Teachin' Books Episode 1.5 - Instapoetry

[Music: "Homer Said" by Dyalla Swain]

0:10 Jessica McDonald Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica MacDonald and on today's episode, I'm talking about Instapoetry.

0:23 If you spend any time on the internet, especially on social media, but also outside of it, you will likely be familiar with the form of Instapoetry, even if you don't recognize that particular term. And you might also be familiar with the names of some of the more popular Instapoets, like Rupi Kaur, or Atticus, or Lang Leav. Instapoetry is essentially a form of poetry that's published online, often via social media as the title suggests, Insta as in Instagram. It's usually posted as a graphic with text and sometimes visuals like accompanying drawings. Because of the nature of the publishing process, online or via social media, Instapoetry is often written by sort of amateur or emerging poets, who then make a name for themselves through this kind of poetry. The poems often include a name or a username embedded within the image as a kind of credit. And in general, you'll notice that the publishing structure really determines the form and content of the poems. So, for example, Instapoems are often created to look nice in and fit within the Instagrid or the Insta square sort of look, that aesthetic. Typical features of an Instapoem are hard to define, maybe even unnecessary to define, but some of the features that are often attached to Instapoetry are... These are poems that are accessible, that have simple diction, that are short, shareable, digestible, marketable, sometimes confessional, very sincere, pleasing in the way that they sound or in their conveyed image. And some of those characteristics explain why Instapoetry has become pretty big business. For example, for Rupi Kaur, who has made quite a bit of money off of Instapoetry.

2:21 So on today's episode, I'm doing something a little bit different because I'm talking about sort of a category more than a single text. But really, I'm wanting to talk a little bit about a couple of exercises that I've used when I teach Instapoetry. In part, I want to do this because these exercises have been some of the most successful ones I've ever had in my classrooms. And I partly want to talk about these exercises because I had a listener request, whoop whoop, to talk about assignments that work well in an online teaching context. So you'll see that a couple of these exercises, these short exercises that I'm going to talk about, I did in an online teaching context, when I was teaching a class, a poetry course, digitally.

3:08 So if you have no idea what I'm talking about when I say Instapoetry, if you've never seen an Instapoem in your life, as far as you know, you can check out the links to some of the Instapoets that I will put in the show notes, and then come back to join me.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

3:30 So before I get into these exercises that I used to teach Instapoetry, I want to tell you a little bit about the kind of courses that these exercises are embedded within. So these are first -year university English classes that focus on poetry. At the University of Saskatchewan and St. Thomas More College, we have English 111 Reading Poetry. So the entire semester is focused on different forms of poetry. And I've taught this class both face-to-face and online, which is where the two different types of exercises come from today. Because it's a first year English poetry class, that means oftentimes, as you might know, if you also teach first year English, students are not familiar with a lot of the stuff we read in that class and are familiar with a lot of the poets, but they tend to be familiar with Instapoetry as a genre I find and I've had at least one class or one group of students where there was a really noticeable division between Instapoetry lovers, on the one side, and then those who think Instapoetry is trash on the other side. So in my experience, really interesting, lively discussions can happen around Instapoetry, just simply based on student's pre-existing knowledge and distaste for or love of these kinds of poems.

4:55 The other thing that's important to say here about this particular teaching context, my poetry classes: in these classes, our study of Instapoetry is positioned right at the very end of the course I like to put it kind of in the last week or two of the course. And even more importantly than that, I organize it to deliberately sort of pull out the edges of what poetry can be, of what our assumptions are about what a poem ought to look like, what a poem sounds like, or what a poem feels like. So in order to do that kind of pulling apart, by the end of the course, we have looked at a lot of different kinds of poems. We've looked at traditional poetic forms like sonnets, you know, we do Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, we look at haiku and dramatic monologue and villanelle, or often just Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night." But we also look at other forms of poetry, like visual poetry from bpNichol, we talk about can a poem be an image? Can a poem be just a few words arranged in the form of a landscape? We look at Jordan Abel's erasure poetry and we I bring up the question, you know, does a poem have to have text at all? Does a poem have to be readable? We look at poems that are derived from prose found in a dictionary, like Nada Gordon's "Poem to My Enemies," that brings up the question of, can poems be made of other language from other non-poem texts? We look at poems that are a list of ingredients, Craig Dworkin's "Fact," we look at poems that are only one or two lines long, maybe Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." We look at poems that are performed only and never written down. That brings up interesting questions of textuality, whether poems need to be written. We look at poems that are actually songs or are actually music videos like Vivek Shraya's "Part-time Woman." We look at poems that are written on billboards and constructed with fire or like neon lights, Robert Montgomery's poetry and work.

