

# **A Digital Project of Community and Identity: The Work of Rupī Kaur**

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## **Inception**

This paper was written for Dr. Bruno Cornellier's Field of Cultural Studies course in the 2017-18 academic year. Students were asked to engage with a topic relevant to contemporary cultural studies research.

## **Abstract**

This essay looks at the work of poet and social media artist, Rupī Kaur, and her use of a digital platform to promote community and selfhood. Kaur's work focuses on women of colour. Her poetry uses language of support and resilience to draw attention to discrimination and silencing particular to women of colour under systems built on colonialism. By reading womanhood as connected to nature, by reclaiming the body and by constructing a digital room or home space, Kaur's project rewrites the sexualisation and the "othering" of women of colour. Drawing on the postmodern diversification of voices and the encouragement towards projects of self-identity, this paper navigates Kaur's role as a subversive agent within a wider community, as well as the functional limitations of a patriarchal and colonial framework. Primary concerns include feminism and aspects of womanhood, ethnicity and decolonization, social media and community built on personal relationships to identity.



Rupi Kaur is a twenty-six-year-old woman whose poetry books and Instagram account have become tremendously popular over the last four years. Kaur, a Canadian of South Asian descent, creates work that addresses femininity, collective identity, and solidarity with women of colour (WOC), offering a space in which these women have an opportunity to speak. Kaur creates and inhabits communities wherein marginalized women take steps to reclaim ownership of experiences, cultures and bodies. I aim to study the ways in which Kaur operates within an online network, to establish connective systems and visibility for women whose gender and ethnic identities intersect. My key areas of focus are identity and womanhood, and explorations therein; the latter, Kaur constructs around the physical body, beauty and conceptions of the natural. In my essay, I will consider the symbolic nature of this embodiment (Kruger pars.4-5). First-generation immigrant women like Kaur are made to navigate multiple femininities of divergent cultures; the landscape of experience for these women is influenced by their cross-cultural upbringing (Handa 4-5, 14). Kaur's work promotes sisterhood and solidarity, reclamation and resistance of oppressive cultural norms. I will look at the virtual "room" or "home": a space that balances public representation with private self-understanding and identity work (Sveningsson Elm 603-604; Kruger pars.17-18, 22-23). Kaur's use of language around kinship for WOC accesses and builds on "shared texts" of struggle and resilience.<sup>1</sup> Her poetry and

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the term "resilience" entails a structure of internal strength and growth on the part of an individual, within, and with the support of a community of shared circumstance. Elizabeth A. Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady provide a framework for feminist resilience that shares key attributes with my understanding of resilience in Kaur's work; this includes a communal aspect, creative work in response to struggle, and a reflexive relationship that sees the subject as an agent of their own empowerment and transformation (5-8, 11-12, 22). See *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience* for further study.

Instagram platform capitalize on a potential for development of community and identity practices that social media affords; its focus on WOC suggests the latent possibility of decolonized online spaces and media diversified beyond Western and patriarchal centrism (Handa 12).

Rupi Kaur's books, *milk and honey* (2015) and *the sun and her flowers* (2017), continue a social media project that she began in 2014. On Instagram, an image-oriented micro-blog, over two million accounts followed her poetry of resistance and self-love, as of June 2017 (Jain). A growing group of teenage girls and young women praise Kaur's assertions of radical womanhood, strength and self-love; in early 2018, her popularity saw her tour India, North America, and Great Britain to full venues (Kaur, "GB"; Kaur, "january. february. march."; Kaur, "tour update"). The positive attention her work has received suggests, in tune with an argument by Lorraine Chuen, that experiences of minority artists and writers can gain traction when they obtain a platform alongside works that default to Western and patriarchal ideologies. Perhaps the greatest realization of Kaur's project is its ability to speak at the level of individual, though it may be to a wide audience. Kaur explains "[t]he pain that all people experience in life and the light that helps them champion through it" as motivation for her writing, and speaks of a desire to "nurture / and serve the sisterhood / to raise those that need raising": singular and group womanhood is a "role" that Kaur presides over (qtd. in Jain; qtd. in Kruger par.11). She voices emotions and ideas that have value to young women, and are often inaccessible in many areas of their lives; the resonance of the female body and a lived understanding of oppression appear alongside observations on love, friendship, or beauty. The spaces of Kaur's words give these women a sense of recognition and solidarity, and allow them to develop resilience and resistance as a significant part of their shifting identities. This construction of femininity is rooted in clarity and nuance Kaur has discovered in herself and an emerging concept of womanhood; she uses personal confidence and self-esteem to

