Now you know it.

You've visited this page 3 times. Last visit: 9/6/19

www.washingtonpost.com › lifestyle › style › 2018/05/06

From Instapoets to the bards of YouTube, poetry is going viral ...

May 6, 2018 - But social media is upending what it means to consume **poetry** and what ... art back to life, at a time when some feared it was becoming **extinct**.

Illustration 1.1: A screenshot of two *Washington Post* articles, published three years apart. The first claims poetry is “extinct”; the second, that it has gone “viral.”

Eras of Poetry

The changing “eras” of poetry are obviously dynamic, and while similarities can be tracked between poets working at the same time, “neither diction nor metrics alone” are regular enough to indicate the patterns that link them together (Miles, 1957, p. 2). Instead, a “spirit” of the work is what ties it together, which can better be understood through sentence structure or syntax, meaning the ways that phrases are structured as opposed to the exact language that is used (Miles, 1957, pp. 2–4). Miles classifies these structures as falling into three categories—phrasal, which emphasizes nouns and adjectives; clausal, which favors compound predicates and action statements; and a third that combines the two and features a balance between the structures (1957). These modes find themselves cycling with the changing times and usually indicate changing intentions for the poetry itself, based on the cultural values of the era it was produced in. To demonstrate this difference, Miles says “The first might say ‘Rising and soaring,

the golden bird flies into the stormy night of the east”; the second if given the same terms would say, ‘The golden bird rises and soars; it flies into the night which storms the east’ (1957, p. 2). The third would theoretically vary between the two styles, perhaps combining the two styles as “The golden bird rises and soars, flying into the stormy night of the east” (Miles, 1957, pp. 2–3).

However, when work produced in an era falls outside the assumed structure, it is often forgotten due to its outlier status (Kellogg, 1995). Kellogg, specifically referring to contemporary poetry, notes that the academy often overlooks poetry published in an era that is divergent from that which has been canonized as that era’s poetics, stating that “such poetics takes multiple shapes in alternative histories, anthologies, magazines, writing programs, affiliations, and self-definitions, as well as the promotion of certain forms of writing over others... yet little has changed in the most authorized representations of poetry and its histories” (1995, pp. 161–162). Thus, eras are not monolithic in values and tone, and broad statements about particular time frames of poetry styles will inevitably overlook some of these outliers, especially as self-publishing channels such as the internet makes sharing one’s work even more accessible to greater numbers of people.

In order to meaningfully analyze a particular style of poetry, especially from a communication studies perspective, and not generalize all that which is produced in a timeframe or location, it is necessary to look even deeper than just at eras and at the communities that exist within a particular era. Within these eras exist “poetry worlds” that are “emergent cultural constellation[s] of individuals who come together around a particular form of poetic activity in particular times, places and spaces” (Vernon & Marsh, 2014, p. 2). The idea comes from sociologist Howard Becker’s concept of “art worlds” and allows people to study the “core activity of artistic work by looking at the contributions of all those who participate in an art

world's characteristic conventions" (Vernon & Marsh, 2014, p. 1). This is particularly relevant to the Tumblr poetry community, as it explains many of the similarities between poetic choices made by Tumblr poets, especially as opposed to other poetry communities that exist in the contemporary Western market. Using this framework to consider the Tumblr poetry community can get more at the heart of this world and its place in the larger poetic genre, rather than focusing on possible differences between individual Tumblr poets.

Pre-20th Century Poetry

The resistance to new forms of poetry is perhaps as old as the artform itself: In Ancient Greece, the shift from spoken to written poems led many to believe that poetry's essential being had been lost, and that the transition to teaching poetry was its detriment (Sikes, 2016, pp. 5–7). The meaning and intention of poetry also came into question with the growth of rhetoric, which took up some of poetry's persuasive functions and was considered to have much of the same effect (Sikes, 2016, pp. 28–31). As a result, poetry was no longer as respected as it once was, because it was no longer unique, and was thus subject to far more criticism.

As soon as poetry had competition in both the communication and the art spheres, many in the Western world formed strong opinions over its worth or usefulness, especially in comparison to other tools or forms. In early Roman culture, around the fourth century, poetry had taken a backburner to other Latin literature and the trajectory that began with the advent of rhetoric continued as poetry's "political, social, and ethical relevance" waned in favor of prose, which was able to capture such intentions more clearly and favorably (Mastrangelgo, 2014, p. 313). Just prior to this in Rome, there had been little interest in literary arts in general. Prose's resurgence in popularity was largely connected to the relatively new Christian church and its use of prosaic scriptures, leaving little room for poetry among the masses (Mastralengo, 2014, p.

315). While many now consider scripture more akin to poetry than straight prose, there is no consensus on the matter, and at the time the general public believed it closer to prose (Mastralengo, 2014; Nettelhorst, 2015).

After more revivals and declines of the form, a 1579-1580 (exact date unknown) “Apology for Poetry” was written by poet Phillip Sidney (also known as a “Defence of Poesy,” derived from the Latin “apologia,” meaning a formal written defense), hoping to convince his Renaissance-era peers that poetry had value as an artform and as an educational tool, while acknowledging criticism that as an artform, it had suffered through its adoption by the common people. The reasoning for this criticism was that commoners treated poems as a commodity to be sold to others instead of as an honest expression of emotional authenticity and art, which Sidney sympathized with.

While it is somewhat reassuring that Sidney considered the form with more nuance than those he was pleading to, rather than simply considering all new poetry to be worthless, the class divisions present in Sidney’s letter are still problematic. By hedging his defense of the artform, he is complicit with the problematic separation of “real poetry” from mainstream commodity, similar to what exists today with Tumblr poetry. However, what is different today on Tumblr (and in internet-based amateur writing in general) is that there is not a specific goal of monetization (although this becomes more complicated when you look at similar poetry communities on platforms with heavy monetization cultures, including Instagram and YouTube). It can be argued, however, that the “viral” nature of digital poetry in general (and the number of Tumblr poets who have signed book deals) means that monetization or notoriety is always on the minds of Tumblr poets, but this is less direct than the poem-for-money exchange of Sidney’s day.

Similarly, the poet Percy Shelley later wrote “A Defence of Poetry” in 1821, to be published posthumously in 1840. The piece takes aim at another essay written by Thomas Love Peacock—a friend of Shelley’s—published in 1820 that claimed poetry had become useless in the new age of science and technological discovery. This is a common thread of criticism in early poetry transformations, as it seemed to many that the world only had room for poetry or less ethereal, more grounded experiences. Shelley argued that poetry was “connate with the origin of man” and an “expression of imagination” (1891, p. 2), much like a religious experience, and was thus more personally fulfilling than any scientific achievement could be. However, he follows the same binary that Peacock created, instead arguing for poetry’s merits rather than allowing for both it and science to coexist.

These debates about technology have only become more relevant as progress in scientific fields has grown exponentially. While criticism about poetry in general no longer places it in a dichotomy against science and technology, the debate within the literary community does still argue about technology’s place in poetry. Tumblr poetry is illustrative of a convergence between the two, as poetry created through and by technology, both in how its shared and in how its form has been adapted to the digital sphere. While more nuanced than Peacock and Shelley’s debate, many are still asked to choose between their traditional notions of poetry, and that which is born online, instead of allowing room in the literary canon for both

Contemporary Poetry

Even more recently, literary elites still call the validity of newer forms of poetry into question, especially as many different aspects about poetry’s form, purpose, audience, and accessibility have changed yet again (and again). A number of “schools” are accepted, broadly ranging in form and purpose from mid century “confessional” poetry (which is largely

autobiographical and explicitly personal in nature), to “surrealist” poetry, (which uses dreams and imagination as inspiration in both subject and form) to many others (Brinkman & Nelson, N.D.). However, there are still arguments about what constitutes a real poem, and whether or not newer forms indicate the “death” of the form as a whole.

Poetry created for and by children was examined in an article aptly called “But is it poetry?” by Glenna Sloan, who analyzed criticism of poetry written for and by children, sometimes called “rubbish” or similarly negative adjectives, or simply a creative expression more akin to “fill-in-the-blank” activities, where pre-established formulas are given personal meaning through word choice and not arrangement, rather than actual art (2001, pp. 46–47). Such criticism implies that the line between what is and is not poetry is not actually determined by form and intent but is instead reliant on quality of the work, or at least the effort put into it, and perhaps some kind of formal knowledge of the art form. Instead of being a mere definition of content, the term “poetry” carries with it the implication of value and worth, and as seen throughout history, this value is often questioned when authorship changes and new, previously uninitiated poets enter the scene and interpret the medium with their unique takes on it.

One of the most recent controversies in the broader poetic community is the revolution of slam poetry—a spoken word, oral expression of poetry that has made its way across the Western Hemisphere, especially in classrooms and among minority communities. Slam poetry is a spoken word genre of poetry that gained popularity in the late 1980s and '90s and gave both a performative and competitive element to the poetic form (Johnson, 2017, p. 5). Venues across the world host slam competitions, some of which have a team element, and many performances are scored by judges or audience reaction. Slam differs from earlier forms of performance poetry by giving greater emphasis to the content of the poem, as opposed to theatricality—earlier

performances were more closely aligned with theater, including costumes and characters as key elements (Johnson, 2017, p. 5). It also differs from regular poetry readings—that is, poetry being read aloud—through specific elements beyond the competition sphere, such as subject matter, rhyme patterns, and intonation (Johnson, 2017, p. 526).

There has been much criticism of slam poetry, including those who participate in its communities. “Slam voice” is a term coined to refer to the popular way of reciting slam poetry that is often imitated by those making fun of the art, and it's one that irritates many who hear it due to its high pitch, repetitive rhythms, and warped vowel sounds (Donaldson, 2017). This is typically something that goes away with practice, or is sometimes purposely developed in parody of the form, and is thus attributed to young slam performers or those who are new to it. Alongside the criticisms of literal sound, the craft is also looked down on for overuse of alliteration, onomatopoeia, and rhyme which are seen as juvenile and “bad” practice. However, these tools have practical applications in aiding the teaching of poetic conventions by first exaggerating these elements in order to showcase their function (Brown, 2011). They are also closely linked to the popularity of rap music, which uses these elements in an even greater capacity, and also faces similar disdain from traditionalists (Low, 2006). However, that these elements are more forgiven in the realm of music but still looked down on in rap music is indicative of a more socially constructed problem based on class and race than an aesthetic one (Low, 2006).

Slam poetry, in being popularized by minority communities, is a recent example of poetry being interpreted by a historically underrepresented group, and given new life and meaning that is personal to the artists. While critics often don't directly acknowledge this aspect of their criticism, the format has been subject to contempt from traditional literary scholars,

including Howard Bloom, the controversial critic known for his disdain of populism and contemporary works (1994). Bloom, in writing much about classic works and the concept of a literary canon, is likely aware of prior shifts in literary form (Bloom, 1994); however, even he cannot resist playing into the “death” metaphor, deeming slam specifically “the death of art” in a 2000 interview with *The Paris Review* (Barber, 2000). Referring to this incident specifically, in the book *Killing Poetry*, written in 2017 by slam poet and professor Javon Johnson, condemned Bloom's disgust as “an attempt to save white male normativity” due specifically to slam's large number of minority participants (2017, p. 2). It is also closely linked to the rising popularity of rap and hip-hop music, which has had similar critiques regarding its authenticity or worth as music (Low, 2006).

Both slam and rap, having been around for several decades now, have become more widely accepted by both the mainstream and in academia (Goldring, 2018), but they still highlight the gatekeeping present in criticisms of new poetic forms. When the basic concept of “poetry” is challenged by new authors, taking its emotional intention and trying their hand at it with their unique experience and culture to inform it, there are often traditionalists not just criticizing the new conventions, but proclaiming the offense so severe that the form is “dead.” The new audiences are also looked down upon especially when they do not have much of a history with poetry as well, as they have contributed to the degradation of art.

Technology: the great culture killer

Much like the contempt many have for new types of poetry, many are apprehensive toward anything new being developed through technology. Many fear new technology, and more specifically they fear the internet and social media. It is often scapegoated as making the world and culture less personal and authentic, with skeptics claiming that the way things once were was

more sophisticated, or more natural (Bennett, 2017). The internet is blamed by many to be the cause of death for brick and mortar stores, physical media, a number of jobs, privacy, romance, and so on. It should not be surprising that its popularity is also connected with recent proclamations that poetry is dead, once again, given that everything the internet touches dies (Williams, 2013).

Language and writing themselves can be considered technologies as well, and many developments that are based on them (i.e. literature, instruction, and of course, poetry) are frequently shunned upon invention by those who feel they're culturally destructive. Even up through the digital age, it can be argued that html—itself a “language” facilitating communication between humans and machines—is a direct relative of these prior conflicts. Communication, in being a means to facilitate cultural production, is inherently vital to all communities (hence, sharing the same “communi-” prefix)—which explains why communication technologies in particular are subject to strong emotional reactions.

