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An Inquiry Concerning the Phenomenon of YouTuber Historians and their Communities

Adam Buono Glazer

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Abstract

This master's thesis explores the trend of YouTuber historians and the communities they create through the use of the platforms Patreon and Discord. The exploration is grounded in analysis of three case studies of YouTuber historians and their communities. I analyze the videos made by the YouTuber historians (their historiography) as well as the discussions related to historical topics which take place in their communities. Through these examples we can see what history and historianship are to many people today.

The theory driving this thesis is that the convergence of certain social and historical factors have opened a new space for a novel type of historianship to emerge. These factors are discussed under the general categories of Media Technologies, Political Economy, and Historianship. Borrowing from media studies of rhetorical analysis, anthropology (netnography), and basic historiographic methods, my analysis of the three case studies shows that YouTuber historians combine an entertainment factor, a conspicuous degree of playfulness, a method of appeal that is largely visceral but not without empirical underpinnings, and frequent polemical content. They thereby become an intriguing variant of 'the historian'. In addition, through the affordances of Patreon and Discord, the ability of a YouTuber historian to combine their historianship with an entrepreneurial drive and a community building ethos sends their mode of historianship on an expansive trajectory.

To cap off the thesis, we consider two diverging attitudes one might take to the phenomenon, and then a pragmatic way to interact with YouTuber historians and their communities if one is so inclined.

Preface

Supervisor: Espen Ytreberg (Autumn 2022 - Spring 2023)

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Contents

Abstract	i
Preface	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
Contents	iii
1 — Introduction	1
Creating the Creator	4
Community in Context	6
Historianship in Orbit?	8
What's Ahead	9
2 — Concepts and Theory	11
Media Technology	11
Political Economy	16
Historianship	22
3 — Method	27
4 — From Nothing	32
Neglect - Ancestry - Identity	32
Afrocentrism and its Discontents	37
Animation and Collaboration	38
The Empire	41
#court-of-vassals	43
#history-discussions	45
5 — Kraut	50
The Cultural Despair of (Online) Politics	51
Do No Evil; Do Know Evil?	53
Collaboration and Countryballs	58
On Kraut's Canon	60
Kraut and Discord	64
Der Server	64
#history	65
#video-discussion	69

6 — Bernadette Banner	71
Rumps, Frocks, and High Fantasy	72
Historybounding	78
Friendship and Forgery	80
Bernadette Manor	83
#introduce-thyself	84
#resources	86
7 — Research Questions Revisited	89
8 — Historiography Reconsidered	92
9 — Concluding Discussion	97
A Frame of Acceptance	98
A Frame of Rejection	101
A Comic Frame	103
10 — Four Suggestions for Further Research	108
1. Go Big	108
2. YouTuber Historiography for Teachers	108
3. Fan Studies	109
4. Historical Game Studies	109
Works Cited	111
Texts	111
Videos	114

1 — Introduction

YouTube certainly opens a window onto human nature in the early 21st century. In just a handful of years, this vast buffet of audio/visual information, knowledge, entertainment, and whatever else, has become one of the greatest resources, and most troubling sinkholes, for public discussion and private understanding that has, perhaps, ever existed. As diverse experiences and explanations wend their way onto YouTube, and find particular expression in this networked environs, it is perhaps unsurprising that the subject of *history* has become a distinct genre on the platform.

Legacy outlets, like the History Channel, and other established actors, like History Hit, have had channels on YouTube since the early years of the platform. But recently a new trend has gained momentum. People have discovered that, if they wish, they can become historians on YouTube. For those interested in history, and who believe they have what it takes to enter the role of historian, a lack of credentials, or institutional backing, or a bibliography of published works, need not hold them back. On YouTube no permissions are required. The opportunity is there for the taking. Go for it, the circumstances seem to say.

This thesis will look at how three people have fashioned themselves into being historians on YouTube. The trend which they represent suggests a new and emerging type of historianship. To state the obvious, a YouTuber historian's approach to historianship is marked by the form their craft takes: aesthetically and rhetorically eclectic social media videos which cover diverse topics of historical inquiry. Yet it is by means of the peculiarities of their medium that the YouTuber historian enters the role of historian in a novel fashion. A key indicator of this novelty becomes apparent through what I call the *historian personality*.

