AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REDEFINING LITERARY SPACE: INSTAGRAM POETRY, NAYYIRAH WAHEED, AND THE RISE OF THE SUB-GENRE ONLINE

by
DANA WAHEED MAAN

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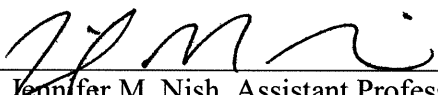at the American University of Beirut

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Dana Waheed Maan   for   <u>Master of Arts</u>
<u>Major</u>: English Literature

Title: <u>Redefining Literary Space: Instagram Poetry, nayyirah waheed, and the Rise of the Sub-Genre Online</u>

Poetry is circulating on several social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Poets on Instagram, specifically, are taking part in a new cultural trend. The chain of writers online are bringing the genre of poetry to an environment that is built to share personal or visual information about any given topic that any online user wants to include on their account. This thesis project aims to examine a new cultural phenomenon on social media that includes circulation of a specific literary genre online: poetry. Instapoets' presence on social media platforms such as Instagram, including their followers and readership, has expanded over the years as they have started to increase their posts and publish books regularly. This research focuses on an African-American poet called nayyirah waheed and uses her as a case study to discuss how Instagram can be perceived as a literary space and Instagram Poetry as a literary genre. waheed acts as a key example that portrays how Instagram, although a visual space, can become an active literary one where discussions on race, gender and oppression can occur. In engaging in aspects of language, slavery and vernacular traditions, this research situates waheed's work in African-American historical factors. This thesis argues that platforms that were originally a visual and creative space can also become a literary and creative one. Writers, especially poets who repetitively post their work on Instagram after the publication of their books, are transforming a mostly visual space into a vernacular space. In this project, the main focus is to enter a discussion in which I can explore other scholars' definitions of literary space in order to apply it to a new context and create my own definition. So, in studying aspects of genre and literary space, I will use nayyirah waheed, as a case study, to make my claim about Instagram.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

i lost a whole continent.
a whole continent from my memory.
unlike all other hyphenated americans
my hyphen is made of blood. feces. bone.
when africa says hello
my mouth is a heartbreak.
because i have nothing in my tongue
to answer her.
i do not know how to say hello to my own mother.

— african american ii

— nayyirah waheed, *salt.* (2013)

      A poet I was introduced to a few years ago, through scrolling down on my phone, nayyirah waheed, left her mark on me since then. She is active on multiple social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Poets on Instagram, specifically, are taking part in a new cultural trend. They are identified as "Instapoets" which is short for "Instagram poets" and their poetry that they post on their accounts are called "Instapoems" which is short for "Instagram poetry." I will be describing and using these terms interchangeably in the thesis when discussing waheed, amongst a couple other Instapoets. The chain of writers online are bringing the genre of poetry to an environment that is built to share personal or visual information about any given topic that any online user wants to

include on their account. Instagram is a platform owned by Facebook and is known as a photo and video sharing social media application. This thesis project aims to examine a new cultural phenomenon on social media that includes circulation of a specific literary genre online: poetry. Instapoets' presence on social media platforms such as Instagram, including their followers and readership, has expanded over the years as they have started to increase their posts and publish books regularly. Although waheed belongs to the phenomenon of Instapoets, she uses the platform differently from other poets. She does not show any images of herself and only uses her account to post excerpts from her books. waheed has made my attempts at finding more about her personal life very difficult and one could say that she is aware of her audiences' interest in her personal identity as she writes in her book *salt*. "listen to my poems. /but/ do not look for me./ look for you./ –you" (124). waheed does not want the reader, such as myself, to pay attention to who she is as a person or where she's from specifically, but rather to focus solely on her poetry and the messages within her works.

I start with discussing waheed briefly not only because she is a poet whose writings describe vital historical themes that deal with race, gender, sex, oppression, colonization, and feminism but also because of her style and the way her performativity on social media platforms are separated from her private identity. And so, I want to focus on her own identification as an African-American writer whose blackness is essential to her poetic identity. What defines her relationship, as an online user, with social media is her poetry.

This thesis argues that platforms that were originally a visual and creative space can also become a literary and creative one. Writers, especially poets who repetitively post their work on Instagram after the publication of their books, are transforming a mostly visual

space into a vernacular space. So, I argue that Instagram is becoming a literary space that involves black female voices in platforms that are accessible to the public. nayyirah waheed acts as a key example that portrays how Instagram, although a visual space, can become an active literary one where discussions on race, gender and oppression can occur. The second main claim I make in this thesis involves identifying Instagram Poetry as a sub-genre. In discussing genre theory and Amy Devitt's *Writing Genres*, I will highlight several aspects that define genre and help in establishing factors that deal with the public and their contribution to its creation. I argue that Instagram can be conceived as a literary space and establish the poetry posted and circulated on the platform as a contemporary literary genre.

Through analyzing waheed's poetry and posts online, this thesis project also hopes to bring forward a fresh perspective on black female poets and their role in new technological ways of publication, commercialization and advertising. Most of the poets on Instagram self-publish their books which gives them agency over their work, and of course, they also control the content they post on their accounts. Accordingly, some of the questions this thesis asks are: How does the exposure and deconstruction of Instagram through a new lens of popularizing poets today help change the way poetry in itself is being read and received by the public? Why is Instagram even an option for poets today to appeal to an audience who may or may not be familiar with their content? What is waheed's relationship to African-American literary and sociopolitical history? Who does she identify with in her writings and why? Does she reference any Black female poets historically or contemporarily? How do the poems on Instagram look and how do the poets' use of the platform differ than waheed's?

This thesis attempts to answer these questions by first setting the theoretical framework and engaging with the discourses on public spheres and space in the Media studies field. But before I discuss this, I start with highlighting descriptions and definitions of the phrase "literary space" in which scholars such as Michel De Certeau and Sally Bushell engage in conversations that portray how the term space relates to a map, a place and literary fictional texts. The first chapter focuses primarily on framing the research within a configuration of public sphere versus space, online space and the emergence of networked publics. It addresses questions concerning who the online public is and what constitutes a public space? I then discuss some logistics of Instagram as a platform briefly in relation to other social media platforms such as Twitter. The second chapter situates waheed's literature in a conversation about African-American cultural, political and literary history. It takes her poetry and places it in dialogue with specific historical condition such as slavery, sexist and racist oppression and white supremacy. This chapter discusses several Black female poets who waheed includes in her books like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, some of which were prominent participants in political and artistic movements such as The Black Arts Movement. The third chapter combines detailed definitions and references to Certeau's definition to literary space and links to Devitt's interpretations of genre theory in relation to scholars such as Carolyn Miller. This chapter draws connections between Instagram, the platform, as a literary space and the Instagram poetry, the content circulating within, a literary genre or more specifically a sub-genre of poetry. I also formulate my own definition of literary space in relation to Instagram and Instapoetry in this chapter. It then moves on to descriptions and illustrations of waheed's posts on Instagram, alongside other Instapoets and compares them by analyzing the posts'

contents and different styles of posts. The screenshots below (figures 1 and 2) show the

visible difference between waheed's account and another prominent Instapoet, Rupi Kaur.

waheed's account focuses attention on her poetry, whilst Kaur's includes both poetry and

images of the poet. Kaur could be seen as more of a pubic figure. In contrast, no one knows

what waheed looks like as her activities on platforms such as Instagram focus only on

sharing excerpts from her books. It is important to note that waheed does not respond to

any of her followers' comments to her posts. Just like Kaur, she follows no other accounts
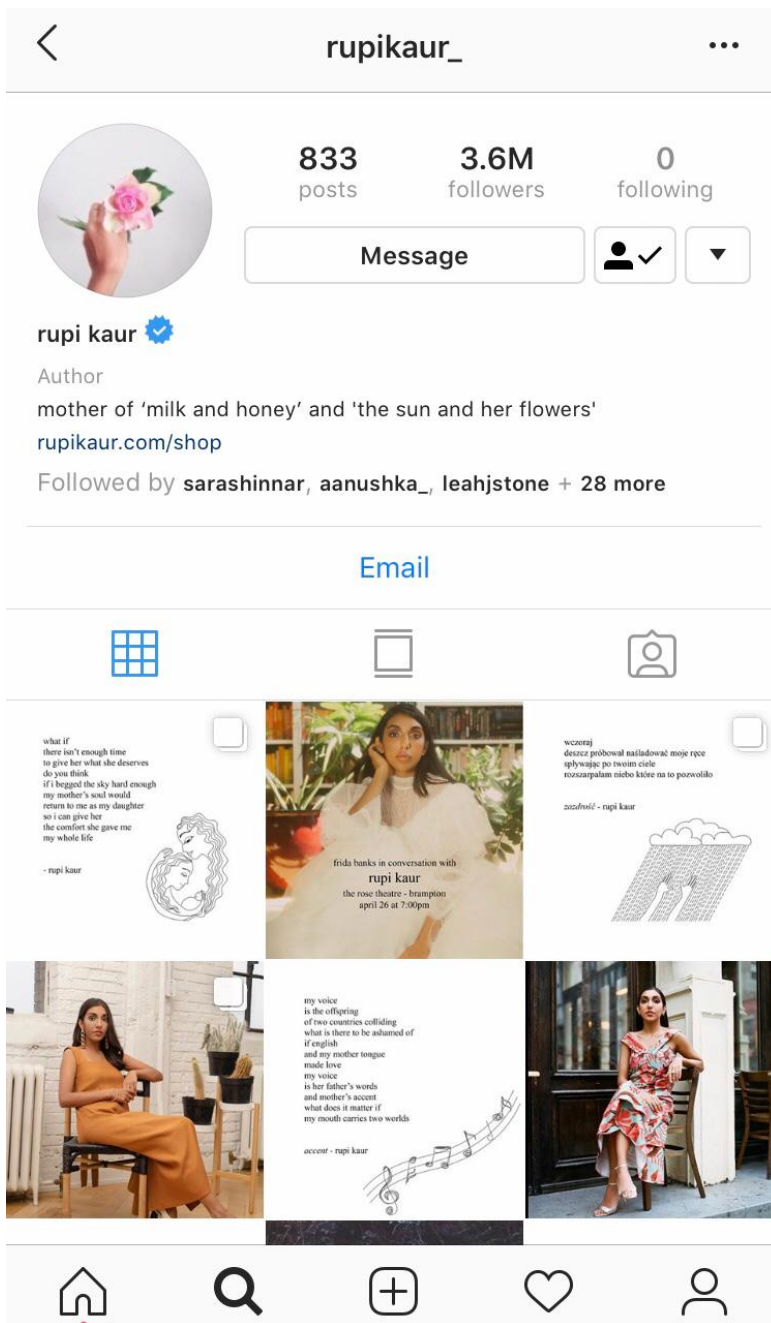
but is followed by many people.

Fig. 1. Screenshot of Rupi Kaur's account from Instagram, 25 April 2019
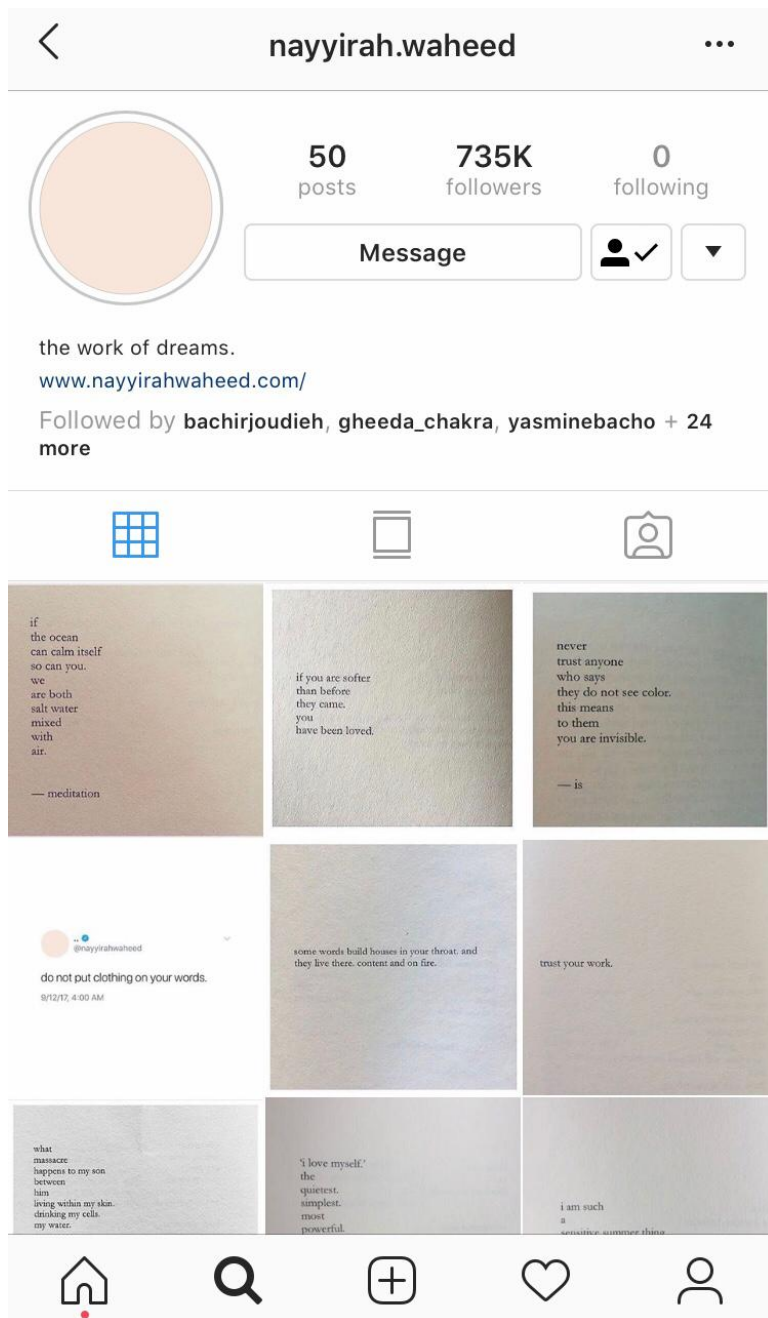
Fig. 2. Screenshot of nayyirah waheed's account from Instagram, 25 April 2019

Finally, the third chapter concludes by discussing the discourse on Black female identity in relation to waheed's secret personal identity online, but her affirmative identity as a Black female poet in her poetry.

The ultimate purpose of this thesis is to draw attention to the discussion on Instapoetry and Instapoets and how, as a cultural trend, it is flourishing and developing extensively on a daily basis. Delving into details of waheed's poetry and analyzing them in relation to the African-American context allows for a more concrete investigation of a specific case of an Instapoet and her use of the platform in relation to other Instagram poets. In this thesis, my main focus is to enter a discussion in which I can explore other scholars' definitions of literary space in order to apply it to a new context and create my own definition. So, in studying aspects of genre and literary space, I will use nayyirah waheed, as a case study, to make my claim about Instagram.

CHAPTER II

LITERARY SPACE AND PUBLIC SPHERE: DESCRIBING NETWORKED PUBLICS, INSTAGRAM AND GENRE THEORY

Spaces are defined, interpreted and theorized in many fields of study, however in literature, when identifying a certain space, one needs to focus on the narrative or social context, text and the physical or temporal conditions. The first chapter of the thesis aims to lay the groundwork that defines prominent concepts such as literary space, public sphere versus space, online space and the emergence of networked publics. Also, in discussing how Instagram as a platform operates through its features and the way in which the public use it, I aim to introduce my argument in situating the discourse on Instagram within the framework of publics online. This section of the research combines notions on literary space, the complexity of space online in a digital and literary context, and the way in which social media and literary genres such as poetry are identified as the new cultural phenomenon introduced on platforms such as Instagram. Poetry, as a prominent genre in literature that has historically been correlated with performativity and the elite community, is contemporarily exposed to a much larger public online. Thus, this chapter outlines the emergence of this exposure in relation to the larger frameworks that discuss who the publics are, how Instagram functions, and the dynamics of genre theory.

A. #Literary Space and Public Space

In *Literary Geographies*, Sheila Hones explores the concept of literary space through the various intertextual references in novels such as *The Great World* and *The Great Gatsby,* which include narrative and geographical space that takes place in New York City. She writes that the word "space- whether geographical, narrative, or literary – has to be understood not as a fixed and measurable frame within which action takes place but as the product of action: an active dimension of interrelations, intertextualities, and multiplicity" (9). Therefore, Hones' definition portrays how space is difficult to define because it includes layers of interpretations that take place between the reader and the text, and thus cannot be apprehended as a "fixed" or "measurable" notion. She references the author of *Written Somewhere: The Social Space of Text*, David Coughlan, in which he explains that space in whichever text "has to be understood in terms of its existence with an uncontained (in fact, uncontainable) textual dimension, in which the intertextual is 'not a means by which we can link one textual space with another, or move from one to another, but is itself a part of that space, is, in fact, the whole of that space'" (qtd. in Hones 117). Furthermore, literary spaces are not static; Hones continues to elaborate on Coughlan's insight and says that the "uncontainable literary space is not susceptible to measurement; as a whole, it is unmappable – its distances and proximities, its absences and gaps are contingent and unfixed" (qtd. in Hones 117)[1]. This definition both liberates and complicates the concept of literary space as it also encourages an erratic definition of the term space in relation to literary texts, which portrays, for example, how intertextuality in itself operates on multiple levels of interpretations within and perhaps beyond the text. This

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[1] See Coughlan's "Written Somewhere," pp. 202-7

chapter argues that there is a link between literary space that is present in fictional and narrative texts in relation to readers and their approach to a text and the public spaces online in digital and virtual spheres. This project emphasizes the importance of literary space in which it is a view in which one could explore in different environments and adapt to different contemporary situations. What one can gain from understanding literary space and its basic meaning is how with technology, definitions may shift or change in order to adapt to new social contexts.

Shifting away from identifying literary spaces within literary texts, how is it created and how does it come to life? In "Mapping Fiction: Spatialising the Literary Work," Sally Bushell discusses the effects and usages of a map in a literary text defining the phrase "literary mapping" as "viewing the world from multiple perspectives; the relative situation of objects in space; the locating of the self and a sense of 'mapping things out' (in relation to the fictional world, movements of characters of the literary work) – are likely to be as important as the tangible object of a map" (125-6). In extensively discussing various scholars' distinction between space, place and literary texts and readers' creation and activation of these factors, Bushell references the French scholar Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. She acknowledges his definitions of literary space and place, which according to Certeau "things are fixed and specifically in place, which is associated with the rigid imposition of order [and] in contrast, space is mobile, fluid, adaptable" (130); therefore one factor is in opposition to the other. Thus, she continues and says, "in his terms, then, *the material text* is literary place, *the act of reading* brings to existence literary space" (130). Therefore, place is an essential factor when identifying a space for de Certeau and in correlation with Coughlan's description they both agree that space is unsolidified

and mobile. Also, Bushell elaborates on Certeau's approach and says that the literary space deals with the "activation of the imaginary world through the act of reading: indeed, space can only be created through this active engagement with place" (130-1). Therefore, the reader is responsible in generating the space, which the literary text provides in a description or an actual map. I will explore Certeau and discuss his work in more detail in chapter three where I discuss literary space further and define it in my own terms.

