

Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility:
The Subversive Simplicity of Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey*

by

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This project was produced in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. In its production, I have used resources extracted from this territory. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) People first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.

For Jim.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Difficulty, Accessibility, and Literariness	3
Chapter 3: Kaur and her Critics	14
Chapter 4: The Non Difficulty of <i>milk and honey</i>	19
Chapter 5: The Dissidence of the Non Difficult	30
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	41
Works Cited	43

Abstract

Rupi Kaur's debut poetry collection, *milk and honey*, has been accused of inadequate difficulty by critics and consumers seeking to discredit her work. What is difficulty in poetry, and why is it so central to poetic value? Difficulty in poetry is an affective response to a variety of writing strategies that obstruct a reader's interpretive capabilities. It has remained a central aesthetic priority in poetry since the early twentieth century, a legacy of high modernism. It can also be understood as a reading practice, by which readers can work through such interpretive challenges. Kaur's poetic style is direct and accessible, which disrupts the systems of value that typically support poetic work by resisting difficult reading practices. Kaur's non-difficulty frustrates many of her readers and critics, creating an aesthetic scandal around her work. Her non-difficulty, however, can be valued as a subversion of dominant aesthetic values in poetry.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Rupi Kaur is a new young voice in Canadian Literature, the author of two poetry collections, *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers*. With these two collections, Kaur has achieved massive international success and is, according to *Globe and Mail*, “probably the most popular Canadian writer in the world, and one of the most popular writers in the world, full stop” (Medley). Kaur has achieved a level of commercial success uncommon in poetry. Her work had “sold 2.5 million copies worldwide and [had] been translated into 25 languages” as of October of 2017, representing, potentially, a shift developing in the global literary marketplace (Mzezewa). In fact, Rob Walker of *The Guardian* credits Kaur’s success with rising poetry sales in the UK, writing that “More than a million poetry books were sold in the last year, the highest number on record, as the popularity of social media sensations such as Rupi Kaur continues to reinvigorate the art form” (Walker). This success, however, has not come without controversy. Kaur’s poetry has been accused critics of being too simple, too easy, too accessible to be considered poetry. Kaur is a Canadian poet but also, and perhaps more comfortably, belongs to another global community of “younger poets using social media to gain an audience” such as “[Kate] Tempest and [Hollie] McNish,” who “have been dismissed as populist while their often extremely autobiographical poetry has been variously praised as brave, or criticised as simple and solipsistic” (Flood and Cain). As Tariro Mzezwa writes, “the underlying message of all this criticism is that Ms. Kaur’s work isn’t ‘real literature’” (Mzezwa). Mzezwa argues that “the literary world doesn't have a great track record of embracing or even acknowledging artists like Ms. Kaur, who are different in some notable way, but who attract an enormous and fervent audience” (Mzezwa). At the heart of this controversy lie the cultural legacies and aesthetic priorities of twentieth-century high modernism, which privilege difficulty in literature above all

other reading practices. In this thesis, I will explore the legacies that have given the mode of difficulty in literature the power and prestige that it commands in Canadian literary criticism and to challenge that position, to offer a reading of Kaur's debut collection, *milk and honey*, that creates room for systems of value in literary criticism independent of difficult reading practices and to argue that Kaur's work subversively privileges simplicity and accessibility over complexity and difficulty.

Chapter 2: Difficulty, Accessibility, and Literariness

I wish to begin this thesis by defining some of the terms that I will use in my discussion of Kaur's work, specifically the concepts of "difficulty" in poetry and "literariness". I am also interested in the conceptual relationship between these two terms, and I will ask how important difficulty is in the construction of literary status or prestige in the legacy of modernism and postmodernism. By difficulty, I mean an aesthetic feature of a given text, characterized by the relationship that a reader forms with a text in response to specific, but variable, features. This relationship between reader and text is articulated as the intelligibility of the text, by the reader's ability to understand, to interpret, to create meaning from, or to be affected by a text. Difficulty is often framed as an obstacle to such reading strategies and can also be characterized by describing the reading practices that enable readers to overcome that obstacle. Difficulty in literature is a slippery term, recognizable more for "the extreme responses it elicits, provoking people to anxiety, laughter or anger" than by "a set of formal strategies" (Diepeveen 45). Difficulty, then, is itself *difficult* to characterize or codify, and is recognizable primarily for its power to evoke visceral responses in readers. By literariness, on the other hand, I mean the status of a text as a piece of literature, distinct from other kinds of writing, in other words, the value of a text as a work of art. After surveying key critical understandings of the terms "difficulty" and "literariness," and situating those terms in the framework of my analysis, I will then consider the aesthetic scandal that Kaur's work has generated and the type of responses that she has received from critics and consumers. In other words, the goal of this chapter is to explore the scandal of accessibility as it applies to Kaur's work.

In order to generate such an animated critical response, Kaur's work must violate certain aesthetic expectations about what poetry ought to be in order to deserve the title of art. So, I will begin by discussing the specific attributes that are considered to be inalienable from the craft of

poetry. If Kaur's poetry is simple and accessible, what makes other poetry challenging and obscure? Does difficulty in poetry refer to the complexity of language being used, or does it instead refer to poetry that operates outside of existing aesthetic norms? Kaur's work can, in a sense, be considered difficult in the former sense *because* of its apparent lack of difficulty in the latter sense. Leonard Diepeveen, in his book *The Difficulties of Modernism*, argues that difficulty in modernist literature played an essential role in the "formation of the modern canon" by acting as "the ticket of admission to high culture" (45). Further, Diepeveen argues that difficulty "also continues to be," for literature, a "legitimizing force today" (xi). Iris Yaron, conducting a cognitive study in relation to difficulty in poetry, also extends the reign of difficulty beyond the Modernist movement, arguing that "over the past 150 years, difficulty and poetry have become intertwined terms. Modern poetry has developed the norm of aesthetic difficulty, making it focal, or as Riffaterre (1984) would say, a differentiating feature of poetic discourse" (131). Yaron defines difficulty as a "disruption of the process [of understanding a text], due to something in the text that prevents rapid construction of representation and blocks the continuation of reading" (142). This process can be disrupted by techniques such as a lack of "coherence," which "is conditioned by consistency with previous sentences in the same state of affairs" (137). Yaron lists other factors, which can be summarized as lexical obscurity (use of "rare words") and syntactical complexity. Davide Castiglione, in his article "The Semantics of Difficult Poems: Deriving a Checklist of Linguistic Phenomena," agrees with and expands on Yaron's categories of literary difficulty. Like Yaron, Castiglione lists "the employment of a wide and non-conventional vocabulary, including neologisms . . . archaisms, technical terms and specialized jargons" (121), as well as "syntax associated with difficulty is considered either 'ambiguous (i.e. allowing a double reading), 'contorted' (i.e. showing unusual word- orders and

a tendency for embedding) or ‘incomplete’” (117), and “referential discontinuity” or a lack of “cohesion” (129) as obstacles to reader comprehension or interpretation. Castiglione also lists several other categories of difficult textual features, such as “violation[s] of selection restriction,” or, in other words, unconventional “collocation[s]” or “substitutions” (123); obscure literary or “private biographical” allusions (126); ambiguous, unspecified, or otherwise irretrievable deictic referents (127); “extreme morphological and typographic deviances” such as nonsense morphemes and unconventional or nonsensical punctuation or symbols (133); “the presence of a culturally restricted theme” (131); and, finally, “statements” that are “impossible” or otherwise “incompatible with current states of knowledge” (132). Castiglione’s taxonomy of difficult literary techniques, while more extensive and detailed than Yaron’s, is no doubt still incomplete. Castiglione acknowledges this lack by pointing out “the paucity of both linguistic and critical data currently at my disposal, as well as the lack of their empirical validation,” which, he argues, “severely limit the validity of [his] findings” (133). That Castiglione and Yaron are unable to comprehensively catalogue all potential sources of incomprehensibility in language is, I believe, inevitable. The diversity of literary forms and techniques, as well as the nearly endless potential for innovation in literary production, render such classifications always inadequate, but perhaps still useful. Yaron and Castiglione offer a useful way of discussing many of the formal and aesthetic techniques by which writers create the type of difficulty in literature so valued by modern and postmodern readers and critics. The lingering effects of modernism continue to define the aesthetics standards by which art is criticized and canonized despite the de-narrativizing effects of postmodernism. These lingering modernist fetishizations of difficulty preserve the division between low and high culture and relegating the popular into the low. That which is popular, after all, is accessible and therefore must be easy. Easy, accessible art can be,

and often is, read according to difficult reading practices, but the accessible art remains a guest within high culture – it is the criticism, not the accessible art, that is taken seriously.¹