inspire and teach girls and women in earlier stages of identity exploration (Butler 8).

Kaur's poetry often shows discovery and formation as an essential part of selfhood, specifically womanhood. She seeks to expand knowledge around areas of cultural inscription that hold integral meaning, such as female fertility and the latent power of WOC; to develop self-love in these identities with the seed for expansion into resistance and subversion (Butler 175; Burns; Kruger pars.3, 7-8). She writes, "just being a woman / calling myself / a woman / makes me utterly whole / and complete," which concretely shows the primacy of the female in her conception of self, and implies the importance of naming attachments in identity. (qtd. in Kruger fig.4). As an artist on Instagram, Kaur defines the body and femininity within language of "autonomy;" she lays claim to these areas as private structures of identity, against the possibility that others will seek to dismantle these internal strengths; these are areas of focus and mantra-like phrasings that she or her readers can return to when they are questioned or traumatized externally (Burns). The feminine acts as Kaur's centre and home space; an assertion of gender identity is also one of self-love (Kruger pars.6-7, 19, 24). Kaur implies that she sees womanhood as a holistic identity, complete, central, and preceding other specifics of identity to represent her. Other selves are filtered through the primary selfhood embodied in the female: physical form, energies, and the body's spiritual connection to Earth.

Kaur's embodied womanhood functions such that, for her, meanings associated with the body correspond to meanings around femaleness. Two of Kaur's works read: "it is a blessing / to be the colour of the earth / do you know how often / flowers confuse me for home" and "the name kaur runs in my blood / it was in me before the word itself existed / it is my identity and my liberation" (*the sun and her flowers* 227; qtd. in Kruger fig.9). Kaur compares the universal woman (a cisgender form) to water, flowers, and other natural

elements (qtd. in Kruger fig.3, 4, 6, par.8); neither Kaur's ideal of a woman nor processes of nature are, here, restrained.<sup>2</sup> Cultural norms based in oppressive misogyny connect the "chaotic" or untamed with elements of the female body, including body hair, stretch marks, menstruation, and tears; for Kaur, they indicate beauty in naturalness (Kruger pars.7-8). Through this reclaiming of physical processes, Kaur takes ownership of the body. She names it as a feminine space in its natural form, as opposed to one that requires policing and alteration in order to becoming acceptable or attractive. Her attention to patriarchal representations of women and questioning of social controls gives Kaur a space of refusal in which to insert a narrative of her own identity. Her womanhood, then, is one that refuses the patriarchal voice that gives attention to the woman's familiarity with her body, insights that arise from her experience of it as her own.

The community Kaur maintains is chiefly that of WOC, through "acts of (de)colonial self-love" and "sisterhood," and which she underscores above, tied to the "colour of the earth" (Kruger [abstract], pars.7, 16). Kaur takes up her identity in a community of WOC: a group that represents her and in which she feels comforted, seen, and part of a relational language; she explores shared