From the beginning of writing as a means of communication, there has been criticism of it. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the Greek philosopher criticized the newfound art of writing things down. “If men learn [to write], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls,” he urged. “They will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.” Beyond that, attempts to globalize written language—i.e., through the printing press or any mass media publication, have also been derided as ways to dilute culture (Eisenstein, 1980). What these technologies typically have in common is their ability to promote written works—either for knowledge or entertainment—to a broader audience, who prior to these inventions did not have accessible ways to access written works like books or even legal doctrine. This is similar to the

pattern seen in poetry criticism, when new communities adopted and adapted poetry to suit their needs, only to be told they were “killing” the artform. The problem is twofold, in being both a criticism of new artists as well as new audiences; criticism is common whenever any previously-shut doors are opened.

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of bringing access to knowledge and information to new audiences and creators on a global scale is the rise of digitalization and networked technologies. The invention of the computer and internet systems has had a particularly revolutionary effect on culture and the way that people communicate, “render[ing] experience, and the real itself, problematic... alter[ing] our relations to our environment and mind” (Nichols, 1988, p. 43). That which is communicated via computer is encoded through multiple layers of technology, simulating traditional communications, which can make people feel uneasy about that which is produced through technology. Previously, the simulation of cultural practices and communication were not as apparent to the average person, who did not have to confront the artificial mechanisms by which they communicate with others regularly, but now that everyone is aware of social media platforms and most use them often for some purpose or another, there is no keeping it out of mainstream discourse.

Outside of Tumblr poetry and communities like it, the popularity of social networking sites is often criticized by cultural analysts and average joes alike—the latter, sometimes, posting their disdain on social networking sites themselves. Many fear that these platforms are artificial, facilitating only shallow forms of communication instead of the more meaningful interactions they have offline, somehow making that which happens online “fake” or “unnatural” (Tufeki & Brashears, 2014). Many fear the potential the internet gives the masses, and democratization effect it has on mobilizing masses for political means, although others see this as a good thing

(Ferdinand, 2013). This is another example of opportunity and accessibility breeding fear in those who wish for the potential for change and creation to be limited to select classes of people.

Tumblr poetry: A convergence of technological and poetic woes

The internet has had an influence in developing poetry communities (and individual readers) for a few decades now, even relating back to slam poetry which was widely shared on sites like YouTube and Facebook. Social media as a genre has made it easier to share any digital content online, and Tumblr stood out as a host that could handle a number of file types. Even when Facebook did not allow for gifs and audio files, Tumblr as a platform offered a number of sharing options to its users. Where it didn't offer support, it offered flexibility, as there were a number of extensions designed independently of the site's management to enhance the Tumblr experience for users (Casti, 2013).

The ease of access provided by social media communities, as well as the ease of participation, also contributed to the rise of online criticism in general—not just about poetry, but through the internet (or specifically, what is noted as the online disinhibition effect), users feel safer to share any opinion, even if they would otherwise keep it to themselves (Suler, 2004). In online creative spaces, this has led to harsher criticism than amateur artists (and poets) would typically be used to—perhaps contributing to the excessive amount of negativity that surrounds these communities. The internet as a venue for criticism is not only applied to newer forms of poetry or social media poets alone, as even older, established works of the poetic canon are re-interpreted and argued about via the internet (Richey & Kratzert, 2005), further contributing to the idea that online communities are hotbeds for any kind of opinion sharing.

Online poetry communities in particular receive much criticism, given the form's long history of criticizing new developments. In general, Tumblr and Instagram poetry have been degraded as "artless," thanks in large part to the internet's alleged "deleterious effect" on our ability to process complex information (Watts, 2018). In a scathing criticism published in 2018 by PNRReview literary magazine, poet Rebecca Watts argues that social media's "dumbing effect" had a negative impact on poetry being produced, questioning "What good is a flourishing poetry market, if what we read in poetry books renders us more confused, less appreciative of nuance, less able to engage with ideas, more indignant about the things that annoy us, and more resentful of others who appear to be different from us?" (2018, para. 7). She is not alone in her lament; others who criticize social media poetry as "ruining everything good in the world," theorize that the way we easily scroll through our feeds without much thought is responsible for the new style of poetry's popularity, directly blaming technology and the way it has changed our behaviors for the shift (Bakdash, 2017, p. 16). However, she does not acknowledge that many of the poets that she is critical of are often of a different background than other contemporary poets, and that their adaptation of the form is resonant with their large audiences who buy their books in record numbers (Hill & Yuan, 2018; Ramanathan, 2018).

Those who study and write "traditional" poetry that considers tradition and context, and therefore relies on a formal, considered knowledge of past poetry, seem to be the most offended by the shift. Almost all of the most popular criticism is by working poets or those with creative writing degrees, indicating a formal knowledge of poetry trends and context. This is likely because Tumblr poetry takes everything they were taught or have been working with in their own crafts and turns it on its head, favoring simple and straightforward imagery where complex

metaphor was once king, delightfully unaware of its ignorance of formal ideas and concepts poets have reckoned with for centuries past.

It would not be accurate to say that Tumblr poets have no knowledge of poetic history, as many of them were taught rudimentary conventions and popular poems in schools; but this knowledge is nowhere near as complex or considered as the work many professional poets have undertaken to hone their skills, more based on cliches instead of anything with more depth. While conventional contemporary poets have usually worked very hard and likely considered their works and the context surrounding them very carefully, that they are unaware that their criticism of Tumblr poets mirrors older criticism of all attempts to give poetry to the masses is ironic.

The advent of all social media poetry is closely tied with the rise of the internet and access to computers and information in general; through technology, opportunities for access into *whatever* kind of community someone desires is not terribly hard to find, even if that community is for something unsavory or illegal (although those communities require a different kind of analysis). The kinds of people who utilize social networking platforms to build communities include both people who previously had access to artistic communities *and* people who did not. Many of Tumblr's users are young, female, and of minority status in some way—people who have not traditionally had access to the white, educated male-centric poetry communities of the past (Clement, 2019). While not all of the digital poetry community is of any kind of minority status, many of its most popular members (including Rupi Kaur) are, and so criticisms of the form as a whole are often aware of this, even if they don't explicitly draw attention to one's identity when criticizing the work.

Even when the new world of social media poetry is being complimented, it is still noted that its primary function is as an industry instead of an artform, akin to the beauty and health supplements hocked by so-called Instagram influencers to an audience of admirers instead of literary connoisseurs (Hill & Yuan, 2018). However, Tumblr is not an easily-monetizable platform, and does not have the same influencer culture as other networking sites—a nuance not often afforded to the different communities that develop on different platforms. (Chapter three of this thesis discusses this more in depth.) Similar to the defense of poetry that Sidney wrote, the separation between poetry as art and poetry as commerce is invoked—although in the largely capitalist Western world of communication, monetization is not *as* demonized as a great killer of art. However, it does make readers more skeptical of the artist’s intentions and their quality.

Conclusion

Is social media the death of poetry? No, not even if it is a transformation of its format, intention, and primary audience. In fact, this same shift has occurred again and again throughout poetic history, with the same panicked uproar that eventually gives way to ultimate acceptance. It is important to consider that poetry eras are not monolithic, and that Tumblr poetry is merely one, popular facet of a varied and complicated literary scene—one that caters to an audience who may have never considered poetry as a viable tool for them to use to understand their own emotions in prior eras. Similarly, technology is merely a means of access to information and cultural production, and not capable of killing anything or instituting mass change on its own; it has functioned more as an evening of the playing field, and while not perfect or entirely accessible to all, has enabled global communication on a scale otherwise unseen.

In several decades or so, looking back on this era and its eventual conclusion will likely bring up new observations and considerations about Tumblr poetry's link to social media culture

and the literary world that I have not touched on. However, from looking back at several millennia of poetry, it seems to me that the outrage over it will soon pass on, and whatever happens next will be even more obscene or artless than ever before—and perhaps, so on ad infinitum. It does, though, make sense that Tumblr poetry has been so maligned, when considering the history of poetry criticism before it. It represents poetry in the most accessible state yet—the internet—and is commonly written by young women (mostly) with little-to-no formal training, using their emotions and intuition as their guide.

Literary critics have historically hated all of these things, as it represents to them a dumbing down of a once precious and subliminal artwork that should take effort and romanticized pain to get to. Not only does poetry prove to be a tool that extends far beyond class and social status, it will continually evolve to do so, adapting to the time it's produced in and the needs of those who desire to use it. There is no death of poetry, at least not until there is death of emotion and nuance—there will simply be much greater variety.

Chapter 2: What is Tumblr poetry?: A textual analysis of poems on Tumblr

The textual elements that cement individual poems as part of a larger “school” or “world” (Vernon & Marsh, 2014) of poetry are important to identify when looking at any new genre, so as to ensure an actual change in poetry form instead of just poetry culture. In chapter one, I found that shifts in the culture surrounding poetry are ubiquitous to the artform itself, and that this is often linked to changes in both poet identity and audiences. These changes are directly linked to the specific dynamics in which that poetry is created and consumed, which is a significant part of any specific poetry community.

However, there are also significant textual changes that occur between shifts that are just as important as signifying a new era and a new school of poetry creation. In this chapter, I have performed a textual analysis of Tumblr poetry to differentiate it from other schools of contemporary works, as well as to confirm it as a unique style of poetry as opposed to just work that happens to appear online. While chapter one contextualized Tumblr poetry through criticism and public reception, the formal elements of those poems were not considered in detail. This chapter takes on this task by looking deeper at the written language that makes up Tumblr poems, formalizing the particular conventions that identify a poem as of this genre.

While it might be easy to group all poets who have similar identifying attributes as a part of the same creative community, what actually links poets together into one “school” is their work itself. Poets of the same school typically abide by similar writing philosophies, writing poems with similar attention to (or against) convention. This does not always match their outward identity: For example, Allen Ginsberg and W.H. Auden were two English-speaking gay poets, publishing works in the 1940s and ‘50s, but their work could not be considered of the same variety. For instance, in 1955, Ginsberg published the controversial “Howl,” which was

legally accused of obscenity for its references to drug use and sex in its portrayal of American culture, and notable for its long lines that were broken up based on where Ginsberg naturally took breaths (Miles, 2001, p. 183; Morgan & Peters, 2006, p. xiii); the same year, Auden published *The Shield of Achilles*, a collection of poems featuring one of the same name that uses an almost exact AB rhyme scheme (with some near rhymes and odd lines out) to tell a story about the well-known mythological hero (Auden, 1955). It is possible for some comparisons to be made between the two in terms of general subject matter, but their actual written language is quite different from one another, and they are thus considered to be of different schools.

While Ginsberg and Auden were of different nationalities (the former American, the latter English), this example can be applied to a number of contemporary poets who on paper may seem similar, and have even published in the same places. However, the only way to truly define a genre of poetry is through its language. After all, what else is poetry if not an art form based in language instead of color or image? By being language-based, any study of it necessitates the study of its text. The study of all else is still significant in understanding the communities and cultures that are based on poetry schools; but to understand a poetry genre, you must look at the poems.

Methodology

Using the poems found directly on Tumblr itself as my guide, I set out to consider a random number of poems from a variety of samples to analyze for textual elements including form and structure; subject matter and tone; and the use or lack thereof of common poetic tools, such as rhyme scheme and metaphor use. I balanced this analysis with a few poems by Rupi Kaur to further cement the genre as something beyond Tumblr itself as a style that has gained traction in the “real” world. Kaur is a divisive figure in the contemporary poetry world, having

gotten her start through social media—a Tumblr page, and then a prolific Instagram account—and has become a best-selling poet in the traditional publishing world through the poems that went viral online, and thus serves as a bridge between this online form and a more traditional literary world (Mzezewa, 2017).

By looking briefly at her work, I am able to understand what elements of the online communities were able to transcend amateur status, and if any elements were discarded. As the most visible of Tumblr poets, her work most affects the public and critical perception of Tumblr poetry as a genre, and so any differences between her work and amateur is significant. Although questions of legitimacy and authenticity are brought up by the online/traditional publishing world divide, I emphasize my study more on the traditionally unpublished online works in order to highlight the new ways that new media is allowing for common, not-famous people to contribute their voices into a larger conversation, and thus shape a completely new style of an ancient artform.