In relating literary space in fictional texts to the readers' act of reading, Bushell discusses how both activities complement each other. She further writes,

> We might also want to note that that the *creation* of space, making place meaningful, occurs twice over; for characters existing within that world and moving through it, and for the reader activating a work of literature through the act of reading… however, for the *reader* each reading is potentially *a new mapping* since there is no absolutely fixed and static place out of which space is generated or through which to locate ourselves (142)

This is important when understanding literary spaces in relation to time and place because it occurs as an active practice for readers who bring the text to life; thus we, as readers, scholars and interpreters, are the creators of literary spaces. So, the discourse on space, according to de Certeau, is that "space is a practiced place" and Bushell elaborates on his explanation and highlights the significance of a literary space being "experiential not static" (142). In her contribution to the conversation on space and place, Bushell's emphasis on mapping is concerned with the ability to read a text whether digitally or physically, in a self-conscious manner through which readers can connect the spaces in the literary text with the real world, depending on their psychological geographical history and experiences. She also considers interchanging the term map with 'spatialise' as she writes "Spatialising

texts involved mapping but extends far beyond this and allows for the possibility of mapping not just movement across and within place (geographical; physical) and space (projected; dreamed; imagined; interiorised response to place) but also for finding ways of exploring the significance of situated being through language – which would seem to be ultimately what the mapping of literature is all about" (141). In highlighting the significance of mapping in literary geographies, Bushell stresses its necessity to a readers' experience when engaging with a fictional text. When spaces in literary texts can be imaginative or real based on existing geographies and actual maps, then what happens when we apply this phenomenon on the digital sphere? With the acknowledgement of the scholarship on space and its diverse elements and usages in reading literature, one can identify a literary space through readers' physical and mental experiences of reading a text, whenever and wherever they are. For the purpose of my research, I attempt to extend these definitions of literary space in creating one that applies to a digital sphere, specifically social media and the texts circulating on platforms online. Hence, my project is concerned with identifying a specific social media platform as a literary space, with an interest to redefine place and space in terms of a virtual sphere that may not have any chronological maps or actual physical geographies within the text. The relationship between virtual sphere and chronology or geography depends on the type of text that is explored, for example, when discussing a text like poetry on social media; it differs from when exploring a fictional story or text where dimensions, geographical details about a place are present in detail.

However, before entering the conversation on social media, scholarship on public-ness that exists online is important for this project because it is significant when addressing

online platforms since it helps in building an understanding of readers and audiences in a virtual world. This approach, of course, affects the concept of space due to limited accessibility and admission, which also reflects the definition of a public found on these platforms. In "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere," Zizi Papacharissi writes,

> It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy (11)

The clear-cut definitions here show how the linkage between political discourse, public opinion and dialogue that happen online are highly relevant in differentiating space from sphere. Hence, the Internet is considered as a public and virtual space that encourages political debates and conversation without an agenda or target for equality. The scholarship on public sphere is usually related to Jürgen Habermas, who "saw the public sphere as a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate…" (Papacharissi 11). However, the idea of the public sphere does not promote any form of social equality as it excludes women and the lower class population. This is problematic when addressing the public online as an ideal or complete public, as one needs to consider the fragmentations and exclusions that prominently live online. Nancy Fraser attempts to deconstruct Habermas's definition and introduces the idea of "multiple public spheres" which "are not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged, and which give voice to collective identities and interests…" (11). It is important to understand the different groups

that constitute up social media users, therefore breaking down the public online and discussing the users is extremely helpful in comprehending the amalgamated audience in a divided sense. Furthermore, she continues mentioning that, "a public realm or government, however, which pays attention to all these diverse voices, has never existed" (11). This evokes how censorship and other factors has promoted manipulation and domination over the voices online, which, when studying publics on media, helps to break down the controlled vs. direct opinions posted in a virtual space. Papacharissi investigated whether or not the Internet has affected or deserted the idea of a public sphere in an attempt to perhaps "recreate a public sphere that perhaps never was, foster several diverse public spheres, or simply become absorbed by a commercial culture" (12). The digital environment was and remains a vague and chaotic discourse to grasp fully because of the intrusions of advertising and promotion, which of course, includes the fact that most of the platforms online are owned and controlled by for-profit companies such as Facebook and Google. Thus, this shows how there are different interests for audiences and readers who can be identified as active or passive users online. As research published in 2007, Papacharissi acknowledges the capitalistic features of the Internet and writes that because the online world is only available to a minor proportion of the public, it is an "electronic public sphere that is exclusive, elitist, and for from ideal…" (14). Thus, identifying failures in depicting a public that is viable, it is more possible to criticize how publics are defined on social media platforms, for example.

An interesting correlation made by Papacharissi is where she links the public and virtual sphere and writes that just as Habermas's concept of the public sphere includes the "bourgeois property holders," the virtual sphere is also "dominated by bourgeois computer

holders" (21). Therefore an equalitarian and universal public sphere online does not and cannot exist, so she states, "Our political experience online has shown that so far, the Internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere" (23). In another chapter called "The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and beyond," Papacharissi gives more detail on online media and its relationship to the audience who are able to access it. She writes that "online media enable conversations that can transcend geographic boundaries" and that "they also allow for relative anonymity in personal expression, which lead to empowered and uninhibited public opinion" but "still, the technological potential for global communication does not ensure that people from different cultural backgrounds will also be more understanding of each other (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998)" (235). Therefore, in relating this phenomenon to space, this approach allows more room for "reciprocity" and a two-way communicative model, which Papacharissi also stresses. However, this tactic denies a collective idea of a "public" in which will enhance an improved and diverse online culture, perhaps due to contradictory philosophies and mentalities that come together. But, this method also helps enhance a space that extends beyond the physical public spheres we live through every day, which at least creates more room for communication, although not harmonious. In addition, Papacharissi writes about the commercial based agenda in relation to politics and repressive voices that online media incur, and says,

> These commercially public spaces may not render a public sphere, but they provide spaces where individuals can engage in healthy democratic practices, including keeping a check on politicians, engaging in political satire, and expressing/circulating political opinions. These spaces are essential in maintaining a

politically active consciousness that may, when necessary articulate a sizable oppositional voice, in response to concentrated ownership regulation… (243)

The debate on the political discourse that evolves online is crucial in understanding how the public performs online versus offline. Online platforms, especially social media, have been highly involved with political debates. This is because peoples' voices travel easily and freely on online platforms even if their perspectives may clash or disagree with one other. As Papacharissi exclaims in the quote above they did "articulate a sizable oppositional voice, in response to concentrated ownership regulation"[2] which caused a large fraction of the population to talk back to the dominant forces in their country and the revolution still goes on today. The public discourse on social media then enhances a literary space that allows political or literary activists to pose and reflect on certain ideologies, therefore the platform offers an opportunity to speak, with no restriction on identity, however of course some voices are heard more than others. There are certain targeted audiences online that some powerhouses are interested in, whether politically or culturally, which is why the virtual world denies the idea of a public sphere, and welcomes its identification as space.

In Jodi Dean's "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere," she defines the public sphere as the "site and subject of liberal democratic practice [and a] space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern…" (95). As previously mentioned, Papacharissi also discusses the definition of public sphere in relation to a "discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions" ("The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere" 11). Therefore, the conversation about public sphere overlaps between both

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[2] Papacharissi is referring to an explanation in R. McChesney's "Media Policy Goes to Main Street: The Uprising of 2003." See pp. 223-258

scholars where they both agree that it encourages a conversation that is both "democratic"

including "common concern" or "exchange of ideas and opinions" between the public.

Furthermore, Dean writes that problems that deal with the Internet include how "young,

white, American men" control it, which reflects the phenomenon of the "bourgeois public

sphere" because of the omission of "women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the working

class" (98). Thus, the Internet has to be more "inclusive" (98). So if it not a public sphere,

then what is it? Dean explicitly uses a term established by Lévi- Strauss that identifies the

Net as a "zero institution" and extends his argument to include the Web to accommodate

new technologies (105). Therefore, she writes,

> It provides an all- encompassing space in which social antagonism is
> simultaneously expressed and obliterated. It is a global space in which one can
> recognize oneself as connected to everyone else, as linked to everything that
> matters. At the same time, it is a space of conflicting networks and networks of
> conflict so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus or convergence
> seems an act of naïveté at best, violence at worst. Both these dimensions of
> convergence and conflict hold without canceling each other out or resolving into a
> process of legitimation or some sort of will-formation that carries with it a
> supposition of rationality. The web is communicative capitalism's imaginary of
> uncontested, yet competitive, global flow (106).

With a shift away from pinning down the Internet as either a public sphere or space, this

quote provides an insight on the complex dynamics of the online world in relation to

elements such as space. Thus, recreating a definition that portrays the space online as an

interchangeable and interactive compass, but also acknowledging its deficiencies and gaps

as being interpreted as a public sphere or space. The way Dean approaches space as "all-

encompassing" is interesting because it portrays how as a "global space," interactivity and

networks are formed continuously and inevitably due to the never-ending interactions

online. Furthermore, if she chooses to name the Web as a "zero institution," then how might this approach change when discussing social media in detail? Will it also be applicable? Dean's method, for the purpose of this project, can be linked to the previous analyses of the term "literary space" as a factor that readers control and activate, thus when discussing virtual space as "global" and "all-encompassing," one can also mirror this phenomenon with space, according to scholars such as Certeau, being a mobile factor.

According to danah boyd's book chapter "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics and Implications," she shares her understanding of social media through referring to it as a genre of "Networked Publics" which are "publics that are restricted by networked technologies… they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (1). boyd enters the broader conversation on publics and public spheres by sharing other theorists' definitions, which include a general understanding of the public and what it constitutes. Furthermore, she links cultural and media studies and mentions scholars who connect the two fields of study together. For example, boyd makes use of Sonia Livingstone's approach to the two terms, "public" and "audience" in which Livingstone "uses the term to refer to a group bounded by a shared text, whether a worldview or a performance" (2). Therefore, in this case of defining the public, Livingstone's perspective intertwines with the cultural dynamics provided by online platforms. boyd also mentions Mizuko Ito, a Japanese cultural anthropologist, who writes that "'publics can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception'" (qtd. in boyd 2). This reference to the public portrays its

interactive nature provided by the spaces created online, thus the audience activate this "social exchange" and at the same time are users who are responsible for circulating texts and information online as well as receiving them. Also, boyd includes the point of view of political scholars such as Habermas, where she writes that he "challenges the legitimacy of any depoliticized public preoccupied 'with consumption of culture'" (2). In a reply to Habermas, boyd mentions a couple more scholars such as the feminist scholar Fraser and sociologist Craig Calhoun who contradict Habermas' negation of the cultural intervention in public dynamics by mentioning the significance of forming and practicing "social identities" in public spheres as well as the "naïve view" that these identities are established privately before being shaped into the public sphere (2). boyd succeeds in bringing forth the conversations where theorists have critiqued and discussed their definitions and descriptions on the public sphere, thus moves on to say that "networked publics exits against this backdrop" (2). She writes that Ito "introduces the notion of networked publics to 'reference a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media'" (qtd. in boyd 2-3). So, in accommodating to the new emerging technologies, boyd's argument highlights that "networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people" (3). I find it compelling that boyd extends the scholarship on public sphere and transmits it immediately to space online. Thus her chapter focuses on extensively defining the phrase "networked publics" in relation to social network sites and their components such as profiles and friends lists. In previously mentioning the various definitions and approaches to the term "public," it is significant to understand how these descriptions somehow unite as far as distribution, reciprocity and

interactivity between the audience and a particular cultural or textual phenomenon that these users can discuss. For the purpose of my research, I aim to explore how the audiences in the public sphere or the "networked publics" are vital in constituting a space online that stimulates conversation and engagement on a digital scale.

B. #Social Media as Public Sphere/Space

Public spheres and spaces concern people and how they communicate and connect with one another on a political, cultural and literary level. However, how does social media affect the way scholarships perceive studies on the public? In "Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction" by Nancy Baym and danah boyd, they describe social media thoroughly saying that it can "blur boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real…" and add later on that "social media complicate what it means to be public, to address audiences, and to build publics and counterpublics" (320). In placing the concept of "publicness" in a digital environment, both authors explain how the terms "public" and "media" have been used synonymously in history, however also hold an intricate relationship due to factors such as visibility, accessibility and privacy. Therefore, the "blur" is evident when trying to identify various media platforms that existed before social media and how they differ from audiences' experiences with a new platform that allows for a constant and more immediate interaction with the public (321). Therefore, the article defines the term "audience" in relation to the "public," and reads that according to Jay Rosen, a media critic and a NYU journalism professor, the audience is "simply the

public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable" (qtd. in Baym and boyd 322).

So, there is perhaps a shift in defining the public, however it has also become harder and

more difficult to identify whom the public is on media platforms. The authors focus on

identifying Eden Litt's, a researcher on the News Feed team at Facebook, "imagined

audience of social media" theory, where "in it she identifies many factors that may

influence how and who people take their audiences to be when they post (quasi-) public

material online" (323). Thus, this shows how the audience is difficult to identify on social

media because they might include users who are familiar or unknown, depending on who

the users allow accessibility to with privacy settings. The article further states that "social

media makes it particularly challenging to understand 'who is out there and when' and

raises the potential for greater misalignment between imagined and actual audiences" (323).

This is prominent when trying to comprehend the idea of the public online because it is not

just one unified public or audience; it is a layering of several publics together. The authors

further discuss the "collapsed contexts" of social media where "utterances may be heard by

multiple kinds of audiences…" (323) which users may or may not be fully aware of. In

noting that social media activity allows for a merge between contexts, cultures and

societies, this leads to a larger and more convoluted relationship between the user and the

audience. However, it also triggers new theories and adaptations of the public to emerge as

well. The article incorporates Baym's definition of a "socially-mediated publicness" where

it states that she argues, "the online community should be understood as emergent, taking

shape as people unpredictably appropriate elements of different influences" (326). This

includes a couple of influences, the first one highlights "media infrastructures" which

means the "temporal structures" online and the second is "external contexts" which shows

that online activity is generated through the offline and vice versa. This article crucially initiates an argument for "socially-mediated publicness" in terms of "an ever-shifting process throughout which people juggle blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the system they use, and the contexts of their use" (328) and in addition people also "engage in and reshape social media" and "they construct new types of publicness that echo but redefine publicness as it was known in unmediated and broadcast contexts" (328). Incorporating several publics in social media theory seems important when discussing different views of the public, which helps grasp the shift from a controversial Habermas's public to a more debatable and intricate public that exists on online social media platforms.

Some definitions of the public delve deeper into theory, but with no mention of the social media conversation in specific, however still precisely applies to the idea of several publics existing in the physical everyday life and in the virtual world. In "Publics and Counterpublics," Michael Warner writes, "a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed" (50). In addition, the "circulation of texts" is what brings a public to life. This is essential in defining a public because it is based on the interchangeability of texts at any place and at any time. He further writes that "space and physical presence do not make much difference; a public is understood to be different from a crowd, an audience, or any other group that requires co-presence…publics differ from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that, though not requiring co-presence, saturate identity" (53). This conveys how public discourse, that the public produce

themselves, travels beyond studies on, for example, space due to its complexity, and therefore is not restricted by any temporal or geographical conditions. Warner's approach does not limit the definitions of a public to one public; it acknowledges multiple publics that change from one context to another. This is significant because when relating it to social media, the publics are neither restrained nor easy to track as they are embedded in contexts that sometimes cannot be fully traced. To link the idea of multiple publics to social media, Eden Litt writes "the imagined audience is the mental conceptualization of the people whom we are communicating, our audience…the less an actual audience is visible or known, the more individuals become dependent on their imagination" ("Knock, Knock. Who's There? The Imagined Audience" 331). She stresses that users depend on the imagined audience when communicating online, which helps in comprehending the complexity of the layers that come from amalgamations like "public" and "audience." Similarly to Warner's idea about the publics being an independent factor which changes and is not stagnant, Thérèse Tierney writes, "online social space is actively constitutive of everyday life, and by extension, our everyday spatial environment… rather than entering into an existing public space, the Internet is public only through the actions of its agents, who engage in reflexive, spontaneous, and potentially democratic activity" ("Assembling the Publics" 33). Also, Tierney further highlights how just like the theory of public sphere mentions the inequality in its dimensions, "all space…is not equal" (Tierney 34). This is due to the power dynamics that allow voices of the public to be controlled and manipulated and therefore, it is important to note that even though the concept of "space" seems to be a more liberal form of expression when used with the term "public," it is not yet equal. As Tierney previously also discusses the traditional definition of public sphere as a "set of

physical or mediated spaces where people can gather and share information, debate

opinions, and tease out their political interests and social needs with other participants"

(22). This definition mirrors the previous definitions of public sphere outlined by

Papacharissi and Dean where they also mention that it basically encapsulates a space where

the public share their opinions and views on political and social interests.

She further explains how the media is perceived as a "global space" where public

space emerges and thus the discourse on public sphere shifts to the term "networked

publics" (22). In relating her definition of networked publics as a "community that forms

among some set of members of a social media site [and] are defined as publics are that

restructured by networked technologies as spaces and audiences bound together through

technological networks" (32) to boyd's definition, there is a clear overlap between the two,

they both agree that the concept of "networked publics" emerges as a result of the digital

contexts that the public is involved in on platforms online.

Tierney's chapter deconstructs several notions of the term public; hence, she writes

that it is perceived through three categories, which are "the spatial public, the media public,

and the networked public…" (36). First, a spatial public refers to a public that is

constructed within a performative space through face-to-face communication. Second, a

media public denotes a more complicated notion of publicness, which reimagines a

member's "space of reception." (36). She entails that the term public is now not just one

unified public, however "there are many diverse publics" and as mentioned earlier, this is

the result of the existing advances in technology and media in which the "one-to-many

model" of communication has been substituted with "a many-to-many network" of

communication (37). The correlation between public, space and media is highlighted in the

sense that they are all a continuous process that involve interaction with many members of the public at the same time and thus Tierney approaches this shift when she highlights that "social media is where public discussion occurs today" (37). In evoking a shift in the communication panels, social media complicates what a public is, was and will be in the future because of its features, characteristics and options. Thus, the shifting notions of the public plays a role in how the audience on social media should be analyzed or interpreted, there is no unified public online, there are several publics that take part in the conversation online. However, what sort of discourse are the publics involved in online? How does political or literary discourse take part in this interchange? I will further explore in the next section how social media, as a specific example, can adopt or subvert this phenomenon of the publics or networked publics in the way in which the public shares text or information in an online space.