I would also like to parse out the differences between and relationships shared by the terms *difficulty*, *complexity*, *accessibility*, and *simplicity*. As Diepeveen tells us, ‘difficulty’ was, in early twentieth-century discourse, a “sloppy” term, used by different people to mean different things, and “apparently untethered to rigorous analysis” (*Difficulties* 48). Further, Diepeveen argues that “difficulty gained its massive place in shaping twentieth-century high culture precisely *because* it was so sloppy” (48). Difficulty is, at times, used synonymously with ‘complexity’, but Diepeveen is careful to distinguish between “difficulty as a property of a text” and “difficulty as a reading protocol that is radically affect-based” (244). While difficulty can be generated by “propert[ies] that ha[ve] immediate consequences for the reading process” by ‘stym[ying] the strategies one typically use[s] to generate meaning from a text,’ and which “demand[] to be addressed first in order for one to have a significant interaction with that text,” the reader’s response to the text is the true deciding factor when assessing a text for difficulty (49). The difference between *difficulty* and *complexity*, therefore, is that complexity exists within the text and can be shown to be a property of the text, whereas difficulty exists between the reader and the text. Complexity can be the textual feature that prompts the responses typical of difficulty, but is not the only feature that can do so. A work can lack complexity but be difficult due to abstraction, for example. A similar relationship exists between ‘simplicity’ and ‘accessibility,’ or perhaps ‘easiness’ for a closer parallel to difficulty. Simplicity describes the text and is the opposite of complexity, whereas accessibility or easiness describes a reader’s

¹ There is, of course, an entire field of Modernist middlebrow studies that, while outside the scope of this particular thesis, might complicate this reading and provide a fruitful comparison should this study be expanded in the future.

ability to engage with the meaning of a text free of obstruction and is the opposite of difficulty. I hope to show, by the end of this thesis, that Kaur's poetry is both simple and is accessible to a wider audience than most poetry, but that this accessibility need not be seen as a weakness and might, in fact, be seen as central to the text's efficacy and value as a work of literature specific to the current moment in Canadian literature, which seeks to challenge the national and aesthetic boundaries of the Canadian literary canon.

This inquiry into aesthetic standards and the terms by which critics attack Kaur's poetry leads to another question: are literariness and difficulty inextricably linked? Or can we usefully parse them out as critical concepts in their own right? David Miall writes that, despite the fact that "it is now widely maintained that the concept of literariness has been critically examined and found deficient" in the wake of postmodernism, certain formalist ideas of literariness have resisted postmodern criticism (4). The close and rigorous attention of professional literary criticism continues to be a powerful force for the conferral of canonical status to literary texts. Further, such criticism, as Diepeveen argues, continues to privilege difficulty and difficult texts, while ignoring or, as I will highlight later, disparaging allegedly simpler writing on the grounds of inadequate difficulty. Literary criticism, in other words, continues to expect, foreground, and celebrate texts possessing formal elements that generate some degree of interpretive difficulty – be it a lack of coherence, semantic complexity, or lexical obscurity. A text lacking these elements is much less likely to be considered 'literary' according to current aesthetic expectations. Charles Altieri, in his article "On Difficulty in Contemporary American Poetry" writes

that modernist spirit wants poetry to take on other roles—to insist that beauty is not enough precisely because it can be so seductive. To fall for beauty is to ignore how much

we need the imagination to devise models of the self and of intimacy that make identification problematic and that test other resources for elaborating utopian social relations. (Altieri 115)

Beauty, then, is framed as a distraction, one placed in opposition to “the imagination,” one which resists and threatens to undermine the virtues of more ‘imaginative’ modes within poetry.

Contemporary poetic discourse, still stubbornly heavily influenced by the aesthetic values of modernism despite the de-narrativizing and deconstructive impulses of postmodern criticism, continues to value difficulty over simplicity, the labour and discipline of the intellectual and imaginative modes within poetry over the indulgence of the straightforward and accessible, beautiful modes.

Diepeveen addresses the relationship between difficulty and literary status by discussing the process by which texts enter into the literary canon and by exploring how difficulty has become a key consideration for the canonization of a text in the wake of modernism. According to Diepeveen, “a big part of the answer to that is found in simplicity’s inherent weakness as an *argument*, a weakness that can begin to be seen in how simplicity’s champions thought that everything about difficult art was excessive” (*Difficulties* 183). The problem was, and perhaps in Kaur’s case continues to be, with the rhetorical weight behind simplicity as an aesthetic priority. Diepeveen tells us that “simplicity’s proponents, then thought laborious argument could never demonstrate the greatness of art; aesthetic greatness was self-evident, mute,” and “the central aesthetic effects of simplicity (purity, pleasure, authenticity, sincerity, directness) could not be supported with evidence” (185). The “aesthetic effects” listed by Diepeveen echo much of the praise for poets like Kaur. Canonization and other conferrals of literary prestige, however, occur largely through literary criticism, a process supported by the institution of the university that

requires the interpretation and re-interpretation of texts by literary professionals – through argumentation and explanation, in other words. In order for such a process to occur – and for the output of that process to be generative – the virtues of the text must require some explanation. Simply stated, there needs to be a reason for professionals to write about a text, some degree of rhetorical weight. For the text to be worthy of discussion, there has to be something to talk *about*. Modernism privileged difficulty as the only reading practice worth talking about in this way. The features of the text cannot be self-evident, so simplicity simply does not respond well to criticism.

Poetic texts, in particular, inspire an expectation for literary difficulty. Yaron writes that “readers of a difficult text can be persuaded to accept difficulty within the poetic framework, while rejecting it elsewhere” (132), but is the reverse true? Can readers be “persuaded” to accept a lack of difficulty “within the poetic framework” if difficulty has become “a differentiating feature of poetic discourse”? By “readers” here, I refer to a specific audience, but one whose boundaries stand to be altered by Kaur’s poetry and poetry like it. I refer here, rather broadly, to readers of poetry, those who would consider themselves to be consumers of poetry. This audience includes, of course, readers who find pleasure in Kaur’s writing, but also those who seek to refuse it the title of poetry – readers of accessible poetry and those of difficult poetry, and those who read and find pleasure in each. This audience is central to my discussion because it is the inclusion of one part of this audience – readers of Rupi Kaur – into the audience as a whole that is at issue here. If Kaur’s poetry is denied the status of “real poetry,” then her readers cannot be “real” lovers of poetry, but instead be lovers of some qualified and othered subgenre of poetry. By “readers,” I mean those who are invested in the debate over Kaur’s literary status and the place of her poetry in literary culture. If a poetic text is rejected on the grounds of a lack of

difficulty, as some critics of *milk and honey* seek to do, then the literary value or ‘literariness’ of the text is called into question. Diepeveen describes the role of literary difficulty in the “assembl[y of] a canon of like-minded literary works,” which resulted in an “apparently seamless end product (a product that by the 1950s was known unproblematically as modernism), and the dominant ways of reading that product” (2). According to Diepeveen,

modernism’s difficulty set up the terms and protocols by which readers read and gained access to modernist texts, and it became a litmus test: one could predict both a given reader’s response to modernism by his or her reaction to difficulty, and a writer’s place in the canon by the difficulty of his or her work. Modern difficulty was a powerful aesthetic, then...Modern difficulty has profoundly shaped the entire twentieth century; one’s ability to move in high culture continues to depend, in large part, on how one reacts to difficulty.