7:02 So all of that is to say, the poetry course that I design is meant to, from the outset, sort of show breadth and variety in what a poem can look like, what a poem can be. So I tried to, from the very beginning, get at questions of the boundaries established around poetry, what gets counted, or dismissed as poem versus not poem. And also, why all of that matters, which I'll get into a little bit later in this episode. So the Instapoetry week is just really one piece of this larger puzzle, as are the in-class and online exercises that I'm about to tell you about. Those are just small pieces of this larger puzzle, of course, that I designed to sort of pull at the threads of what poetry can be.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

7:58 Okay, so the first exercise I want to tell you about is one that I've done only in person in face-to-face classes, and then I'll get into the online ones. So this in class exercise includes a sort of pre-class homework component. So ahead of class, I think about like a week before the scheduled first Instapoetry class, I ask students to submit to me examples of Instapoetry that they find out there online, on the internet or wherever. I ask them to submit texts that they think are relevant to discuss. And I get a range of submissions, from sort of classic Instapoems like Rupi Kaur's poems, or Amanda Lovelace's, to, you know, sort of celebrity quotations or celebrated quotations, to memes, you know, things that we might more easily categorize as means, perhaps, to digital comics.

8:36 So the question of what counts as Instapoetry and even just what counts as poetry comes up not only in the variety of the submissions that they give to me, but also more explicitly, usually in their emails. So they'll say, you know, I'm not sure if this is an Instapoem, but here it is, I'm submitting this and blah, blah, blah. So that question of what really counts as an Instapoem is something that I bring into the class once we get there, you know, what is an Insta poem? And are the range of texts that the students submitted Instapoems or not? So for this exercise, what I do is I put up a selection of the Instapoems they submitted -- I just sort of choose a representative selection. And then for each one I, you know, just put it up on its own on a PowerPoint slide. For each one I have the class discuss, and then eventually kind of loosely sort of vote on whether each one is an Instapoem or not.

9:50 And honestly, the voting part is not as important because the purpose of this exercise is not to decide or to finalize this question for each text. Like, yes, this one is a approved Instapoem. This one has been rejected by the Instapoetry committee here. That is not the point. The point is to have the conversation about how and why these texts count as poems or as Instapoems, or don't. The point is to have a conversation that identifies and critically looks at the criteria that the students have used to determine what is an Instapoem.

10:31 Okay, and then the next thing I do in this activity, after I've gone through a representative selection of student examples, I then submit my own text for their consideration. And I think this is kind of the fun part of the activity, if I do say so myself. So this is what I do in three steps. First, I drag a chair to the front of the room. Then I ask, Is this chair a poem? Then we examine the chair, look at it as closely as they like, discuss as heatedly as they like, I mean, usually it's like, haha, no, of course, it's not a poem. That's just a chair, you're trying to fool me! That kind of thing. Step two, I take a picture of the chair. Then I show the picture on my phone screen to the class, I just sort of hold it up. Then I ask, is this photo of a chair a poem? Then we look at the photo, we assess it, we discussed that question. Step three, I post the photo to Instagram, and I accompany the photo with a caption. So in the case that I'll link to in the show notes, the caption was "good chair where I rest and lay my head down." And honestly, that's

that's actually not a very good caption. If, if I were doing this, like this semester, I would pre-select a caption. But I just thought of that off the top of my head in the middle of class that day. So then I ask, once I've posted that photo with that caption, is this post now a poem? I mean, it has the caption, it has text, it has graphics. The text is kind of strange and sort of poetic in a weird and not very good way. Then we look at the post and we discuss.

