Teaching Literatures in the Age of Digital Media

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The web and digital technology have revolutionized our lives in many ways. Probably the most important change in the last fifteen years is the ubiquitous use of the Internet, smartphones, and social media, which has enabled instantaneous sharing of information and images, and communication between people in different geographical locations. The rise of Web 2.0 and digital technology have enabled more and more ordinary people to participate in the creation and distribution of media (Turner). This digital technology, which has facilitated connections between family, friends, and organizations from near and far through social media, has led to different ways of reading texts such as e-readers and online access to research material, but has also created new problems for youth such as cyberbullying and public shaming. This paper explores various ways in which the Internet and digital technology have reshaped and diversified literature as we know it, and offer a number of examples of how authors and readers have taken advantage of digital tools to produce, share, and consume literature.

Digital technology has influenced literature and literary studies in a number of ways. First, the participatory potential of Web 2.0 has redefined and broadened our notions of authors and authorship; for example, selfie culture focuses on stories of the ordinary subject. Second, digital media have promoted an increase in the use of visual imagery, which has been accompanied by a decrease in the consumption of traditional printed material (Alter). Web 2.0 is usually associated with user-generated content and participation, and platforms such as *Twitter, YouTube, Facebook,* and *Wikipedia* have all been "lauded for their capacity to harness people's creativity and knowledge, and for their potential to challenge traditional hierarchies in politics, science, and media" (Wyatt et al. 153). Whether these sites actually democratize knowledge, still rely on existing hierarchies, or help proliferate fake news is contro-

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versial. However, social media, particularly blogs and fan fiction, do provide spaces for authors to write and be read. Many works distributed via social media are short pieces such as op-eds, anecdotes, recipes, travelogues, journal entries, how-to articles, meditative essays, or reviews, in addition to the aforementioned blogs and fan fiction. Writing is no longer the purview of specialists or authorities, but is rather part of a shared body of knowledge. Some well-known works that originated in this kind of writing include E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) and its two sequels, which began as a response to Stephenie Meyer's YA vampire series *Twilight*. Writing fan fiction and publishing her novels as Kindle books inspired James to write her romance bestsellers. Another author who began on the Internet, Julie Powell, started a blog chronicling her attempts to cook all the recipes in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. As the blog gained a large following, she signed a book deal which resulted in *Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes*, which further inspired the film *Julie and Julia*.

In addition to online fiction and blogs, another form of new literature engendered by digital technology can be found on *Instagram*. The popular smartphone app takes advantage of digital photography to allow users to share media with their followers. Instead of text-based interaction such as *Messages, Twitter,* or email, "the core of *Instagram* is the image stream and the strong connection between any image and an individual's profile wherever it might eventually end up" (Fallon 57). Kris Fallon argues that the *Instagram* feed can be read as a kind of "narrative autobiography": "*Instagram*'s emphasis on the photo stream, and its 'instant' appearance on other social media timelines bind it more firmly with a traditional notion of individual identity, temporal linearity and serial progression" (57-58). Rather than posting manipulated images and hashtags, *Instagram* poets fit lines of poetry into the cropped square, which "takes talent and an understanding of what will resonate quickly with readers in a short amount of time" (*Teen Vogue*). They use the platform as a kind of inspirational messaging through art.

One well-known *Instagram* poet is Atticus, who has approximately 334,000 followers, and who has subsequently signed a book deal with Simon and Schuster. Michelle Dean notes that his poetry "is pretty much devoid of politics. He writes chiefly about love, and sadness—and sunsets. Most project an aura of extreme emotional fragility, and use the cadence of inspirational literature." Sometimes, his posts consist only of texts:

She was
everything real
in a world of
make believe.
Atticus

True friends
are like burning stars
they shine brightest

on the darkest nights.
Atticus

More often, his words are strategically written and superimposed on a woman's body. Though he celebrates the female spirit, his works do suggest and exploit female sexuality. His lines are not always original, but, like Hallmark greeting cards, they appeal to a wide audience and are often used as tattoos. Part of the attraction of his work is his effort to respond to comments from fans. Remarks by followers are usually appreciative, such as "lovely" or "thank you." Atticus's online poetry can serve as an example to encourage students to think about what it means to be "popular" on *Instagram*, and how this kind of work relates to other works of poetry they have read in other classes.