To find the poems on Tumblr, I accessed the #poetry, #ocpoetry, and #spilledink tags at random intervals over a few months in 2019 to track a variety of content. There are other tags poets use to identify their work on Tumblr, but these were selected because they were consistently active and well-known to members of the Tumblr poetry community. I saved these poems by “liking” them on a specially created Tumblr account, which allowed me to easily access them when it came time for my analysis. This analysis is specifically that of Tumblr poetry posted in 2019, allowing me to consider a moment in its history in depth as opposed to a general un-nuanced overview of the style. There has been a thriving poetry community on the site since at least 2011 that has no doubt evolved, especially in the wake of the site’s significant

user loss mentioned in this thesis's introduction. However, I have captured the spirit and unique attributes of "Tumblr poetry" through this method, allowing for the canonization of the style.

I ultimately liked 85 posts across the three tags, many of which used more than one tag to identify itself. I did not read content carefully upon my initial selection, as I did not wish to insert any kind of selection bias—however, I did check to ensure poems selected were original content. It was important to me to read poems that were both popular and not, in order to get a full picture of what users deemed "Tumblr poetry," so I sorted the tags both by "top" and "recent." Poems written in other languages as well as posts that were obviously jokes (usually indicated by tags) and not in poem format were ignored for the sake of this analysis, which gives it an English-centric focus, and potentially misses out on an important understanding of Tumblr poetry. While the internet and many of the websites on it are global and exist across cultures, by the very nature of the tags I used, what I found in my analysis was an English language trend that may or may not have similar output in other languages.

A significant portion (but not a majority) of the content in #poetry was not original content, but instead excerpts or whole poems from published and noted writers. While a thread of popular poets could be tracked and related to the ethos of Tumblr poetry (such as individual poets who were frequently quoted, such as Sylvia Plath and Walt Whitman, or subject matters that appeared regularly, such as love and grief), I disregarded these posts in order to focus solely on content created by users. In the #ocpoetry and #spilledink tags, original content is more expected and made up the majority of content. Some of the content posted in these tags was placed there ironically, in order to mock Tumblr poetry or their own experiences, and I have addressed some of these poems separately in chapter 3 of this thesis. In the #spilledink tag, a majority of the content found was original poetry, although some posts were tagged as prose and

thus disregarded. There was also a nonzero amount of unoriginal writing in this tag, but much less than in the #poetry tag. The #ocpoetry tag was by far the least active of the three I accessed but is the only one dedicated solely to “oc” or original content.

My brief inclusion of select works by Rupi Kaur, for which I gathered viral poems from social networking channels, was intended to ground my analysis in the “published” sphere, considering she has book deals based on work that was posted on Tumblr and other social media sites early in their careers. Acknowledging her work allows me to verify or deny observations that I make on Tumblr poetry by considering whether or not certain elements can translate to the published world, and if their poems can still be considered Tumblr poems, even as they move beyond the platform. There are other published poets mentioned in my introduction who would also fit in this analysis, but I focused on Kaur as she has become the face of the movement, and much criticism and ire has been directed at her directly (Church, 2018).

Through this textual analysis, the formal elements that make up Tumblr poetry—both in amateur and professional settings—become more clear, allowing for a more articulate discussion of how it differs from other contemporary poetry beyond the exaggerated statements seen in chapter one that it’s merely bad or ruining the world (Bakdash, 2017). This analysis will serve to more strongly define the genre as a style of poetry, instead of a cultural phenomenon. However, it does not ignore how these cultural elements have shaped it, and instead tries to interpret how the conditions around it have worked to define it as it is now.

Common Elements of Contemporary Poetry (Outside of Tumblr Poetry)

It would be difficult to differentiate Tumblr poetry from other styles of contemporary poetry without some kind of understanding of what contemporary poetry looks like. While a

formal and textual analysis of popular poetry that exists outside of the “online” sphere would satisfy this, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, using other interpretations of contemporary poetry as written in the middle/end of the 20th century, as well as in the beginning of the 21st, can shed light on how it has shaped Tumblr poetry and where they differ. A 2012 computational analysis of anthologized poems from that era versus amateur poems submitted to researchers found that professional contemporary poems “have significantly higher type-token ratios [more varied word choice], contain fewer perfect end rhymes, fewer instances of alliteration, fewer positive outlook words, fewer negative emotional words, more references to concrete objects, less references to abstract concepts, and fewer generalizations” (Kao & Jurafsky, 2012, p. 13).

It is also considered “difficult,” especially in its handling of sophisticated topics such as political, social, and cultural structures, meaning it does not provide simple answers or ideas and instead, through language and form, invites the reader to consider these concepts for themselves (Davidson, 2007, p. 1). Contemporary poetry also communicates commonly through space and form, instead of relying solely on the language and sound of a poem, using the entire room on a page to symbolize part of the poem’s core message (Davidson, 2007, p. 124). In tandem, contemporary poets also frequently reckon with their personal space, in terms of location and physicality, through language (Davidson, 2007).

It is also to some degree considered postmodernist, as it comes after the reign of Modern poetry and employs postmodern techniques like novelization and narrative elements; hybrid constructions; explorations of heteroglossia (two distinct styles of voice within one literary work); uses of polyphony (a musical term used to describe the presence of more than one independent harmony); and the use of monologue (Gregson, 1996). Postmodern or not, it is

certainly informed by the Modern movement of poetry that came before it, and “is by and large traditional,” meaning it has transformed poetry in a very similar way to how movements before it have done so (Pinsky, 1976, p. 6). Contemporary poetry is also closely linked to “mainstream” culture and can thus be used alongside cultural knowledge to illuminate something literary about one another (Altieri, 1984). Furthermore, in poetry altogether, “the distinction between the mainstream and the margins has become increasingly difficult to maintain,” partly because the influence of postmodernism has been so broad that it would be difficult to distinguish between avant garde techniques and a poet who has been influenced by the popular works before them (Gregson, 1996, p. 238).

Popular and influential contemporary poets include Ada Limon, Tracy K. Smith, Mary Oliver, Claudia Rankine, and Billy Collins, to name a few that frequently appear on best-selling lists or in award line-ups. Contemporary poetry itself is not a “school” of poetry, but rather the definition of all poetry being produced in the contemporary age; it encompasses a number of genres of poetry, including Tumblr poetry, meaning that generalizations are not terribly useful for my granular study of genre. However, it is notable that while social media poets join them on best-sellers lists, they are often not represented in high-level awards competitions, signifying a rift between the two types and a distinction not unlike that of different schools.

Most scholarship on contemporary poetry only considers professionally published poems that go through an established model of submission and acceptance (or rejection). This gatekeeping mechanism is difficult to maintain on platforms like Tumblr, in which best-selling poets and so-called amateurs alike can publish their works on the same platforms, with little difference except in follower count (and even social media poets had to build up their reputations like any other amateur might). Kao and Jurafsky acknowledge that the division between

professional and amateur work is “coarse,” (2012, p. 15) and while typically the poems analyzed in this thesis would be categorized as amateur (and also fit well in the amateur elements detected by their study), the internet’s self-publishing capabilities have further blurred this line. Given that the elements I identified in Tumblr’s user generated poetry also found themselves repeated in the published or “professional” poetry of Kaur the division between amateur and professional practices is nearly obliterated.

Differentiating the two (amateur and professional work) when it comes to “Tumblr-style” poetry, appears to be based more on branding than content, although Kao and Jurafksy’s findings are still relevant when comparing Tumblr poetry (both professional and amateur) to more traditional contemporary works coming out in the same time period (2012). While no doubt poets like Kaur are beholden to editors and other publishing agendas when they receive their book deals and become established in that world, prior to this point they are no different in process from other amateur content creators, choosing for themselves when a poem is ready to be posted and what that might look like. This is largely why Tumblr poetry is considered amateur, as there is no governing body to approve or request edits of these poems; they exist as the poet intends and with the poet’s approval, only. Even in published books, poems are usually reprinted posts taken directly from the poet’s social media feeds (with perhaps a few extra illustrations or works that weren’t posted). However, even if “unpopular” Tumblr poems can be considered amateur and popular ones, with many interactions, are considered “professional,” both works are informed by the greater movement of social media poetry, which has developed out of contemporary poetry, through social media affordances, and by online communities with unique cultures and norms—thus defining itself as a genre of its own, and a sector of contemporary poetry rather than a direct opponent to it.

Social media's impact on writing

Social networking sites have been around in some fashion for more than two decades, and they have shaped the way that people communicate with one another. Language specifically has been shaped by social media conventions, with broader reach than just on the internet itself. In both English and Chinese languages, orthographic (spelling), syntactic, discourse and sociocultural conventions have been documented as adapting to online spheres (Lotherington & Xu, 2004). Social media sites often have unique limitations or affordances that can shape how people write on them. For instance, Twitter has a character limit of 280 characters that encourages shorter sentences or even abbreviated words. Even on Tumblr there are consequences to posts over a certain length with a “see more” button that directs you away from your feed and onto someone’s blog directly, disincentivizing engagement.

Similarly, digital writing has become more like speech, and has also adapted to the use of emojis and emoticons and other non-language forms of communication (Lotherington & Xu, 2004, p. 302). Further, text in general has become blended with visual conventions to such a degree that it has become difficult to separate the two; the internet in general is a multimedia platform, and studies of online writing can also be considered studies of online design and visual studies (Hocks, 2003). The unique attributes of social media communication have become so ubiquitous that specifically, social media communication skills are becoming increasingly desired in business communication job listings, which demand that applicants have an inherent “understanding” of social media practices and know how to write for these unique audiences (D’Angelo, 2010).

Many educators have taken note of social media’s ability to shape language development, and have developed pedagogical strategies with these online platforms in mind. Often, they note

that it is through social media that many students are writing at a greater frequency than ever before, and that teaching can be adapted to use these platforms for good (McGuire, 2017). Tumblr specifically is one of the most used social networking sites for this purpose, since its blogging-centric nature makes it an effective tool to practice and share writing, and its interactivity facilitates the kind of back-and-forth communication required to solidify language skills (McGuire, 2017; Yunus & Salehi, 2012). Furthermore, by learning to write through a public platform, young writers can learn to create work that goes beyond basic conventions as “students are aware that they are writing for their peers and the general public, and thus can become more motivated to create work that stands out and will distinguish them among their peers and the massive blogging community” (Valdez Young, 2011, p. 14). This can encourage writers to take risks with their writing, as they hope that the risk will help them stand out in a sea of other posts, and if something fails, they can try again with something new. Fanfiction is also used in teaching spaces to teach engagement with literature, and to foster creativity in writing as opposed to just communication (Mathew & Adams, 2009).

While much study of social media writing is specifically about prose writing and blog or forum posts, which are typically aimed at communicating as straightforwardly as possible, digital platforms also have an effect on poetry writing, as I will examine in this textual analysis. Many of these elements studied in prosaic and blog writing have been found in my study, and will be noted in the following analysis.

What makes a Tumblr poem?

As theorized, there were many common elements that repeated themselves throughout Tumblr poems, both on the site itself and in the work by published poets who write in this style as well. I separated analysis into a few distinct categories: length of poem, use of form or formal

style, use of rhyme, as well as subject matter and tone. I used these categories in my analysis because I found that these were areas that have shifted vastly throughout poetry's history, and were also elements that were commonly noted and criticized about Tumblr poetry as well (Bakdash, 2017; Church, 2018). I also noted other common elements such as accompanying photos, concurrent tags, frequently repeated tools and imagery, and repeated insecurities regarding a poem's "poetic" status.

Length

The majority of poems analyzed were found to be of a shorter length, with seven coming in at over 50 lines, 52 that were between 10 and 50 (usually veering closer to 10), and 26 poems under 10 lines long. There is no typical length of a poem, although the favoring of long or "big" poems falls in and out of fashion, depending on era, meaning that the default length has typically been a few stanzas or so, each 4-5 lines on average (Friedman, 1990, p. 9). However, it is also likely that these poems are following conventions of typical social media posts, which veer toward the shorter end of the spectrum in order to retain engagement, although exceptions apply. Some sites, like Twitter, even enforce short post lengths by instituting a 280-character limit—although this is sometimes subverted through long threads that are still more broken up than a straight blog post would be. This would be a similar effect to the changes other forms of writing have undergone, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Use of style

The vast majority of poems were written in freeform style, (meaning it doesn't use a pre-established rhyme scheme or line break structure) with only four utilizing any kind of style including meter and rhyme, and 81 that did not. Forms have fallen to the wayside in most

contemporary poetry as well, so this isn't a far departure from professional poems (Kao & Jarafsky, 2012, p. 13). While they can be a useful tool in giving structure to a concept, if a poet is writing to form without attention to the emotional story they are telling, the poem can feel stunted and does not perform its central communication task, which is why there is more leeway these days. The intention of most Tumblr poems, like many others, appears to be to share an emotional expression with an audience, and form is likely not important in those situations as it can actually hinder emotional expression in favor of aesthetic ones.