C. #Instagram as Literary Space

Contemporary literary works have definitely been prominent on social media platforms where they are advertised, promoted and visualized for the readers online. Also, some writers today are publishing an excerpt of their works online whilst promoting their full texts at the same time. In identifying how literature is taking on new forms of existence, my research will attempt to enter a conversation on literary genres to show how online platforms can take part in a new phenomenon, which helps expose literature to a variety of spaces.

As mentioned earlier, nayyirah waheed is an African-American poet who, like many

others, publishes her works on several social media platforms such Facebook, Twitter and

Instagram. Her literary movement on social media, compared to other poets who are also

contributing to the platform as well, is prominent and significant because it is one that

addresses race, sex, oppression and dialogues on colonial and postcolonial discourse. So,

unlike other Instapoets who write of the themes that may be considered cliché and

mainstream, her works are appealing due to the complex psychological and historical

elements featured in her works. She is the author of two books called *salt.* published in

2013 and *nejma* (star) published in 2014 and they include a collection of short poetry and

prose that merely discuss subjects such as the African-American identity, language and

feminism. Instapoetry and Instapoets are interchangeable terms online, however have not

yet been introduced academically to the field of literature. Therefore, it is a fresh cultural

movement that is developing on a visual platform such as Instagram, thus Instapoetry are

usually short poems that appear, most of the time, on a blank background page where

readers can scroll down their phones and react to these poets' posts freely with a comment

or just a like. I will further discuss a concrete definition of Instapoetry and its features when

I include the content written online about this emerging phenomenon. But first, this

discussion needs to be situated in the digital media and literature discourse generally,

providing other examples such as Twitter in order to base my argument on a similar

approach to another social media platform.

       If a comparison of Twitter and Instagram is to be made, it is because there are

studies on how literary texts have been shared and circulated on platforms such as Twitter.

Therefore, for the purpose of my research, I would like to highlight the way Twitter has

been approached in relation to literature in order to further explore the dynamics of literature circulating on Instagram. Simone Murray in "Charting the Digital Literary Sphere" writes, "Since the late 1980s, proponents of literary hypertext and later network-inspired variants such as interactive fiction and Twitterature have challenged literature's traditionally linear-narrative and single-author characteristics" (311). This instantaneously links twitter to literature in disrupting the established scales and measures that define literature in print. She further labels types of the literature embedded in media as "hypertext fiction, wikinovels and Twitterature," which she signifies as "manifestly unstable digital genres" (334). Michael Rudin in "From Hemingway to Twitterature: The Short and Shorter Of It," writes that Twitter encourages not only a different practice of literature, which is the "condensed short-form of writing" but also an original and new readership which produced "a new micro-fandom for micro-lit: *twitterature*" (7). Twitterature, a term that contains a certain task in its creation and it is to transpose literary canons in 140 characters to the public. The article "E-Philology and Twitterature" by Massimo Lollini and Rebecca Rosenberg discusses *Twitterature*, the book published by Penguin in 2009, with a brief background on the two 19-year-old freshmen at the University of Chicago called Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin where the authors write,

> We are the Martin Luther of our time, they write, because – as Luther understood that the classic Vulgate no longer spoke to the souls of his contemporaries and translated it into the vernacular of his time, – we realize that literature cannot be proposed to the modern-day readers in the same form it has been for centuries and needs to be translated in the language and format of our time (116)

This approach identifies the necessity to adapt literature to the contemporary cultural changes and thus it defines the purpose of "Twitterature" when gathering classical and popular texts and reiterating them through tweets, which creates a direct connection between social media and literature. However, the attitude of transmitting these texts is not to simply summarize the works but also to twist the texts that have been summarized with tools like irony and sarcasm (117). Reception, acceptance and continuous and reciprocated interaction is necessary when trying to reach a certain audiences' awareness about a certain field of study or a genre like novels. The article mentions that the appreciation of the readership has been proven in classrooms where "most students appreciated the sense of continuity from one tweet to the other and the comprehensiveness of our interpretative reading that allowed a complete review of" an entire text "in just three hours" (119). The discourse of "Twitterature" then is an amalgamation of education, fast-forms of readership, familiarity with the canon and overall a desire to keep literary classics alive in the lives of contemporary readers and active social media users today. Different scholarships discuss the link between Twitter and literature where they elaborate whether or not the discourse challenges or accepts this trend by discussing its elements and features. The article "Digital Postmodernism: From Hypertexts to Twitterature and Bots" by Mariusz Pisarski highlights the shifting dynamics of literature with the emergence of social media, suggesting that readership has become framed through people who not only active online operators but also, "players, viewers and users surrounded by self-broadcasting and instant-messaging devices" which allows the entertainment online to be somewhat threatening to literature (41). Twitterature, Facebook and Instagram have all become platforms that promote an online reading activity where Pisarski writes that "the dominant singular chunk of reading

is not a stand-alone text but a single tweet, Facebook or Instagram post connected to a living and breathing audience of, potentially, thousands and millions of readers, and their 'likes', comments and 'shares'" (47), therefore the article further states that "short forms with less text and more graphic elements, and with not many links seem to be better received by the audience of digital-born literature" (47). It is significant to note how the texts are shaped on online platforms, also how they adapt and change with the change of environment in which they participate. Deducing text, collaborating text with a blank image in order for it to become a picture than can be uploaded on any of these platforms (instead of being a caption) all promotes visual readers that read through an image and not a text bar. I will further explore and show what Instapoetry looks like and how waheed versus other Instapoets make use of this platform in chapter three.

Furthermore, a scholarly conversation based on the shifting dynamics of literature on a social media platform such as Twitter and Facebook barely exists for Instagram. My research has found minimal to no academic acknowledgment of the visual vs. textual analysis that arose on Instagram. Through an analysis of this platform, how will this research differentiate Instagram from other social media applications? Other than the fact that is relies on the visual, where text is a secondary and an optional addition, how is it that Instagram can integrate literary texts when it is a basis for picture distribution with minimal induction of text? The images posted on Instagram include the caption feature which usually further describe the content in the image above it. Therefore it allows the user to share their personal voice, but also becomes a visibly different experience when poets or writers post an image that includes only text but also add a caption; therefore the post shifts the emphasis from image to text. Therefore, even though Instagram includes captions

underneath the posted picture to describe what the picture symbolizes or represents, how

does this differ when the picture in itself includes text (in this research, a literary text such

as poetry)? Furthermore, the public and authors operating on the platform labeled the

poetry published on Instagram as Instapoetry and poets who publish and post their work on

Instagram as Instapoets. Online magazines have shed light on this practice by mentioning

Rupi Kaur, an Indian poet who is believed to perhaps have started this phenomenon and has

been described in popular publications as, "the leader of a new wave of young poets who

are bypassing the literary gatekeepers – the editors, agents and publishers – and instead

finding fame and followers via social media" (Edwards par. 3). Also, this article offers a

clear-cut definition of Instapoems, stating that "Instapoems tend to be short enough to fit

neatly into a single Instagram photo (often in pseudo-typewriter font) and simple enough

that readers can instantly grasp the meaning while scrolling on their iPhones" (par. 7).

Hence, there is a diverse group of poets that exist for mutual purposes on Instagram, but

Edwards further mentions,

> Of course, the quality of Instapoetry varies, and the most powerful poems are those
> that move beyond what could be seen as inspirational quotes and instead speak to
> experiences that are rarely talked about in public. For Kaur, that means writing
> about menstruation, body image, rape or the immigrant experience, all the while
> invigorating her young female fans, who appreciate her honesty and vulnerability
> (par. 9)

One can sense a generic type that comes within Instapoetry which straddles the line

between the mainstream type of poet that addresses simple and cliché topics such as

teenage love and heartbreak, and others that address perhaps personal experiences of being

an immigrant or black female in today's world. Therefore, I would like to propose

questions such as: what type of audience are they targeting and why? How do they achieve authenticity and verification on a platform with many different types of audiences? This is what perhaps differentiates Instagram from the other platforms and allows it to be a candidate for a literary space that diverges from the content that includes for example "inspirational quotes." Thus, these topics that some Instapoets discuss appeal to the audience and thus allows them to be perceived as referred to by Edwards, "honest and vulnerable." This distinction between different Instapoets is highlighted further in chapter three where I include examples of poems by Kaur, in comparison to waheed's and show how they perhaps overlap or contrast with one another in their style of writing, usage of the platform, and thematic approach.

Scholarship on Instagram tends to tackle examples of visual-based readings of the platform in parallel to others. In "Instagram: Motives for its use and relationship to narcissism and contextual age" by Pavica Sheldon and Katherine Bryant, they say according to Tim Highfield "Instagram primarily focuses on images or pictures whereas Twitter is a more text-based forum…" and therefore "when people want to document moments of their lives, they are more likely to post a picture on Instagram rather than compose a tweet about such events " (qtd. in Sheldon and Bryant 94). In extension, this portrays how the public usually functions on the platform, and it is important to denote this dynamic in order to later on explore how Instapoets or Instapoetry does something different on the same platform.

Now, I want to return to linking the initial purpose of Instagram of publicizing images that are considered somewhat personal and oriented around bodies, i.e. images of the self (face and body). The general and perhaps surface level perception of Instagram is

that is operates as a self-fashioning and self-imaging mechanism. In "I'm Going to

Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram," Lauren Reichart

Smith and Jimmy Sanderson write, "with the advent of the internet and online

communication, people were afforded more control over their self-presentation, with the

ability to engage in impression management virtually, without an audience being physically

present to counteract self-presentation claims" (344). This approach to the attitudes of the

public online can apply to the way in which Instagram is perceived as a platform that is

very concerned with the physical representation of the self, and therefore detached from

societal debates on controversial matters such as race and gender inequalities that still exist.

In "Social media photography: construing subjectivity in Instagram images," Michele

Zappavigna writes "Instagram is a vehicle for photo distribution and Instagram images an

example of Jenkins et al.'s (2013) concept of 'spreadable media', that is, media which is

shared by audiences for their own purposes within participatory cultures" (273), hence

describing the social media application as a transmitter of images that travel through time

and space in order to reach a more diverse audience, however is fixated on subjective and

opinionated choices on how to portray the self.

    With all these descriptions amalgamated about Instagram, I argue that contemporary

poets (especially women) are diverging from these conceptions and disrupting the usual

activity that audiences and users might experience while using the application by

integrating pictures that include text only. In chapter three, I will show examples of how

Instapoetry is identified on the platform due to similar characteristics that some of the

authors follow such as including hashtags (#) in their captions for analogous purposes.

There has always been a special interest that combines poetry and imagery and according to

"Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts" by Hessa A. Alghadeer, she devotes a section titled "Instagram and photograph poems," where she writes, "Instagram facilitates taking pictures and sharing them on other social networking services, including Twitter and Facebook. These features are more creative, when implemented while interpreting or annotating original poems, engaging in active meaning making, and interweaving visual experiences to design stimulating digital poetic texts" (91), and therefore she discusses how the visual complements some of poetry's content which rely heavily on imagery and thus could be analyzed differently through overlapping with imagery, "through merging poetic text with digital image, we are likely to begin negotiating the semiotic possibilities that lie behind the act of interpreting text-image"(91). Alghadeer mentions how Instagram does not restrict users from using texts, however combines imagery with a caption that helps the users understand the image more clearly. waheed, though, uploads blank background images with texts within them and does not include any substantial information in the caption below. This means waheed successfully "merges" these two features into one and uses Instagram for the sole purpose of publishing imagery, but the image is purely text-based. Her personalization as a poet online covers controversial themes such as race, gender and colonialism in her images. When including text (a caption) below her uploaded image, she just mentions the book's name and in her stories its availability for purchase on the Amazon website.

Instagram can be interpreted as a literary space in the contemporary forms of readership and circulation of literary texts online. Therefore, this cultural trend or phenomenon gives birth to the title Instapoetry, which can be identified and established as a genre. Thus, Instagram can be implemented as a genre in further scholarship and discourse

on writing literary material online. In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt refers to Carolyn Miller's works and writes "rhetorical theories of genre tend to follow Miller's definition of genre as typified social action associated with a recurrent situation…" furthermore, "defines the relationship between genre and its situation as interactive and reciprocal" (3). The terms "interactive" and "reciprocal" can be associated with the type of activities found on social media platforms. Furthermore, Devitt writes "Genre interpretations have been popular among literary critics, those who have traditionally been more concerned with the reading of texts than with the writing of texts" (5). Therefore, poetry published on Instagram can track readership interests in society today, as well as always having an updated daily "interactive" attitude where users can like, comment or share the work they are being exposed to during their everyday lives. The concept of "hashtags (#)" found on social media can be translated as important pillars in identifying this generic association because they are purely a public creation. In "Ambient Affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter," Zappavigna writes that hashtags are used to "mark potential targets of evaluation and to render these as metadata that may be found by other users" (804). Therefore, when the public online repeatedly uses hashtags, they are activating or pinpointing an indicator or sign that could be searched and accessed by anyone using the platform.

Devitt writes, "Carolyn Miller argues for analyzing the everyday genres that people use, and by 1997 David Russell takes as a given that participants' recognition of a genre is what rightly determines whether one genre is distinct from another ("Rethinking" 518)" (*Writing Genres* 8). Thus, this firmly associates with the concept of a "hashtag" because it is naturally derived from repetitive usage of the terms by "participants" on Instagram, the

i.e. words or phrases become hashtags when people use them in their posts. Furthermore, Devitt also states "People construct situations through genres, but they also construct genres through situations" (22) which therefore shows an inevitable tie between the way people connect and identify a certain experience as a genre. It is substantial to emphasize the effect that social media has on creating and recreating connections between, in this case for example, what can be considered a genre and under which branch of genre studies does it belong? The word genre is a broad term and therefore needs to be specified, categorized and identified where Devitt writes "Text, whether literary or rhetorical, is no longer seen as objective and static but rather as dynamic and created through the interaction of writer, reader, and context" (165) and that "For many literary scholars, genre has become part of the cultural context which writers and readers interact" (166). For the purpose of my research, I aim to connect Devitt's take on genre theory and associate it with social media which is distinguished through its direct and immediate access which brings to life never-ending interaction between the users online. Therefore, in relation to literary texts circulating online, poets on Instagram have accounts that create the effect of contact and an accessible relationship with their readers; hence they receive immediate feedback on their posts and can remain connected with their readers at any given time and place. Also, readers can interact with each other as well where a community online could spur from similar interests, in this case analyzing or giving feedback on Instapoems. I will explicitly discuss and expand on Devitt's approaches to genre theory in chapter three as I claim Instapoetry as a genre and Instagram as a literary space and thus show how the two concepts link together.

The exposure and accessibility of any type of content circulating online is a product of the people and of the institutionalized platforms created by for-profit companies that give the public an online and unobstructed space to speak. In *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*, Zappavigna discusses how social media can be perceived as "corpora," where "The World Wide Web consists of hypertext documents that are linked together in various ways, and in this sense, it can be thought of as a large collection of texts" (16). Therefore, the content online is an amalgamation of texts but also within this huge collection, there includes different types of text such as an image or a video as well as actual text. Therefore, by using Instagram as a prime example, I aim to focus on the type of material or text that waheed shares on the platform and how her poetry discusses several themes that link to African-American history, such as race and identity. The next chapter explores and analyzes her poems in relation to a historical framework that convey overlaps and intersections that deal with language, poetic styles and traditions.

CHAPTER III

SITUATING NAYYIRAH WAHEED'S POETRY IN RELATION TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY: LANGUAGE, WRITING AND THE VERNACULAR TRADITION

every poem here.
is an unwrite.
of all that has been written in me without. permission.

— nayyirah waheed, *nejma*. (2014)

your novels.
the classic novels of a minutia. i have no interest in.
pale. in comparison to the novels of my world.
the novel of my mother.
the novels of my grandparents.
the articulate novels of how my people walk down a street.
the novels i have been reading my whole life.

— classic

— nayyirah waheed, *nejma*. (2014)

In this chapter, I explore race and poetry through a feminist lens whereas waheed interrupts the "norm" on a visual platform that is photograph and image based such as Instagram by incorporating plain background images of text that stand out. One of the things she does differently is narrate the past through her poetry in the subjects she addresses. The important historical themes in waheed's poetry books include discussing racism, black female poets and their works, losing the mother tongue, and black feminism.

Furthermore, in her inclusion of the significant themes in the history for African-American poetry, her text can be framed in relation to cultural history such as slave narratives, The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement and in addition, the political and socioeconomic themes of colonialism, sex and race. Precisely, the creative traditions that existed within these historical moments frame my reading of her works because her poems straddle the line between particular African-American literary styles and forms of writing such as the oral and vernacular tradition. In case studying nayyirah waheed's works, she is a new voice, one that is both black and female flourishing on her own self-published materials where her poems are entangled in both the past and the present. For example, her direct reference to some black female poets in her poetry encourages an interpretation of their role in history as well as her role as a poet today. In her decision to admit to popular cultures' virtual platforms of communication along with snippets of reality in her poetry and a taste of genre and style, she seeks to be heard by an audience that mostly includes the post-millennial generation, also known as Generation Z.