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<sup>2</sup> Indigenous communities in what is today called Canada carry knowledge and a historical relationship to the land that differ from a Western perspective and from Kaur's own learnings, which may be called upon, as a vital connection between women's bodies and the Earth. Lee Maracle (Sto:lo) and the Native Women's Association of Canada characterize a relationship to the land as one of interdependence and protection, in which the body finds its life force in the land from which it comes (Maracle 41-42; "Aboriginal Women and Traditional Knowledge"). Gwen Benaway (Anishinaabe and Métis) joins the discourse as a two-spirit woman; she writes that "decolonial love flows from creation and through the land to our bodies" (130). These and other indigenous writers speak of land and body sovereignty, and see parallels between colonial violence against women and against the Earth; see these works for examination of their understandings.

struggles bound up in that identity. One of Kaur's poems, signed "*women of colour*," reads: "our backs / tell stories / no books have / the spine to / carry;" here, she underscores this fundamental connection as related to trauma and resilience (qtd. in Kruger fig.8). Kaur brings attention to a weight of racism, behavioural policing, and sexualisation enacted in South Asian and Canadian communities. Though Kaur's poetry is often non-specific in the issues it approaches, Handa articulates a possible understanding when she writes that immigrants like herself and Kaur "never quite have ownership over the nation-building process, either in Canada or back home" (14). Women's diasporic gender and ethnic identities war with dominant, white notions of others: tensions between tradition and modernity, exploitation and oppression, the weight of invisible racism in ethnocentric politics (Handa 5-7, 13, 19-20; Arnott 167). Kaur's experiences of "difference, diversity, and subjectivity" include sexualisation, racialization, and colonization. The trauma she draws on in "*women of colour*" is multiple and difficult to unpack, but a subject that inscribes a deep impression on her and necessitates voice.<sup>3</sup>

Where Kaur's poetry only scratches the surface of this trauma, research shows some specific sources to this impact. The female body undergoes a misreading that is "the very condition of possibility for physical suffering and exploitation" by Western colonialism and misogyny (Arnott 162). While there is a complicated social history to the misreading of racialized bodies and female bodies, in her solidarity with women of colour, the idea of "weight" is a broad concept that collects multiple differentiated forms of othering into an empathetic space of belonging. Butler writes that by relegating women to an alternate, "Other" space, "men are able through the

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<sup>3</sup> Kaur's reference to trauma accounts for trauma as related to her individual experiences, as well as collective or shared experiences of violence and oppression felt by women of colour, in communities which Kaur is a part of.

shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies [...] and to make their bodies other than themselves” (Judith Butler, qtd. in Arnott 163). Kaur’s attempt to assert herself within the body codifies speech as an expression of the body’s power. In the presence of a poetry created of written and spoken language, she means to bridge her identity as a woman of colour with its home, the body. The unification of the personal identity with the body takes this physical form away from the opportunity for its external othering. The speech act of the body defends that place as a source and haven for personal meaning; she makes both the body and its meaning as WOC tangible through their interdependence.

Part of Kaur’s elaboration on the body is to refuse its objectification or occupation (Kruger pars.5-6, 23). A poem published in *the sun and her flowers* describes a scene in which Kaur reclaims and heals her body, rewriting strength and feminine identity into her body after facing sexual violence:

at home at night  
 i filled the bathtub with scorching water  
 tossed in spearmint from the garden  
 two tablespoons almond oil  
 some milk  
 and honey  
 a pinch of salt  
 rose petals from the neighbor’s lawn  
 i soaked myself in the mixture  
 desperate to wash the dirty off

Here, Kaur ritualizes a practice of removing and uninviting passage to her body; she uses symbols of nature, “spearmint from the garden,” “rose petals,” and “honey,” and “salt” to re-establish claim to the body, which she frequently symbolizes as a natural form; when she states this signification here, it reinstates the voice

destabilized by the man acting against her. The lines that follow read: “i wept / a howling escaped me”: the actions chronicled here reconnect body to person as the speaker feels the pain of trauma with the use of her body; in these lines, the speaker takes up space in her body, and thus, displaces the claim of the person who touched her. Following these lines:

i found bits of him on bits of me  
 the sweat was not mine  
 the white between my legs  
 not mine  
 the smell  
 not mine  
 the blood  
 mine  
 the fourth hour i prayed  
 (*the sun and her flowers* 76)