Another more politically conscious *Instagram* artist is Indo-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur, who now has over one million followers on *Instagram* and has also published a book of poetry, *Milk and Honey*. Like Atticus, Kaur uses a combination of visual and textual elements in her poetry, but unlike him, she incorporates photos of herself, her friends, her family, landscapes, and other things, as well as her pencil sketches, into her *Instagram* feed. Autobiography and creative art are intermingled so that what is fictional in her work is not always clear. What is most interesting about Kaur is that she presents herself as producing "honest and raw" work (El-Safty). In an interview for the *Walrus*, she says that for her, "writing is a form of healing" and that she has to "completely feel it" (El-Safty). Her assertions make it tempting to consider her work as autobiography, but she notes that, although the poems are about her, "it's not *all*" her: "it's also the emotions that the women around me have carried" (Smith).

Demonstrating a strong feminist stance, Rupi Kaur posts pictures that are aesthetically beautiful, but do not rely on the sexualization of women's bodies. She says that she "was really dissecting rape and sexual abuse and domestic violence" (Smith) when she first started writing. Her claim to fame is a pictorial series on menstruation, featuring images of a woman with blood leaking from the back of her pajama pants, of blood-stained sheets and toilets. The pictures were initially taken down by *Instagram*, but after they became viral on *Facebook*, they were allowed to be posted on *Instagram* again. She says, "I've identified myself as a feminist for as long as I can remember," but also declared that feminist poetry is "beautiful" and is "for everybody" (Smith). Her poetry seems disarmingly simple, yet reveals a sophisticated understanding of the psychological complexities of family dynamics. In "to fathers with daughters," Kaur draws a silhouette of a girl:

every time you
tell your daughter
you tell at her
out of love
you teach her to confuse
anger with kindness
which seems like a good idea

till she grows up to
trust men who hurt her
cause they look so much
like you.

The juxtaposition of the illustration of the young innocent girl with the text that deals with the complicated relationship between anger, love, the father complex, and abuse literalizes the confusion girls feel growing up with criticism and anger and how this confusion carries into their relationships in their adult lives.

Significantly, the most serious poems about domestic violence are written in the second person, as if Kaur is attempting to distance herself from her experience of physical abuse:

you trace the bruises on your ribs
with nervous fingers
before he swings
at your startling face

you will pour every bottle
down the drain
he will beat you
'til there is enough blood
spilling from your split lip
to intoxicate him

he has to stop himself
you cannot teach him

[...]

you are not a rehab clinic for addicts
your body is not a prison

Written in the present and future tense, the poem essentially has two narrators: one who is experiencing the abuse as it is happening, and another who is distanced and has learned from the experience. The use of the future indicative tense in phrases such as "you will pour every bottle" and "he will beat you" suggests the inevitability and repetitiveness of this horrific ritual. The only consolation is the realization and self-affirmation in the last two lines, in which the narrator declares that she will no longer function as his punching bag. She is able to use the lyric poem not to describe the beauty of pastoral life, but the often unspoken violence in the home.

Rupi Kaur has become a spokeswoman for girls and women. She has led writing workshops for girls, and has been invited to give readings and lectures at which the majority of the audience are women. Her *Instagram* and web pages present empowering images of girls and women reading, attending talks, and writing. More recently, she has also been posting short videos, not only of herself reading, but of other women. On March 8, 2017, as part of the International Women's Day celebration, she and her publishers put together a video in which mostly women, in various languages

such as Mandarin, Spanish, French, Korean, English, and others, read aloud one of her poems that apologizes for the tendency to call women and girls "pretty" instead of praising them for their intelligence, bravery, or resilience. By having different people read these lines aloud, Kaur simulates a kind of collective apology on behalf of everyone who has been conditioned to see beauty first before all other attributes in women. The reactions to this video are similar to reactions to her other online/print poems and spoken-word poetry: fans are moved and appreciate her sentiments. As Kristy Melville, publisher and president of Andrews McMeel, observes, "We saw that there was this generation of young women, mostly in that early-20s age group, who were responding to this form of expression" (Gross). Melville explains that "the medium of poetry reflects our age, where short-form communication is something people find easier to digest or connect with" (Gross).