A. #On Language and Colonial History

In *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, the editors Harris Trudier, William Andrews and Frances Foster write that African literature initially has its roots recognized in East and West Sub-Saharan Africa, also North African countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt (Andrews et al 5). Also, in relating the history on colonialism and language to literature immediately, they emphasize that "the first observation to be made constitutes a central irony surrounding African literatures today:

their primary languages of expression are European, not African" (5). Many African-American writers express their frustration with writing in the language of slave owners who oppressed them and disrupted their history in the past. nayyirah waheed in her book *Nejma* includes a poem that reads, "sometimes i want to say it. / and there is nothing in english. that will say it." (60). She uses the word "it" to perhaps refer to any topic or subject she experiences or feels the need to express in her works. However, there is a clear struggle in expressing her thoughts or ideas because of being restricted by the English language, and therefore "it" can never be uttered. In Simon Gikandi's "African Literature and the Colonial Factor," he writes "… the existence of oral literature in all African language and precolonial writing in Arabic, Amharic, Swahili, and other African languages is ample evidence of a thriving literary tradition in precolonial Africa" (379). He further emphasizes that ahead of the eighteenth century, the colonial circumstances have fashioned the identity of the African writer and their works (379). Somehow, waheed possibly answers to this phenomenon and includes a single sentence quote in her poetry book where she says, "i will always be a translation" (*nejma* 119). The word "always" evokes how there has been a continuous historical discourse that is repeating itself, as if waheed's persona in her poetry is her own identity as an author who is forced to write in and be personified as a "translation" forever. Historically, it was evident that African literature was almost completely controlled and manipulated by European authors due to their attempt to address a non-African audience in order to be understood. Accordingly, "As Europe became more familiar with the outside world, its fascination with exoticism faded somewhat, making way for the next movement, referred to as 'colonial literature,'" and in this case, "European writers during the period from the late 1800s into the 1920s continued to speak on behalf of

Africans, though this time they used their experiences as colonials and colonial administrators as vouchsafes for the authenticity of their writings" (Andrews et al 5). Colonial literature was shaped due to interest of the colonizers in exploring and continuing to "speak on behalf of the Africans." Furthermore, even in the postcolonial era African literature was "shaped by the pressures of 'arrested decolonization' and the 'pitfalls of national consciousness,'" that "can be said to have been driven by the same imperative as writing under colonialism – the desire to understand the consequences of the colonial moment" (Gikandi 380). Both the colonial and postcolonial generation of writers reflect on this period due to its conspicuous traumatic effect embedded in African history. This notion of language and translatability of one's own nation through writing in their native language is a much more complex phenomenon when it comes to the African context. Gikandi writes that "It is not accidental that the foundational texts of modern African literature in the European languages were concerned with the dialectic of modernity and tradition as it was played out on the continent under colonialism" (382) therefore, this results in conforming to the "new language" which "sought a synthesis between modernization and African autonomy" (382) to be the only escape, ironically, from the colonizer.

If language was and is the only way out, hypothetically, how can African authors affirm their own roots when writing in English or French? Gikandi writes that the surfacing of African literatures in "European language needs to be located within the crucial claim that colonized subjects had set out to use the instruments and grammar given to them by the colonizer to oppose foreign domination and assert their sovereignty" (383). It is important to denote that some African writers "identified" with the "colonial culture" even though they were against their brutal actions against their nation. Therefore, Gikandi continues

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"indeed, a key axiom of African literary history is that the founders of African literature were the most Europeanized" (383). The fact that the establishers of African literature "were the most Europeanized" explains how they use the English language instead of any African language to write. In her poetry, waheed identifies as a woman of color, refers to "africa" as her mother, and also titles some of her poems "african american." Although African and African-American are not the same and each of their literature is a field of study on its own, waheed's poetry includes both her African-American identity and her identity as a Black female writer who repetitively refers to home, which in her case is the "whole continent", lost from her memory, "africa" (*salt.* 114).

Therefore, the colonial cultures have had an impact on African literature and literary scholars and writers continuously discuss or portray the impact of this colonization. waheed's poems are in constant commentary on the intricate notions of language as she figuratively continues to portray the struggles of writing in English not only in her words, but also the in the structure of one of her poems. For example, in *salt.* she writes,

    i s t u,, ,, ,m b l e in this lan guage.
    i f all down in this lang ua GE.
    i am p & a & i & n = in this lang | uage.
    my (mouth). heart. arms are losing muscle + in this l
    a n g u age.
    my body does not $ recognize the taste $ of this –
    language-.
    i long

    _____
    in this LANGAUGE.
    i am not/ {myself} in this l anguage."

    — e.n.g.l.i.s.h./ for all of us who are held captive (177)

waheed chooses not to conform to the "instruments and grammar" of Standard English and this poem can relate to the history mentioned previously about language for several reasons. First, a section of her poem's title reads "for all of us who are held captive" which shows that she belongs to a larger community of people who may experience the same struggles as her. When analyzing how the persona in this poem is suffering through expression in the English language, one can note how waheed uses phrases like "i long in this language" to relate to the history in which this language is a colonial one. Also, waheed's poem implements various levels of metaphorical physical torment and psychological frustration with the English language especially when she states that she "stumbles" and "fall down." One can almost experience her "stumbles" while reading the poem, which is a powerful method of transmitting her own struggle through all the pauses that the text infers because of its structure. This poem challenges the conventions of language, whether it is capitalization, punctuation, spacing and or inserting symbols. This poem captures the discrepancy of the language at several layers, one that contains a realistic experience where the reader actually stumbles while reading, trying to incorporate and absorb all the signs, so it's a struggling experience for both the persona in the poem and reader. One can categorize this poem as a visual or shape poem, which means that a poem visually (literally) looks like what it means. In this case, it does not take the shape of an object, however uses punctuation and spacing to accentuate the "stumble." In an interview published on *Ezibota* in 2015, one of the few pieces of personal information we learn about waheed is that she is an African-American writer based in the U.S and she says "I want black to be attached to me in everything I do." Even though audiences and readers online do not know where she

is from or what she looks like, she includes and references the label "african american" many times in books.

According to "The Alchemy of English" by Braj B. Kachru, the English language with its restrictions "had been perceived as the language of power and opportunity, free of the limitations that the ambitious attribute to the native languages" (292). In fact, "A non-native writer in English functions in two traditions. In psychological terms, such a multilingual role calls for adjustment. In attitudinal terms, it is controversial; in linguistic terms, it is challenging, for it means molding the language for new context" (293-4), which resonates how the writer takes on several roles when trying to deliver certain message through a language that is not theirs. Therefore, not only are they using the English language, they are appropriating it. In the case of waheed's poem, although the "medium is non-native…the message is not" (Kachru 294). However there are two different scenarios which are possible regarding her native language. First, she either sees English as the oppressor's language and this is what restricts her expression or identity, or it may not be her native language, but one could not know for sure. Furthermore, it is visually proven that she is delivering a message through using all the punctuation and characters which she uses to perhaps subvert the language she is perhaps "held captive" in. She is an African-American U.S based writer, but we have no further information on her nationality or ancestry. She may see English as the slave-master's language because of the way she negatively approaches the language in her poems. In "The Language of African Literature," Ngugi Wa Thiong'o emphasizes on his experience whilst attending a colonial educational system where he writes, "the language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (288). In his discussion of the dynamics of European languages, Thiong'o stresses

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the influence of the oppressor's language on the Kenyan community. He says that "In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference," and it was also a route towards universal recognition and rewards and therefore ensures acknowledgement on an international level. At the same time, students were punished physically or humiliated publicly if found speaking in their native languages which left them with no choice other than to learn and master the language that they were trying to reject (Thiong'o 288). In discussing both Thiong'o and Kachru's views, the complexity of the relationship between language and colonization is evident in the way in which it affects writers' either visible or invisible histories.

In bell hooks' *talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, she voices her concerns with the complexity of language by discussing several factors of oppression. She writes, "Growing up in a black, working-class, father-dominated household, I experienced coercive adult male authority as more immediately threatening, as more likely to cause immediate pain than racist oppression or class exploitation," (48) and therefore her oppression started with the patriarchy at home. She further discusses a similar type of oppression that deals with women and writes "I was just a girl coming slowly into womanhood when I read Adrienne Rich's words: 'This is the oppressor's language, yet I need to talk to you,'" (58) which indeed shows the way in which one might make use of the oppressor's language in order to speak to them but at the same time challenge or subvert it. Thus, hooks mentions the way in which Black women go through layers of oppression and through her personal experience as being a black women who lives in the U.S. she says "I understand that in many places in the world oppressed and oppressor share the same color. I understand that right here in this room, oppressed and oppressor share the same gender"

(46), which shows how this concept goes beyond generalizing or specifying that the white man is the only oppressor, so one needs to understand that as she phrases it "we all have the capacity to act in ways in that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized)" (46-7). It is important to note that hooks discusses colonialism together with oppression, whether it may result in a sexist or racial sense, or even both at the same time. In relating these factors to language, she says that,

> Within any situation of colonization, of domination, the oppressed, the exploited develop various styles of relating, talking one way to one another, talking another way to those who have power to oppress and dominate, talking in a way that allows one to be understood by someone who does not know your way of speaking, your language" (*talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black* 37-8)

Therefore, as hooks references Rich earlier, one needs to talk to the oppressor, no matter what the consequences or struggles of the language were. For the purpose of my research, I aim to use the minimal information on waheed's identity as an African-American writer living in the U.S. so I can discuss her attitude towards language further in her poems. As a black woman who might be oppressed in a country in one way or another where she feels she might not belong, waheed's poetry illuminates her experiences and thoughts on being African-American that writes and contributes to literature in English.

In her book, hooks describes language and its controversies and says,

> We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves – to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action – a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle" (*talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black* 58)

The concept of language as a "struggle" and a form "resistance" is an overarching theme in African-American literature. It is crucial to emphasize how writers, today, still explain this internal battle that they face when trying to express their thoughts through genres such as poetry. waheed repetitively writes about her own strife and how she is "often broken into language" (*Salt* 54) either with an intention to speak or be silent. In one of her poems she writes,

> there is a phantom language in my mouth.
> a tongue beneath my tongue.
> will i ever
> remember what
> i sound
> like.
> will i ever come home.
>
> — african american i (*salt.* 113)

Previously, Thiong'o also voices his own experience of being in a constant conflict in retaining his own native language, that he was forced to abandon in a colonizer school. When discussing the history of colonization and highlighting the difference between Africans and African-Americans' relationship to language, in this case, one should mention that Africans whose countries have been colonized, and in Thiong'o case obliged to learn English, is different from African Americans who have been oppressed, but typically have not been specifically colonized because they were born in the U.S. In *talking back*, hooks also mentions her academic experience saying "we were no longer taught by people who spoke our language, who understood our culture; we were taught by strangers" (173). waheed describes this phenomenon using vivid imagery when she says "a tongue beneath

my tongue" which portrays not only a linguistic conflict, but also a psychological one. She describes English as a "phantom language" to perhaps comment on the history as well, that the colonizer has become a ghost that still lives amongst any community that leaves home and ask "will I ever come home" and thus, they are away from their nation and their nation's language, where they feel like they are losing their "sound" or origin's voice. How can one get a rid of a ghost? They cannot. It always remains in disguise, but its presence lingers everywhere and anywhere. This is what language is to waheed; it is a powerful force that still haunts her and also her writings.

Jamaica Kincaid, an Antiguan writer, also describes the experience of not having a tongue as the "worst and most painful of all" and asks a significant question where she says "For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?" ("A Small Place" 94). This is one of the examples that show the frustration of the writers who are unable to write in their own mother tongue and thus reflect this irritation, ironically, in English. Furthermore, some African writers such as Chinua Achebe feel a sense of remorse and unfaithfulness to their mother tongue, but admit that they had no other choice. Thiong'o quotes him in a speech titled "The African Writer and the English Language" in 1975, where he says,

> Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it ("The Language of African Literature" 285)

This sense of "betrayal" and "guilty feeling" that Achebe highlights is inevitable when writing in English because he did not have the choice, he was "given the language" and

therefore in order to write and communicate, had to use it regardless. Therefore, there is a

clear contradiction that delineates language and mother tongue in a sense that one is the

opposite of another but "there is no other choice" for writers like Achebe. He further asks

an important question that states "why… should an African writer, or any writer, become so

obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues?" (286). And through

stressing this struggle or complexity that ties language with a nation or country that the

writer is originally from, one could sense the internal battle writers go through when

writing in a language they don't feel they belong to.

In waheed's case, her commentary on the complications of language that is not a mother

tongue evokes also a struggle with identity, where she writes,

> can you be a daughter.
> if you have no
> mother language.
> — african american iii (*salt.* 115)

One could argue that her poem reflects a similar attitude as Achebe's where a feeling of

detachment from the mother tongue has resulted in writing in a language they do not relate

to or identify with. So, waheed is saying she does not have a mother language, however

because she writes in English, it suggests that English is her first language but she does not

identify with it. Indeed, many other writers whose countries have been colonized feel that

their tongue has been lost in time and space.

One may propose a simple question; why not write in Swahili or Antiguan then?

According to "Creating in the Mother-Tongue: Challenges to the African Writer Today" by

Penina Muhando Mlama, a Tanzanian and Swahili playwright and theorist, she discusses several aspects of writing in the native language. Interestingly, she voices the realities of the international appreciation of African writers and how writing in the indigenous language is considered a huge risk for the writers' careers (8). She also highlights how writers claim to "have a handicap in using their mother-tongues because they have become alienated form their own ethnic roots" (7). In the preface of s*alt.*, titled "for us," waheed incorporates a hundred different translations of the word "salt" in many languages. These include Arabic, English, Turkish, German, Spanish, French and numerous African languages such as Yoruba, Swahili and Sotho. Some examples of the African languages include "chumvi" which is Swahili, "meleh" which is Arabic, "iyo" which is Yoruba and "cusbo" in Somali. In fact, there could be further questions about the significance behind the repetition of the word "salt" which may be because it holds historical richness in West Africa, where it was used for trading purposes and meat preservation. Here, waheed is translating the title of her book in multiple African and European languages in order to perhaps reach out to an international audience, even if it is only through the title because the content of the book is in English. waheed also infuses Arabic words repetitively in the title of her poems; for example one of her poems discusses the idea of the "cleanse" of the body and the title that follows reads "wuḍū" (*nejma* 5) which is the Islamic pre-praying ritual where one washes several parts of the body. She also uses other Arabic words such as "shukran" which means thank you in one of her poems in *nejma*. In another title, she includes a "West African philosophical concept" ("Aṣẹ"), which according to *Wikipedia* refers to the "Yoruba People," who constitute of southwestern and north-central Nigeria who believe in "conceiving the power to make things happen and produce change." In

waheed's poetry, this concept exists as a title of one of her poems which reads "the process | writing a book | the ancestors were my midwives | ashé" (*salt.* 251). One could argue that the effect of including words from multiple African and European languages aims to allow people from different parts of Africa and Europe to relate to her book as she titles this section "for us," in which she, as a writer, wrote her poems to communicate with the public, no matter where they are from or what language or dialect they speak.

Although the word "salt" reappears in several of waheed's poems, one poem discusses the significance of "salt" as a metaphor for pain in relation to language. She writes,

> you say
> 'you are such a 'good writer' for a woman of
> color.'
>
> i hear
> 'you have a better command of the english
> language than i do.
> my bitterness is wild salt in my blood
> causing
> my organs to crush and weep
> and
> this is the sound of my pain.'
>
> — translation | white noise (*salt.* 193)

The poem discusses an encounter between a white person and a black female writer where waheed by the title of the poem hears this conversation as "white noise," where it is clear that the persona in the poem disagrees and is repelled by the comment made by the white figure. In her book, hooks discusses the fundamental worth of being a female writer, as she explicitly says, "each time a woman begins to speak, a liberating process begins" (*talking*

back 34). She does not specify the race of the female writer, unlike waheed's poem that targets a public who dismissively downgrades a "woman of color" and deprives her of recognition for being a "good writer." This racist dismissal is heard as "white noise" to perhaps both waheed and the persona in her poem as most of her poems are in a first person perspective and as a black female writer herself, who writes in English, there might be an undertone or subliminal message in this poem about herself or her identity as a black female writer. The reference to the phrase "white noise" portrays the idea of noise as disturbance or irritation to the persona in waheed's poem, it also shows how there is a failure to understand or listen from both sides, the black writer and the white persona producing this "noise." waheed places the word "translation" in the title in parallel to the phrase "white noise," which evokes how she is translating what the white person is saying as "noise," and therefore is acknowledging the racist and sexist dismissal in the comment "you are such a 'good writer' for a woman of/ color," and translating it into what the persona hears which is "you have a better command of the english/ language than i do." Her mention of the word "noise" differs from other references in the African-American context, and thus could be placed in conversation with other discussions of noise.

Other references to "noise" in relation to African-American cultural production prove an additional framework for reading waheed's poem. For example, in *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation,* Jon Cruz introduces his book by discussing what black song making meant to the African-American culture spiritually, politically and culturally. He begins by discussing how in Frederick Douglass's autobiography (1845) he "asked his readers to pause and listen to the songs of slaves" (3) and so as he called them "songs of sorrow" and "tale of woe" because "every

tone was a testimony against slavery" (qtd. in Cruz). In this important historical moment

that Cruz highlights, it is also significant to note that during the eve of the Civil War, the

protestors were expecting and waiting to hear the "spirituals" as "black religious song

making was even enlisted as cultural weaponry in the symbolic arsenal against slavery"

(Cruz 3). After the abolitionists were interested in gathering some examples of these

"spirituals," where they "transcribed and published" them, they had in "their hands the

religious aspects of black oral culture…transformed into written texts" (3). Furthermore,

Cruz continues to elaborate that since the moment where the black songs were published,

"it broke from the earlier frameworks in which black song making was heard as alien noise,

and it created a critical humanistic interest in the music of African Americans" which later

on changed the perspective on black songs because it "helped install the modern

hermeneutical orientation toward cultural practices and laid the groundwork for a scientific

and objective treatment of black music" (3). There is a shift in the interpretation of the

black spiritual songs which shows how although the music was once heard as "alien noise,"

it was then received as a cultural and artistic movement. The reference to "noise" in the

case of both waheed's poem and the slave songs is interrelated because both noises refer to

a form of art, writing and music. The poem can then be interpreted as suggesting that

African-American experiences will always remain in translation to the white population.

And in return, the "white" population may perceive the experiences that exist in the

African-American context as "noise." The word noise alludes to negative connotations and

thus configures emotions such as disturbance or irritation where there is a racist or and

cultural dismissal: black artists' works (music making or writing) are both received or

heard as "alien noise." In both cases, noise corresponds to white audiences' failure to

understand or listen to the experiences of the African-American community. Whereas for Cruz, noise is the language of black liberation, perhaps waheed's poem suggests the inverse: that "white noise" is the language of white supremacy.