Finally, Kaur speaks of blood as her own, which the reader can see both as a result of violence and as another element of reorienting selfhood, as it brings to mind her associations of blood, energy, and womanhood. In this piece, Kaur is declaring the physical space of her body as hers; she describes parts of her body, but does so in a way that reinstates their privacy, as hers alone unless she offers them: this text is such an offering, made from her own decision and agency. The final line offers again, in the form of seeking help or answer. It betrays a privacy not known to the reader, showing that not all of the speaker’s experience can be shared; the words also look for an attention that isn’t the force and objectification that precedes the poem, but are of solidarity and listening, and give what is directly asked for.

A second poem chronicles a ritual of self-love and reclamation, reading: “[i] lifted the foundations of home within myself” and “found there were no roots more intimate / than those between a mind and



body / that have decided to be whole" (qtd. in Kruger fig.10). Here, Kaur occupies her body, and removes other occupation with a combination of "mind and body" and "roots." Again, she uses the natural which she marks as feminine, and describes an energy and action within the body as she makes the space of it "whole" for her habitation. As well, in this poem, Kaur makes a "home" internally, and this creates safety and comfort away from misreadings external to herself. Kaur attempts to leave an area marked by colonization and to inhabit a self-made place, a body made whole by decolonizing (Kruger par. 24). The body is safe haven for Kaur because she has written it as un-enterable.

Rupi Kaur's awareness of misogyny in constructions of womanhood is influenced by a cross-cultural understanding between South Asian cultural history and racial presentation, and Canadian immigrant experience. Amita Handa notes that first-generation South Asian Canadians are perpetually seen as visitors in the country of their upbringing. Unable to fit completely into either their familial culture or the Western culture of their surroundings and peers, women who hold this identity, like Kaur, occupy a space of possibility and subversion through relative separation (14). Kaur's work enters a position of resistance against silencing, out of this space of marginalization and dual occupation. One way through which she draws attention to censorship of women is to speak against the menstrual shame; she states that:

[...] in older civilizations this blood was considered holy. in some it still is. but a majority of people. societies. and communities shun this natural process. some are more comfortable with the pornification of women. the sexualization of women. the violence and degradation of women than this. they cannot be bothered to express their disgust about all that. but will be angered and bothered by this. ("period.", quoted as published)

By identifying “a majority of...societies. and communities” as implicated in the sexualizing of women’s bodies and erasure of violence and discrimination against women, she makes it clear that her argument spans multiple areas of her cultural identity. With this hybrid identification and passage between spaces, Kaur has a personal perspective on women’s cultural positioning that is more broadly developed than individuals with a privilege of singular spatiality. Kaur disrupts Instagram’s scripts of sexualisation and over-enhanced female beauty by transgressing against the violence of erasure. For instance, Kaur connects the disgust around menstrual blood to denigration and dehumanization of women’s bodies, citing both as ways in which patriarchal misogyny plays out in social structures. Kaur undertakes this labour in order to share knowledge, but it also feeds a reclamation of her body and reasserts the strength of her feminine self. She continues her essay on menstruation, characterizing the process as “a bridge between this universe and the last” and “love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful” (“period.”, quoted as published). This affirmation clarifies Kaur’s body as the “site” of her agency; the body is, to use a designation from A. K. Burns, the primary within which the active, or the action, exists. The body is not peaceful or passive, but is, for Kaur, a space of potential energy, of creation and the “holy;” again, she provides a spiritual nuance, and seems to say that patriarchal decrees can have no authority over that which she believes is divinely writ.