The styles that were used were not particularly formal, such as a sonnet or villanelle form, noted usually by tags that drew attention to meter such as iambic pentameter, or through couplets. The other poems did not reveal their reasoning for structural choices and did not follow recognizable forms, such as poems written in "prose poem" form, which indicates a block of text that reads like a poem in spite of its prosaic look. Again, you could assume that this is because forms require effort and thoughtfulness that many Tumblr poets are not willing or able to give, but this would be missing the whole picture (although it may be an element).

To rhyme or not to rhyme

Out of the 85 poems analyzed, 64 did not implement rhyme and 21 did. Of the 21, 17 used direct rhyme patterns (such as ABAB or ABCDBE) and four utilized more indirect rhyming mechanisms such as internal rhyme or less clear ending patterns. While a majority of these poems were not rhyming, which is more similar to contemporary poetry (Kao & Jarafsky, 2012, p. 13), a more significant portion did implement it than particular styles, implying its both easier or more effective for Tumblr poems. That rhyme has fallen out of favor across the board mirrors the decline of form, as well, as rhymes can be similarly restricting. However, rhymes are more ubiquitous with "poetry" than any kind of form is, because it allows for a particular sound that

differentiates prose and poetry that is more obvious than any other element. It is easier to use rhyme than any kind of style that requires odd repetitions or specific meter, as it requires less outside knowledge and gives the poet more choice in diction. It also unequivocally marks a poem as a poem instead of prose—something that I will touch on later in my analysis.

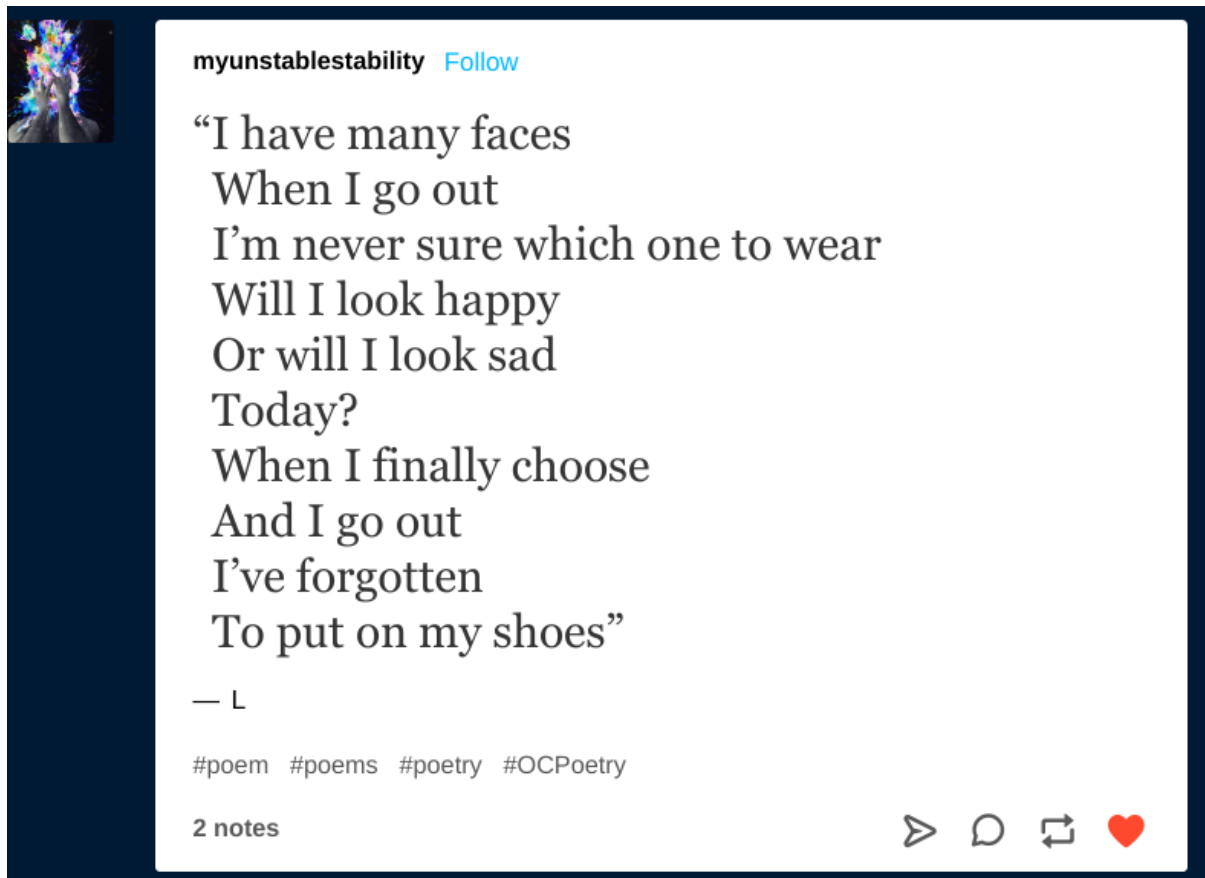


Illustration 2.1: An example of a Tumblr poem that uses an unspecified rhyme scheme.

Common subjects and tone

Poem subjects largely fell into what I divided as five categories, with a few outliers. Those categories are:

- Love/Heartbreak (47)
- Health/Addiction (16)

- Self-image/self-esteem (15)
- Nature (7)
- Fandom-related (3)

Eight outliers could be grouped into subcategories: poems as metaphors, poems to honor events, and poems to address global issues such as war and inequality. I define health as including physical and mental health, and addiction as poems pertaining to complicated or negative relationships with drugs or alcohol. Love and heartbreak poems mostly consisted of romantic love, but a few select poems about deep friendship and familial grief were also included for similar tones. Self-image and self-esteem poems were typically positive, which differentiated them from poems about depression or worthlessness that would have been classified as “health.” Classification of these poems specifically relied on the use of subsequent tags, which often identified a poem as being about a mental illness (like #depression, #anxiety, or even #mental illness) rather than general sadness or low self-esteem. Nature poems typically described nature scenes, such as forests or woods. Fandom-related poems were similar to fan-fiction and were tagged with respective fandoms, including *Game of Thrones* and *The Dirt*, a biopic based on the band Motley Crue.

There was some overlap between categories, specifically between drug addiction, mental illness, and love poems, as well as between mental illness and self-esteem poems. These categories are rough and obviously subject to my own bias, but many tagged themselves as broader themes which guided my categorization, such as those about love and self-image. Poems typically took serious tones, and focused on emotions like sadness, loneliness, grief, and melancholy—even those with more positive messaging typically did so without irony or humor.

These are all issues that can be relatable to many young people across cultural divides, so it makes sense that they would be commonly written about and shared.

Multimedia poems

Tumblr itself is a multimedia platform, allowing posting options for a variety of file types not limited to text posts. Its programming allowed for gifs and other complex image types to show up before other platforms, like Facebook, embraced them (McHugh, 2015). It follows then that one element characteristic of Tumblr poetry is the combination of different media types. This is seen most commonly through images and poetry: In the tags, 12 such posts were found to combine the two elements in a few different ways. (There was one poem that utilized audio, as well, but most examples of multimedia poems used images.) Some photos were screenshots of “Notes” or other writing apps, similar to popular poems on the Instagram platform (to be discussed more in chapter 3), others were computer generated images of words on blank backgrounds, and some incorporated actual photography and artwork into the poems, either through the use of edited stock images or through fan edits of popular media content, as was the case with one of the fandom poems.

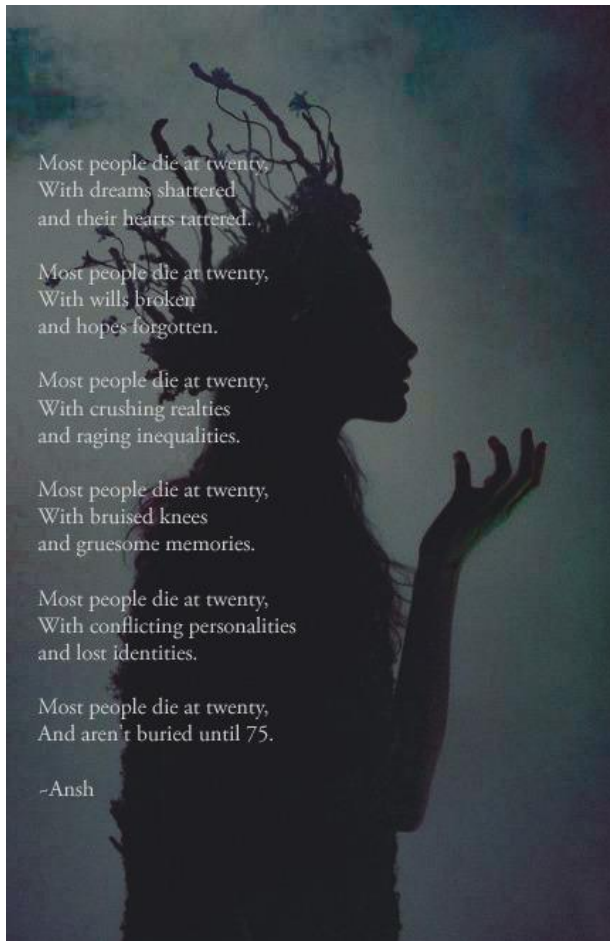


Illustration 2.2: One example of a multimedia Tumblr poem, using a stock image to accompany the poem in the background.

Beyond just Tumblr, the internet itself has made multimedia production more accessible to content creators as opposed to analogue publishing methods. Even in zines or publications where images were common, they might have been more expensive to print, or more complicated to share in their highest definition (Brown, 2005). With Tumblr, posting supplemental art is as easy as posting the poem itself, and thus makes Tumblr poetry a more dynamic style than some others. However, poetry has long been associated with other forms of art, and many collections of poetry, especially in the Victorian era, were accompanied by illustrations or other visual accompaniments (Koudinoff, 2019). Furthermore, poetry itself has

not necessarily been bound to language-only arts, as many discussions of film, music, and visual arts also use poetic frameworks to discuss works that are less focused on narrative and more focused on the communication of emotional experiences (Staff, 2011). This includes works that incorporate traditional poetry into their works, similar to these Tumblr poems that add on images or sound to a typical poem, as well as in traditional Chinese art known as “Three Perfections,” which focuses on calligraphy, poetry, and painting skills in tandem (Moonan, 2016); It can also refer to works that seem poetic in essence, such as the films by directors like David Lynch or Andrei Tarkovsky, which are regarded for their emotional resonance more than any linear narrative. Tumblr, however, easily offers the tools to create multimedia art to novices and minimally-experienced creators who can experiment with little financial or professional risk.

Tags as context

While some may consider Tumblr poems to be highly personal due to their common subject matters, it would ironically appear that through abstraction and generalization, few personal details are ever shared in this style of poetry, making it simultaneously invulnerable and emotionally expressive. Poems were oftentimes vague and fragmented, relying on Tumblr’s tag feature for context and explanation. While many of the classical tradition would say that poems need to speak for themselves (Ciardi & Williams, 1959), this kind of paratextual experience allows for a vaguer and sometimes confusing poem to convey meaning to its readers. There is often a tonal shift between a poem and its tags, implying that Tumblr poets treat their poetic content with more reverence than the tags, and don’t wish to sully their content with actual personal details. For instance, a poem entitled “Sisyphus,” with a stanza that reads “Voltaic air looms over the towers of arrogance/ False promises of an eternal life/ The concrete reeks of mortal cunning and pride,” immediately shifts in the tags with “#i might have a big oofy crush on

death boi #heeeheeee.” This is a more extreme example of the stark difference that can occur between poem and tags, but it is indicative of the greater trend to drop a “poetry persona” in the tags and instead focus on explaining the poem or giving further context for it.

Tags are what bring Tumblr poems back into the personal and detailed realm, by giving readers insight into where a poet was coming from when they approached a poem. Beyond the example I shared above, sometimes this is through sharing inspiration, such as tagging a poem #daydream, #soul searching or #writing prompt, and other times it gives broader insight into what the poet was trying to express, such as a vague poem about heartbreak that revealed in the tags that the writer’s grandfather had just died and it was actually a poem about grief.

#poetry #writing #Love #Romance #spilled ink #poets on tumblr
 #writerscreed #poetryriot #micropoetry #micro poetry #poem #poems
 #poeticstories #poetryportal #illustrans #inkstay #abstractcommunity
 #twcpoetry #blotchedpoems #re-bumbleblossoms #creative writing #surrealism
 #surreal #lit #confessional poetry #brokensoulsreborn #amwriting #am writing

70 notes



Illustration 2.3: An example of a poem that makes good use of Tumblr’s tagging function to contextualize and categorize itself.