B. #On Writing and History of Slavery

In her book *salt.,* waheed says "i am always writing/ of you. / for you./ − breath | my people," (2) in which she titles her poem by placing the word "breath" with the phrase "my people" besides each other. Because this is one of the first poems in her book, it refers to the ultimate constant of being alive which is breathing in relation to her "people." It is noteworthy to state that this poem also comes after the section "for us," in which one could argue that this is her attitude in which she affirms the purpose of her books, a dedication called "for us" at the beginning of her book and a poem on page two in which she is writing "of" and "for" her people or community. According to *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century by* Joan R. Sherman, black poets have suffered negation in American literatures and are "invisible in white magazines and poetry anthologies of their time and ours" because, for example, "it is estimated that only 10 percent of nineteenth-century Afro-American poetry is currently available" (xv). Sherman writes that black writers and their voices have been omitted from "all standard biographical dictionaries, collective biographies, and state literary histories" also "they infrequently appear in similar compilations by and about Afro-Americans, most of which were published between 1860 and 1935 and are now rare books" (xv). Black writers have struggled with recognition and acknowledgement over the years and Sherman writes, "no group of writers in any place or

time has struggled to surmount lowly birth, poverty, lack of education, and life-long

discrimination to produce a body of literature" (xvi). Therefore, historical absence

repeatedly appears as a theme in waheed's work. She often positions the act of writing as a

way of compensating for the past to make up for lost time. waheed writes,

> remember.
> you were a writer
> before
> you ever
> put
> word to paper.
> just because you were not writing
> externally.
> does not mean you were not writing
> internally.
>
> — stories (*salt.* 194)

waheed often refers to socio-political history in her poem titles. The title "stories" can be

interpreted in multiple contexts historically and contemporarily. In the poem, waheed

reminds the reader that they could be identified as writers before even actually writing.

Thus, they could be writing their stories in their minds but not be able to know how to

translate them onto the page. Therefore, she still identifies them as writers, perhaps

untraditionally, writing their "stories." The slave narratives were stories that were difficult

to utter and articulate and one of the obstacles is language. There were many kinds of

barriers that prevented slaves from writing, which include threats of violence and the

prohibition on learning to read or write. *The Norton Anthology of African American*

Literature states "In the stubbornly durable history of human slavery, it was only the black

slaves in England and the United states who created a genre of literature that, at once,

testified against their captors and bore witness to urge to be free and literate…" (Gates Jr. and Mckay xxvii). Therefore, their writing experience has been one that was of course reflective of their stories as slaves and their suffering. So, the activity of writing has become solely a purpose to seek liberty and literacy. In *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Valerie Smith writes about the link between liberty and language that "since an unlettered slave was assumed to be ignorant and easy to dominate, antebellum laws privileged the acquisition of letters by explicitly prohibiting slaves from being taught to read and write" (3). Thus, in this forbidding, slaves who learned how to read and write wrote their own stories and like Frederick Douglass and many others it was "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (2 qtd. in Smith). Smith's book aims to argue "slave narrators and the protagonist-narrators of certain twentieth century novels by Afro-American writers affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the stories of their own lives" (2). Thus, these slaves were writing "internally" before being able to learn how to read and write in order to be free and also share their stories. Therefore, her reminder that anyone could be a writer even if they did not have the tools or language to write "externally" on paper or in print.

It is vital that my research highlights some factors of slavery and its dark history, because it was a significant source of artistic and literary production that is repeatedly mentioned and emphasized in African-American writing. Initially, in *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry,* edited by Richard Long and Eugenia Collier, exists a precisely important historical moment of slaves as they write "though blacks were to be found, both slave and free, in most of the colonies at the time of the Revolution, it is Virginia which best encapsulates the history of the black man in the colonies" and therefore

"it was at Jamestown that the first blacks arrived in 1619 as indentured servants… it was

there in 1662 that slavery was declared hereditary" (7). This significant historical milestone

shows how the African-American history is tied up with the history of slavery in the U.S.

and in highlighting the substantial dates in history; one could track the link between slavery

and slave narratives. Moreover, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*

describes the reasons and connection between African-American literature and slavery,

> From its earliest decades America has been engaged with tales of bondage – the
> African American slave narratives being simply the major form of those tales for
> the earlier nineteenth century. During that half-century the literature of slavery was
> important to most of the writers of the nation. Following the war they remained
> absorbed in the issues raised by slavery, for many reasons, usually the better to
> understand the struggles of their own day. Finally…several historians have seen a
> national literature mixed or creolized from its inception, with white writers
> borrowing freely from a large store of black images, themes, and language"
> (Andrews et al 670)

The ontological aspect of African literature is embedded in the slavery and anti-slavery

period, thus their art will never overlook or disregard such a crucial aspect of their

existence. waheed's poem titled "stories," mentioned above, speaks to experiences that may

not be translated into written words, but still exist in memory. Although many people in

slavery in the U.S during the early 19th century were born there and would have been native

speakers of English, "the African American slave narratives" were significant stories that

ex-slave narrators or writers would publish after they were free such as Frederick Douglass.

Andrews et al. refer to Douglass, "the first great slave narrator," as they mention that "more

than fifty autobiographies by former slaves [were] published between the Civil War and the

1930s" (671). An important section in the quotation above reads that the writers after the

war "remained absorbed" in the conflicts brought by slavery and one of the factors is that it helps "usually the better to understand the struggles of their own day." Since racism still affects African-Americans today, this phenomenon is important to examine because many African-American writers connect their works or writings, to themes such as racism, which is unquestionably tied to slavery because slavery is a result of racism. As an example, waheed writes in *salt*.,

> racism is a translucent skin.
> it defends itself
> by
> attacking itself.
>
> — reverse racism (95)

The title "reverse racism" refers to the idea that people who are oppressed on the basis of race can be racist, such as black people being racist towards whites. So, in this case, a white person can accuse a black person of "reverse racism" by claiming that the black person is being racist toward them because they are white. Therefore, when the white person positions the accusation of racism as a racist attack, that person is defending their ability to be racist. Thus, the white person is defending racism by claiming to attack racism. However, this interpretation of the poem would not be valid if it weren't based on an interaction between individuals. This is because if one sees racism as tied to power and systematic, institutionalized oppression, then "reverse racism" does not exist. This poem is hence about an interaction between people within a society rather than a system of power.

There are a couple of periods in the history of African-American culture that have produced and affected prominent female writers. First, the Harlem Renaissance,

acknowledged as the "Negro Renaissance" or the "New Negro movement," was an "artistic and sociocultural awakening among African-Americans in the 1920s and the early 1930s" (Andrews et al 340). The most relevant aspect of this historical period in regards to my thesis, is that the "racial aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance focused on the folk" (67). Critics, scholars, and authors at the time who wrote about this movement focused on how it was celebrating black culture with a "desire for literature to record the folk, in keeping with the general affirmation during the 1920s of folk culture, the culture created by the black masses" (68). Also, how "racial aesthetics are usually based on the idea of an authentic folk culture. That is, southern folk culture serves as a link to Africa, the homeland [and] therefore, the folk culture is the source of an authentic and distinctive black self" (68). W. E. B. Du Bois, a well-known African-American scholar and critic, advocated for a "Negro Theatre" in 1926 where the content purely reflects "black life" (67). Du Bois' "Negro Theater" relates to the Harlem Renaissance movement because of its focus on performativity and reception by the black communities. Therefore, Andrews et al. write "Du Bois argues we have been judged too long by the white world and we must judge our own work by African American standards" (67). This movement, then, shows how artists wanted to create authentic performance spaces that are solely a creation and interpretation of black peoples' lives. Moreover, the focus on "folk" on black lives is important because it implements a more authentic representation of the black peoples' lives and experiences.

The second movement is The Black Arts Movement, born in the 1960s, which "broke from the immediate past of protest and petition (civil rights) literature and dashed forward toward an alternative that initially seemed unthinkable and unobtainable: Black Power" (Andrews et al. 70). It was an explicitly political movement and "the only

American literary movement to advance 'social engagement' as a sine qua non of its aesthetic" (70). It is important to emphasize that the notion of "Black Aesthetic" surfaced in this period. The theorist Hoyt Fuller defines the phrase "Black Aesthetic" where he says that it is "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience" (qtd. in Andrews et al. 68). The infusion of political activism and art was one that shaped identities of artists at the time of the movement. Amiri Baraka, a theorist, writer and poet was a prominent voice on the topic of "Black Aesthetic" and wrote a poem called "Black Art" where he claims "that poems are useful only if they are weapons that will create a new black world and destroy the white one" (69). The power of art being used as weaponry to fight for rights has become a tool and a significant theme that a number of black female poets have taken up. In the interest of my research, I discuss poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez that were pivotal in relation to The Black Arts Movements because waheed mentions them in her poetry. According to the *Oxford Companion,* "militant poets" were trying in their "poetry to incite the black masses to revolt" (Andrews et al. 69). waheed references these two poets in her work. She writes,

> i knew
> read
> sonia sanchez.
> nikki giovanni.
> audre lorde.
> before
> i ever even
> heard the name
> charles bukowski.
> finally,
> a proper education.

— the order (*salt.* 229)

She uses three black female poets in opposition to a white male poet with European roots living in the United States to appreciate the education she has received through the writings and experiences of these particular black female voices. One could argue that she is using these women in order to be identified through their historical activist milestones. Their work spoke against the political and social system, whether it was through language or through action. An interesting insight in Sanchez's literary style is that she "disrupts normal typography, word shapes, and the use of space to convey both emotion and clues to performance" (Andrews et al. 642). She was a playwright and her works were extremely influenced by the blues and thus her poetry was considered a form of lyricism. waheed uses similar techniques when she writes, adding spacing and "disrupting" the proper and expected use of language. As I have shown in the section on language, waheed also "disrupts normal typography," for example she also does not use complete sentences and adds excessive punctuation in her poems. Another aspect to Sanchez's persona as a poet is that she was known as a "people's poet" amongst many other titles (643). Through her legacy, she appealed to the public for decades and this is how she is still relevant to black female writers like waheed today. This element is worth exploring later on in chapter three when I deconstruct waheed's identity and persona on Instagram and social media platforms in general. Finally, in an interview published in a book called *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* by D. H. Melhem, Sanchez shares an experience of engaging the audience before a dance performance, for example, with some information on her poetry before reciting it to them. She says,

This was in the early sixties. This was also when the poetry began to change and move towards Black themes much more. We're talking about '65, '66. And what that meant simply was that for some reason, I began to understand the need to integrate the talk with the poem – (154)

As a poet and artist, Sanchez acknowledged the importance of performance in relation to poetry. In her experience as a teacher of poetry and poetic styles, she was a performer who recited her poetry in front of an audience and it was a part of her identity. The "need to integrate the talk with the poem" relates to the oral culture in African-American thematic history and I will discuss this later on in the chapter in relation to waheed's style of writing and the vernacular tradition.

Giovanni, on another hand, is a poet who was concerned with "female identity and female autonomy" and also she "rejects the male constructions of female identity that have led to the double oppression of African American woman and asserts instead the right and the necessity for African American women to shape their own identities" (Andrews et al. 317). Furthermore, she has also acknowledged herself as "a poet of the people" where she targeted the general public, instead of academics (316). Both Sanchez and Giovanni had powerful relationships with the public and thus their identities somewhat overlap as "peoples' poets". Also, Sanchez's poetic style is short and lyrical (317) and in waheed's case, this is similar to the way her poems are, brief but also very expressive. She comments on this style and says, "even the small poems mean something. they are/ often whales in the bodies of tiny fish" (*salt*. 19). Therefore, she describes her poems in an image of "whales in the bodies of tiny fish" which vividly shows how although they are "small" or short, they are still poetic with value. In waheed's reference to Sanchez and Giovanni, she relates to

their works because she studied them and was familiar with their style and historical contributions to essential movements in the African-American history such as The Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement.

waheed dedicates another poem exclusively to Audre Lorde, an American writer who, like Sanchez, was a teacher of and writer of poetry and identified herself as a "black feminist lesbian mother poet" (qtd. in Andrews et al. 461). She spoke against "sexual oppression" and for "personal survival," (461) which also can be placed in conversation with some of Giovanni's ideological beliefs on asserting autonomy. Lorde's "elusive and fragmented" style is one that is prominent in her works and in "Audre Lorde: The Voice of Multiple Consciousness" Margaret Kissam Morris states that Lorde's "Modernist style depends on the use of free verse with almost no punctuation. Larger than usual spaces between the words and line breaks indicate pauses that suggest the performative aspect of her work." (100). Morris elaborates on Lorde's literary attitude as she says her Modernist style mirrors the agony of the "fragmented world dominated by capitalism and institutionalized oppression" (101). Thus, in direct relation to her poetry and prose, Lorde "worked to destabilize the pattern of domination/subjection by challenging entrenched attitudes concerning, race, gender, class and sexual identity" (Morris 101). In her strife against homophobia and sexual oppression, Lorde has been dismissed by women in the African-American literary field due to her openly lesbian identity, which vividly affected her writing because she started to signify suicide in some of her poems. However, she was known for praising the power of black women (Morris 102-103). waheed mentions Lorde in *salt.* as she writes,

audre wrote
of
the
'secret poetry.'
we all know
this
poetry.
lining our arms.
rusting our teeth.
walking through our hair.
feeding
our wild stomach.
soothing
our mouth tears.
folding itself into waists.
between legs.
always
climbing up our sadness
into
our necks
to
sleep.

— the secret poetry | audre (152)

Lorde once wrote, "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden

angers," (*Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* 32) which resembles her complicated

relationship with her mother and her lesbian identity. In "Mothering Herself: Manifesto of

the Erotic Mother in Audre Lorde's *Zami*: A New Spelling of My Name" by Bethany

Jacobs, "Critical discussions of *Zami* invariably draw on Audre's relationship with her

mother, Linda, sometimes through a psychoanalytic lens. Barbara Christian asserts that, 'In

many ways, *Zami* seems to me to be a book about Lorde's reconciliation with her mother'

(199)" (111). In a book that is evidently saturated with erotic implications and subliminal

messages, the graphic imagery that waheed includes in "audre" can be read as a reference

to Lorde's sexual identity, but it also might refer to motherhood in general. The poem

includes a reference, which may be immediately linked to Lorde's personal identity, it reads that poetry is "folding itself into waists" and "between legs" which provokes a sexual, yet an intimate encounter that deals with both poetry and the self. By referring to Lorde as "audre," one could claim that waheed identifies with her on a somehow personal and informal level, where she understands the notion of "secret poetry." This can be in relation to sexist and or racist oppression and thus, she forms a relationship with "audre" that allows her to refer to her by her first name in both the poem and the title of the poem.

C. #Defining the Vernacular

African-American writers are known for including the "vernacular tradition" in their art. According to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, the vernacular tradition "refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and, in our own era, rap songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literature (or written-down) tradition of black expression" and "what distinguishes this body of work is its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character…" (Gates Jr. and Mckay 1). This tradition denotes a unique view of this particular literature, whereas it is inspired or derived by other styles or forms of art. Historically, as mentioned earlier in Cruz's book, this also started with slaves and their songs, which then later, after being recorded and published, became a part of the African-American culture and literature representing the black oral culture. Gates Jr. and McKay write that the vernacular tradition "consists of forms sacred – songs, prayers, and sermons as well as secular – work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz and stories of many kinds. It also consists of dances, wordless musical performances, stage

shows, and visual art forms of many sorts" (3). waheed acknowledges a couple of African-American musical giants in her second poetry book *nejma* where she writes about two men: "the man who raps in flowers. – andre benjamin" (113) and "the/ music/ i knew as father. – steveland morris" (139). First, André Benjamin (also known as André 3000) is an artist and actor who is also a part of a hip-hop group called Outkast. They are known for promoting Southern hip-hop and have won multiple awards. waheed's decision to include Benjamin shows her awareness of music and popular culture. Also, Outkast is known for including jazz and funk in their music that may interest waheed because her references to specific artists and writers allude to a certain culture they contribute in or historical movements they are part of. Second, Stevland Morris (known as Stevie Wonder) is not just a musician and performer; he is also a politically active figure. He was known as an active supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. waheed includes both artists who continue the vernacular tradition of African-American culture with their music. Cruz emphasizes the significance of music in creating a public sphere for the black population, he writes that "from gospel to blues to soul and to rap and hip-hop…black music making remains part of an enormously important as well as a sprawling black cultural public sphere" (*Culture on the Margins* 20). Therefore, all the aforementioned genres of music are a fundamental notion in the "black cultural public sphere" as they were and still are relative to the African-American community. These genres are still sung and performed by black artists who, just like waheed, discuss racist and sexist dismissals.

Just like the genres of rap and hip-hop usually tend to recite a historical incident, personal experience or story in verse, waheed also addresses her audience through historical commentaries using customs such as the vernacular. Her poems usually include

immediate and short sentences, which are straightforward and precise. Some of her poems

may be interpreted and analyzed as a direct interpretation of history. For example, she

writes,

> white people are not chinese.
> because they are born/live in china.
> white people are not indian.
> because they are born/live in india.
> white people are not african.
> because they are born/live on a continent they
> murdered their way into.
>
> –   there is no such thing as a white african |
> colonial blood myths | a revisionist history (*salt.* 53)

A basic definition of the vernacular, as written in the anthology, according to *Webster's*

dictionary is that "the term comes from the Latin – '*vernaculus*: Born in one's house,

native, from *verna*, a slave born in his master's house, a native' – and counts among its

meanings the following: (1) 'belonging to, developed in, and spoken or used by the people

of a particular place, region, or country; native; indigenous… (2) characteristic of a

locality; local'" (Gates Jr. and Mckay 3). waheed's poem may relate to the rooted definition

of the word "vernacular," however she complicates the idea by rejecting or challenging the

relationship between having a home or nation and belonging to another. She uses repetition

with different examples at the beginning, to lead her way into the phrase "white people are

not african./ because they are born/live on a continent they/ murdered their way into," and

thus argues that we pay attention to the history behind white people's existence in a

particular place. The two titled phrases "colonial blood myths" and "a revisionist history"

summarize her overall remark on historical narratives that perhaps might have led people to

believe that there is such a thing as "white african." Therefore, this can be interpreted as waheed's direct commentary on history, colonialism and race.

The attitude in which waheed approaches topics that were embedded in African-American history in relation to being born in a country and living somewhere else is very familiar and can be traced back to slave narratives and their experiences as well. In *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry,* Richard Long and Eugenia Collier mention Frederick Douglass, a man born a slave and who escaped and became one of the most prominent anti-slavery activists in the 19th century. In one of his speeches titled "The Right to Criticize American Institutions" he says, "I have no love for America, as such: I have no patriotism. I have no country. What countries have I? ... How can I love a country that dooms three million of my brethren, some of them my own kindred...A country… the Government of which… is in favour of supporting and perpetuating this monstrous system of injustice and blood?" (59-60). waheed affirms a comparable attitude that speaks against historical processes such as white supremacy and oppression, she writes "the worst/ thing that ever happened/ to/ the world/ was/ the white man coming across gun powder./ − the end of the world | the beginning of white supremacy" (*salt.* 111). Her poem almost echoes as a speech, as if she is directly addressing an audience about an incident in the past that is vital to the present. waheed's previous title "there is no such thing as a white african" evokes a similar message which rejects any association of the two terms "white" and "african" allowing obvious consequences that combine these two words together such as racism to linger.