12:23 This is a pretty fun, engrossing activity. In my experience, it sparks a lot of exciting conversation, just kind of light hearted. And it really confronts the students with this question. Can a quotidian physical object in front of us be a poem? Like, does it turn into a poem once I post it to Instagram with some words? Do the words make it a poem? Was it already a poem? Does the platform Instagram make it a poem? Is the fact that I say it's a poem, does that make it a poem? Or is it just never going to be a poem? It's just not a poem? And oftentimes, students will have pretty strong opinions on that. But then through conversation, we all sort of shake up our views. So it's a really experimental, exploratory activity, the purpose of which is, like I said, not to define for students like "Ah, yes, this is a Instapoem." But instead, it is to ask questions about how we decide what counts is instead poetry or as poetry in general. The wrap-up after this activity is a discussion about why these questions even matter. And that's something I'll get to after I describe the other short exercises I want to talk about in this episode.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

13:47 Okay, the next exercises I want to talk to you about are two related online discussion forum exercises that you can set up on Blackboard or Canvas or whatever learning management system you use, or you can set it up in other ways, too, online. And these exercises really came out of the... I want to say the pivot-to-digital the pivot-to-online semester, in winter 2020, where I was trying to translate some of the in-class activities I do for this poetry class into meaningful online exercises that wouldn't be too burdensome for students, that might be fun, that might be getting at the same questions and the same aims I had in the in-person classes, but doing it in an online way. So as I say, the goals of the online exercises are similar to the goals of the in-class exercise that I just described, which is to pull at the threads around the fabric of poetry, to get students to think about and sort of articulate the boundaries that they construct around what counts as a poem.

14:53 So similar to the last exercise, these discussion board exercises come at the end of a long semester in which we've already looked at a whole bunch of different kinds of poetry. And we've already thought and rethought about what makes a poem a poem. I think that organizational aspect is important here. The first exercise is this: I ask students to find a post, a graphic, another online text that they believe falls under the category of Instapoetry. I ask them to pick the text purposefully, like because it affected them, or caused an emotion in them, or provoked or angered them, or they thought it was really good, or they thought it was horrible, or it sort of seemed to push the boundaries of what

poetry can be. I asked students to have a reason. And to explain why they've chosen this specific example, this text, and then they post it on the forum. And with their post of the proposed Instapoem, I ask them to consider a few related questions that they can sort of pick which one they want to answer, or answer a couple of them, like: what was their reaction to this Instapoem? What larger ideas from the course does this example relate to? How does this example either align with or unsettle what we've seen of poetry so far? That sort of thing. So it's essentially an exercise where they submit an Instapoem of sorts, and a reflection on that Instapoem.

16:19 Much like the in class activity that was similar to this, where I asked students to submit Instapoems ahead of class. In this exercise, I get a range of responses, too. So I get sometimes more visual entries with mostly, you know, a picture it being a picture or a photograph. Sometimes I get Instapoems where there is no illustration, but the font seems to be important, or Instapoems were the aesthetics didn't really seem to matter at all. Also a range of submissions in terms of mood. So there was a lot of Instapoetry that students selected that was really sad or was about heartbreak or about lost love. But then there is also students who chose to submit satirical versions of Instapoetry, like the kind of Instapoetry that makes fun of Instapoetry. The exercise was all about studying the contours of Instapoetry, seeing where its edges are, troubling the assumptions that we bring in about this category of poetry. For example, one of the questions that sort of inadvertently, we got at through this online discussion was, is an Instapoem still an Instapoem once it's published in print? Like, can you just take a photo of a printed poem by Rupi Kaur? And then post it and say that that's Instapoetry? What about if a poem started as a post it note, but was then simply shared on Instagram? Does that make it Instapoetry? How much do the realities of where and how the poem is published, play into our categorization of the poem. These are all questions that we got at through our online discussion and through students responding to each other's submissions of Instapoetry.