For most of poetry’s existence, the proximity of these two things (the poem and the context) would not have been this close; if you wanted to know the purpose for a poem or any of its choices, you would need to read a memoir by the poet or ask them yourself. Even now, many are of the opinion that poems must stand for themselves, and that if you want something to be communicated, you must integrate that into the poem itself and not rely on any postscript or author’s note (Adcock, 1997, p. 81). Even in more traditional schools of contemporary poetry,

however, there is sometimes a section for commentary. In the case of the “Poem A Day” emails from Poets.org, which publishes new poems by contemporary poets most weekdays, there is a section at the end of each poem typically featuring a brief note by the poet on their inspiration or with extra context. However, this is a relatively new phenomenon, and also deeply linked with online communities of poetry, so the trend still signifies a difference from prior poetic practices. What differentiates Poets.org and other online publishing bodies from social media poetry is their use of editorial boards and editors to choose content and send it out, in curated form. The latter relies more on individual activity; both in posting and in finding and interacting with content. While trends and popular users can receive more engagement than other posters, all content is available for access; in online literary journals and newsletters, only that which has passed an editorial process can be seen.

Other poetic elements

Commonly seen tools include the use of color and nature imagery, especially that of fire and water. Alliteration was seen in several poems, as well as allusions to Greek mythology (including references to Sisyphus and the river Styx). There was also use of “archaic” language (words not in common use and were likely found via thesaurus or dictionary-surfing, such as overmorrow), and similes were more common than metaphors (for example, “like a tiger in a zoo”). These particular elements indicate that Tumblr poets are using tools from older poetry that they are typically taught in school to craft their poems. The old adage “write what you know” probably applies here, and poets unfamiliar with the nuanced ways that contemporary poetry has adapted to modern language would very possibly defer to the more academic texts that taught them what poetry is and isn’t. For instance, poems heavily alluding to Greek mythology or

following a strict rhyme scheme may be imitating the kinds of poetry that are taught to young students.

Another common tool is poems as letters, addressed to “you.” Usually these are love or breakup poems, but sometimes they say “you” to mean the writer, as if they are speaking with themselves. Common imagery includes cigarettes and alcohol, witches, fire, the sky, and other common nature elements. There are a lot of color adjectives, especially over other descriptors, and vague words like “mysterious” are used over specific images. I also noticed in the tags an attempt to connect to broader cultural groups, including #blackpoets, #LGBTpoets, etc.

A number of poems appeared as quotations attributed to the poster, or were merely signed by the poet with a signature or their initials, sometimes tagging other social media channels in this space. This is unique to the internet, because even though the poet’s profile is right next to their poem, through its format it is already primed to be shared on any platform, either through screenshot or a link—it ensures that no matter where the poem goes, they’ve made the best effort to retain credit for their work, especially in a space where authorship is often lost.

But is it a poem?

Something notable in a few poems catalogued by different posters was self-doubt, or the conscious hedging that something may or may not be a poem. Beyond that, if a poster had accepted that their work is poetry, they question if it has any semblance of quality, or may not even be good. This self-doubt was seen in four of the poems I’d gathered, mostly in the tags, but in one case in the text body of the poem after it ended. For example, tags included “#does this count as poetry?” and “#still wondering if im doing this right,” which indicates a greater insecurity that you don’t normally see broadcasted in more traditional poetry. Some poems are

also tagged as “#prose,” indicating that some do not see the difference between the two forms, or know where their writing fits in the dichotomy.

However, this is not unheard of in other online creative communities, such as in fan production spaces, which are closely linked to Tumblr’s overall culture, more so than other social media sites (Hillman, Procyk, & Neustaedter, 2014). In general, feedback in online creativity spaces is generally shallow, and those seeking actual workshopping of their writing are still more likely to find it in a more traditional classroom space (Magnifico, Curwood & Lammers). When critique does take place in online fan spaces, it usually takes the form of mentorship and one-to-one discussion, instead of a community exercise (Evans et al., 2017a). The general lack of critique in online writing cultures can lead to further insecurity, both because honest feedback isn’t the norm, and because these spaces are meant to encourage those who feel insecure to share anyway; and so sharing your insecurity via tags invites praise and positive feedback to assuage any fear a poster may have.

Insecurity no doubt exists in professional poets as well, but it typically isn’t shown to us in the more traditional channels—not only is there not the space for it, but whenever anything becomes professional, the default mode is usually to act with confidence. Also, when something is submitted and then chosen for publication, poets receive direct validation that their work counts as what they wanted it to count for. When a poet self-publishes on Tumblr, they do not have that validation, and instead seek it from their peers, or make excuses for it. They receive this validation via engagement, through likes, reshares (on Tumblr, reblogs), or comments.

Many of the poems I viewed had little engagement, as I was sure to view both recent and trending works, with only a handful of likes and even less reblogs. Because there is an influx of work, and no gatekeeping system, this means that even quality poems might be overlooked

because they were posted at the wrong time or were otherwise buried by an algorithm. Similarly, since many other members of the community are also contributors, any praise and feedback that is positive may be seen as ingenuine, or an attempt to be nice and keep the community positive. In fanfiction communities, praise is the most common feedback, as the goal of writers is usually to keep their particular fandom positive and alive instead of becoming better writers (Littleton, 2011, pp. 88–89). All of these factors together can contribute to the insecurity that Tumblr poets feel about their work, as there might not even be consistency in the ratio of quality to feedback; there are simply more variables at play in social media poetry, and one’s talent level is rarely truly validated.

Published vs. unpublished

Using Rupi Kaur as a case study of a Tumblr poet who has “made it” in the traditional poetry world, elements of Tumblr poems can be solidified into “legitimate” status, rather than just amateur work of no consequence. While there is still value in understanding the unpolished work of amateurs, it is Kaur and her other published peers of a similar background who elevate the Tumblr poem style into the mainstream, and ask us to consider it in context to other poetry trends. Her work has been criticized directly as an embodiment of the movement, and I find that many elements I found in Tumblr poems correspond almost directly with hers.

Kaur’s work is noted to contain themes of “heartbreak, self-loathing, hope and love,” similar to what I found on posts in the Tumblr tag (Church, 2018, p. 2). It is highly fragmented, combines images and text, and often does not follow typical style or rhyme schemes—poems often only last for a few lines, and she herself even considers them to just be part of her own larger work, meaning they’re best read in conjunction with one another and not necessarily standalone, even though they’re often shared this way (Kaur, n.d.). When her poems are removed

off the web and into book form, the poems lose their mechanism for contextual clues—which Kaur now uses in the form of Instagram captions as she has moved off the Tumblr platform. (More on the significance of platforms in digital poetry movements will be discussed in chapter three.)

Conclusion

So much of poetry is manipulation: the emphasis is on wrapping an idea up and feeding it to the reader on a subliminal level, to be experienced on an emotional level instead of a rational one. In Tumblr poetry, audiences are refreshed by its literality—even its metaphors serve to feed us a concept directly and unabashedly, its writers unashamed to tell us exactly how they feel, even if they don't tell us why. It's fearless in this way, considering the hesitation many have toward laying their own emotions bare, but it also isn't—as I mentioned earlier, while its emotional content is shared unabashedly, there is a detachment in being unable to show, rather than tell. There is still a layer of separation between this emotional content and the reader, as it is not experienced on the same emotional level, because readers do not work as hard to decode the meaning for themselves. Instead, they are told how they must feel, directly by the writer, and while there can still be resonance, it removes an essential layer from the poetic process. I don't mean to imply that traditional poetry is somehow more or less vulnerable or somehow more or less authentic, but this could explain its appeal to younger audiences who are often not prepared to explore the more nuanced meanings of other forms of poetry, but still emotionally complicated enough to seek understanding and commiseration.

I do not believe that this distinction is not understood by critics; I think for many, this observation is at the root of their criticism, as many critics specifically call out this lack of depth for the reason this poetry is “overrated” or even “sucks” (Fysudeen, 2019). “Of course, it's great

that a whole new wave of people are enjoying poetry and it's been made accessible to them. It's just really bad poetry, vacuous, full of lackluster language and the illusion of profundity, all set on the background of simple type font and a cute line drawing," Fysudeen writes in an explainer for the University of Michigan's arts blog (2019, p. 11). Poetry, a tool of elitism and complicated decoding, has sometimes seemed like some kind of special club with limited access—hence its stereotypical status among those who are required to learn it. By removing the problem-solving element, the doors are opened to a new audience—and something is lost, admittedly. But something was also lost when poetry lost its rhyme, in its musicality. When poets began writing poetry down, it lost its ephemerality. Through all its changes, it adapts, and thus it remains poetry. Especially when you remember that poetry belongs to the poet, and no two will approach their work the same way.

However, through these changes, poetry has the same ultimate function, with a few changes that can be revealing about the group using that style of poetry for their unique purposes. Using the text of these poems is vital to understanding what that poetry is being used for. However, this does not tell the whole story; sometimes textual content is a result of other factors that are not obvious to the reader, such as convenience or platform requirements. In my third chapter, I will review this in more detail, and further add to Tumblr poetry as a genre unlike other social media poetry; its textual details are merely one element of the larger picture.

Chapter 3: Platform's impact on digital poetry: Why is it just *Tumblr poetry*?

Throughout this thesis, I have made it a point to designate its subject as *Tumblr poetry* in order to differentiate it from other kinds of internet-based poetry. Not only am I separating Tumblr from the growing online-only literary community, but I am also separating Tumblr poetry from poetry communities that form on other social networking sites. Sites like Reddit and Instagram have their own active communities of poets, but especially on the former, the content differs from what I have defined as a Tumblr poem. So, what makes Tumblr the originator of the poetry style that I claim to be so influential? Through this final chapter, I examine the role platform plays in online communities by looking at alternative poetry communities and their relationships with their host platforms. I do this specifically in comparison to Tumblr's unique attributes as previously examined in this thesis in order to understand why Tumblr poetry has become so prolific, and why this community could only form in the environment that it did.

I will specifically be looking at the forum site Reddit and popular subreddits r/ilikthebred and r/boottoobig, which both have at least 150,000 subscribed members, as well as the perceived poetry community on image-based platform Instagram. The latter is referred to as "Instapoetry" by many. There are also poets' communities on a number of other websites and social networking platforms, such as the "Hello Poetry" website that exists as a social networking site just for poetry, as well as closed Facebook groups for poem workshopping. I have specifically chosen Reddit and Instagram as case studies of the role platform plays in online poetry because both communities exist publicly on social networking sites that are not specifically designed for poetry, which makes them most similar to the Tumblr poetry community. Their similarities make them ripe for nuanced comparison, given my ability to look at how small differences affect the communities that form on each platform, instead of focusing on larger, more obvious differences.



Illustration 3.1: A screenshot of a Reddit post of a screenshot of a Tumblr post of a screenshot of a tweet.

A part of this platform analysis rests on understanding the role that Tumblr poetry plays in the larger ecosystem of digital poetry, and how it is interpreted on other sites. Understanding a platform and defining its specific attributes is complicated by the cross-disciplinary nature of the internet: For example, posts from one platform are screenshotted and shared on other platforms, sometimes to a humorous degree—at times, popular posts have been screenshotted so many times that defining attributes from a number of social media channels can be found on one, central post (as seen in illustration 3.1). Furthermore, microcosms of site users and replicas of platform-centric communities exist on other sites, which is evident on Instagram pages dedicated to reposting famous Tweets or Reddit posts (@latenighttweets and @me_irl_bot_, for example); or subreddits meant to collect the “best of” Tumblr and 4chan (r/Tumblr and r/4chan respectively). Even beyond a formalized allusion to another platform, trends in popular content

are represented on multiple different platforms, as many users of one platform are also users of other platforms, and they bring trends and content with them as they use other platforms (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). Tumblr poetry, a style of poetry with its own trends and conventions, can be found on other platforms, especially through reposts and screenshots. However, I am focusing on how other platforms that host communities of poets cannot ultimately create what I have defined as Tumblr poetry.

I begin my chapter with a dive into parodies of Tumblr poetry, which can usually be found on other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, what characterizes them as parodies, and how they solidify Tumblr poetry as its own genre. This links to my cross-platform hypothesis, in that trends on one platform can transcend that platform and become influential to others. Many Tumblr poetry parodies can be found on Twitter or Facebook, perhaps to an even greater extent than on Tumblr itself. After this, using parody as a jumping off point into what can be called “humor poetry,” I analyze Reddit’s “ilikthebred” and “boottoobig” subreddits, as examples of intentionally comedic, community-based digital poetry. The two forums are examples of poem-centric communities with unique styles, conventions, and communities that are perhaps more uniform than Tumblr poetry due to their platform affordances and features.