There are more particular styles in African-American literary works that have been established since Douglass's slave narratives. Long and Collier write about the "two

essential modes, two categories of vision: the simplistic and the oracular" (3), where the oracular characteristics were evident during Douglass's time. These two approaches to literature help transmit a view on the African-American personal experience and expedition through history. The anthology states "the writing of Afro-American is the stain in the literature of this country which seriously challenges the myth of American perfection… it is also a literature of protest, a cry for redress. And in its most recent manifestation it is preeminently a literature of liberation" (Long and Collier 5). It is a literature of survival; it was and still is a tool that fights inequality and injustice. Therefore, waheed's tactics when using the first and second person perspectives such as "I" and "you," allows her poems to speak to an audience directly as if it is a real conversation between the writer and reader. Also, if African-American writing is a "literature of liberation" and a "cry for redress," a connection and identification with the reader is necessary in order to deliver messages that protest and advocate political and cultural ideologies. According to *Modern Black Poets* edited by Donald B. Gibson, "black poetry intends always to be as clear, frank, and explicit as possible. It is a poetry of statement, which may engage in puns of an uncomplicated sort, but which intentionally avoids understatement, irony, or complex verbal expression of any subtlety" (10). Gibson also highlights that black poetry is designed to be spoken and articulated out loud, not read silently as the poets are considered "oral" poets (11). waheed writes in a manner that is simple to read and understand, because of her short poems and one-worded sentences, however she is direct in her approach and communicates directly with the readers. For example,

never
trust anyone
who says
they do not see color.
this means
to them
you are invisible.

−   is (*salt.* 140)

She is frankly giving advice to her readers to pay attention to the white dominant culture

and the moments of ignorance and perhaps negation of the African-American racial history,

which might trigger a conversation where a white figure might imply that they "do not see

color." waheed emphasizes the dangerousness of this perception because it results in being

"invisible." Her target is to perhaps write short reminders that her readers should embrace

and employ. Her language, although blunt and immediate, operates through references to

everyday experiences where readers can relate to the moment she is describing. In this

poem, she is warning people of color that they might be underappreciated or undermined

because of their identity. Gibson emphasizes how this direct and blunt language is related

to the poet's conscious awareness of the audience. He writes that "the audience is the urban

mass, and the level of their writing is pitched accordingly (not condescendingly, however)

in the interest of communication by means of a medium easily available and well known to

both the poet and his audience" (10). Furthermore, black poets aim to target the "masses" in

order to seek "solidarity" and also become relatable to the black working class (11). This

shows how black poetry is often written for a specific social and cultural group, and this is

why its language, tone and style seem very straightforward. Sherman writes that "Johnetta

B. Cole, writing on 'Culture: Negro, Black and Nigger,' finds soul and style the 'essence of

blackness' and the consistent themes in black American life. Soul consists of three notions: a particular brand of long-suffering weariness, deep emotion, and an aggressive sense of racial group identity" (xxi). The culture in African-American societies is one that is saturated with the formal aspects of writing that bring out "soul and style." A more concrete example in which writers take on specific styles like a modernist one and adapt it in their poetry is discussed earlier when highlighting Sanchez and Giovanni. Therefore, they both also succeeded in reaching out to and targeting the masses through perhaps their poetic "soul and style".

In *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture,* Fahamisha Patricia Brown discusses the use of African-American "vernacular speech" in literature. Paul Laurence Dunbar who was a black poet known for advocating "dialect pieces" of poetry is one example (Long and Collier 218). Furthermore, Dunbar "was the first 'to use dialect as a medium for the true interpretation of Negro character and psychology' (35)" (10). waheed uses African-American slang in one of her poems from *salt.* and writes,

> white people try to take
> blackness.
> pour it out
> run it into their skin
> and
> wear us
> like they know what we about.
> but
> honey
> it's only ever gon' be a suntan.
> ain't neva gon' be black.
>
> — tan | stealing from the sun (101)

The last two lines of the poem use African-American slang with words/phrases like "gon'"
and "ain't neva gon' be black," which signifies an aspect that refers to culture and
belonging that "white people" can never attain or master. Brown discusses several critics
such as Stephen Henderson and Donald Gibson and their approach to the vernacular
tradition. She says that they share a "view of language, particularly African American
vernacular that is not limited to vocabulary [and thus] the literary traditions that the African
American poet explores are both oral and written, a cultural reinvention specific to a
syncretic culture" (15) which summarizes both the historical and cultural infusions that
have led to the merging of poetry and oral traditions. Brown explains further that,

> African American poets extend the griot, or bardic, tradition by performing their
> poetry in formal and informal readings and recitations before audiences. The silent
> reader, too, becomes an active participant in the language situation as she or he
> hears with the inner ear and praises (or dismisses) the written text… the poet
> achieves a kind of written orality" (26)

The literary tradition that ties poetry, poets and performance is important in African-
American writing as it relates and affects style and reception where poetry is written so it
could be performed in front of an audience. The poets' achievement of "a kind of written
orality" emphasizes the trajectory between the text as a performance piece and reader as an
active participant with the poetry. What does it mean to be a silent reader and how does this
relate to performing her poetry on Instagram? This is a question I will attempt to answer in
chapter three as I explore her role as a black poet on social media in relation to the oral and
vernacular traditions. Brown further writes, "African American poets write out of a

vernacular tradition that particularly values the sounds of language. The style of *sounding*

the language, as much as the language itself, communicates meaning" (27). This certain

poetic style of uttering phrases including speech to speak with the reader or audience is of

interest to this project because in chapter three, I will be discussing waheed's role as black

poet on social media who uses traditions such as the oral and vernacular in her style of

writing.

And so, in highlighting some aspects of the African-American literary culture and

tradition, the discussion of waheed could be situated within this literary discourse when

analyzing the poems in her book and the ones she chooses to post on Instagram. The

readers online may not be fully aware of this tradition, which begs the question, would they

know that a single poem by waheed carries such heavy history? Are they aware that her

choice to publish online may be because she perceives it as an act of performativity?

waheed contextualizes her poetry and identifies herself with specific black female poets

that belong to movements such as The Black Arts Movement, which suggests a sense of

belonging to this African-American poets' community that relates her to Sanchez and

Giovanni and also Lorde. Her decision to implement styles that overlap with theirs, or her

disruption of formal conventions in her use of punctuation and spacing in a poem, can be

perceived as an extension of some poets' styles, traditions and roles from movements such

as the Black Arts Movement. Perhaps waheed is too attached to the vernacular tradition,

and this is why her poetry almost immediately reflects some of the forms that were derived

from this literary discourse. Finally, this chapter tries to prove that only by digging into

some of the history of African-American poetry can one analyze or interpret poetry written

by a politically outspoken black poet. Framing waheed's texts in relation to historical and

contemporary poetic works, can later on show how the active participation of readers on

platforms such as Instagram where they can interact with the text through liking,

commenting, and giving direct feedback can prolong oral and vernacular traditions, black

feminism and discourses on public and private spheres and spaces.

CHAPTER IV

INSTAGRAM AS A LITERARY SPACE:

INSTAGRAM POETRY AS A LITERARY GENRE

i am simply the poet.
the
poem
is
the one
that
can change your life.

— medium

— nayyirah waheed, *salt.* (2013)

The chain of writers on Instagram who write short pieces of poetry and prose are labeled "Instagram poets" or "insta poets" and their target is to maximize their readership on social media platforms in order to sell their (mostly) self-published books. After discussing some of the historical context of black writers and their literary traditions, I will now move on and shed light on the relationship between literary space and genre theory, show examples of Instapoets' works on the platform and highlight the importance of identity within the black feminist discourse. Moreover, in first engaging in a conversation about literary space and defining its aspect, I will discuss elements of genre theory in relation to literary space. Finally, I will also highlight prominent writers such as bell hooks

and Patricia Hill Collins and bring forward the discourse on autonomy, identity and authenticity of writers on Instagram. Popular culture identifies Instapoetry as a phenomenon that is emerging and expanding on Instagram. So, my aim is to complicate this idea and identify a genre that might change and challenge the readership of poetry. I will portray the way in which Instagram has become a literary space that the audience is activating on a daily bases by reading and accessing these poems anywhere and everywhere. The questions I propose ask whether the poets on social media are challenging, resisting, and/or critiquing the basic structures of both Instagram as a platform and poetry as a genre.

A. #Identifying "Instagram Poetry" as a Genre

In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt defines genre and its effect on both the public and cultural sphere as significant. In chapter one, I briefly mentioned Devitt's approach to the term genre and its relationship with communication and the acts of reading and writing. In addition, Devitt writes, "genres so significantly impacts how people use language, read literature, and write and read nonliterary text, theories of genre can contribute new perspectives and approaches to many deavors of how people operate and have operated within their societies and cultures" (2). By relating this concept to social media, I want to extend her take on genre theory and apply it thoroughly to the literature posted and circulated on Instagram. Social media platforms operate by people and their contributions to their accounts as well as other peoples' accounts. For example, Instagram allows interaction on several levels such by adding comments or "reposting" other people's images

or texts. One can simply screenshot other peoples' posts and repost them as a sign of approval or agreement. Both the poets and the people take part in the creation of the hashtag "#instapoetry," as their acknowledgement and usage of the hashtag affirms its existence on the platform. So, although the poets also take part in creating the genre, the online audiences affirm the hashtag by mentioning it during their elaboration or interaction on the poets' posts and this is how it becomes a popular reference on Instagram. Devitt continues saying that her book "extends a rhetorical theory of genre, a theory that sees genres as types of rhetorical actions that people perform in their everyday interactions with their worlds" (2). I aim to highlight how the everyday interactions with the poetry published and circulated online adds to the genre of poetry as well as the social media platform. The photograph of text is a cultural phenomenon that has emerged on social media platforms and is completely unrestricted and open to writers to share their work freely for people to read and interact with on a daily bases. Devitt highlights the formalistic approach to genre from a critic's or a scholar's perspective, as I already mentioned in chapter one, however emphasizes the shift of genre definition in the contemporary era. She says, "Even in literature, though, the emphasis with genre has been on the product one reads than on the process of reading" (5). To further elaborate on this point, social media has become a platform of a specific genre of literature, the short poetry and prose. What distinguishes social media from other types of interaction with literary texts is the immediate and direct access to writers' works where they can provide feedback instantly. Also, the "process of reading" has changed in the digital era, so metaphorically Instagram has become the portable poetry book people carry around everyday in their devices.

This chapter adapts theories of genre to a social media context where aspects such as reciprocation and interaction are important pillars in identifying a genre. Therefore, this will be tackled by highlighting immediate examples provided by Instagram as a platform and poetry as a traditional genre. By combining many scholars' approaches to genre theory, such as Carolyn Miller, Michael Halliday and Mikhail Bakhtin, Devitt writes that their "common elements of genre definition [are that] genre is action, that genre is typified action, that typification comes from recurring conditions, and those conditions involve a social context" (13). The activities that individuals perform on social media platforms, whether reading text on an image, writing their own text, reposting someone else's text or choosing an image to post on their profile, are all actions that create a social context, however it is virtual instead of physical. Devitt stresses the phrase "people construct situations through genres, but they also construct genres through situations" (22), and previously in chapter one, I stated how the concept of "hashtags (#)" is an example of this by referring to the way in which genres extract a particular phrase used on the platform which can be found by users who look for it or refer to it (Zappavigna 84). However, to further emphasize this idea, I want to list the types of hashtags found on Instagram that relate to the poetry published and circulated. They include "instapoetry" with 2.4 million posts, "instapoetrygram" with around 56,000 posts, "instapoetrycommunity" with approximately 16,000 posts, "instapoet" with around 2.7 million posts and "instapoem" with around 1.5 million posts as of today (April 12, 2019). Due to the poets' and audiences' recurrent use of these terms, they have become the most popular hashtags found on Instagram when looking up the terms "Instagram poetry" or "Instagram poets". It is important to note that hashtags act like a search engine on the platform, thus making it

easier for users to find the content they are looking for. If any user on Instagram wants to find various posts that define or undermine who "Instagram poets" are or what "Instagram poetry" includes, they would search for these specific tags which would refer them to examples of posts that include these hashtags in their captions. These hashtags are proof that "instapoetry" is popular on Instagram where millions of people incorporate them in their posts, which is why they have become searchable as a tag on the platform. Therefore, hashtags dictate conversations that are recurrent on Instagram and also notes how many times people have mentioned or included a specific hashtag.

Situations help in formulating or constructing one of the bases of genre theory. Devitt states "connecting genres to situation provides genre with an essential rhetorical nature. It helps explain how language users know to take particular reader and writer roles… and why certain genres are most commonly used within particular groups" (16). She makes use of Kenneth Burke's approach to situation, which he discusses in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. I want to now shift my focus on how writers adapt and deal with situations that may challenge their roles as writers or poets in particular. Burke says "It is, then, my contention, that if we approach poetry from the standpoint of situations and strategies, we can make the most relevant observations about both the content and the form of poems" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 124). Through highlighting how the role of the poet is adapting to an environment like social media, I want to extend on Burke's concept. Therefore, I will discuss his take on "form and content" through poems published on Instagram which in the case of nayyirah waheed are mostly excerpts from her books *salt.* and *nejma*. Devitt further engages with Burke's text as she writes that in his "model, writers develop strategies for 'encompassing' situations,

strategies that 'size up' situations in ways that have 'public content' [and he] notes that

similar situations enable us to see 'poetic acts' as relevant…" (*Writing Genres* 15). Thus, in

relating this concept to genre theory, Devitt continues to accentuate Burke's approach to the

"discourse acts of situation and strategy" which he argues, "is the precursor of his five-part

dramatic act" (15). Therefore she connects to the way we perceive genres as strategies that

"have been commonly used to answer situations" (15).

The role of an "Instagram poet" is affected by the situation and thus is interrelated

to the theory of genre. Devitt continues to emphasize the way in which "people identify the

situation in order to choose an appropriate genre [and] once the genre is chosen… the genre

reciprocally acts to shape the situation" (*Writing Genres* 22). In a digital context, poets and

people on social media are the sole creators of the genre of Instapoetry through, for

example, the phenomenon of hashtags. Thus, they have, through the experience of viewing

and reading the poems online, established it as a genre on its own by sharing and

interacting with the poetry. It is important to also state that preexisting genres take part in

creating a new type of subgenre. Therefore, Instapoetry is not a phenomenon created from

vacuum. People identified the genre from the way the writers have presented it on their

accounts, therefore when writers are voicing their works as a part of a larger project (a

poetry book), they have started to shape a whole new take on contemporary poetry, one that

combines image and text. Devitt comments on this idea saying, "a writer or reader

recognizes recurrence because she or he recognizes an existing genre" (21). I have

previously touched upon the idea of "recurrence" that Miller focuses on when defining

genre theory. For the purpose of my research, in linking this notion to social media, it is

more likely to track the repetitive attitudes that are located by the platform's engine, which

continues to post and update what the writers or readers have added to their own accounts. Thus, social media platforms facilitate tracking by updating the way in which users online use or incorporate hashtags such as instapoetry and instapoet by counting all the recurrent posts or mentions within the search of the terms.

Devitt continues to elaborate on Miller's attitude towards a genre functioning and recurring in a social setting or context. She emphasizes the way in which a genre is joint between groups of people and thus writes,

> First of all, genres require multiplicity, multiple actions by multiple people [and] all discourse is predicated on two people, a writer and reader or speaker and listener… but genre is predicated on more than two people, or multiple people acting repeatedly, thus creating the perception of recurrence " (*Writing Genres* 33)

It is significant to note how a genre registers in peoples' lives as a repeated form of interaction with a text or a discourse. Furthermore, the types of people involved in this interchange begin with a "writer and reader or speaker and listener," and then start to proliferate when a genre is identified and thus becomes public amongst a group of members. This connection between people sharing similar interests or engaging in a conversation occurs and recurs in a form of communal activity between individuals. When Devitt discusses the genre theory and establishes its foundation, she does not mention the types of platforms in which people can be in contact with one another. However, she does mention the different social settings in which this type of interaction can take place. She distinguishes three groups of people including communities, collectives and social networks. She identifies that communities are "people who share substantial amounts of time together in common endeavor" and collectives are "people who gather around a single

repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community" and finally social networks are "people who are connected once – or more – removed, through having common contact with another person or organization" (46). In the case of social networks, Devitt uses the example of e-mail spams and jokes where individuals within that network "…may never have met one another, but … are receiving common discourse [and] the interactions and influences of such social networks are less easily traced than those within tighter communities, but they exist nonetheless" (45). It is important to examine how, for the purpose of my research, this can also be applied to the type of content people are exposed to on Instagram. Thus, users online encounter the same posts by the poets on Instagram and reply to each other's comments on the posts without evidence of personal connections. Also, by reposting some of the poems published by the authors on their accounts, people are also engaging in a conversation (even if its one-way, unless the author replies to them) with the writers.

One could argue that Instapoets are consciously aware of the genre that they are creating and contributing to on an everyday basis. In fact, Instapoetry could be perceived as a subgenre of poetry itself. Devitt expresses that

> Within a community, then a defining criterion for genre status might be recognition of that genre by all expert members of that community. Subgenre status might be a useful distinction to maintain, defined as a type of text that some but not all expert members recognize and that has some distinctive linguistic and rhetorical features. Significantly, however, one subgenre appears to represent the prototype of that genre (69)

There are two types of audiences that receive and interact with the poetry circulating on Instagram: the writers who post their poems online and the readers who are interested in

this specific genre. In the aforementioned definition of a subgenre, it is significant to denote

that the poetry online is distinguished as "micro poetry," because they are short and concise

in their format. Micro poems can be considered a subgenre of poetry as they are still poems,

but are taking on new forms. As I mentioned before, hashtags suggest that publics

recognize the genre of instapoetry and Devitt writes that recognition of genre is by "all

expert members of that community" and even if not everyone recognizes it, it "has some

distinctive linguistic and rhetorical features" (69). Accordingly, one could argue that

instapoetry operates on a platform that relies mostly on imagery, however now incorporates

a literary discourse that has resulted in the creation of a subgenre. Poets have mastered the

platform and started to either embrace it by adding images of themselves and participating

in the dynamics of a mostly visual platform or in the case of nayyirah waheed challenge it

by using it solely to publicize and add excerpts form her poetry books. I will discuss later

on in this chapter how she subverts the expectations of the platform.