> our backs
> tell stories
> no books have
> the spine to
> carry
>
> *women of colour*—rupi kaur

In addition to being a feminist champion, Kaur is also important as she represents a visible minority/woman of colour poetry and digital technology, two fields that have been dominated mostly by, respectively, Anglo-Europeans and males. Her poems highlight questions of voice and hybridity, as exemplified in "Accent": "my voice is the offspring / of two countries colliding." She concludes confidently, "what is the matter if / my mouth carries two worlds." Instead of apologizing for the fact that her "mother tongue" was not English, she sees her hybridity as an enrichment, as suggested by the vastness of the word "worlds" that she is able to carry. In addition, her *Instagram* photos unabashedly feature South Asian people, places, and clothing, and everyday acts without exoticism, making the other familiar. Images of herself and her family reading, wearing traditional long scarves, Punjabi suits, and turbans, are integrated into her poems and sketches. Her webpage and *Instagram* posts help to demystify visible minorities in North American culture.

Digital technology has also increased the presence of the visual in everyday life, as many visual culture scholars have observed. Drawing insights from art history, film studies, and photography, visual culture has developed since the 1980s in order to "explore the uses and meaning of images across disciplines" and how the beliefs of the viewer inform the way she or he interprets the work (Jones 3). Amelia Jones notes that "visual culture is a rubric and a model of critical thinking about the world of images saturating contemporary life" (1), which entrepreneurs, advertisers, and others have also recognized. Gerald Kane and Alexandra Pear discuss the "explosion of visual content" and advise businesses that "image really is everything to the digital economy." For the purposes of marketing, "posts with visuals receive 94%

more page visits and engagements than those without and elicit twice as many comments on average" (Kane and Pear). It is not surprising that Marxist film scholar Jonathan Beller has concluded that "today the habitation of the senses by the logic of capitalised visuality is widespread, structuring desire, performance, perception and self-perception on a world scale, even in the most unlikely of places" (7). According to Beller, "every ad we see, every page we browse, every email we send, every word we say, every thought we think and every dream we have is part of the production and reproduction of capitalist society—sensuous labour 2.0" (14), so that "anti-racist, anti-capitalist critique is ever more difficult to launch effectively, since the general intellect, increasingly expropriated, thinks for capital" (14).

Comics and graphic novels, which are predicated on images, have developed exponentially in the twenty-first century. Sales of comics and graphic novels have been rising for years, estimated to have grown more than three times since 2000, from $265 million in 2000 to $870 million in 2014 (Lubin). Gus Lubin notes that "one obvi-

ous reason for comic book gains is the spillover interest from the movie adaptations that have dominated the box office in the past decade," but "comics are simply better these days" (Lubin). Comics have also benefited from digital technology, both in their means of production and in the way they are delivered. Digital comics can tell stories with "sound, links, animations, and interactive charts" (Low), and allow authors to self-publish online. Contrary to the pessimistic pronouncement of Jonathan Beller, a number of graphic artists do use images and comics to criticize today's market economy and thinking. Korean Canadian Michael Cho's *Shoplifter*, for example, critiques the advertising industry and, by association, the capitalist system as a whole, by focussing on a young twenty-something-year-old Asian North American heroine, Corinna, who shoplifts as a way to find fulfillment in the modern city. In the splash pages of the cityscape, Cho illustrates her isolation and alienation and depicts the ways that modern cities box people in. The advertising on the billboards and in store windows display clothes on headless models, reflecting Corinna's sense of being cut off and truncated from her coworkers. Cho's visuals call attention to the way the urban setting contributes to the failure of the modern world to deliver its promise of happiness.

Shoplifter is appealing to young readers because it deals with the kinds of challenges faced by readers of Corinna's age: a disenchantment with the capitalist focus on making money, and an inability to make meaningful connections with people through social media. The graphic novel demonstrates what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism" (24), in which we desire objects, people, and projects that are "compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered wither to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (24). Influenced by advertising, we crave a variety of goods, foods, clothes, jewelry, cars, and locations that we believe will bring us fulfillment. However, these fantasies of the "good life" are increasingly becoming unattainable because of financial markets, globalization, and technological changes in the last two decades. Cho's graphic novel is one of several works to

focus on Asian North Americans, not as successful professionals, but as humans with complex desires and frailties. In the last few pages of the novel, using mainly visual rather than textual narration, Cho shows a much happier Corinna, who resolves to leave the ad agency. She goes to buy notebooks, suggesting that she will pursue her dream of writing, a choice that may not be lucrative, but at least is more in keeping with her desires.