(xi)

How one reacts to a lack of difficulty, then, was and remains similarly linked to one’s “ability to move in high culture.” A will to disparage and delegitimize Kaur’s poetry on the basis of allegedly excessive simplicity ostensibly becomes the mark of the astute, educated, and cultured reader. The more dismissive their critique of Kaur’s poetic style, the more the reader is able to distance themselves from Kaur’s style of poetry and thereby implicitly assert their comfort with and taste for more difficult and therefore “superior” poetry, without having to invoke any specific examples of “good,” adequately challenging poetry by name. By so closely associating aesthetic difficulty in poetry with the artistic value of a given text, readers seeking to distance themselves from “simple” poetry cast difficulty as a prerequisite for artistry, or at least for good or worthwhile artistry. In order to be a satisfying work of art, a poem must be difficult in one or more of the ways described by Yaron, Diepeveen, Altieri, and Castiglione.

The concept of difficulty as an essential feature of literary reading emerges in another study of literariness as well, one that seeks to parse the difference between literary writing and non-literary writing, and to challenge the notion that there is no such distinction. In their article “What Is Literariness? Three Components of Literary Reading,” psychologist Don Kuiken and literary scholar David Miall address the ubiquitous demand for difficulty in literary writing by asking “what sort of activity is the reading of literature?” (121). Miall and Kuiken are interested here in those aspects that separate literary writing from other kinds of writing, and what is involved in the practice of reading literature. Challenging the notion that literature is an entirely distinct linguistic exercise and that literariness involves unique distinguishing features, they posit that reading literature depends on “a particular organization of the cognitive processes that are also apparent in ordinary prose or conversation” (121). They propose that “reading literature may be the outcome of rhetorical devices designed to promote a particular ideology” and that “any text, whether literary or not, depends on functions common to all texts” (121). According to this assertion, “there purportedly are no processes unique to the act of literary reading” (121). Miall and Kuiken “suggest that literariness cannot be defined simply as a characteristic set of text properties. On the other hand, neither can it be regarded as the result of applying a set of conventions” (122). Miall and Kuiken, however, do allow for some distinction between the literary and the non-literary, “argu[ing] instead that literariness is the product of a distinctive mode of reading that is identifiable through three key components of response to literary texts” (122). The features that Miall and Kuiken identify as ‘literary’ are largely congruous with Yaron and Castiglione’s characteristics of difficulty, citing “the first component of literariness, as... the occurrence of stylistic variations that are distinctively (although not uniquely) associated with literary texts” (122). In order to illustrate their second characteristic of literariness, Miall and

Kuiken provide an example in which “the more usual and familiar locution ... has been replaced by a phrase that unsettles the reader's conventional understanding,” and argue that “the second component of literariness is the occurrence of this type of defamiliarization” (123). This process of defamiliarization closely echoes Castiglione’s notion of “violation of selection restriction” (123). Miall and Kuiken go on to argue that the reader’s “difficulty in finding the appropriate words attests to the reinterpetive effort required. Thus, the third component of literariness is the modification or transformation of a conventional feeling or concept” (123). Miall and Kuiken’s characterization of literariness and its similarity to the characteristics of difficulty provide further evidence of the close association between aesthetic difficulty and literariness, a legacy of the contentions surrounding difficult modernism – and difficult modernism’s triumph – in the early twentieth century. Allegations that Kaur’s poetry violates this relationship provide much of the basis for the criticisms mounted against her.

The challenges mounted against the literary status and popular reception of Kaur’s work are meant to undermine her status as a poet, or what Diepeveen and Van Laar might call her “prestige” as an artist, a concept linked to ‘literariness’ and, inevitably, back to the question of difficulty. The prestige of a work of art, which, in the case of Kaur’s poetry is under intense scrutiny, is one of interaction between that work and its audience; as Diepeveen and Van Laar put it, “prestige, which we define as a system of hierarchies of agreed-upon social value, is a twofold thing: it is a quality that people confer on others, but it is also a system inextricably bound up with that conferral” (5). There is a pragmatism to discussing this “system” of prestige, which is helpful in a consideration of Kaur’s poetry and its place in contemporary Canadian literature. When the conferral of prestige becomes as contentious as it has become in relation to Kaur’s work, there arises, perhaps, an opportunity for a conversation about the “process of

valuation” associated with literary works. Diepeveen and Van Laar write that “concepts always have a social embodiment. Consequently, we are not interested so much in whether painting is actually dead as we are in how this argument circulates” (6). In following Diepeveen and Van Laar’s example, I am interested in examining Kaur’s work in a way that might account for readers’ responses to her poetry in order to better understand the type of work that her poetry is able to accomplish by interacting in the real world with real readers. With an “interest[] in *how* things mean,” Diepeveen and Van Laar “examine the *way* people talk about them” (6, emphasis original). How, then, Kaur’s readers – both those that praise her poetry and those that disparage it – choose to negotiate the question of the literariness of her poetry is crucial to the work in which her poetry is engaged.

Chapter 3: Kaur and her Critics

This brings me to how, specifically, Kaur's critics approach her work and engage with the question of her literary status. Despite her success, Kaur has faced harsh criticism for her poetic style. Citing the simplicity and the accessibility of Kaur's poetry, critics call into question the literary value of Kaur's writing, seeking to dismiss its aesthetic merit and exclude it from the ranks of 'serious' poetry. For example, in an article published in *PN Review*, Rebecca Watts describes Kaur's poetry as a departure from everything that makes poetry artful, as "the complete rejection of complexity, subtlety, eloquence and the aspiration to do anything well" (Watts). Watts identifies the main targets of her polemic critique as contemporaries of Kaur, "UK equivalents" Kate Tempest and Hollie McNish. Watts's piece, however, does open with a critique of Kaur, and, given the connection that she draws between Kaur, Tempest, and McNish, the following criticisms no doubt fully include Kaur within their scope. In this critique of Kaur's poetry, Watts points toward a lack of "complexity," referring to the type of language being used in Kaur's poetry, a lack of "subtlety," referring to the apparently straightforward and direct way in which Kaur addresses certain topics, painting Kaur's writing with what she sees as an unbecoming bluntness or clumsiness, and lack of "eloquence," by which Watts accuses Kaur's poetry of inadequate complexity or aesthetic value. Watts refers to the increasing popularity of and increasing support of poets like Kaur as a "pandering to a strain of inverse snobbery that considers talent to be undemocratic" and calls "'honesty' and 'accessibility,'" words often used to describe such poets, as "buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterizes their work" (Watts). These poets, according to Watts, are "playing a part in the establishment's muddle-headed conspiracy to 'democratise' poetry," a process that might threaten the cultural status of literature and literary criticism in Canada, should it continue unchecked (Watts).

It is a perceived lack of skill at the craft of poetry that inspires the harshest and most dismissive critiques mounted against Kaur's work, from critics such as Watts as well as from consumers on popular review sites and forums online. In fact, as Kaur has largely been ignored by the academy outside of Watts' polemical critique, most of the debate surrounding Kaur's poetry has taken place in social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram and in periodicals such as *The Guardian*. Shortly after the release of Kaur's debut poetry collection in 2015, for example, Twitter users parodied her work extensively, posting direct, bathetic statements in a faux-serious format with line breaks reminiscent of Kaur's work, some of which were taken from popular viral videos and memes, and attributed these phrases to Kaur by adding "- rupi kaur" at the bottom of each post to humorous effect. Priya Khaira-Hanks of *The Guardian* calls these attacks "often witty, and close enough to Kaur's formula to sting," listing as an example a tweet by user Guy Mizrahi: "I wanted / Chick-fil-a / but / you / were / a Sunday morning" (Khaira-Hanks, citing @guymizrahi_).² In the comment section of Khaira-Hanks' article, the attacks continue. A community member named blckchps writes "what a gigantic pile / of festering / wank," to which user Mikko replies "but in an attractive / young / female shape." The terms by which Kaur is being dismissed are legible in this exchange; Kaur's poetry is simple and

² More examples of this trend include the following tweets:

"if you / get bored / just write / some / fake / rupi kaur / poems / it's fun" (@oliviacruzhead)

"i shoved a whole / bag of jellybeans / up my ass" (@colorsfinn, from attached image)

"Milk and honey be like: / but when i come around / you don't wanna / post up" (@ricardojkay)

"two bros / chilling in the hot tub / five feet apart cause they're / not gay" (@implicittrees)

Further, in 2017, two students published a full parody version of *milk and honey* titled *milk and vine* that capitalizes on this line of popular online criticism by presenting quotations from videos taken from Vine, a now-defunct popular video sharing app through which users created and shared short, comedic videos, in the style of *milk and honey*, complete with illustrations reminiscent of Kaur's. The parody, like *milk and honey*, quickly became a bestseller (Martineau).

disposable, and the fact that a young, attractive woman is achieving international commercial success as a poet is infuriating.