She establishes this viewpoint in order to confront critiques of women from Western authorities that so frequently position them within the control or the use of men. Her goal is to emancipate women from these social strictures that bind their access to knowledge and self-created identity by overlaying them with social roles built on their repression. Kaur’s writing makes visible the “relationship between women and silence,” but subverts this relationship by phrasing the female bodies that are subject to critique as active, fertile and spiritual, giving voice to these characteristics so

as to give strength to the women they belong to: her writing gives a sense of value to experiences that have been classified as other (Spivak 82). This sense of value allows women like her to form community differentiated from colonial authorities and misogyny, with dialogues of care around femininity and growth as women.

However, the “unfixedness and diversity of femininities” makes it important to analyze what Kaur’s “contextual” ideas of herself as a woman constitute (Pilkington 192; Butler 10). As Butler argues, gender “does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (10). Kaur’s relationship between physical form and identity threaten to simplify the feminist struggle to create femaleness as intellectual, social, political, and equal to maleness, disembodied and placed in a larger interactive space. Kaur manipulates femininity in public writings, and her work is faulted in the broadness, and often, surface definitions, of its feminism. Kaur’s audience has grown vastly, and transformed from a personal project into a mass-produced object and a community far beyond her personal reach. Kaur’s work is limited in its inclusiveness; the partialities of female identity she focuses on manifest as essentialism. Her feminist outlook is hemmed into a cis-centric and heteronormative perspective: her attention is often on motherhood, imagery of breasts and the vagina, relationships with men, nature-based beauty and life-giving (fertility). Writing of the female through biology and essential beauty is assumptive of sex and gender; these gender associations are also bound up in the patriarchal and imperialist modes of representation and conflation that Kaur attempts to dismantle (Kruger pars.10-11; Kaur qtd. in Kruger par.19; Kaur 2015). By releasing her beliefs into web and mass-produced print materials, Kaur gives voice and validates women’s experiences of injustice through language; however, though her work is important and inspiring for many, the collective womanhood she speaks to and accesses is limited (Kruger pars.12-13).

On an open platform, Kaur begins with a core of the cis female self and body, and builds self-understanding and collective understandings of identity and presence in space. Through Instagram, Kaur “creates ‘alternative, spatialized narratives,’” of woman who have “traditionally been relegated” to the periphery (Kruger par.17). In the digital context, she carves space of and for identity through language, and demands a right to that occupy that space on social media when it is contested (Kruger par.17; “period.”). In relevant research around identity, Malin Sveningsson Elm shows digital phenomena as a tool in individualization for Swedish teenaged girls, where she suggests that girls habitually explore identity in the private space of the “room” as opposed to the somewhat threatening, male-dominated outdoor space. In the immersive room, a safe, female-inclusive area, girls “gather information on what different identities may be available,” and share their groundwork in intimate groups; online environments provide this type of community and identity information on a grand, public scale, though still accessible from physically secluded places (603-604). Sveningsson Elm’s room is much like Kaur’s naming of social media profiles on an online network as “my home” (qtd. in Kruger 17). For Kaur, the work in digital spaces is as much in solidarity with others as it is personal. In one poem, she writes: “perhaps we are all immigrants / trading one home for another / first we leave the womb for air / [...] some of us just happen to leave entire countries” (*the sun and her flowers* 131). Kaur demonstrates the act of broadening and practicing identity as a marginalized person, to both identify her difference and accept a diverse following. She establishes centrality of herself and sisterhood with WOC, making her space inclusive even on a corporate platform that often censors women’s work (Kruger par.4).