Digital technology has also made it easier to share and distribute comics online. Just as *YouTube* offers samples of songs by new artists, the Internet enables artists and illustrators to showcase their works online. Sean Fenty, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor define webcomics as "comics that are made first for the web, made by an independent creator, who may be working with others, but who all have no originary print version and no corporate sponsorship" (qtd. in Jacobs, par. 7). Dale Jacobs observes of webcomics that "not only do more people have access to both the production and reception of webcomics because of the lowered cost structure, but the medium allows the potential for a greater degree of dialogue through the interactivity that can be included within the texts themselves" (par. 7). Jacobs argues that comics are inherently "multimodal" because they use "multiple realms of meaning making," including images of people, objects, animals, settings, word balloons, lettering, sound effects and gutters" (par. 15). Comics are ideal for helping "students engage critically with ways of making meaning that exist all around them, since multimodal texts include much of the content on the internet and interactive multimedia, and in newspapers, television, film, instructional textbooks, and many other texts in our contemporary society" (par. 15).

Trinidad Escobar, a Filipino American graphic artist, produces webcomics and poetry that take advantage of the features of the computer screen. Using the scroll down function of the mouse and the ability to animate pictures, she reveals her fears, desires, and meditations about the earth and her mother, and also retells folk stories. In a short comic called "Undertow," Escobar uses animation to illustrate the force of nature. In a story of the end of her father's career as a fisherman, the sea, the "wild" movement of the water under the boat, the accident in which he is injured, and the rain are all animated. The human figure is static in contrast to the sea and the rain, suggesting the power nature has over humans. In a series of ghost stories called "La Loma," Escobar uses mainly black and white images to evoke a child's eerie and scared feelings. The movement of scrolling down the page adds to the sense of plummeting down the depths into a netherworld ("La Loma 2"). Vertically elongated panels create depth of field and emphasize the height of the monster. The few splashes of colour evoke the fear of the lighted match and burning, while the use of extreme close-ups of the monster's face, his teeth, and the girl's sister's body intensify the girl's terror and anxiety. At the end, the blackness that surrounds the only word, "daaaaddy!" reveals the void from which the voice comes.

In "Sleeping Standing Up," a girl watches as her fellow students joke and mock their grade nine math teacher, Ms. Nava. Though the narrator observes that the teacher

"was making an effort. She respected school" (Escobar, "Sleeping"), the students do not. The narrator says that she "sat up and listened" perhaps because Ms. Nava was Filipino, like her. Finally, the teacher gets angry and yells at them, telling them that they do not know how lucky they are, with her "full Tagalog accent and all." The teacher says, "You are all spoiled little boys and girls!! You have a free education and you just waste it! [...] Do you know what it feels like to have to sleep standing up because there are 20 people living in your room and there's shit—garbage and sewage seeping through the ground!" (Escobar, "Sleeping"). This elongated panel containing the teacher's dialogue is larger than the others, giving a sense of the teacher's pent-up rage. However, the class still laughs because "the concepts were so alien to them that it was funny" (Escobar, "Sleeping"). Only the narrator can relate to the scene, and learns the next week that the teacher was being deported, along with other teachers who were on work visas. Retrospectively, the narrator wishes that she had defended Ms. Nava: "I wish I could tell her that I'm awake." This mini-comic consisting of only twelve panels raises issues of race, gender, affect in the classroom, immigration, and deportation.

Digital technology has helped various genres develop to the point that publishers of traditional print works have taken notice of the popularity of online literature. Instructors can use *Instagram* poetry or webcomics to discuss important issues such as abuse and violence, diasporic identities, capitalism, and global perspectives. Digital narratives merge the visual and the textual in ways that appeal to today's media-savvy students and can be fruitfully integrated into the classroom, exemplifying the thematic, ethnic, and generic diversity of literature.

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