Kaur's work also faces harsh criticism on Instagram, a social media platform that she herself uses³ often in order to promote and disseminate her work. Each of her posts receives a great deal of attention, along with many comments posted by fans and detractors alike. On one post, user @guerrero_dave writes "Your poetry is trash" and @richatron5000 claims "I've seen more poetic puddles of vomit on the floor outside a late night bar." On another post, user @soundslikeyogurt criticizes the simplicity and apparent arbitrariness of Kaur's poetry and the ease with which they believe Kaur composes her work: "step 1: write a bland sentence. Step 2: press 'enter' after basically any word you want so as to separate into new line. Step 3: Poetry, bitch." Other users write, "these are really nice and touching words but I don't see where the poetry is" (@questanoepoesia) and "Ok, but this is not poetry. It lacks the linguistic resources of poetry. It is just a phrase cut into pieces" (@pauloavelino22). Khaira-Hanks calls these attacks "little jabs at [Kaur's] plaintive voice" and writes that "even if you like her writing" the criticisms are "spot on" (Khaira-Hanks). These negative responses to Kaur's work, though often outnumbered by praise from her fans, seek to discredit her poetry, to exclude it from the status of literature and to cast it instead as something too simple to be taken seriously, something disposable, something without literary value. In other words, they seek to challenge its literariness.

While these negative responses are diverse, and at times take up alternative terms to difficulty such as *craft*, *excellence*, and *eloquence*, the ground upon which Kaur's poetry is being

³ Kaur is not the only poet to use Instagram – and online platforms like Instagram – in this way. Poets who use Instagram in order to promote their work, or who use it as a primary publishing platform, have been branded "Instapoets" and their poetry "Instapoetry" (Walker).

disparaged is ultimately an apparent lack of difficulty. These terms ostensibly refer to qualities of the text, rather than to the affect caused by reading the text, or to the relationship between the reader and the text, but are part of the way in which Kaur's poetry is framed in these critiques as being both simple and easy. According to the work done by Diepeveen, Castiglione, Miall, Kuiken, and others, qualities such as *craft*, *excellence*, and *eloquence*, have been linked to difficulty since the advent of high modernism in the early twentieth century. These terms are left undefined, referring back to aesthetic norms and relying on the power of those norms for their critical weight. Furthermore, there is a palpable sense of anger in some of the responses to Kaur's poetry, both online and in Watts's more professional critique. According to Diepeveen, such affective responses to literature – anger, anxiety, and derision – are common responses to *difficult* writing (*Difficulties* 64). In the cases critiquing Kaur, however, these affective responses are being mobilized against difficulty's apparent opposite – simplicity, or at least inadequate difficulty. While it is certainly possible to interpret non-conventional art as offering a type of difficulty for its subversive and challenging nature, it is possible that these angry and derisive responses derive from another source, one common in both the history of difficult art and in society at large – that source being scandal. Sociologist Ari Adut describes “scandal as the disruptive publicity of transgression” (Adut 214). Kaur's transgression, in this case, is predominantly an aesthetic one. She also, however, violates typical economic and institutional systems of assessing the cultural value of poetry and prestige of the poet. John B. Thompson writes that “if we understand reputation as a kind of resource that individuals can accumulate and protect, then we can see why scandals often involve much more than the transgression of values or norms: they are also struggles over power and the sources of power” (58). Kaur's poetry, her popularity, and her economic success challenge the sources of symbolic power that poetry

typically commands, all achieved while operating outside of the aesthetic norms of the genre. As a poet who is also young, stylish, a woman of colour, and commercially successful in a field that is not known for its economic viability, Kaur poses a threat to the systems of value by which poetry is usually produced and distributed, and by which a poet's status is assessed. Kaur's poetry is branded as "Instagram poetry" or "Instapoetry," a genre of poetry written by "a burgeoning group of young 'Instapoets', so called because they have shot to fame after building up huge followings on social media" (Walker). This genre of poetry is closely associated with the apparent superficiality and ephemerality of social media. Yet, it is important within our current socio-cultural moment not only to acknowledge the preponderance of social media, but also to acknowledge that it fundamentally affects what and how art and culture circulate. Ultimately, these responses denying the artistry of Kaur's poetry on the grounds of excessive simplicity, or inadequate difficulty, are arguing from a position deeply rooted in a value system that privileges difficulty in poetry – in each of its diverse manifestations – above all other rhetorical strategies, aesthetics, or types of affect that poetry is capable of producing.

Chapter 4: The Non Difficulty of *milk and honey*

With a working definition of what difficulty is and some of the ways in which it can be generated through various writing techniques, as well as its role in the conferral of literary prestige, I wish to turn now to Kaur's *milk and honey*. Take, for example, the following poem, one of the longer verse poems in the collection:

my issue with what they consider beautiful

is that their concept of beauty

centres around excluding people

i find hair beautiful

when a woman wears it

like a garden on her skin

that is the definition of beauty

big hooked noses that

point upwards to the sky

like they're rising

to the occasion

skin the colour of earth

my ancestors planted crops on

to feed a lineage of women with

thighs thick as tree trunks

eyes like almonds

deeply hooded with conviction

the rivers of panjab

flow through my bloodstream

so don't tell me my women
aren't as beautiful
as the ones
in your country

In this poem, we can see what has been referred to as the simplicity of Kaur's poetry. This poem is entirely coherent, with no major shifts from one subject to another. The argument of the poem is clearly stated in the first three lines, "my issue with what they consider beautiful / is that their concept of beauty / centres around excluding people" (1-3). This promises to be a poem, then, that articulates a more inclusive definition of beauty, a topic from which the speaker does not deviate. The rest of the poem is comprised of a list of characteristics that the speaker recognizes as beautiful, such as "hair...when a woman wears it / like a garden on her skin," "big hooked noses," "skin the colour of earth," and "eyes like almonds." Each of these examples relates clearly and without ambiguity to the poem's stated purpose and does so using simple language and straightforward syntax, resulting in a sense of coherence and intelligibility that resists typical poetic difficulty. The reader's search for difficulty, a "cognitive process" initiated, as Yaron argues, when the reader is confronted with a text understood to be poetry, is rendered ineffectual (133). The typical strategies of interpretation and meaning making in contemporary poetry remain unengaged, or at least unfulfilled. This, I believe, causes a sense of frustration in the experienced reader of challenging poetry, which contributes to the critical scandal around Kaur's work, especially when taking its commercial as well as popular successes into consideration.

Kaur's shorter poems appear minimal, but are not made minimal through elision or abstraction, techniques by which other poets create ambiguous meanings and interpretive difficulty. For example, a poem cited pointedly by Watts at the beginning of her review reads

“she was music / but he had his ears cut off” (115). There is a rather obvious metaphor here of the ‘he’ in question being utterly incapable of recognizing, appreciating, or even sensing the ‘she’, who is, like music, lively and dynamic, an engaging and rewarding sensory experience that is being wasted on the ‘he’ without ears. There is enough ambiguity here that one can, if so inclined, question the agency and culpability of the ‘he’. Does the phrasing of “had his ears cut off” imply a conscious choice to remove his own ears? Is there blame in the speaker’s voice? Or does his inability to ‘hear’ the “music” that is ‘her’ remove his culpability? After all, one cannot neglect that which one cannot sense. Is the ‘he’ being portrayed as a victim of societal forces that ‘remove his ears’ and leave him without the tools to recognize and appreciate the ‘she’ for her virtues? To what extent does this short poem privilege the agency of the male gaze and assert the problematic passive prettiness of the female subject? How important to the meaning of the poem is the accompanying line drawing of a male and female figure, sitting despondently beside one another? A reader trained in the tradition of difficult literature can approach this poem with these reading practices in mind in the effort of generating difficulty from the text, but is doing so a useful, generative exercise? As Diepeveen argues, “while every text can be made difficult, it is not the case that every text can be made difficult in equally rich and compelling ways that are central to the effects of the text” (*Difficulties* 243). It could be that the “effects of the text” in this case are not best served by parsing out the ambiguities present in these two short lines.