18:03 The second exercise I think, is even better, if I can say so myself. So this happened in a week leading up to the Instapoetry unit, to sort of prep students for that unit online. And in that week, on the discussion forum, I had asked students to find an artifact in their room, in their house, in their neighborhood that they think could be considered poetry, just poetry. I said the artifact could fit into the category of poetry as strictly or as loosely as they like, it could include text or not, could be aesthetically pleasing or not, it could be serious and profound, or silly, or comical or emotional and affecting. And I ask them to either take a picture of the artifact or describe it in writing. And then to post that picture or that description to the discussion forum. Then I asked, in their post, for them to really make the case for why this particular artifact should be considered poetry. Make the case seriously, I said to them, as if you were truly trying to convince a skeptical observer that this indeed is a poem. This prompt received a huge, huge variety of artifacts in response, there were submissions that talked about ornamental house items and decorations like clocks and figurines, that kind of thing, paintings, pictures, but also, maybe more experimental submissions as well, like a stuffed worm plushy, a bottle of vodka, a staircase, an empty box, a letter, a Schubert album, and other things that maybe were stretching the bounds of what poetry usually is considered.

19:48 I think why this exercise was so successful is that it really gave students full permission to embrace getting experimental with what a poem can be. It helped them then work on creative interpretations, like looking at ordinary objects with a poet's eyes or a critic's eyes, or with an eye toward the obscured meanings of, you know, commonplace objects. It helped them develop skills in argumentation and analysis and critical response, because I really did ask them to make the case quite seriously that this was this object was poetry. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, to me, it became a compelling, interesting exercise where students shared bits of their lives or their environments with each other. So it was really a community-building exercise in that respect, which was important in the face of COVID and the quick shift to digital learning, and is still important now. And it's important in many kinds of learning, the community building that happens in classrooms. And I think one important part of this is that I built in the sort of protection that students didn't need to photograph the item, if they didn't want to, if they didn't, you know, have a means to, that sort of thing, they could just describe it in writing. And honestly, it could even be something made up. You don't have to invite students to share parts of themselves that they don't want to share. So, I mean, you could even be more explicit about it and say that "if you don't have an artifact near you that you'd like to share about, then you can always make one up." I think that would be a fine addition to this exercise. But at its core, this exercise, I think, was successful because it really did stretch all of our, including mine, conceptual boundaries around poetry. Like, if this is poetry, then what? If we take as our departure point that a box of bills or a stuffed worm can be poetry, then where can we go from there?

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

22:00 All three of these activities, these discussion prompts, this in-class exercise that I described to you, require a complimentary and, in my opinion, ongoing discussion of why the H all of this matters. Why does it matter if something is called a poem? Why does it matter what gets counted as poetry by the powers that be, whether those be readers, or critics, or professors, or publishers, or poets themselves? What makes this remotely important to study or to think about?

22:34 And that boils down to the politics behind calling something art versus not-art, and how worth is assigned to pieces or to movements of culture, movements like Instapoetry. So just to back up here for a second, one of the ways that I set up this unit on Instapoetry, this sort of week of Instapoetry, is by talking about how Instapoetry is bound up in these heated debates over taste, quote unquote. So it's not just bound up in debates about what counts as poetry, which is something I focused on a lot in this episode. But it's also bound up in debates about whether Instapoetry is good poetry, whether it even can be, and these debates seem to form around two positions. I'm sure many folks would fall somewhere in between these positions. But the two sort of poles are, on the one hand, whether Instapoetry is a public good because it fulfills a sort of democratizing function, it puts poetry into more of the public's hands, is available to diverse writers, and it becomes more accessible to readers as well as writers, versus on the other hand, whether Instapoetry is a sign of the downfall of poetry itself, because

(this line of thinking goes) you know, if anyone can write bad poems and make them popular, what is the value of craft or of poetic skill? So those are the two kind of positions that I talk about.

24:06 When I lay out this debate in class. I use screenshots from a range of popular articles about Instapoetry to show the sort of loaded public language that's used around Instapoetry. I mean, even today, I just was looking at the Wikipedia article on Instapoetry and a very quick scan of the reference page at the bottom of that Wikipedia entry really reflects that very language. You know, some of the titles of the articles are: "Instapoetry: The Age of Scrolling Literature," "The Legitimacy of Instapoetry: Why We Need It to Save Poetry Publishing," "Verse Goes Viral: Instagram Poets Shake up the Literary Establishment," "Instapoetry: The Polarizing New Poetry Style That is Making Poetry Relevant Again," "Poetry Sales Soar as Political Millennials Search for Clarity," and finally, "Why This Poet is Posting Meaningless Verse on Instagram."