However, while the attempt is for communities like Kaur’s to build both individual strength and collective resistance, residing in the digital public means that the designation of home or “safe haven” is not always under the group’s control (Kaur qtd. in Kruger par.19;

Sveningsson Elm 608). Censorship is an ongoing problem in women's representation—"period." was removed twice from Instagram and Kaur fought for it to be reposted—that "actively contributes to the legitimation of the social order" (Chunn & Lacombe, qtd. in Olszanowski 84). Historically, the female body as represented through female "subjectivity" has been "delegitimized" and marked as shameful (Olszanowski 84-85). Congregating in digital space means Kaur remakes the body into words and imaging, which concretize emotional and abstract identity in language, and onto the physical form (91). "We create space as we create our bodies across digital media," says Farman: Kaur's poetry is a form that expresses the body, and remaps the body into accepting, safe, and valuable space (qtd. in Olszanowski 91). Though the process of "homing" is made difficult by social media websites' rules and censorship tactics, Kaur's art practice of the written body is an alternate form of self-representation. In centering communities of marginalized women, this work undermines the sexualisation typical of patriarchal norms and social pressures that attempt to erase the "untamed" or "leaky" female body (Kruger pars.5, 9-10; Burns). When Kaur draws the body into online space and effects that space as "home," it becomes hers, conditioned by the narrative she herself writes. By mapping the body through poetry and photograph onto Instagram, she forces that space to accept her body, and her femininity as connected to her body: she takes up that space.

The possibility of securing a homeland in the digital sphere is significantly influenced by facets of postmodernism that rose out of the 1960s. Marianne DeKoven argues that postmodern theories of popular culture see it not as a reorganization of society, but a change in the flow of information. Communication spreads from various points; people may access a variety of perspectives and ways of being, and income is available from multiple sites given unlimited possibilities for business and commercialization (60). The primacy of the popular from a postmodern angle is the "belief in creativity as a source of meaningful agency over the construction of passive,

instrumental subjectivity in bourgeois capitalist modernity,” and this effort of creativity and subversion has the outcome of enabling voices that are marginalized along racial, gendered, and class lines to be heard (69, 71).

The nature of Rupi Kaur’s work in the lens of the postmodern is a crucial question. Hannah Black brings this analysis directly into the cultural sphere of digital media in her article “Social Life”: “Social media has fused together and concretized the social. In its rearrangement of the social, or at least how the social moves, or the speed and connectivity of its movement, social media has predictably gathered together all the existing tensions, possibilities, and impasses of society.” Rupi Kaur merges a non-traditional form of poetry with marginalized cultural identity, and shares it through popular mediums and mass production. Kaur uses technology to share representations of herself and to relate these narratives of womanhood and self-love with a sisterhood bound by similar struggles, thus expanding the narrative and strengthening a community of WOC in the act of reclamation. However, as Black states, “[t]here are no technologies of the social [...], because attachment is non-technological, non-purposive” (46). Black argues that digital media brings together multiple perspectives, conflicts, confusions, and assertions in one place. It allows a greater diversity of voices to be broadcast, and people of similar identities form pockets of community in this space. As well, the online spaces Kaur asserts herself on are subject to the rules and ownership of powerful capitalist organizations whose interest is not primarily in the sharing of subversive information and building of resistance.

Kaur’s project originates in a digital landscape that affords the possibility of global network and community, and is controlled in significant, frightening ways by corporate ownership and new manifestations of capitalist production (Chuen). For Kaur, this means that social media gives her space, spreads her content, raises questions about the organization of society; but it is a work of

exploration more than answers, individual confidence and belief in self-worth as opposed to great rebellion and permanent social shifts. The new proximity of digital technology that Black speaks of affords boundary and information-crossing, and this creates an alternate space for the vital projects of identity exploration, sharing of experience, and building of communities. Rupi Kaur's project is about who she is, not entrenched in ways she has been continually seen as a woman of colour in a country brought up on settler colonialism, but surrounded by elements of her world and identity that she has chosen. Kaur's voicing of a narrative around her place as a WOC in a Western landscape replaces the narrative of other voices about her and people like her in physical space; cyberspace becomes new ground in which to make claims to her body, her mind, and the intricacies of her person (Scott). She carries racism, oppression, and objectification into this space where she can reorganize these violences and, rather than existing within the script of weakness enforced on her person by dominant groups, she broadcast these experiences and the truths she has gained from them, with the strength of her own voice.

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