A poem of similar length, employing a metaphor with a similar tenor appears fifteen pages earlier: “i am a museum full of art / but you had your eyes shut” (100). Flipping another seventeen pages back reveals these words above a door open to a room entirely obscured by shadow: “you were so distant / i forgot you were there at all” (83). In this case, the words are entirely free of metaphor; the poem is a simple and direct expression of emotion. The image of

the door, however, does deliver a similar tenor to the previously mentioned poems. The imposing, scribbled opacity of the darkened door speaks to severed ears and tightly-closed eyes; there is an insurmountable obstacle to understanding and recognition. The speaker feels constantly, helplessly alienated from their subject, and the poems are meant to capture and express the feeling of that alienation. This is not a difficult or complicated reading, as the poems are more focused on a feeling that is not complicated but that is no less urgent for its straightforwardness. By being direct in this way, the poet speaker is able to represent her feelings as they occur. She does not speak from a position of didacticism or of moral authority, at least initially, and she is able to grow and to change as the text proceeds.

One possible reading of *milk and honey*, therefore, is one that depends on reading a narrative arc across Kaur's collection. The speaker grows with her experiences throughout the collection, forming more of a story of love and loss of love rather than a meditation on love, the narrative of the traumas and pleasures of a young relationship rather than an authoritative reflection meant to make sense of the complexities of love. The poet speaker at the beginning of *milk and honey* is not the wise, reflective, pensive soul that a reader might be used to in poetry, and is not an unreliable narrator either, but is instead a narrator who is honest and direct. The poet speaker in *milk and honey* does not speak from a position of authority and wisdom but from a position of apparent sincerity, vulnerability, and openness. In the second section, "the loving," the poet speaker is fully and unproblematically enamoured with her new lover, despite the traumas of the first section, "the hurting." One poem in a section entitled "the loving" reads "it's your voice / that undresses me" (69). Another reads "I'd be lying if I said / you make me speechless / the truth is you make my tongue so weak it forgets / what language to speak in" (61). A final example from this section is "how do you turn / a forest fire like me / so soft I turn

into / running water” (65). The poet speaker here is vulnerable and opens herself completely and unreservedly to her unnamed lover. In a later section, however, titled “the healing,” which follows the heartbreaking end of the relationship, the speaker says “fall / in love / with your solitude” (161), “you must enter a relationship / with yourself / before anyone else” (150). The speaker here adopts a tone radically different from that of the speaker in “the loving.” Gone is the poet speaker so in love as to be helpless. She has learned from her relationship and now expresses her changed perspective, as openly and earnestly as she did her love at its height. While the speaker has new insights based on her experiences, her voice remains the same and she is no less removed from the wise and powerful authoritative poet. The poems are no more or less complex at the end of the collection than at the beginning, so despite the legible growth of the poet speaker, the love that she experienced earlier in the collection is no less intense and no less valid for the changes that she has experienced. The speaker remains direct and open, and her poetry remains consequently simple and accessible. She does not show herself to be a more complex or pensive thinker than her audience is capable of being, but because she is expressive and direct, she is able to create art that resonates with her audience.

In other words, these poems make sense – obviously and immediately, even to those who are untrained in modernist poetic reading practices that are able to *make* sense of poems in which sense is not immediately apparent. According to modernist criticism, this leaves critics with little or nothing to do with these texts, no meaningful way to interact with them. It is a challenging, and perhaps not particularly useful, exercise to bring a difficult reading practice to these poems. There are, of course, poems that offer potential moments of exception to this simple and direct style. Some of the poems are potentially more receptive to a difficult reading than others. What I

do not want to do, however, is to argue that Kaur's poetry appears to be simple but is actually deceptively difficult.

According to Diepeveen, a common strategy in literary criticism for canonizing an allegedly simple writer involves reinterpreting their work as deceptively difficult, possessing what Diepeveen terms an "essential difficulty" despite being, on their surface, simple (*Difficulties* 189). Using the works of Robert Frost and Willa Cather as a "curious but typical moment," Diepeveen describes the process by which these two writers were brought into the modern canon (188). Diepeveen argues that "asserting a lack of simplicity became a necessary move for establishing Frost's value – not only for Pritchard but for virtually all of Frost's critics, for critics of Willa Cather – indeed, for critics of all the simple moderns" (189). While these writers might appear to be simple on the surface, they can be read as difficult under the right reading practice. According to Diepeveen, "every text can be made difficult," but "it is not the case that every text can be made difficult in equally rich and compelling ways that are central to the effects of the text" (243). This strategy – the application of a difficult reading practice to a work of literature that appears to be simple – is, perhaps, possible in the case of Kaur's poetry. There is room to engage with Kaur's poetry on the basis of difficulty, to make her difficult by reading her in such a way. Such an interpretation, however, is not what I aim to do with this essay. In fact, it appears to me that Kaur's poetry resists such a reading by using plain language and a uniform aesthetic. Take, for example, the poem "we began / with honesty / let us end / in it too" (123). Not only do would such a reading would add little to the experience of reading the text, I believe that *milk and honey* operates most effectively on the basis of its simplicity, or, alternatively, its non-difficulty, not in spite of it.

Diepeveen concludes his discussion of difficult literary modernism's lasting impact on

literature by explaining that “difficulty is an excess that is not a property of the difficult work at hand, but a reading protocol that is radically affect-based” (244). Because difficulty is affect-based, it is highly subjective, determined by a given reader’s personal response to a given text, and “the line between pleasure and unmanageable anxiety is personally determined, occurring in an interaction between reader and text” (244). While Yaron and Castiglione have specified a number of specific techniques by which writers can, and do, create obstacles to the average reader easily reaching an understanding of a given text, a more useful definition of difficulty must account for the reader as well as textual features.

Here, I wish to return to Yaron, who reaches a similar conclusion, proposing a “Reception Approach” in his discussion of literary difficulty and framing his understanding of difficulty, as Diepeveen, Castiglione, Miall, and Kuiken also have done, more around the reader’s response to a text than to the formal elements of the text itself (135). Yaron identifies the key variable in a reader’s response to a given text as their “sociocultural background”:

The sociocultural background of different readers will, therefore, determine how the difficult text is processed. Indeed, the Reception Approach, starting with the responses of subjects, is capable of dealing with relativity that results from differences of sociocultural background... In summary, an approach that deals with difficulty from the reader’s perspective is broader and more flexible than an approach that adopts the viewpoint of the writer. (135-36)

This argument foregrounds the “sociocultural background” of the audience of a given text, therefore presenting an opportunity to talk about the audience of Kaur’s poetry. Miall and Kuiken also emphasize the fact that “the reinterpretive effort that follows defamiliarization seems to be the source of individual differences in response to literary texts” (134). According to

Miall and Kuiken, this “reinterpretive effort” and the “reader’s attempt to articulate the phenomena within the text that are found striking and evocative of feeling” characterize one of three essential “components” of literariness and literary reading (135-6). Further, Miall and Kuiken suggest that “the modification or transformation of readers’ concepts or feelings...is thus specific to the individual reader: it is in this respect, indeed, that literature seems to invoke what is individual in the reader” (134). Literary works, then, are distinguished from other, non-literary kinds of writing, by the application of an appropriately literary reading practice, which requires a literary reader. This reading practice, according to Miall and Kuiken, depends on a reader experiencing a “defamiliarizing response” to “stylistic” or “narrative features” within a text and engaging in an “attempt[] to articulate” their own “reinterpretive effort” to make sense of those notable and “defamiliarizing” features of the text (135-6). A text, therefore, cannot be literary on its own, but requires an audience that experiences a literary response to it. The work of literature and literariness occurs not within the text and not within the reader, but somewhere in the relationship between the two. The literary reading practice suggested by Miall and Kuiken is suggestive of, and perhaps to some extent beholden to, the dominant presence of difficulty in literature; calling literary reading an “*attempt to articulate*” an act of “*reinterpretive effort*” in response to “*defamiliarizing*” features suggests that the process is, at least, not easy. But must these features always be difficult? If we maintain that literariness depends on a literary response, then we are able to see Kaur’s audience as playing a role at least as significant as the poetry itself to the question of the ‘work’ that Kaur’s poetry does. This quotation from M. Nourbese Philip, posing a question on audience, might also be helpful for understanding the work that Kaur’s poetry is doing,