After these analyses, I consider “Instagram poetry” in a similar way to my analysis of Tumblr poetry—this is where my choice to consider Tumblr as the originator of the style becomes most notable, especially considering Rupi Kaur, as I have been, who has moved between platforms and is now commonly referred to as an “Instagram poet” in much criticism of her work. A lot of the criticism published about Kaur specifically denigrates her work, her word choices, and her simple subject matters, but some go even further as to criticize the platform itself, blaming “the way we use social media ... for this. We go on Instagram to scroll quickly ...

we experience media overload” (Bakdash, 2017, p. 17). Bakdash, among others, believes that the social media experience is inherently shallow, and the content that forms on it will match that expectation (2017). The criticism of Kaur and others works in tandem, criticizing the platform as well as the content. Many critiques of Kaur specifically call out Instagram poetry as the school of poetry I’ve worked to define in this work, but the app’s specific attributes and affordances shape a slightly different community than the one I’ve defined, making my choice to go back to the original home of such poems, Tumblr, more clear.

Methodology

To perform this platform analysis, I looked at popular poetry-based communities on the platforms Reddit and Instagram in order to understand the role platform plays in the creation and proliferation of Tumblr poetry. I have chosen to perform a platform analysis; more specifically, a careful consideration of how digital media platforms and their specific designs and features shape their use and the communities that form on them (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). This helps discern the nuanced ways that the internet in general has affected previously existing communication and art. While I have already spoken to how “digital” and “poetry” interact as concepts, diving deeper into the specific platform I’ve chosen as the crux of this study—Tumblr—versus alternative social media outlets with different poetry-based communities complicates the blanket term of “digital,” and considers the interaction of different communities online as separate but aware of one another.

Platforms can be defined in this context as programmable, generative, reliant on participation, and modular, meaning they can be specifically configured and reconfigured to allow for certain affordances; they foster content generation that is up to the user and not known in advance; they foster community and interaction; and they connect a stable core, like an

operating system, to variable components, like apps (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019, p. 170). Digital platforms have been studied for their nuances and interactions with other platforms in many different contexts, from how people receive and interpret news (Diehl, Barnidge & de Zuniga, 2019) to how they receive political messages (Bossetta, 2018). Platforms are considered to have infrastructural power over their users (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019), fundamentally shaping how the communities that form on them will operate. Kelkar (2018) concludes his study of educational platform “EdX” by surmising that “even prior to creating tasks and goals, the architects and users of platforms have multiple conceptions of their own and each other’s roles and tasks... And these questions, while never completely settled, get resolved, through the design of the technology and the organizational roles” (2018, p. 2643). Thus, the way that platforms are run and the tools available on them are telling and translated into the communities that formed.

One way to analyze platforms is through their affordances, which are different than just features or outcomes; instead, they are defined as variable opportunities that the platform affords a user (Evans et al., 2017b). Variable refers to a range of possible effects, as opposed to the binary of features: Anonymity is a common affordance, and different platforms offer varying degrees of this to their users, for example (Evans et al., 2017b, p. 41). Common affordances noted among computer-mediated communication channels, including social networking sites, include accessibility, bandwidth, social presence, privacy, network association, personalization, persistence, editability, conversation control, anonymity, information control, and synchronicity (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Considering these and how each platform differs in the regards is vital to understanding how platforms are used and why certain communities gravitate toward certain websites over others, even for similar interests. Many of these affordances are seen in varying

degrees in the platforms that I am analyzing, and enable use practices and the ways the communities take shape.

The relationship between platform and user is symbiotic; just as the platform shapes the user's experience of it, users have the power to control the discourse of a platform or even subvert the platform's intention to fit their own communication needs (Kennedy, Meese & van der Nagle, 2016). "Because these practices are socially developed, they can deviate from the wishes, and affordances, of a social media platform" (2016, 154). Whether or not a platform welcomes this behavior is wholly dependent both on individual platform and specific instance. An example of a positive response is that Reddit, once branded as a social news site, adapted to more social groups forming by developing more tools for social interaction (Singer et al., 2014); a negative response is when Facebook began deleting pages of individuals not using their "legal" name because the site's intention was to remain as authentic to one's "real" self as possible, thus excluding trans or other vulnerable individuals (Levin, 2017).

Specifically for my analysis, I viewed top and recent posts on two subreddits and in the Instagram tags #poetry, #ocpoetry, and #spilledink—the same tags I used to analyze Tumblr poems. Instead of diving as deeply as I did into Tumblr poetry, I looked at platform and community difference through rules, common practices, and affordances. I also looked specifically for similarities and differences between my Tumblr poetry findings. I also analyzed the site-specific functions of the Reddit and Instagram platforms in general, beyond community guidelines that were specific to the poetry communities I looked at, as compared to Tumblr—on Reddit, this includes features such the forum style as opposed to a personal blog style, and elements like upvoting and downvoting, and the reporting function for posts that were deemed irrelevant to the community—not just against site rules. By doing this, I understand how this

community is both guided and limited by its host platform, and can hypothesize the effect this has on the content that is created and rewarded by users.

On Instagram, I consider the difference an image-based platform would have on its poetry community, as opposed to a multitool blogging platform, like Tumblr. Because it uses a tag system similar to Tumblr's to allow exploration and discovery of community (as opposed to Reddit's segmented "subreddits"), I specifically looked for common or divergent poetic themes, post styles (i.e. the kind of images and multimedia elements used on both platforms), and any other elements distinctive of Instagram as a primarily photo-driven social networking site. I also made a list of functions that users could take advantage of or were limited by in order to understand how users of the community were making use of the app's specific affordances to create their communities.

"The internet" as a platform

The notion of "digital poetry" in and of itself can be viewed as a platform change from traditional poetic forms. Not only has the medium radically changed, but so has the general audience and the affordances and features for those interacting with poetry, simply by virtue of the internet's broader affordances. The internet in general has allowed for a certain longevity to pieces that might have been fleeting if published in literary magazines, as content is not erased to make room for new content (Verdaasdoonk, 1989). There is also a lower barrier to entry, typical to online participatory culture in general, that does away with the requirement that others must approve of your work in order to be seen (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Considering the vast array of communities that have erupted on "the internet" at large, I will be looking more specifically at what these platforms have to offer communities of poets in relation to one another, instead of at all the things that digital media offers poetry communities.

This narrows the scope of this chapter to become more nuanced, but perhaps misses out on some of the broader implications of online poetry that may be seen more strongly on platforms other than Tumblr.

Humor poetry

The Parody of Tumblr Poetry

your ventra card
may be
expiring soon
so make sure your rides
don't

register your
ventra card online
and you'll receive a new card
in the mail for
free
prior to expiration

learn more at
ventrachicago.com

- rupi kaur



Illustration 3.2: A parody of a Rupi Kaur poem that circulated on multiple social media platforms.

When an object or work has become subject to parody or satire, you can be assured that it has cemented itself as an important work in the historical canon. Shakespeare, Frost, and Poe are made all the more delightful through their imitators and satirists. What better acknowledgement that you have done something unique or noteworthy than careful mockery? Parody, defined by Linda Hutcheon as “imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text,” (1985, p. 6), is something that has shown up both on Tumblr and other sites like

Twitter and Facebook, indicating a familiarity with the form beyond its own community. There are a number of parodies and humorous “poems” mocking the style’s fragmented nature and seemingly uninspired line breaks.

On Tumblr, there were a few posts in the #poetry tag on Tumblr that were clearly meant to be humorous takes on Tumblr poetry rather than poems themselves, and were often identified as such through their concurrent tags, such as #joke or #funny. These poems were disregarded for the sake of my analysis in chapter two, in order to understand Tumblr poetry at its most sincere form. They typically consisted of fragmented statements broken up similar to the poem in illustration 3.2. The text comes from an announcement on the Chicago Transit Authority that played several times a journey throughout 2018 and 2019, and was found on Facebook without a source, similar to other meme images. Notably, the image credits itself to Rupi Kaur, as it is made to look exactly like one of her many viral poems, down to the minimalist image of a train car beneath the poem.



Illustration 3.3: Parodies of Rupi Kaur works specifically are common, and exist beyond the platforms she uses.

Parodies of Tumblr poetry are commonly found Tumblr itself, sometimes within the poetry community and other times outside of it, not labeled by any tags so as to not be found by those searching for genuine Tumblr poetry. However, many parodies of the form, such as those seen in illustration 3.3, are found frequently on other platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Online media trends often transcend platform, given that social media users often interact with more than one platform (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). While parodies don't necessarily have negative intentions, much of the mockery of the form does in fact serve to belittle and devalue it, which can much easier to do from a distance, i.e. through an alternative platform. This differentiates it from "trolling," which on Tumblr similarly relies on knowledge and subversion of local culture, but instead interacts directly with those the trolls are making fun of in an attempt to enrage or harm them (Fichman & Dainas, 2019).

However, that Kaur's first book was published in 2014, and that there are still popular tweets being posted and interacted with specifically parodying this book, is more significant of the cultural staying power and impact this school of poetry has had on the larger public. Regardless of intention—whether it be to denigrate or merely poke a little bit of fun at the emerging style—the outcome is that this style becomes canonized and understood widely by a group of people via essence. Parodies are funny because people understand the source, and they understand that the source is unique as well—people understand Tumblr poetry beyond the community itself, and regardless of criticism or disdain, they understand it as unique and significant as well.

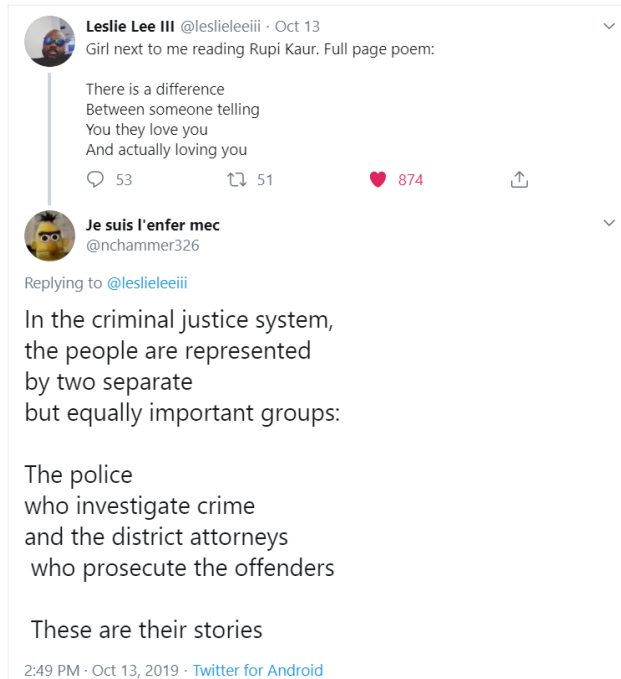


Illustration 3.4: Another example of cross-platform parody.

The particular form that Tumblr poetry parodies take is notable as well, given that many of them often identify themselves through a fictitious Rupi Kaur signature. While she is no doubt the most public face of the movement, many others are known and criticized for their employment of the style, but the targeted critique on Kaur must be carefully considered. Is it her status as a woman of color, her extraordinary book sales (even compared to her well-read peers), or something else that has culturally granted her the status of “Tumblr poetry” poster child? Further, while criticism of Kaur focus on her work and her platform, her identity (as well as the identity of other online poets, often of a similarly marginalized status as Kaur), is inherently linked to both the genre and the critiques.

I believe it is a combination of these factors, in addition to something else unique to this form—much of its critique is that it’s too mundane, too commonplace, and not “poetic” enough aside from arbitrary line breaks to be valid as poetry (Fysudeen, 2019). Considering this, critics

may not feel it is enough to add line breaks to their own parodies, and need a bigger signifier that what they're doing is parody and not authentic contribution to the art form itself—thus, the playful forgery of Rupi Kaur's signature becomes inherently necessary to the act of parody itself, and perhaps reasons behind it become less important than if it were a totally pointed and considered choice in and of itself. Why Kaur is still a thoughtful question, but perhaps the answer is no more complicated than that she was in the right place at the right time for the internet to make its move, and in typical meme fashion, the trend stuck.

Reddit and poetry

Reddit as a platform

Reddit, the host of more than 130,000 unique forums called subreddits, is home to multiple poetry channels. It is a unique platform both in concept and execution; few of the other main social media channels allow for such niche creation or internal guidance at the scale Reddit does. By allowing users to create their own subreddits, and govern them as they see fit, more control is given to users regarding what content they want to see and exactly how that content should be created. That each subreddit creates its own rules and appoints a unique moderation team with intimate knowledge of that community is significant; this process ensures more uniform content on subreddits in general, and poetry-based subreddits are no exception. Furthermore, tools built into the Reddit platform, like upvote/downvote functions that allow users to literally vote on what content they believe is worthwhile, also encourage conformity among users. Reddit as a platform is also built to curate an idealized experience for its users through the use of “default” subreddits that everyone is subscribed to when they create an account on the platform. While users have the ability to unsubscribe, and these particular default subs do change over time, what the platform chooses as default is significant to the Reddit

experience and how users engage with the platform (Jurgens & Stark, 2017). More site features, such as the ability to sort posts by “top” and “hot,” and the ability to “guild” or monetarily award especially worthy posts also reinforce conformity.

