Instapoets and bards of YouTube are going viral — and some poets hate that

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Mahogany L. Browne's first taste of Internet fame came when her poem "Black Girl Magic" — which she had recited in a single, self-assured take for PBS NewsHour in 2016 — found its way to Facebook.

"You ain't 'posed to get married. You ain't 'posed to want no dream that big," she spat in a two-minute video. "You ain't 'posed to dream at all." Her words traveled far, on a wave of likes and shares.

"I didn't know what viral was until I went viral," Browne says now. "As a poet, I'd never experienced it."
Poets, after all, pen chapbooks. They lecture at esteemed universities. They drop verses at poet stomping grounds such as New York's Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Going viral, on the other hand, is for drunken Eagles fans who face-plant into poles and little kids who try to lick TV news cameras.

But social media is upending what it means to consume poetry and what it means to create it. It has birthed a new cohort of bards known as "Instapoets" who share on Instagram tidy compositions that have the feel of literary selfies, often in retro-looking fonts that evoke a dusty old typewriter. And it has allowed writers of verse to reach a generation that grew up with Twitter, emoji and memes. It has turned the Coachella crowd into a promising new market for poetry.

Lily Myers couldn't understand why she was getting so many messages about her poem "Shrinking Women," which she performed at a 2013 slam competition. "And then I saw it on Facebook," she said. Today, it's racked up more than 5 million views. Not uncommon for a music video — but stunning for a poem.

It's as if social media is the defibrillator that has zapped the age-old art back to life, at a time that some feared it was becoming extinct. But if you think poetry was eager for the shock — well ...

"There was something about this that felt over-the-top touchy-feely ultra new age feministry," a commenter groused beneath the YouTube video of Myers' performance. (Commenters! One thing Robert Frost never had to deal with.)

"It's just not for me," a writer for Deadspin lamented about the work of Rupi Kaur, the reigning queen of the Instapoets — and the target of much literary backbiting. (Responding to her critics, Kaur told Rolling Stone "that just because your work is successful does not make it bad work.")

"There's a lot of negativity," sighs Sam Cook, 34, a founder of Button Poetry, which specializes in spreading the gospel of poetry through YouTube. "Poetry has been such a niche space for so long, and the people in it feel like they're entitled to decide what is good and what is bad." They fret that the artlessness of Twitter, and the heightened self-consciousness of Instagram, is diluting poetry's power, if not making a mockery of the whole canon.

"There are people," Cook says, "that think it never should have gone to the Internet."
No one riles them up quite like Kaur, an Indian-Canadian poet who has emerged as the Sylvia Plath of Instagram. A couple of times a week, she posts one of her short, elegiac poems, illustrated by delicate line drawings, to be lapped up by an audience of more than 2 million followers. (A sample poem, in its entirety: This place makes me exhausted/the kind of exhausted that has/ nothing to do with sleep/and everything to do with/the people around me.)

But Kaur's real impact on poetry has been book sales. She's sold millions of copies of her books "The Sun and her Flowers" and "Milk and Honey" — which, even three years after initial publication, scored the No. 2 spot on Amazon's bestseller list for last year, above J.D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy" and Hillary Clinton's "What Happened."

There are others, such as Reuben Holmes, a self-proclaimed feminist poet who goes by the handle "r.h. Sin." His bite-sized, pro-women works command a million followers on Instagram; his new book "She Felt Like Feeling Nothing" just landed on the New York Times paperback bestseller list at No. 15. There's also Yung Pueblo, a New York poet whose May reading at Washington's Busboys & Poets had sold out weeks in advance.

But if you look at the work of Browne, Myers, Kaur and others like them, it's largely made by women — young women — for audiences of young women. The poems are highly personal messages of self-esteem and empowerment, deeply rooted in call-out culture — taking aim at abusers, bad boyfriends and all the (generally, male) oppressors of the bedroom and boardroom.

The popularity of such poetry on social media "demystifies this idea that poetry is some high, academic art of white men brooding in corners, trying to write poems that nobody understands," says Rob Casper, head of the Poetry and Literature...
Center at the Library of Congress, which appoints the U.S. poet laureate. Its success suggests that the old guard may be increasingly irrelevant, along with its rules.

But, he adds, "A lot of first-time readers have come to poetry through Instagram poets. It gives them an 'in' to the art. Rupi Kaur makes sense in our Instagram-oriented lives."

"On behalf of the establishment, I find this very exciting," jokes Don Share, editor of Poetry magazine, a publication founded in 1912. "Poets now know they have an audience. We used to think, 'Well, there's not a big audience for this.'"

But ask Cook what the establishment really thinks of organizations such as Button that try to make poetry go viral, and he laughs.

"They hate us," he says without hesitation. "Not uniformly. Not everybody. But it's got to be very disconcerting. ... People have been dedicating themselves to something that they thought no one cared about."

And so, they turned toward themselves, and poetry became an echo chamber. Until the viral poets came along.

Sarah Browning, a poet who has for 10 years organized the Split This Rock poetry festival in Washington, said she welcomes new voices. "Ten poets can't run the literary world anymore," she says. "The gatekeepers are losing power."

But ask her about the viral poets, the Instapoets, and she begins taking long pauses between words. "It seems to spin ... in a different sphere ... somewhat."

"And sometimes," she laughs nervously, pausing again, "it intersects."

Danez Smith, a Minneapolis-based poet and National Book Award finalist whose own work is frequently cited for straddling both worlds, agrees. Smith's poems, for example, have appeared on BuzzFeed. On YouTube, Smith has a poem, "Dear White America," that has garnered more than 300,000 views.

"I'm not interested in writing short bite-sized pieces that can fit into a square on Instagram," Smith says but adds, "We're not thinking about our work in the same way. They're thinking about their work to be quick and digestible. In a more traditional sense, we're trying to build poems that people get to marinate on for a while."
Other poets who've experienced viral fame are wary that book sales may become more important than the verses themselves.

"Right now, everyone's trying to get their Instagram poet," says Browne. "That's a good thing. But if everyone has a five-line poem book on the New York Times bestseller table at Barnes & Noble?"