How, then, is work from communities that appear marginal to the mainstream, with what

Williams so aptly describes as their ‘emergent energies’ completed – that is, received and responded to, both by audiences of the more dominant culture, as well as audiences that comprise the artist’s natural community? (Philip 7)

Philip’s question here points toward the role of the audience in completing a work of art. The work of poetry, according to Philip, is not ‘completed’ until it has been ‘received and responded to’ by an audience. According to this understanding of work in relation to art, audience reception is a crucial component of the work that poetry can do. Further, Philip also points toward the various roles in which various audiences can take on by completing the work in different ways. The subjective aesthetic experience of that audience, then, is relevant to the type of work that a piece of art is able to do. This experience has as much to do with the reader’s previous personal history and sociocultural background, their preparedness for successfully interpreting certain strategies for impeding easy understanding and generating difficulty, as it does with the presence or absence of any specific textual features. The readers taking issue with the simplicity of Kaur’s poetry are often readers familiar with the aesthetic conventions of twenty- and twenty-first century English-language poetics, descended from Western European traditions, who would have some experience with reading poetry and who would be frustrated by the lack of difficulty in Kaur’s work. Kaur’s work, however, appeals to a broader audience, one that is inclusive of young readers, international readers, and those potentially unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to reading poetry. The fact that Kaur’s work has been popularized largely on the internet, which is accessible to these diverse audiences, is no coincidence. Kaur undeniably has an enormous audience both within Canada and internationally. How does that audience interact with and complete her work? What kind of reading practice does Kaur’s poetry call for? How does it differ from dominant difficult literary reading practices such as those suggested by Diepeveen,

Castiglione, Miall, Kuiken, and others? Finally, how might literary professionals within institutional structures that support and are in turn supported by difficulty talk about the kind of work that Kaur's poetry does and the reading practices that it supports?

These are the questions that Diepeveen poses toward the end of his text. Diepeveen argues that "high culture should recognize that the audience for difficult art will always be small, and will always need to be supported by the university classroom or some institution like it" (244). Kaur's poetry, as I have argued, is not difficult. It also has a large audience, one that needs no support from the university and any formal literary institution. But what is its interaction with high culture, if it can be said to have any? It is poetry, a category of language typically—or at least typically understood as—reserved for high culture, but it is enjoyed by a wide reading audience and has faced harsh criticism from literary professionals. Where does that leave it within the "two-tiered audience for the products of art" that Diepeveen argues "is just one of difficulty's consequences" (244)? Do these two tiers, however, have to be an inevitable "consequence" of difficulty in literature? And if these two tiers persist, must difficulty forever remain the most important criteria separating the two? Perhaps, if difficulty is to remain the highest aesthetic priority within literary criticism in Canadian literature, this will continue to be the case. However, should enough non-difficult works emerge that can be judged by literary professionals as having value outside of difficulty, perhaps a shift can occur in literary criticism that makes room for alternative systems of value. Diepeveen calls for just such a shift toward the end of his book:

literary professionals need to move away from privileging difficulty as the central and highest paradigm of what art ought to do. Difficulty's effects are not the *only* effects of art, and at times high modernism made it seem like they were. In response to this, high

culture need not return en masse to simplicity. But it should be open to alternate aesthetic systems and to finding ways to discuss those systems, so that difficulty isn't inevitable.

Modernism's difficulty is just one form of attention that can be brought to bear on art.

(244)

Difficulty, then, need not be replaced as the dominant aesthetic in order for these alternative systems of value to emerge. But by what other criteria might we find value in art? What might these new systems of value prioritize, if difficulty is so dominant in English Canadian literature? Working within Canada, a country with a diverse population with diverse cultural practices, the answer might be to look outside of the literary tradition that has given us difficult modernism and its legacies. Not only is difficulty just "one form of attention that can be brought to bear on art," it is also a product of Western European and colonial literary traditions. Difficulty functions by creating exclusions – and the exclusions that difficulty produce happen to conform to aesthetic standards that arise from twentieth-century European and colonial cultural practices. This statement is not, in any way, meant to suggest that difficult literature is a uniquely Western European or colonial tradition, or that such cultures are better suited to producing such texts, but merely to suggest that to support a literary value system that privileges a particular kind of Western aesthetic practice, without being, as Diepeveen suggests, "open to alternate aesthetic systems," the academic community would potentially be missing a widespread and significant cultural experience that is occurring outside of its gaze.

Chapter 5: The Dissidence of the Non Difficult

Diepeveen's call at the end of his book for a re-evaluation and challenging of the notion that "difficulty's effects" are "the *only* effects of art" coincides with another developing body of criticism that urges the Canadian literary community to challenge and expand the existing Canadian literary canon and literary institutions (*Difficulty* 244). Smaro Kamboureli, in her preface to *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, describes Canadian literature as

a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural by-product of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices. (vii)

Canadian literature, according to Kamboureli, has, for most of its history, been a colonial, and predominantly English, institution; "notwithstanding the various attempts to instigate and maintain a dialogue between Anglophone and francophone literatures in Canada, CanLit has, more or less, always functioned as a referent to Canadian literature in English" (ix). Diana Brydon, writing in an essay for the same collection, "Metamorphoses of a Discipline," supports this point, arguing that Canadian literature has "developed in its Anglophone form as a subdiscipline of English Literary Studies, in its francophone form as a subdiscipline of French, and in its comparative study as part of comparative literature" and that, as a result, "it is still working out its relation to Indigenous, diaspora, and postcolonial studies" (3). Further, Kamboureli tells us that Canadian literature has a long history of being used to serve various institutional, often colonial, ends, writing that "whether it is considered an integral part of the Canadian nation formation, an autonomous body of works, a literature belonging somewhere

between nation and literariness, or a part of ‘world literature,’ CanLit has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization” (vii). Part of English Canadian literature’s ability to wield cultural power in the name of these institutions comes from its prestige or literariness, its status as a separate and heightened form of language, accessible only to those who are trained to engage with it, as described by Miall and Kuiken. Kamboureli, however, challenges this separation of literary language from ordinary language, writing that literature “may be understood and employed as a special category, as it is in English studies, but this unravels when literature is seen to operate as an inter- and intra-, as well as discursive, cultural site of exchanges” (viii). Because literature is always completed by its audience, it always in some way must engage in conversation with that audience. Literature functions, as all art must, as a “cultural site of exchange” with its audience (viii). By limiting its audience to an elite, educated few, difficult art limits the conversation in which it is able to engage. Some art, no doubt, benefits from this limited engagement. What do we make of art, however, that enters into conversation with a larger audience, one that includes members typically left outside of such conversations? What do we make of art that not only looks beyond the institutions that typically engage with English Canadian literature, but that ignores those institutions and their aesthetic priorities altogether?