Thus, content on Reddit is more hierarchical in nature than on Tumblr and Instagram, — on those sites, content is not subject to an executive board (mods) that decide whether it adheres to predetermined guidelines. User control of content on Reddit is to an extent merely perceived, as it is actually tightly regulated by these appointed leaders. Mods, who have threefold power over their subreddits (becoming and developing as a moderator, developing rules, and handing rule-breaking and trolls), are instrumental in the development of Reddit communities (Seering et al., 2019). If someone posts a poem on Tumblr, no matter how much an audience might hate it, it will stay for as long as the creator wants it to stay. However, the relationship between mods and end-users is somewhat balanced by Reddit’s ease of community creation; if a community rebels against its mods, it can reform somewhere else without their authoritative rule (Squirell, 2019). The risk for totalitarian-like rule remains, though, as many users don’t want to engage in any kind of community conflict if not necessary, giving mods more power.

Also, whether or not a post is even seen by a large audience on Reddit depends on its positive engagement. For instance, all engagement counts toward boosting hot posts on both Tumblr and Instagram whereas only positive reactions (and the close mimicking of a predetermined model) allow a post to be pushed forward on Reddit. While there is no set guide on how to write the perfect Reddit post or comment, “best practices” can still be discerned by users to fit a relatively hegemonic model—Horne, Adali & Sidkar (2017) performed a content analysis of popular subreddits and were able to find a relatively accurate way to predict post popularity using sentiment, content, relevance, specific user, and time. The effect that this make-

it-or-don't model has is that posts on the former allow for more nuanced discussion, and there is more variety in what can be seen by a passing public; on the latter, there is a bias of well-received content that rises to the top, meaning that things that are different or could possibly drive nuanced discussion could easily be forgotten. Furthermore, the earliest engagement with a Reddit post has great consequences for that post's overall popularity, as many users find themselves beholden to a bandwagon effect, and will be more likely to vote according to prior vote trends (Weninger, Johnston, & Glenski, 2015). This also affects a particular subreddit's reputation, as well as the ability for particular individuals (power users) to receive more attention than others.

Furthermore, the Reddit model, which does not value risk-taking, is possibly less likely to reveal "embarrassing" or "emotional" content in order to retain its general audience—so long as that audience is not specifically looking for embarrassing or emotional content, as they might be on subreddits dedicated to emotion talk or general support. This would be in line with Reddit's perceived userbase, which is typically more masculine than Tumblr's—men are twice as likely to use Reddit than women, and Tumblr has been studied as a social network that is particularly welcoming of femininity (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Kanai, 2017). Older users on Reddit have also been noted as receiving more positive feedback than younger users, implying the site's ethos values more measured, mature community interaction (Finlay, 2014), whereas Tumblr is considered a safe space for youth culture to develop (Hart, 2015). Even though young people and women are users of Reddit, they might feel pressured to conform to the site's hegemonic tone; the site's communities are "neo-tribal" in nature, meaning popular content can seem homogenous or unvarying (Robards, 2018). Of course, different communities might have

completely different norms than others, depending on its unique constituents, but many “norms” can be found across Reddit on macro or meso levels (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018).

I would also mention that there are direct poetry communities on Reddit that are sincere in their approach and not humor-based: r/poetry and r/ocpoetry come to mind, but neither are particularly active nor relevant to my understanding of platform and poetry. The former is more focused on discussion of popular poems or the art of poetry in abstraction, and the latter is not nearly as active as the two subreddits that I am choosing to view: many posts come and go from the front page without receiving any replies, which is notable as the sub’s intention is to serve as a workshopping space with guidelines and expectations for feedback between users. This expectation also differs from both Tumblr poetry and the two subs I do analyze; neither of those communities are centered on the concept of improving their work, and instead exist as spaces to self-publish or self-express.

r/ilikthebred

“my name is Cow,
and wen its nite,
or wen the moon
is shiyning brite,
and all the men
haf gon to bed -
i stay up late.

i lik the bred.”

-u/poemforyoursprog, origin of r/ilikthebred community

Beginning with the subreddit “r/ilikthebred” as an example of popular poetry-centered communities on Reddit, I analyzed the sub’s rules, best practices, and popular posts to understand how it formed and why it exists in the way that it does. The forum, which has nearly 160,000 subscribers as of March 2020, is characterized by short, rhyming poems that depict the

content of an accompanying animal image in a silly, often childlike way—using misspelled words (such as the name of the sub itself which misspells both “lick” and “bread”) and sing-songy language, specifically. The name comes from a post on another community in which the punchline of said poem was “i lik the bred,” because the accompanying image was of a cow who was, in fact, licking bread.

The subreddit has a stickied (the site’s term for pinned) post at the top that gives the rules for the community’s signature style, which I am including here: “Stanzas of four lines; Each line has four syllables (or each pair of lines adds up to eight syllables); The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme; The stress should fall on the second and fourth syllables of each line (iambic dimeter); [and] Tend to have mainly monosyllabic words” (r/ilikthebred). Although these are clearly prominent on the webpage, the rules do also state that these trends are not all-encompassing, following up this list by saying “an ilikthebred can still be good without these though” (r/ilikthebred). However, content that differs only does so slightly; sometimes stanzas are a bit longer, or contain more complicated words, but the general rhyming pattern and meter stay the same. The second rule on the subreddit, however, is that complaints about meter and rhyme are not taken seriously by the moderator team; nevertheless, given that the top posts use this form, mob rule through the upvoting process still ensures that the predetermined style is followed, even if not perfectly.

Something not stated in these guidelines is that the key defining characteristic of ilikthebred poems is its subject matter: every post contains an image of an animal, usually doing something exceptionally cute or silly, but this fact is a given to community members, and thus isn’t included in either this or the following best-practices guide.



Illustration 3.5: The top post of all time on r/ilikthebred, as of 03/20.

That guide goes even more in depth into helping its users create uniform content that has a better chance of being successful on the platform, including advice for formatting posts; on crediting other users who may have contributed images or ideas; on how to title a post; or how to tag a post to most help other users, i.e. “if your poem is sad or is about an animal who passed away then please put [Sad] or [RIP] in the title” (r/ilikthebred). While there are tagging mechanisms to help those who wish to avoid emotional content, it is still popular; the top post is of a dog who just died and is being remembered through poem format (see illustration 3.5). This quality makes this poem community more similar to traditional poetry than r/boottoobig, but it is also less popular, with only a fraction of the subscribers.

r/boottoobig

roses are red,
sugar is sweet



Illustration 3.6: The origin post of r/boottoobig.

Following that analysis, r/boottoobig is similar to r/ilikthebred, only far more active than the former. It has more than 630,000 subscribers as of March 2020. The posts follow a predetermined format that utilizes both text and imagery in a different way than r/ilikthebred; There is a brief text “setup” in the title field, and the attached image is either a screenshot or an image of further text that rhymes, creating the poem. The original poem that inspired the subreddit is included above, also using the image of an animal to augment it; however, not all posts contain animals or even objects other than text. The subreddit itself refers to the included image as a “punchline,” further blurring the line between poetry and comedy. The format itself is incredibly basic, boiling poems down to rhyme and meter; many posts on the forum begin with the classic “Roses are red, violets are blue” beginning, as well. There are rules on the subreddit

to help diversify the content (for example, “No Roses Wednesdays” forbid posts with that very opening on Wednesdays).



Illustration 3.7: The top post of all time on r/boottoobig as of 03/20

The subreddit uses rules like this to ensure uniformity among its posts; whereas r/ilkthebred does not penalize for poor rhyme and meter, r/boottoobig’s rules make it clear that these are both vital to a good post. The third rule on the community’s sidebar is “make sure your post has good rhyme/meter. A ‘True BootTooBig’ is a post with both good rhyme *and* good meter. A ‘Small Boots’ post has either bad rhyme *or* bad meter, and will be flaired as such, and potentially removed” (r/boottoobig). They do allot Sundays to these “Small Boots” posts, in which lower quality poems can be posted on this day only in order to keep the forum free from this kind of clutter.

Both of these subreddits are dependent on multimedia content: both images and text are utilized to tell a complementary story, instead of using one single medium to share something completely. Poems without images aren’t even allowed on the subs, as they wouldn’t make sense in their broader contexts. This is a stark contrast to the Tumblr poetry community, where a post can be anything, use any of the site-allowed media types, and exist without fear of moderation. The community has historically had a “featured” poetry tag, where editors would have once

picked the elite poems in the community to be featured, but this system was eradicated in 2015, thus allowing for more organic engagement with tagged posts (Support).

Instagram poetry

Instagram poetry is a close companion to Tumblr poetry. Much of the criticism I mention in this thesis calls the phenomenon I have described “Instagram poetry” rather than Tumblr-based, and there are admittedly very many similarities between the two, both in community ethos and in style (Hill & Yuan, 2018). Rupi Kaur, who has been my primary “published” example of Tumblr poems notably switched platforms herself at the height of her popularity, and is often referred to as an “Instagram poet” in criticism (Bakdash, 2017; Fysudeen, 2019). While Tumblr lost thousands of its users in 2019, following a controversial ban of adult content, much of its poetry community migrated to Instagram before that, considering much of the literature and criticism predates this “purge.” Instagram is a far more “mainstream” platform than Tumblr, even when compared to Tumblr’s peak: Instagram has a billion monthly users, whereas Tumblr has never broken out of the millions. Kaur’s transition could be considered one of convenience and marketing—she can reach more people through Instagram, thus promoting her books more widely. Given the shortness of her poems, and that she was already incorporating drawings into her work, her shift to Instagram did not have to fundamentally change her poetic approach. In choosing to consider her a “Tumblr poet” I am purposely drawing attention to her roots as an artist on that platform; she has shaped Instagram poetry, but she was shaped by Tumblr.

Literature on Instagram shows that it is a feminine space, albeit one that promotes a limited and idealized type of femininity (Duffy & Hund, 2019). This further aligns the platform with Tumblr, especially against Reddit, as the two appear more open to emotional speech and authentic content, even if it's still subject to criticism. It is also a platform where more positive

expression is encouraged, related to its self-promotional and public nature, but also contributing to the creation of “finstas,” or fake accounts where more authentic emotional expression can be shared privately alongside the maintenance of a public profile that appears more curated (Waterloo et al., 2018; Duffy & Chan, 2019). While Instagram gives more of a choice in how one presents themselves, its relationship with Facebook promotes the use of a real-world identity, which lends itself to this positivity bias, whereas Tumblr, while similarly public, feels more private because there is less connection with real world communities, and fake names are common. Vulnerable groups—such as queer youth of color—have been seen using Tumblr to share more personal opinions because it allows for a layer of separation between their online persona and their “real life” identities (Cho, 2018). Finstas are exemplary of how users manipulate a platform’s intentions to serve a community’s desires, but are also typically private and fundamentally do not contribute to any broader community conversation, unlike pseudonymous Tumblr users. These accounts instead function as tools for interpersonal communication between an otherwise networked community

Instagram has more features in mobile app form than its website does. Slowly more features are being imported to the desktop site, but it still lacks key elements such as the actual ability to post. This affects how it’s used, but doesn’t hinder its success, as Kovalik and Kurwood found that specifically in Instagram’s poetry community “value was placed on the mobility and accessibility of Instagram as a mobile app, for composing and consuming digital poetry” (2019, p. 1). Literally speaking, this means that users have access to the app from anywhere they have their mobile phone and an internet connection, and because it is designed for this as its primary experience, there is never necessarily a wrong time to be posting. Tumblr, however, was a website before it was an app, which could potentially affect the way that posting

was treated by its users, as something that should be done from home or with a more stable connection than through their mobile devices.

“Instapoetry,” as it has sometimes been called, has also been studied, and is noted for being “simplistic, little more taxing than reading a meme. It is almost always inspirational or emotional” (Berens, 2019, p. 1). Kovalik & Curwood stated in a 2019 article about Instagram poetry that “community and interactivity were important to poets, especially in regard to feedback” (2019, p. 1), which is also similar to my findings of Tumblr poetry. The platform itself was identified to give poets “agency and [foster] multimodality when composing, thus highlighting the changing nature of digitized writing practices” (Kovalik & Curwood, 2019, p. 1).