Micro poetry is a subgenre that was identified and named by the German scholar

and writer W. G. Sebald. According to Axel Englund, before his death in 2001, Sebald

published a "collection of English-language 'micropoems' – as the author himself called

them…" ("W. G. Sebald's Late Lyrics Between Words, Images and Languages" 123). It is

interesting to examine how Sebald's work has been perceived and also engage in a brief

conversation with the founder of "micro poetry." In fact, Englund writes that "…many of

the poems seem to be reworkings of each other, which gives them a quality of the

indecisive and unfinished: images and formulations reoccur, and sometimes several

micropoems seem to have their origin in earlier, longer, ones" (124). In the case of the

micropoems circulating on Instagram, it is significant to highlight how the trend of short

poems existed before the emergence of social media. Furthermore, their features and characteristics still overlap since the birth of Sebald's micropoems. In my analysis of nayyirah waheed's poems, I focus on her style of writing and the way she disrupts and uses language. Interestingly, Englund emphasizes Sebald's stylistic attitudes and observes that, "one of the most characteristic traits of Sebald's micropoems is the confrontation between the seemingly casual tone and the poetic genre's meticulous attention to detail and meaning" (132). For the purpose of my research, I aim to identify various examples of the instapoetry circulating on the platform, being freely exposed to the public to read, interpret, analyze and use. Therefore, I want to expand on the subgenre that is circulating in online cultures, inevitably changing and shifting away from traditional forms of poetic genres such as a sonnet, for example. Englund highlights the importance of Sebald's works as being an untraditional form of thinking about genres and says that he "deliberately avoided the treatment of poetry as a fixed and finished product, and turned it into a work in progress…" (140). In entering such a conversation, I would argue that instapoetry for some of the self-published poets avoid treating it as "fixed" or "finished." This is due to the fact that people can circulate them and add their own commentary if they want. When poets publish excerpts of their whole works, they are aiming to achieve several goals, some include familiarizing the public with their literary creativity, advertising themselves as authors, and simply selling their books. So therefore, their published books are a "finished product," but the posts on Instagram are a "work in progress" due to the publics' interaction with the text in providing feedback and interpretations.

In returning to Amy Devitt's book, she includes a section on the relationship between creativity and genre theory. I want to focus on analyzing the way in which some of

the writers who depend on Instagram to circulate their work and sell their books adapt to the tools that the platform provides. She writes,

> Because genre encompasses both standards and variation, constraints and choice, genre encourages and even makes possible creativity. Although the term *creativity* may initially associate with things original and novel, scholars of creativity have largely rejected notions of creativity as unconstrained choice, novelty, and originality. Instead, they have added two perspectives: process views that examine how 'new' things develop; and social views that emphasize the important of which 'new' things are valued" (*Writing Genres* 151)

If the discourse on genre is to be situated in a social media context, the way a medium operates can also include aspects of "constraints and choice" in relation to how a genre is established by both the writers and users online. My research examines how the use of Instagram as a medium for poetry enables several layers of restrictions but also freedom for the poets of today's age. Does the poetry change because it is also a product poets aim to share on Instagram in the form of an image? Or do writers learn to become more creative due to the limited amount of text such as the number of words they could add to a plain background image? As I highlighted before, instapoetry, as a subgenre, is not entirely a new cultural and literary phenomenon. It can, however, be construed as a fresh approach to poetry because of its portrayal in a visual arena online. The quotation from Devitt delineates the concept of creativity by focusing on how a new phenomenon emerges or comes to life through preexisting notions. Instapoetry combines both poetry and social media, creating a unique link between the two. Earlier in her work, Devitt mentions how "writers adapt what they want to write to suit the rhetorical situation and the genre that situation suggests" (138). Social media has affected the literary genre of poetry by shaping

its stylistic forms to fit the platform. This is how writers are starting to adapt to the changing environment in which poetry is being distributed. As I previously discussed in chapter one, Devitt discusses how the genre, in a literary framework, has developed as a "cultural context which writers and readers interact" (166). This type of interaction, if placed in a conversation with both social media and literature, is easily attainable, accessible and traceable. Also, it creates and introduces a literary space to a public who can engage in direct contact with the writers and their works, and also other readers and their insights, criticisms or general feedback.

B. #From Genre Theory to Literary Space

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de de Certeau's argument criticizes and comments on the reading practices and passivity of the public when consuming media. He writes, "Reading (an image or a text)… seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the consumer, who is conceived of as a voyeur (whether troglodytic or itinerant) in a 'show biz society'" (xxi). In addition, whilst de Certeau addresses the media as in television or newspapers, which are embedded in advertising and vice versa, his argument encompasses how the larger production system is being imposed on readers, thus they are conceived as passive. He further claims that "today, this text [as in books] no longer comes from a tradition. It is imposed by the generation of a productivist technocracy. It is no longer a referential book, but a whole society made into a book, into the writing of the anonymous law of production" (xxii). It is significant, for the motif of my research, to engage in a conversation with de Certeau and

ask whether self-published books are part of this system. De Certeau continues discussing ideologies of education in institutions of Enlightenment when he describes the way in which the society and the public within it is "moulded by (verbal or iconic) writing, that it becomes similar to what it receives, and that it is imprinted by and like the text which is imposed on it" (167). He further comments on this concept and says that,

> The text was formerly found at school. Today, the text is society itself. It takes urbanistic, industrial, commercial, or televised forms. But the mutation that caused the transition from educational archeology to the technocracy of the media did not touch the assumption that consumption is essentially passive... even the analysis of the repression exercised by the mechanisms of this system of disciplinary enclosure continues to assume that the public is passive, 'informed,' processed, marked, and has no historical role (167)

The way in which de Certeau is describing the way in which "the media did not touch the assumption that consumption is essentially passive" suggests that his theory could be taken further and applied onto a new form of text which is any text written, published and or circulated on social media and its reception as either active or passive. The mere fact that text on social media is text that is written by members of the public, however, calls for new ways of thinking of this topic. De Certeau is pointing out an ideology that positions readers as passive recipients of the text, therefore when framing this in a social media context, it can be perceived differently. The participatory and active engagement of users online hence proves that yes "the text is society itself," but the readers or the "public" are not "passive" recipients of the text. The poetry that circulates on social media overcomes the challenges that the restricted constitutions provided by the publishing industry brings forward, which provides readers with the text as it is, providing no space for discussion, unlike when

immediate feedback on a social media platform takes place. Therefore, as a platform of publication, Instagram helps writers and readers free themselves from the imposed systems of production by the publishing industry. Thus, the poetry on Instagram, as a subgenre, is a societal text that readers can interact with by commenting on or reposting on their own accounts which makes them active participants. Generally, social media is a combination of free platforms that allow users to create free accounts without any financial contributions. Thus, social media does not require a lot of capital to participate, but it does require access to a smartphone, computer or any other device. Popular social media platforms are businesses that have capitalist requirements or limitations, which affects how they operate because, of course, they are designed with profit in mind, which also affects how they operate. Social media challenges the constraints of the imposed system of production by the literary industry where print and books are the dominant traditional system. It does this by allowing poets to add their own choice of their texts, which the public can access, interpret, criticize or praise. However, on social media there is a balance between the advertising content, as de Certeau mentions that the text is taking on "commercial" practices, and a literary space for texts that the public can interact and engage with. But, when deconstructing this argument, one could argue that social media tries to level out the two by voicing people's opinions, comments, literary works and personal information.

In his exclusive definition of the terms place and space, de Certeau discusses these two aspects in relation to one another. As mentioned in chapter one, de Certeau says that "*the material text* is literary place, *the act of reading* brings to existence literary space" (qtd in Bushell "Mapping Fiction: Spatialising the Literary Work" 130). My approach to space in chapter one was trying to portray how it is not fixed or stagnant, but experiential. De

Certeau defines place and space separately by explaining how firstly "a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships to coexistence… thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" and secondly "a space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 117). In simple terms, place is an anchored location whilst space is the activation of this fixed place which in turn fluctuates its fixedness. De Certeau continues and says, "space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization…situated as the act of a present (or of a time)" (117); space is constructed through perceiving, acknowledging, interacting with and experiencing a place. How do these definitions help in understanding how the act of reading relates to space? De Certeau combines them in a phrase that highlights the overall relationship between space, place and reading. He writes,

> In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs (117)

It is important to emphasize there is a difference between the space found in the literary text and the space that the reader creates when actively reading. As mentioned in chapter one, Bushell identifies that in formulating space, the reader's experience doubles because they have to trace the space in the text where characters live and transport in separate worlds and also the reader whilst reading, establishes their own space (Mapping Fiction: Spatialising the Literary Work" 142). In this thesis, I argue that Instapoetry creates a literary space for

the readers in which the space created by the platform intervenes and intersperses with their personal space as readers, thus allowing the medium to become a "practiced place" in which they can access texts such as micropoems online anytime and anywhere. The "place constituted by a system of signs," or in other words "the written text" is found on Instagram in a form of a blank image with text, where the audiences' act of reading is becoming the physical act of scrolling down on their phone screens and reading micropoems in a visual form instead of turning a physical page from a book.

As I mentioned earlier, Miller views genre as a "typified social action associated with a recurrent situation" (*Writing Genres* 3). I define literary space in relation to genre. Following de Certeau, "space is a practiced place" flourishing with a community of readers online who go through the daily "recurrent situation" (Miller) of reading these texts on Instagram. More specifically, I argue that literary space, on Instagram, is any direct access and interaction that the audience, viewers and or readers have with a literary text. It is also a route that allows the community interested in literature to connect with one another and analyze the poems that have taken a new modern form, which is micro and image-based.

C. #On Instagram Poetry and its Elements

Next, I want to combine media, literary and reception studies in exploring how Instapoetry is perceived in a non-academic conversation. Thus, what are some of the publics' views on reading this type of literature on social media? In "Let Instagram Poetry Live" published in *Michigan Daily* newspaper, Miriam Francisco writes that the criticism on "Instagram poetry as a genre —is that it is too general, too sentimental and too easy. By

co-opting the most universal emotions —love, heartbreak, anger, hope, pain —and

whittling them down, Instagram poems often fall prey to cliché" (1). However, these poets

are changing the way a visual based platform functions. Francisco identifies both Rupi

Kaur and nayyirah waheed as the most popular poets on Instagram. They both share similar

themes in their works such as "femininity, race and sexuality"; Francisco goes on to say

that "it's worth mentioning that the democratizing nature of Instagram has allowed these

poets to find an audience when they otherwise may have been unable to" ("Let Instagram

Poetry Live"). Therefore, the platform becomes a vehicle for a new type of poetry that is

both contemporary and accessible. Later in this chapter, I will explore the poetic presence

on Instagram and show examples of some posts by Instapoets which identify the way in

which they are using Instagram.

John H. Maher, starts another newspaper article, "Can Instagram Make Poems Sell

Again," by asking "is poetry dead?" and then goes on to show how "the Survey of Public

Participation in the Arts, for instance, reported in 2015 that the share of Americans who had

read at least one work of poetry in the previous year had dropped from 17% in 1992 to

6.7% in 2012. Then came Rupi Kaur (1)." As mentioned earlier in chapter one, Kaur has

been described as a founding figure of Instagram poetry. Maher discusses publishers'

perspectives on the new movement of poetry online; he writes that some of them perceive

this trend in an optimistic sense, but others criticize its influence on traditional poets and

writers. However, Maher shares the perspective of the publisher and president of the

publishing company Andrews McMeel Universal, Kirsty Melville, who sees "Kaur and her

fellow internet-age poets as part of the poetic tradition--whether other people in poetry care

to admit it or not. She also considers the surge in popularity of this particular poetic strain

as natural in the present political moment" (3). He also cites her commentary on Instagram as a platform for poetry "distribution" which allows the public to be "inspired" and encourage readers to produce literary texts as well and write online (3). In underlining the type of conversation on Instagram poetry, describing the poets on the platform and also highlighting the publishers' insights, the articles portray different views on the dynamics of this new cultural trend.

Kaur is a prominent figure when approaching poetry on Instagram because of her history on the platform as well as the themes she discusses in her works. Also, Kaur and waheed share themes in their poetry that overlaps such as femininity, motherhood and writing. In this chapter, I aim to portray a visual and textual analysis of a couple of Instapoets in order to provide a context for understanding waheed's work.

Fig. 3. Screenshot of Rupi Kaur's post from Instagram, 4 March 2019

Kaur adds both her poetry followed by her own personal commentary in her posts, as well as her own sketches. In an interview with Rupi Kaur, she discusses how she was originally a self-published poet who draws and designs the sketches and content in her works. She is originally from Punjab, India and moved to Canada at the age of four. Due to language barriers of not knowing how speak any English, she escaped to drawing, painting and writing. Her first book *Milk and Honey* (2014) was completely her creation from scratch and it was the breakthrough of her career as a writer ("Rupi Kaur Reads Timeless from Her

Poetry Collection The Sun and Her Flowers," 00:00:15 - 00:02:43). In the poem titled "*women of colour*," Kaur addresses the traditional form of publication, books, however in a negative sense. This is because she denies their ability of physically carrying the metaphorical weight of perhaps the oppression of women of color. Due to her identity as the poet who established Instapoetry, this poem could be interpreted as a justification for her influential existence on the platform. Also, the sketch in the figure above connects with Instagram as a visual platform. In sometimes infusing art in her posts, Kaur is straddling the line between visual elements and text, which balances both the content in her poems and the content on Instagram, which mostly relies on images.

Rupi Kaur and nayyirah waheed share more than themes in their poetry: they also aim to publicize, advertise and promote their self-published books to the public. In "The Rise of the Citizen Author: Writing Within Social Media," Miriam Johnson discusses the development of "citizen authors," who are self-published writers, from the eighteenth century leading towards the context of social media. She defines a citizen author as a figure that "disrupts the discourse of the book by challenging the hierarchy of the traditional publishing model and introducing new elements of power that are situated within the relationship between the citizen author, the reader, and the publisher" (132). She highlights how citizen authors contribute and write in "digital social platforms that are available as apps, websites, forums…" (132). Also, it is significant to denote how self-published authors and citizen authors differ in the sense that whilst one might just "subvert the traditional publishing system," by self- publishing books and eBooks, the other "embraces the new digital technologies to produce their own works, create new networks, communities, and followers, bypassing the gatekeeping mechanisms of the publishing industry" (Johnson

94

132-3). Therefore, the citizen author is a writer who is active online for the purpose of freely sharing parts of their works or their whole works and also promoting their books to the public. In another important section that discusses gender in relation to the citizen author, Johnson shows that the percentage of female users on Instagram is "56.3 percent female to 43.5 percent male; and Instagram enjoys 15.7 percent internet usage" (137). This emphasizes how gender plays a role in text distribution and content sharing online, thus providing an opportunity for female self-published writers to excel on several platforms on social media. Johnson writes that,

> As women authors occupy more space in the global village, they are subverting the traditional publishing industry's hierarchy of gender by embracing the digital social spaces where they can actively commoditise their connectivity with readers by creating feedback loops in their work…this interactivity, in turn increases the cultural capital of the citizen author's work, brining in more readers and the potential interest of the publishing industry, who may choose to traditionally publish the citizen author's work (137)

Indeed, in relation to nayyirah waheed, this can be applied to her as a writer figure on social media, as she subverts both publishing and identity politics online by only explicitly adding content that promote her book in her caption (see Fig. 5.). In contrast, Rupi Kaur adds her own personal commentary reflecting on her poem (see Fig. 3.). These two women approach the platform differently: Kaur includes her own statement as an author to speak of or about her work in the caption, however waheed remains silent and solely advertises and cites her books.

Johnson's previous idea of "embracing digital social spaces" is linked to the creation of literary space. These citizen authors have enabled social media platforms such

as Instagram to become active spaces of poetry where writers and readers communicate.

Johnson further states that,

> In this way, the female citizen author is shifting the power dynamics in the traditional, and traditionally male dominated, publishing industry by embracing technological attributes available in the digital global village such as feedback loops, connectivity, and focusing on the end-user (137)

The presence of female authors on social media is certainly a movement on its own that challenges and speaks back to the "traditionally male dominated publishing industry" where women are using platforms online to free their personas as writers from the political, financial and gendered attributions that exist in the dynamics of publishing. Social media is helping encourage women's voices to travel in online spaces within the online communities as their works are received and interpreted "in the global digital village."

Johnson mentions that although her article focuses mostly on fiction that is written, spread and circulated online, not only do citizen authors "expand where and how they write, they are also expanding what they write" (141). She further writes that "poetry is the most obvious fit for several of the current, major social media platforms [as] it provides snapshots of writing that can be quickly consumed while scrolling past and 'liked' or shared quickly" (141). Readership in the digital age is changing from the traditional form of reading and turning pages in a book, versus rapidly consuming text online by scrolling down a screen. It is interesting to notice how these two activities involve a physical movement by the reader and thus Instagram has become the "practiced place" that readers perform on a daily basis by scrolling down their screens. Therefore, the readers themselves are activating Instagram as a literary space that grants them access to, in this case, poetry.

Johnson states that according to *The Guardian*, "In 2015, three of the top ten best-selling poetry books were written by poets who are best known as Instapoets" (141)[3]. Therefore, Instapoets are recognized on a scale that exceeds online spaces: their recognition on the best-selling poetry book lists shows that a larger public is also receiving their work.

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[3] See Qureshi H.'s "How do I Love Thee?" Let me instagram it."
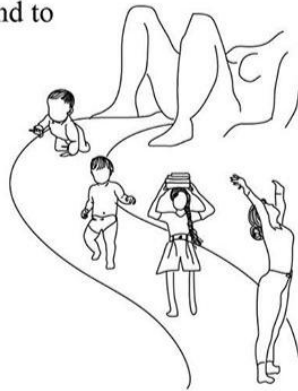
rupikaur_   ...

when my daughter is living in my belly
i will speak to her like
she's already changed the world
she will walk out of me on a red carpet
fully equipped with the knowledge
that she's capable of
anything she sets her mind to

- rupi kaur

(ode to raymond douillet's *a short tour and farewell*)

Liked by **beekayess25** and **306,610 others**

rupikaur_ it's incredible how the small things- how we speak and interact with our children- has the power to transform their dreams and broaden their ideas of what's possible. page 237 from #thesunandherflowers

Fig. 4. Screenshot of Rupi Kaur's post from Instagram, 7 August 2018

what
massacre
happens to my son
between
him
living within my skin.
drinking my cells.
my water.
my organs.
and
his soft psyche turning cruel.
does he not remember
he
is half woman.

— from

♡ ○ ▽   🔖

3,212 likes

nayyirah.waheed poem. from salt. by nayyirah
waheed. 2013.

.

.

.

.

.

.