These questions run parallel to those asked by Kamboureli, Brydon, and their contemporaries, asked by members of the institution about how better to challenge the boundaries of their field and expand the scope of literary study in Canada. Brydon, for example, asks, “what if we were to think about Canadian literary studies within the contexts of literature, institutions, and citizenship? How would such a reorientation change the terms of engagement?” (1). Brydon here is interested in the relationship between the “community produced, maintained,

and promoted through the institutions of Canadian literature,” which, she argues, “is part of a larger, but shrinking, community of people devoted to the entangled disciplines and pleasures of literature, on the one hand, and to a differently constituted but overlapping constituency of people committed to the survival and the improvement of the Canadian nation-state” (2). Rather than “distracting attention from the literary text and its author toward questions about knowledge production and reception” Brydon frames her discussion as “an enlarging of range to resituate the literary and redefine what is meant by literature and its study” (2). By asking these questions, Brydon means to direct “attention to the interactions of institutions, citizenship, and literature,” which she argues “should complement but not replace attention to other dimensions of literary study” (3). There is room within literary criticism to engage directly with the text and with what Brydon calls “literary citizenship”:

those who care about literature (whether it be narrowly or more broadly defined) and about informed reading practices as taught through literary study need to ask how that reframing fits within larger institutional changes, when most disciplines are asking about their methods and mandates, when universities are shifting their financing and their functions, when science and all forms of knowledge production are being brought into question, and when states are reorganizing their priorities. (2)

Brydon identifies the institution in question here as “the university, traditionally an elite bastion of privilege,” which “is currently in the throes of re-creating itself as a generator of patents and a promoter of competitively achieved ‘excellence’ along business models” (2). According to Brydon, “this moment of uncertain transformation” offers critics within the institution and readers outside of it the opportunity “to create an environment for a collectively creative imagining of alternative futures” (2). Brydon does not mean to “reduc[e] [Canadian literature]

entirely to its institutional dimensions,” claiming instead that “it is possible to recognize that Canadian literature as a discipline grew out of institutional imperatives and exists within institutional contexts without” limiting it to those contexts (3). Brydon identifies that “these disciplines operate in relation to established physical institutions, such as the university, research granting bodies, libraries, publishers, and academic societies” as well as “institutional contexts outside of the university” such as “the writers and dramatists who produce the literature, the media that publicize it, and the readers and audiences who enjoy it” and argues that “rather than ignore these contexts, it can be useful to study them” (3). It is, after all, still certainly possible to be professional and to act within institutional structures while challenging the boundaries of those institutions, as Brydon is also careful to draw an important distinction here, arguing that “our choice is not, as Said posed it, ‘between professionalism and anti-professionalism, but between different kinds of professionalism, and different ways to act within institutions” (Brydon 4, quoting Bourdieu 218). Kaur’s poetry, radically outside of the kind of work typically celebrated by Canadian literary institutions, provides an opportunity to question the role of those institutions, both in determining the CanLit canon and in terms of determining literary criticism’s social function.

What, then, is the function of literary criticism, and of literature in general, in contemporary Canadian culture? Brydon tells us that “defenders of literature...write as if it had the power, if not to create a better world, then at least to disturb complacent understandings and enable imaginings of alternatives” (11-12). Miall and Kuiken in their analysis of the elusive property of literariness also write of the “enduring power in human cultural evolution” of “literary response” (136). Literature and literary analysis, then, is framed as a potentially transformative force within human culture, when culture and criticism are in sync with one

another. Brydon's concern over a disconnect between literary criticism and its function in Canadian culture at large prompts her to question whether "these views of literature's anarchic force and social functions be reconciled with each other, and with the worlds currently authorized by the Canadian literary institution of which [she is] part" (12). Much of Brydon's concern comes from the fact that "while diaspora and globalization studies celebrate global flows, official Canadian discourse remains obsessed with social cohesion and integration, centre and margin, seeking to enforce a unified vision that might still contain what Smaro Kamboureli characterizes as 'a history that bursts its seams'" (Brydon 12, quoting Kamboureli 1). What Canadian literary culture and criticism need, in the face of these challenges, are "truly dissident literary texts and their sharper analyses," which, worryingly, "still find less scope for sparking discussion within dominant Canadian public spheres" (16). In saying this, Brydon does not define the criteria by which a text can be "truly dissident" in the context of English Canadian literature. There are, of course, many ways in which a text can be read as dissident in relation to the institution or to dominant cultural norms. One form of dissidence in literature, perhaps a central form in the case of Kaur's poetry, is dissidence of style and aesthetic priority, rather than dissidence in content. Kaur's poetry is not particularly subversive or overtly political in its content, but is certainly striking in its refusal to conform to aesthetic norms within English Canadian poetry.

This reading of Kaur's dissident non-difficulty speaks to Rinaldo Walcott's call for "a theory of contradiction" (20). Walcott writes that literary critics, in order to perform their social function, "require institution without form, without laws, without rules" (20). Literary criticism's social function is best put to use, according to Walcott, in service of "Canadian multiculturalism," which "might be morphing into a transliterary moment of some substance"

(19). Walcott argues that “the time is ripe for a move away from official multiculturalism and a rethinking and reformulation of multiculturalism as ordinary and everyday” within Canada (20). In making this statement, Walcott clarifies that he would “like to invoke Himani Bannerji’s term ‘popular multiculturalism’ or everyday multiculturalism, which are inextricably different from official multiculturalism,” the self-congratulatory, reductive, and nationalistic mandate of the Canadian nation state (19). Further, Walcott argues that literary scholars have a “debt and/or duty to reanimating and remaking the institutions of knowledge production, citizenship, the postnation nation, and the desire for a ‘democracy yet to come’” (23). Enoch Padolsky, in his essay “Cultural Diversity and Canadian Literature,” also challenges the mandate of official multiculturalism in literary criticism, arguing that that “the growing corpus of minority writing...has not yet had a corresponding impact on the critical conceptualization of Canadian and Quebec literatures,” a statement that is “particularly true in English Canada” (24). Padolsky continues, “the question that needs to be addressed, therefore, is what such a cross-cultural and pluralistic approach to Canadian literature would entail. What new elements need to be examined and what impact would there be on the traditional view of Canadian literature?” (25). Perhaps one “element” of Canadian literature that needs to “examined” is the ongoing, exclusory privileging of aesthetic difficulty above all other systems of value within literature.

When considering the work of literature and literary criticism in relation to multiculturalism in Canada, it is important to consider, once again, the role of an artist’s own cultural background and how that background influences the artist’s interaction with their audience. M. Nourbese Philip, in her essay “Who’s Listening? Artists, Audiences, and Language” describes “two archetypal figures symbolizing the two traditions that permeate [her] work,” which she calls “John-from-Sussex...the white colonial tradition, the substance of any

colonial education” and “Abiswa...the African-Caribbean context which, as typical of any colonial education, was ignored” (1). Philip writes that “John-from-Sussex has always represented his standards as universal, but they all – with the exception of excellence which knows no race, class, or gender – bore the trademark ‘Made in Britain’” (1). Philip writes that, in her writing, “bridging the split that these two archetypes represent is a difficult process: each represents what the other is not – each is, so to speak, the other’s Other” (1). Philip is writing from the perspective of an African-Caribbean writer working within Canada, which is, of course, a different perspective from Kaur’s own as an immigrant from Punjab. Kaur, however, has spent most of her life living in Canada, and must also contend in her own way with the spectre of John-from-Sussex, as all Canadian writers must do. Philip acknowledges the challenges that newcomers to North America face in dealing with colonial cultural legacies, writing that while “audience is a complex and difficult issue for any artist, particularly in today’s world where any sense of continuity and community seems so difficult to develop,” it is “even more complex for the artist in exile – working in a country not her own, developing an audience among people who are essentially strangers to all the traditions and continuities that helped produce her” (2). Further, Philip argues that “scourges such as racism and sexism can also create a profound sense of alienation, resulting in what can best be described as psychic exile, even among those artists who are not in physical exile” (2). Kaur, as a female poet of colour, having immigrated to Canada at a young age, faces all of these potentially alienating factors. This is not to argue that Kaur must feel alienated within the Canadian literary community; regardless of how thoroughly her writing has been impacted by her circumstances, Philip tells us that “even for those who have managed to adapt to Canada, there still remains the fact that much of their work will continue to draw on the imagery, rhythms, the emotional resources developed in their countries of origin”

(3). This is certainly true for Kaur, who draws from her Punjabi cultural background in her poetry. Kaur, in an interview with Simon & Schuster UK, says of her lack of punctuation that with the lowercase everything was equal and everything was symmetrical for me...I'm not able to write poetry in Punjabi...and I wonder what my poetry would sound like if I could just write like my grandmother might write and so I thought maybe I might not be able to write in it but at least I can take some qualities of it and bring it over...in Gurmukhi script, which is the script Punjabi is written in, there's no case distinction. Every letter is the same and it also looks very symmetrical and boxy and...the only punctuation that exists is the period. ("Rupi Kaur")

Kaur, then, is able to celebrate her cultural heritage through her poetry, even if the circumstances of her migration and English Canadian education have made it impossible for her to work in her family's language. Kaur's statements echo, in some ways, Philip's statement that "both John-from-Sussex and Abiswa have some rooting in a certain reality which faces me whenever I write – the need to make choices around language and place, both of which will inevitably impact on audience" (9). Kaur must similarly navigate the distance between John-from-Sussex and her own Abiswa, whomever she might be to Kaur.