Instagram poetry, however, is necessarily short enough to fit within the confines of an Instagram post; many poems tagged “poetry” on the platform are even just one line, meant to provoke thought or emotion but not provided with context or elaboration. On Tumblr, while many posts are short to medium length, this physical constraint does not exist. Posts take up as much space as they need to, meaning there’s no platform-enabled limitation on content. Occasionally when a text post is too long, readers will be redirected to a different webpage, but the content still has no length limit. On Instagram, tags are separated into “Top” and “Recent” tabs, and I scrolled through both to get a feel for them. On the “Top” side of the #poetry tag, a number of posts were brief one-liners, and it was unclear to me if they were written by the poster, or otherwise found. Some were clearly pictures of books, but a lot were digitally created images. Some were screenshots of things that were not clearly poems, including a tweet that had been edited with a sky filter, and a photo of a beach with the words “Mentally somewhere else” on top of it. There was a video of a slam poem. In the recent tab, the content appears more

similar to that of “Tumblr poetry,”—poems are short, to fit in the space allotted by Instagram, but of the 15 posts at the top of the feed when I viewed it, I found many familiar subject matters and conventions. Self-esteem, mental health, relationship issues, and love were all discussed, indicating that these are among the more popular subject matters, like on Tumblr.

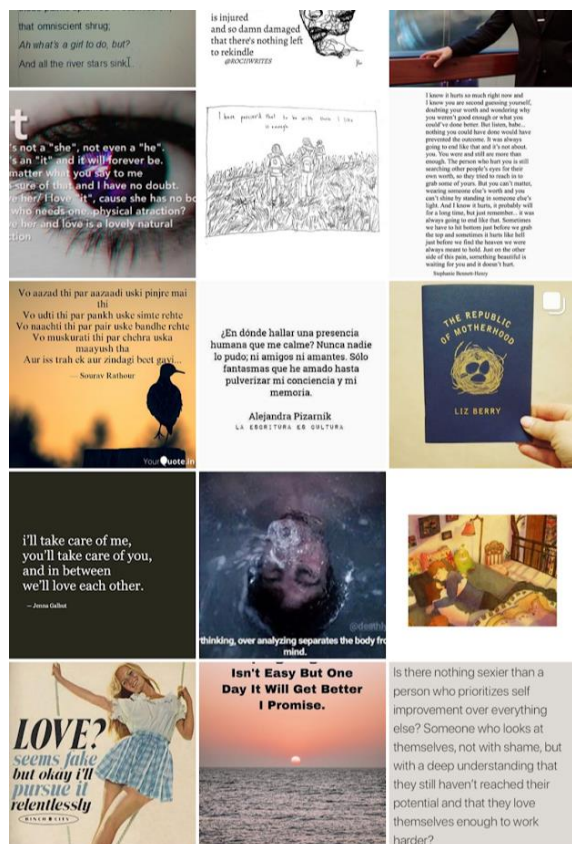


Illustration 3.8: A screenshot of recent posts in the Instagram poetry tab from October 2019.

On Instagram, popular poetry posts are less about written poems, and more about fleeting feelings, emotional in nature—similar to that on Tumblr, but even more abstract. The site’s image-centric intention perhaps lends itself to this abstraction. Visual media such as film and photography have been compared to poetry before, and how the two concepts (visual storytelling and poetry) have transformed one another to tell deeper stories (Bollig & Wood, 2014; Lindgren, 1970). Even outside the direct poetry community, Instagram has been considered a home for “everyday” poetics, or “poetics of the banal,” where the commonality of popular images

“provide common codes of familiarity, conventions and resonance that enable wider connections with others, both friends and strangers” (Ibrahim, 2015, pp. 45–46). Perhaps this is why poetry communities have taken off on Instagram—the marriage between images and poetry is proven to be effective in both creating powerful images, and powerful poems. The produced content is thus richer on Instagram than on communities like Reddit, where images are used but not by any means necessary, as it affects its readers on multiple levels. On Reddit, though, where images are also common among poetic communities, the tendency toward humor instead of emotive expression can negate this transcendence.

Something notable on poems throughout Instagram is that “original” poems are designated by their signatures, or by watermarks. For instance, Instagram user “@worldinsadness” edits “IG // @WORLDINSADNESS” onto their posts, which combine digitally created graphics with brief lines of poetry. This is similar to what was seen on Tumblr, where poems would end with a signature as well, notating them as the author in case the work was shared on other platforms. While @WORLDINSADNESS was a popular account 31.8 thousand followers as of October 2019, others who use this are not necessarily popular; there were posts in the poetry tags with few likes that used signatures on both platforms, but they were still hopeful that through posting, they might become big enough that the signature was useful. Further, Instagram has become a hotbed of commerce and monetary gain, while Tumblr has remained for the most part, a community of amateurs. On Instagram, users of particular influence (sometimes called influencers) can use the platform to advertise for other companies, while this practice is not very developed on Tumblr, meaning those who are most interested in profiting off their work may be more likely to use the former. Combined with the proliferation of signatures, it appears that those posting on Instagram are doing so with the intention of being noticed, and

possibly even profiting off their work. The Tumblr poetry community is not as closely linked to commercial or social success, although indirectly a number of poets built followings that way.

This signature trend is similar to the use of “watermarks” on popular memes that link back to people’s social media accounts. For example, an account that makes an Instagram meme will put a watermark, or a very small almost unnoticeable signature, on the meme itself so that if it’s reposted to Reddit, they will still have claim to ownership. Whether or not a community accepts this process is dependent on the community; some don’t mind, and others find it obnoxious, subscribing to the theory that things posted on the internet subsequently belong to it (Meese, 2014). In the poetry community, these signatures are more complicated because poems are more likely to be considered intellectual property than memes would be, as poetry has existed for many centuries and been subject to copyright law, and memes themselves are products of a remix culture (Voigts, 2018). Many of the top and recent posts on Instagram’s poetry tabs seemed to be reposts with no attribution to the original poster, except through the signature on the poem itself, showing itself a useful feature indeed. Through these signatures, sharing is expected, perhaps encouraged, because the claim to authorship remains.

The line between Instagram poetry and Tumblr poetry, in terms of community and content similarities, is admittedly small; while certainly the two have their differences as seen above, they are considered to be the same in the larger cultural zeitgeist. The small differences, however, matter if you consider Tumblr poetry a predecessor to Instagram poetry, as its more customizable features (i.e. post length and format) are what allowed this particular style of poetry to be formed, through experimentation and risk. On Instagram, what was already developed in terms of affective style and poetic conventions was built on using the affordances of the image-

based platform, having the advantage of seeing what worked as popular and moving content, and what didn't.

The two communities exist simultaneously, although much of pop culture's attention has moved on, because influences are not exactly linear: there will still be those who prefer Tumblr's microblogging format for maximum control of their poems, and others who value Instagram's images and necessarily short formats for their conciseness. But the ethos of both communities is blurred through their value on emotional content, use of tags, and general style, and Rupi Kaur's seamless transition is evidence of this.

Conclusion

Platform is a central element in understanding any digital community. The affordances, features, and community guidelines all shape their given community, and help explicate what the unique attributes of that community are. By looking at alternative poetry communities and their host platforms, and continually comparing back to my findings on Tumblr and its poetry community, I have separated the line between "Tumblr poetry" and "internet poetry" as two separate categories, the latter of which encompasses all communities that I've described in this chapter. While internet poetry is a broad sphere, specifically the differentiation of Instagram poetry and Tumblr poetry is not something I had seen done before, and both platforms have featured many of the same poets. Instagram's affordances make it a platform for those who seek visibility and potential fame; Tumblr's for those seeking community engagement and greater emphasis on language and textual freedom.

The similarities between all three of my studied platforms does speak to something about internet-based poetry as a whole; it values simplistic, easily-consumable and shareable content, and has a basic understanding of poetic convention. On Reddit, poems have elementary-taught

rhyme schemes, for humorous effect. On Instagram, short, sometimes rhyming, sometimes fragmented lines are posted with aesthetically pleasing backgrounds of varying complexity; and on Tumblr, there was an identified leaning on rudimentary poetic knowledge such as basic rhyme patterns, and the use of common archetypes such as Greek myth in many poems. This is in line with many of the conventions of internet use in general: it gives space for many people of varying backgrounds to share their work, no matter how amateur or uninformed it is, and that which is popular is usually easy to consume and also relatable.

However, these social media platforms signal a shift away from traditional publishing models in general, even as the content proliferated on them becomes ubiquitous among mainstream literature. That there are even options among amateur digital production spaces indicates a greater fractioning of the literary market, and more opportunities for access among marginalized and underprivileged people, who are unable to reach more prestigious publishing communities. Through a variety of platforms, poetry is accessible to all who seek it, no matter what their reason or purpose for writing it is. It is not all the same, but poetry has never all been the same, no matter the time period. Obviously, access to the internet in general is still a possible challenge to some, and it should not be seen as the end-all to all gatekeeping. However, this development in digital cultural is promising in the facilitation of diverse literary communities, as well as just diverse communities—internet poetry is as just as much an artform as it is a social tool, hence its presence on social networking sites. Tumblr poetry is only one facet of it.

Conclusion

Since embarking on this thesis, it has been difficult to not see poetry following me wherever I go. Trips to Target, the airport, or the Amazon bookstore mean seeing the latest poetry books on display, and when I take a closer look, I am usually unsurprised to find that the poet got their book deal through a large social media following. However, while some still specifically note their Tumblr use, it is clear that Instagram is the hottest hub of new talent as Tumblr dies out, with less users than ever. Poets with multiple books, including Rupi Kaur, are phasing out references to their Tumblr start when they once boasted about it. It is not my intention with this thesis to perpetuate a strong Tumblr-to-mainstream pipeline, as that is not the current climate. It is clear that “digital poetry” has taken a life of its own, with a number of dynamic and rich communities. However, in being one of the earliest social media communities that defined this shift in poetry, Tumblr poetry has been instrumental in the current climate, and understanding its distinct attributes gives further context to the literary and social trends happening now.

Tumblr poetry does still live on, and is still a prime example of communication influenced by digital affordances, and digital culture influenced by artistic convention. While scholarship and criticism moves on to “Instapoetry,” I felt it was important to define its predecessor and its place in the digital poetry movement. Looking at its place in the broader poetry world required a multifaceted approach, and so I took one: looking at its historical context, its textual elements, and the role that platform plays in it all, to come together to an overarching image of “Tumblr poetry.” Through these separate analyses, I prove that Tumblr poetry is distinct from other kinds of digital and contemporary poetry, but perhaps most importantly that it *is* poetry, in the sense that any major shift of poetry is still poetry, no matter

how much traditionalists object. The three analyses work together to come to this conclusion, even though they look at three different elements of the phenomena.

Chapter one places the abundant criticism of the work into historical context, but this criticism is based on form and platform as much as it is the changing identity of poets and their audiences. Chapter two considers the role that identity and platform play in the formal changes that occur in Tumblr poetry, noting that these changes don't happen in isolation. Chapter three shows that these formal changes differ from the changes that occur in other social media poetry communities, illuminating that this is not a one-size-fits-all analysis, although much criticism groups it together as one big phenomena, focusing on the differences between more traditionally inspired contemporary poetry and digital works instead of in between platforms. The findings from all three analyses canonize Tumblr poetry and address the common simplifications and criticisms that surround it.

More broadly, these findings expand the body of research on online art communities, developments in literature and poetry form, as well as the connection between communities, platform, and poetry. It has a place in both broader communication and media studies, as well as in literary studies, bringing the two together by understanding how literature can facilitate communication, and how digital platforms inform changes in literary practice. On Tumblr, poems are informed by social media conventions, and poets relate to one another through the platform's affordances that allow for easy sharing, liking, and outreach. While it no longer exists in the same abundance, or with the same mainstream significance, as it once did, it played a role in the current renaissance of popular poetry, inspiring a number of bestselling poets and readers to give the once maligned artform another chance to entertain or emotionally affect them.

There are a number of other aspects of the genre that could have been considered or more deeply analyzed to round out the full image of “Tumblr poetry,” that could build off of the work produced in this thesis. For example, it does not fully interrogate the specific identity of Tumblr poets as separate from the identities of Tumblr users as a whole, which could do more to inform this element of the analysis. A survey or interviews of users would do better to illuminate this in a more significant way. More work could also be done to address the shrinking division between “amateur” and “professional” art, which is touched on a bit in chapter two, but not expanded to its fullest extent. Building on this, more could be analyzed regarding the differences and distinctions between traditional contemporary poetry and digital poetry, especially as the latter is finding a welcome home in bookstores and libraries, alongside the former.

Ultimately, however, through historical, textual, and platform analyses, this thesis presents an argument for Tumblr poetry as a genre of poetry separate but within the broader sphere of social media poetry, and worthy of consideration. Its criticisms, different format, and platform do not get in the way of this canonization, but instead define it. It is not the culmination of the social media poetry movement, but its legacy has been vital in shaping the current climate, and it lives on in the active poetry communities running today.

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