25:08 And when I'm laying out the language and the ideas in this debate over Instapoetry's value, I deliberately position myself within that very debate. So I in the PowerPoint slides that I use for these classes, I actually use a screenshot of an old and quite spicy social media post of my own, where I call the work of one very popular Instapoet, quote, "superficial junk." So I throw that up on the slide. And I do that in order to sort of... troubling my own assumptions, modeling the deliberate practice of self-critical inquiry, I use myself as an example, essentially, to show that the judgments that structure how we respond to a work aren't neutral, like whether we see a poem as good or bad. Those are not neutral judgments coming from nowhere, like ooh, out of the blue or out of a vacuum. Because how we read a text is a product of our values and our beliefs and our attitudes because reading and interpretation is always a political act that's shaped by our political selves, by the ideologies that shape us. So these discussions around Instapoetry, I hope, can help students practice this kind of self-critical inquiry, pointing the critical gaze back to ourselves as readers by, you know, recommending or by my own recommendation that we examine not just the course texts, like the poems themselves, but also the interpretive strategies and the emotional reactions that inform our own analyses of texts.

26:52 So to get back to the question of why does this all matter? One of the things I talk about in class is how this is all about how forms of art, forms of culture, are assigned values, or are given worth. So when we declare, "yep, that's poetry," or "nope, that's not poetry," that judgment has within it a commentary on worth: what is worth permitting into the discursive space of poetry? There's a lot of power in that judgment because it's a judgment that determines what creations are worth the title of poetry, are worth something, are worthwhile. And that has material effects, especially when we think about canonization, which relates to the body of texts that are socially deemed canonical, or like the best of the best or the most important. And when we think about education, what gets taught, the kinds of poetries that are circulated through teaching and learning, what kind of poetry is authorized by professors and educators and the academy as the kind of poetry that's worth bringing into the classroom.

28:07 And another part of this equation that's important for me, if we believe poetry is or should be representative of the real reading publics who engage with it, the question of "do you see yourself in the poetry that gets taught?" is therefore a really important one. If Instapoetry is what a lot of my students are already reading before the semester even starts, rather than dismissing it, I want to make sure that we talk about it, and we learn from it, and we learn with it, and we treat it with the same seriousness and perhaps enthusiasm that we do the other poems on the course list, even and especially when that means that I have to do a little bit of learning myself, or self-critical inquiry. That's fine by me.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

29:04 Thank you for listening to today's fifth full-length episode of this podcast. I'm really happy to have you along for the ride.

29:15 This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis. And because our topic today was Instapoetry, I want to tell you about the work of Tenille Campbell, a Dene/Métis poet, photographer, and PhD student who is currently based in Saskatoon here, and whose book #IndianLovePoems reflects the style of Instapoetry in theme, in language, in form, not to mention that Tenille also posts snippets of her poems from the book, as well as from other work, on her Instagram @sweetmoonphoto. I'll link to both her book and her Insta handle in the show notes, but for now, I'll just say her poems are filled with love and with humor and with power, and with wit, and with all sorts of things. So you should really check out her book if you haven't already. And check out her Instagram where she posts a lot of her work. And if you haven't seen her read before, and you get the chance, I would take it. That's all I'll say.

30:27 Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod. And to chat about the podcast use the #TeachinBooksPod. You can also get in touch with me via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. Feel free to send a note if you have a listener request. As you can see from today's episode, I may indeed build an episode around your request if I can, if I'm able to. If you can, please rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts, especially, or on any pod catcher that you have the ability to rate it on: that really helps the show, and I'm trying to grow the community around the podcast so that I can get more feedback and dialogue and just hear what everybody has to say about teaching with literature. Okay, listeners, goodbye for now, but please join us again next week on Teachin' Books, no "g" because here we are all about unruly spellin' and teachin'.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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