In navigating the space between her influences, Kaur has, by all measures, found a large audience with which to engage. Philip writes that, in Canada, to say that the average size of the traditional poetry audience is small – I have counted as many as ten bodies at some readings of mine – is an understatement. The audience for dub poetry, however, has increased this average substantially. It is still, however, not a mass audience here in Canada – in that respect, rock and rap still reign supreme. (10)

Writing these words in 2008, before the advent of Instagram poetry and, in particular, poetry superstar Rupi Kaur, Philip was certainly correct. Kaur, however, has found an enormous audience for her work. Whether Kaur's work can truly be called "traditional poetry" remains up for debate, but she has no doubt found – and engaged with – a large audience. One method by which Kaur can promote a pluralistic, multicultural approach to Canadian literature through her work is by engaging with an audience in a way that celebrates her cultural heritage and communicates her personal connection with that culture to her audience. Further, Kaur is able to perform the work of that translation without conforming to the aesthetic conventions of difficulty, and is perhaps better able to do so precisely by choosing *not* to be difficult.

The non-difficulty of Kaur's poetry offers a subversion of the aesthetic convention of difficulty. This, Ajay Heble, in his essay "New Contexts of Canadian Criticism: Democracy, Counterpoint, Responsibility," addresses "the cultural, political, and institutional consequences of the kind of interpretive activity that engages scholars in the humanities" (78). Heble identifies "the dominant model of intellectual inquiry in our era," as "postmodernism," which has "monumentally transformed, by problematizing, our understanding of knowledge, truth, history, and power" (78). Heble credits postmodern criticism with "expos[ing] the constructed and ideological nature of hegemonic positions, which have traditionally been naturalized as objective, true or universal" (78). Diepeveen, however, tells us that modernist difficulty continues to occupy what Heble might call a "hegemonic position" within literary culture, writing that "because simplicity-based arguments are unrecognizable as literary criticism, some of the presuppositions of high modernist criticism against simplicity (such as difficulty) seem so natural as to be beyond discussion" (Diepeveen *Difficulties* 188). The apparent naturalness of difficulty impacts all levels of culture in the Western world, but is largely maintained by high-

brow, institutional, literary circles, forming what Diepeveen calls a “two-tiered audience for the products of art” in which the difficult is always privileged (*Difficulties* 244). This hierarchal structure persists in contemporary literary culture, as Miall and Kuiken have pointed out, despite the disruptive and problematizing forces of postmodern criticism. Further, this hierarchal structure creates exclusions within literary culture between those within the academy or trained according to the aesthetic standards of the academy, who are able to engage in difficult reading practices, and those common readers who engage with culture in a different way. Heble, however, questions this exclusionary, two-tiered cultural model, writing that “our teaching and criticism have to be connected to the world outside the academy” (82). Along with writers like Kamboureli, Walcott, and Brydon, Heble calls for a shift in Canadian literary criticism that accounts for Canada’s cultural plurality and one that moves away from a tradition that privileges the aesthetic standards of the English, Canadian, dominant majority. “Gould sees the art of combining voices, like the art of combining melodies, as a way of encouraging ‘a type of listener who will not think in terms of precedence, in terms of priority’” (86, quoting Gould 380). Heble argues that this “de-hierarchization process that Gould wants to set into motion” is “akin to the process of *cultural* listening that [he is] arguing for” (86). There is, perhaps, much to gain by listening to Kaur before dismissing her poetry on the grounds of inadequate difficulty. Should we choose to pay close attention to – and perhaps even praise – Kaur’s poetry on the basis of its accessibility, we might stand to learn a great deal about aesthetic potentialities outside of difficulty.

Canadian literature, then, has a history as a colonial and nationalist institution, one that has long prioritized the voices of the nation’s dominant cultural groups. Canadian literature’s colonial, Western European ancestry brings among its central aesthetic conventions the legacy of

ubiquitous modernist difficulty in literature and its accompanying reading practices and criteria for canonization, maintained as they are in institutions such as universities. There is a push within Canadian literary circles to generate criticism that might begin to unravel Canadian literature's colonial ties and to promote the canonization and prestige of texts authored by writers of colour, queer writers, and indigenous writers, for Heble's "de-hierarchization" and "cultural listening" (86). Literary critics engaging in this shift seek to promote diversity within the canon of Canadian literature that better reflects the multiplicity of experiences and cultural perspectives within the nation of Canada and allows writers to share those perspectives without allowing the institution of CanLit to "applaud itself for the 'progress' it has made" and without "wresting difference and otherness into a Canadian trope" (Kambourelis ix). In other words, to "move toward the elsewhere of CanLit" (xiv). Diepeveen's call for alternative systems of value to difficulty echoes a growing and urgent shift in contemporary Canadian literary criticism for plurality and "cultural listening" (Heble 86). As this growing critical body calls for new systems of literary value and a greater engagement with the non-academic world, Kaur's brand of simple, globally-accessible, distinctly non-difficult poetry continues to succeed in a world of difficult poetry. It is, perhaps, easy to dismiss such poetry as inadequate, as poorly-crafted, or as non-literary, but to do so risks supporting a hegemonic, Eurocentric, naturalized system of aesthetic value at a time when subversion and alterity are in high demand.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

So, with the history of difficult poetry in the Western world and the current state of the Canadian literary project in mind, what can we do with a poet like Rupi Kaur? Is it possible to read her poetry, as simple and accessible as it is, as valuable – because of, rather than in spite of, those qualities? Can we do so alongside more difficult works without devaluing either category? As mentioned earlier, Diepeveen points out that in the early twentieth century, “difficulty” was “a *marked* category,” meaning that it had more work to do than simple writing, as a category, had to do. This gave difficulty rhetorical strength against the dominant literary values at the time, those of “emotional expression, sincerity, familiarity, and the common reader” (Diepeveen *Difficulties* 180). This situation, however, has largely been reversed through the work done by high modernism and its proponents throughout the twentieth century. With difficulty occupying the space of the dominant and default ideology within literary criticism, there is, perhaps, work for simplicity to do, a renewed rhetorical vigour to the aesthetically simple as a marked category.

What emerges is, perhaps, a genre of poetry that is accessible to those untrained in or unfamiliar with the conventions of difficult literary modernism, but that need not be any less valuable for its accessibility. The problem with simple or non-difficult poetry in the early twentieth century is that there was not much that could be said about it. As Diepeveen puts it, “simply put, the term ‘simply’ limits the reach of interpretation, closes off inquiry” (*Difficulties* 184). This is only true, however, when simple writing occupies the unmarked space of the default aesthetic. As difficult writing has become and remains the default aesthetic of poetic writing, simple writing takes on a new context, new rhetorical significance. By writing simply, simple poets are able to interrogate difficulty’s now long-held position of default aesthetic. Rather than “close[] off inquiry,” simple and accessible poetry performs an inquiry of its own into the aesthetic standards of modernism, post-modernism, and whatever comes next or has come since.

This inquiry is particularly intriguing in the context of institutional CanLit and emerging global, popular and populist, internet-based literary communities. Considering that difficult literature, difficult poetry in particular, is so closely linked to and often relies on or interacts with literary theory and professionalization, difficult writing is inherently institutional, and difficult writing that uses certain literary conventions and theoretical, conceptual flourishes, no matter its content, is on some level beholden to existing literary institutions such as universities. No difficult or conceptual writing can be said to be fully anti-establishment, or fully independent of the literary establishment. It is challenging to truly and fully explore the aesthetic possibilities of poetry outside of a value system that privileges professionalism, theory, and difficulty while still working within the aesthetic expectations of literary institutions and writing in a way that appeals to literary professionals. Kaur, with a different audience in mind, can be read as radical, whether she means to be or whether her defiantly direct writing is largely unintentional. When it is working against the institution, non-difficulty can be read as a mode of inquiry rather than a writing style that closes off inquiry.

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