#salt #nejma #literature #nayyirahwaheed

Fig. 5. Screenshot of nayyirah waheed's post from Instagram, 25 March 2019

Next, I read both Kaur and waheed's poems (in figures 4 and 5) and place them in a

dialogue with one another. In my engagement with their poems, I want to argue that there

are many overlaps between the themes that some women of color who identify as

Instapoets discuss on Instagram. In the two cases above, they both discuss the idea of birth

and gender but from two different perspectives. Kaur is looking forward to her future

female child's journey as she intends to speak with her before she is even born. On the

other hand, waheed is criticizing patriarchy through her persona's negative experience with

her male child. waheed's poetry is more complex and figurative in her description of the

male child in her body as she describes in a few phrases, for example "living within my

skin. / drinking my cells"(fig. 5). Thus, through the description in the poem, she portrays an

image that the reader or audience online can imagine or develop individually in their minds.

Whereas Kaur actually draws or sketches an image of what her poem alludes to, with actual

imagery of stages of the growth of a baby girl to womanhood. This shows how both their

approaches differ, but still stress on imagery on a visual platform. In fact, this evokes how

these poets are using the medium that is generally based on imagery, by intermixing the

poetry on Instagram with images, whether figuratively or literally. What all of them have in

common is that their poems are "micropoems" that are short and can fit in a blank page the

size of an Instagram post. Not only is the poetic style affected by the structure of Instagram

as a platform, style also plays a vital role in the way the environment changes or challenges

traditional forms of writing. Whilst Kaur embraces the caption option and uses it to include

her own voice as the author reflecting on the themes in her poems (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4.),

waheed uses the platform quite differently. She consistently adds the same caption in most

of her posts (see Fig. 5.), or adds her name and both her book titles as hashtags along with

the word literature as well. Although it is clear that both these Instapoets aim to publicize, promote and advertise their books to the readers and audiences on Instagram, they operate on their own individual terms as writers, which makes the Instapoets community one that is somewhat diverse in its approach.

nayyirah.waheed 2m

visit link in bio @nayyirah.waheed
to purchase salt.

there have been so many times
i have seen a man wanting to weep
but
instead
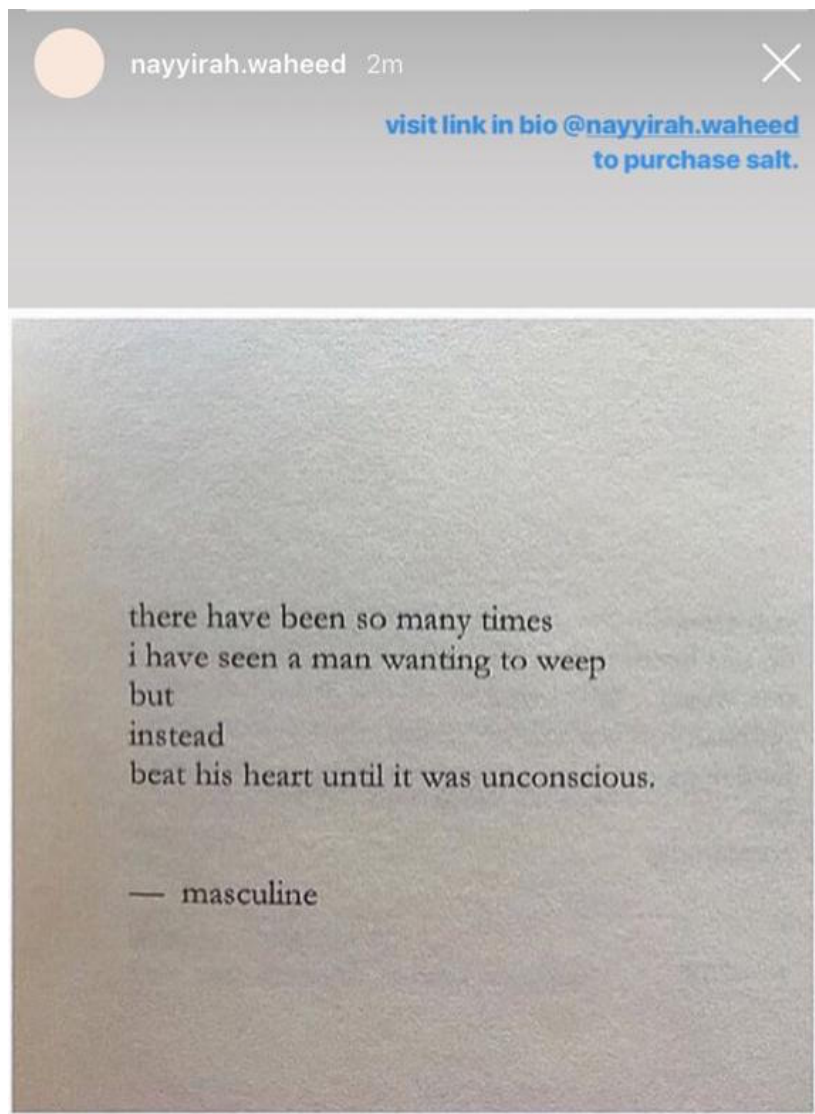beat his heart until it was unconscious.

— masculine

Fig. 6. Screenshot of nayyirah waheed's story post from Instagram, 25 March 2019

In figure 6, waheed explicitly tells her online community and followers who view her story to "purchase" the book through a link in her account that directs them to the process. She uses all the opportunities provided to her by the logistics of the platform to grant readers access to buy her books. Stories and regular posts differ, stories typically last within a 24-hour timeframe and then the users cannot view them after they disappear, whereas posts are always available on the accounts of the writers, in this case, unless the author chooses to delete them. Thus, her use of the stories differs from her posts where her stories are focusing more on publicizing her book by telling users to "visit link in bio… to purchase salt.," whilst her regular posts just include her name, book title and hashtags.

waheed identifies herself as part of the chain of Instapoets and she does this by mentioning a specific Instapoet in *nejma*. I aim to discuss the black female poet, Yrsa Daley-Ward, a black female poet who is the author of *bone* (2014) and *The Terrible* (2018) with 154,000 followers on Instagram. Thus, waheed references her and writes,

> when you are midnight.
> i always know.
> all the poignant blue freckle.
> sweep across you.
> you silver. then indigo. before completely becoming a war of stars.
> it is the transformation of
> human into sky
> and
> back again.
>
> –yrsa's poem (this kind of human) (115).

waheed, although silent about her own identity, establishes herself as part of the communal discourse of poets appearing and activating their authorship on Instagram. This is a very

specific identification and reference because Daley-Ward is also a prominent black voice in the Instagram poetry discourse. As mentioned earlier in chapter two, waheed's poems show that she wants to be established amongst black female writers and in this case, both historically and contemporarily. Also, the only commentary that waheed adds after including Daley-Ward's poem is the phrase "this kind of human" which shows how she is appreciating both the persona in the poem and Daley-Ward as a figure. It could also function as somewhat of a commercialization of other black Instapoets in order to enlarge their readership both online and in print. It is significant to also notice the imagery embedded in "yrsa's poem" where she captures a moment in time by personifying a human by starting with the phrase "when you are midnight." Also, Daley-Ward emphasizes the process of transformation during the night by adding a shift in color from blue to silver and then to indigo. The visual element rooted in this poem is prominent in relation to the parallels noticed earlier in both Kaur and waheed's poems. These examples embrace an amalgamation of imagery in their poetry, shaping the framework of Instapoets and their type of works.

D. #Identity, Black Female Authors and Instapoetry

In *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. he writes that there is a present "sheer energy that accompanies the utterance of a new subject matter, a formalized breaking of the silence of black women as authors" and "in doing so, they have generated a resoundingly new voice, one that is at once black *and* female…" (2). This conversation on seeking "a new voice," through the context of black feminist authorship

applies to waheed, Kaur and Daley-Ward's literary movements on Instagram. My research aims to specifically highlight Instagram as a literary space for black female authors, in which they are a "new voice" on the platform that discuss similar themes of race, sexism and black feminism. In "The Race for Theory" Barbara Christian writes, "black women writers…in their attempt to change the orientation of Western scholarship… sought to 'deconstruct' the tradition to which they belonged even as they used the same forms, style, language of that tradition, forms which necessarily embody its values" (16). "Deconstruction," disruption, and subversion are all characteristics of waheed's poetry on social media. Although she conforms to the language and form that complements Instagram's mostly visual bases, she uses text to interrupt or deconstruct the visual sphere she is entering and engaging in.

Black female Instapoets affirm their identities as authors and online users on the platform differently. In *talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, bell hooks discusses reasons why her pseudonym has been a positive and significant part of her writing career and that it was a "way to avoid making" herself "into 'product'" (277). hooks' separation from the pen is thus similar to waheed's distinctive feature in writing online, because there is barely information about her identity on the Internet. waheed is considered a quiet social media poet because she does not verify any of her accounts; which means that the platform does not recognize her identity as a famous or popular figure on the platform. Usually, Instagram verifies celebrities' accounts and thus they become more visible to the online community and it increases their followers. This comment is relevant to the image that celebrities try to create for their selves on Instagram, as Instagram functions as an instrument to gain publicity and recognition amongst popular culture. Therefore, this shows

how waheed, unlike other Instapoets, is detaching her personal identity from social media platforms. Her identity on several social media platforms remains mysterious and vague, where she uses media only to transmit works from her published books of poetry. There is one source that offers an insight into her personal perspectives and thoughts on the field she is contributing to. According to the interview on *Ezibota,* it states that she "began writing at the tender age of 11…" waheed was asked to share her perception about the label "black writer" or "black poet" being an identification that is inevitably connected with figures such as Maya Angelou and she answered saying, "I want black to be attached to me in everything I do. It may be being used as a weapon, an insult, a stabbing divisive instrument, but I receive it in a way that strengthens, affirms, and nurtures me…that feeds me." In relation to white criticism embedded in grasping black authors and their works, she was asked about poets like Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni and even Sonia Sanchez being often "critiqued negatively" in comparison to works by Shakespeare or Robert Frost, she firmly replies saying,

> Their opinion means nothing to me. Who are they to me? What is their sound… their mouths to our words, our emotions, expressions, or experiences? We don't need validation. I actually want their hands off our work. Our work is a different universe, a requiring of a different set of senses. That which they do not fully understand, is meant for them not to understand, as it is not theirs.

Her response powerfully designates in black feminist discourse and challenges the Western canon by saying that "our work is a different universe, a requiring of a different set of senses." In her description "white noise" in the poem interpreted in chapter two, she shows similar attitudes towards disregarding a white person's opinion and thus calling it "noise."

Furthermore, hooks says "the tendency in this society is to place more value on what white people are writing about black people, or non-white people, rather than what we are writing about ourselves" (*talking back, thinking feminist, thinking black* 82). In this existing ideology that is often emphasized in black feminist critique, waheed shares her views by setting boundaries to the way in which African-American literature is sometimes received in comparison to writers like Frost that distinguish her work from "theirs." This conversation found online on waheed proves that she identifies with a certain background of African-American writers, which not only gives credible information about her personal life, but also helps when situating her works with Giovanni and Sanchez's.

On the other hand, in the black feminist constructive history and politics, identity is considered key for survival and recognition. According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Maria Stewart amplifies that there is a need for self-identification in order to retain recognition and power (1). Stewart, as the first female public lecturer that spoke about political matters, highlighted that "race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty," (1). Of course, Stewart is not the only Black woman to emphasize these oppressions. Stewart finds identification and self-definition of black women "of self-reliance and independence" which means they are crucial elements for their acknowledgement and endurance. Although waheed rejects any personal identification, she includes the first person persona in many of her poems and some are titled "african american." Although we do not know which country in Africa her ancestors come from, the preface in *salt.* titled "for us," as I interpret it, is the only author voice that she decides to include because she only translates the title of her own book to a universal audience before

including any poems. As previously addressed, the preface includes several languages such as Arabic, English, Turkish, German, Spanish, French and numerous African languages such as Swahili and Sotho. In another approach to identity, Allison Weir in her article "Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics" writes,

> I am arguing that an understanding of these forms of identification and their contribution to political struggles opens up a different understanding of identity politics. This different understanding is predicated on a noncategorical conception of identity: not identity as sameness, but an ethical-relational and political model of identity, defined through relationships with other people and through identification with what is meaningful to us, with what we find significant. To understand this we need to shift from our preoccupation with the metaphysical question of the category of women to a different approach to the question, "Who are we?" (116)

Waheed's intricate persona on social media proves to both absorb and reject factors of identity politics on multiple levels. Her identification takes place in her poetry itself, calling out to "her people." This is what Weir focuses on when defining identity as the opposite of "sameness," because in waheed's case, she is conscious that even though she identifies with her people, their experiences can differ. For example, in *salt*. waheed writes, "i am always writing/ of you. / for you. / – breath | my people" (*salt*. 10). In relation to Weir's take on identity and identification, what is important is expressing "relationships with other people," and thus waheed identifies with "her people" because she is dedicating her poetry to them. Ironically, waheed's privacy in a very public context when discussing racism, sexism and womanhood is relevant to the public/private irony in which these topics are discussed by a private figure that shares little to no information on her identity, publically and with no restriction to access.

Zhao Pan et al. write that "The self can be broadly classified into two types: an individual self-identity that emphasizes autonomy and distinguishes oneself from others, and a social self-identity that refers to the categorizations of the self that reflect assimilation to more inclusive social units (interpersonal relationships or collective ones) [56]" ("Who Do You Think You Are? Common and Differential Effects of Social Self-Identity on Social Media Usage" 76). Furthermore, they argue that identifying a social-self identity online is most prominent when "people define themselves relative to others" (76). This is called "relational identity": being identified with a certain community strengthens one's self-identity. In waheed's reference to Black female poets and the preface "of us," she is identifying herself as a part of this specific community of writers. The article further states, "at the collective level (i.e., social identity), self-definitions are derived from group membership [119]" (80), hence waheed identifies within a literary framework of writers, she still does not share pieces of information about her personal life on social media or online in general except for *Ezibota*'s interview. Returning back to Collins, she writes that "Black feminist thought's identity as a "critical" social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups" (9). Collins is positioning identity as central to resisting oppression, and in support of this, one of waheed's poems reads,

> i do not feel
> i need a name or a movement
> to legitimize the defense of myself.
> i am a woman of color.
> my bones have been
> bought and sold every morning.
> so, now i carry a machete in my

mouth.

—ivory" (*Salt* 218)

Here, waheed is talking about "legitimizing the defense" of herself, identifying herself as "a woman of color" and making a clear reference to slavery. The fact that she wants to be associated with these aspects of African-American history, she is voicing her identification through these elements only. According to Nellie Y. McKay, "Black women use the personal narrative to document their differences in self-perception as well as their concerns for themselves and others, their sense of themselves as part of a distinct women's racial community, and the complexities of the combined forces of race and gender for the only group beleaguered by both" ("Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Spiritual Autobiographies: Religious Faith and Self-Empowerment" 142). Her poetry seems like a personal narrative because of her references to race, Black female writers and in the case of the poem mentioned above, slavery. Thus, as Mckay explains, Black women apply personal narrative to highlight "their concerns for themselves and others" and in the poem "ivory," waheed could be voicing the frustration of being forced by the African-American society to "legitimize" the defense of her and other women of color as well.

The reference that waheed makes to Audre Lorde's writing of "secret poetry" is dismantled in her movement online by challenging publicness on social media in being private about her personal identity. In fact, waheed's posts deliver anti-sexist and anti-racist messages on social media through poetry that is anything but secret. Therefore, I would like to draw a connection between how people and systems of oppression, in the case of many black female poets such as Lorde, have been repressive and restricting. However, in today's

world contemporary writers like waheed are using social media to challenge that secrecy. However, it might be perceived as a different kind of secrecy, one that in waheed's case is important because she chooses to hide some of her identity on social media such as her face or where she's from, but not elements in her poetry that identify her as a Black female poet. This makes it a cultural phenomenon that is both public and secret at the same time. Furthermore, waheed, amongst other black women publishing and promoting their books on Instagram can be considered their own niche group of Instapoets that discuss and represent themes related to race, identity, and feminism. They choose to repudiate the expected content on a picture-based platform by adding white background images of pure poetic text. In addressing and approaching genre theory, literary space, black female Instapoets and waheed's identity online, I aim to show how all these various aspects prove that this cultural phenomenon online is one that is substantial to the literary, cultural, digital and racial fields of study.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

when i am afraid to speak
is when i speak.
that is when it is most important.

— the freedom in fear

— nayyirah waheed, *salt*. (2013)

waheed's "freedom in fear" concept is challenged when her work is distributed, shared, commented on and interacted with on social media platforms. The poetry on social media that has been spreading nowadays is one that, in the case of waheed's literature, has been salient within historical and political agendas, especially the racist and sexist ingrains and ideologies. nayyirah waheed is a figure that promotes her poetry on social media, therefore exposes her works to the public who might be familiar with her themes and topics, and others who may have no clue. Her works have not been involved in scholarly or academic conversations before, thus my thesis aims to introduce her works and situate it in more than one field of study and investigation such as discourses on public space and sphere, scholarships on literary space and literary genre, and finally African-American literary and political history.

In "Black Girls and Critical Media Literacy For Social Activism," Sherell McArthur writes "Black women's language practices became the vehicles for action as they fought

oppression, misrepresentations, and dominant ideologies with their pens and voices. They also used the media (mostly newspapers and later radio and television) to inform their arguments and speak their truths. These media were read and critiqued and used as the conduits for their resistance and protest writings (Newman, Rael, & Lapsansky, 2001; Reid, 2001)" (364). waheed's modern approach takes this further by challenging the mostly visual platform she is using as her "voice" on social media. McArthur further states "Black girls and women have been strong activists, disrupting narratives the media (once newspapers and now through television and social media platforms) convey about Black girlhood and womanhood" (365) and this is evident in the way waheed "disrupts" the platform that she uses in order to convey the impediments that her history as a Black woman has witnessed and walked through. Referring back to the discussion of noise in chapter two, waheed's unique usage of Instagram could be interpreted as a visual noise through which she responds to oppression. Therefore, her poetic voice is prominent on Instagram and the topics that she discusses and distributes in both her books and online are more embedded in heavy themes such racism, sexism and oppression.

Nevertheless, I do no claim that she is the only Instapoet worth investigating and analyzing. I argue that the literature she brings forward to Instagram carries a history that the images and videos and even other Instagram poets do not feel the need to include or discuss on the platform. At the same time, waheed says "when i am afraid to speak/ is when i speak" and this shows her awareness of the type of content she is perhaps writing in her books, and including in a digital context.

What I suggest is that Instagram poets and Instagram poetry needs to be classified as a literary genre that is expanding online, in which books are being sold, and people are

being exposed to the genre of poetry on a daily basis by scrolling on their phones or laptop screens. The advantage of social media, in the case of poetry, is that it exposes the literary genre to a new context, and therefore many of the online user will become more aware of where these literary texts have been derived from or what historical or political connotations they might include.

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