By historian personality I mean this: the expression of an individual's approach to historianship. An historian personality can be active in both academic and amateur historians alike, as we will see. But in pragmatic terms, one's historian personality is largely conditioned by the times and the society in which one lives, and, relatedly, the communal environment in which one works. Moreover, one's historian personality is communicated, as well as reproduced, and often amplified, by and through the end products of one's scholarship, that is, one's historiography. For historians working in the academy, or for institutions such as think tanks (a 'university without students') or mass market publishing firms, historiography has traditionally taken the form of a single-authored monograph or academic article. This is the port of entry, as well as the key to advancement, in those communities.

The YouTuber historian, on the other hand, works in a different environment and enters the role of historian through a different door. Their historianship becomes distinct from traditional, more conventional historianship at the very outset of their venture.

Inescapably, to become a viable, let alone successful, YouTuber historian one needs adapt to the conditions of the platform environment. In what becomes a multi-modal feat of self-invention, the YouTuber historian acquires and combines diverse skillsets. These typically (and to a significant degree necessarily) include competence with prosumer post-production software, resourcefulness in research, and synthesis of historical scholarship. But as important as such skillsets are, if the YouTuber historian is to truly succeed they must also possess a certain inner drive. For many YouTuber historians, what becomes their most crucial characteristic is an autodidactic ambition and sense of initiative. And this autodidactic ambition and sense of initiative becomes evident through their entrepreneurial savviness in navigating social media.

Many YouTuber historians, including the three of this study, are doing their self-appointed jobs convincingly enough to attract and retain fans who pay them varying sums every month — now typically via the platform Patreon. Briefly, Patreon is a crowdfunding platform which allows content creators of all kinds to offer subscription based services for their emerging brands. In other words, Patreon has provided an opportunity for creators to easily entrepreneurialize their craft.

Yet in many instances, a YouTuber historian's Patreon supporters give them money not just so that they can keep supplying a product, but so that they can join their online community — now typically via the platform Discord, a popular messaging and digital distribution platform.

Through the affordances of these three platforms, a YouTuber historian can, and many do, form online communities. Their communities, in many respects, are a reflection of both their entrepreneurial successes and their approach to historianship.

To explore this emerging social phenomenon, this thesis is guided by four research questions.

1. How is historianship instantiated in a YouTuber historian's videos, that is, their historiography?
2. What does this mode of historiography look like as it proceeds through the platform ecosystem of YouTube, Patreon, and Discord?
3. How are the online communities the YouTuber historian cultivates engaging with the YouTuber's historiography?
4. What might the trend of YouTuber historians and their communities suggest about the contemporary figure of 'the historian'?

But before we move on to these matters, I want to make clear another intention of this writing. My hope is that this thesis can be of equal interest for those engaged in media studies as for those engaged in the study of history. For the latter, I imagine it might be of interest for historians to gain insight into how historical writing and scholarship is used and consumed across social media. For the former, I imagine that media scholars, ever eager to examine how bodies of knowledge are communicated in, through, and beyond an online and networked *demos*, could find interest in the YouTuber historians and communities studied here.

To press this point a bit further, I contend that any gap between the disciplines of media studies and history may turn out to be more arbitrary than necessary. As the historically-minded media scholar John Durham Peters writes: “Our knowledge of the past is a question of media”, and “Inasmuch as they reflect on the conditions of their own practice, historians are necessarily media scholars.”¹ To this I would add that, in turn, media scholars can almost always benefit from situating and understanding their objects of study in relation to an historical view. And all the better for both disciplines, to combine their expert knowledge and toolsets to think through the problems that face us in the present; problems which, in the grand scheme of things, are always in many ways historical — and now, perhaps more than ever, complicated by media.

To this end, this thesis is a hybrid, a media-historical inquiry. My aim is to analyse how YouTuber historians and their communities are expressing an ancient instinct through new media. In a sense, then, this thesis is a ‘history of the present’. Taking a page from the historian Henry Rousso, I share his contention that:

As soon as a historian accepts the idea there are no boundaries hemming in historical inquiry, there is no need to set temporal boundaries either. But this is more to beg the question than to propose an argument. In truth, this position is founded on the idea that it is impossible to establish a priori from what moment a phenomenon becomes intelligible and accessible to historical knowledge.²

My task is to try to make the social phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities as “intelligible and accessible to historical knowledge” as I can. To start our journey through these intriguing and often surreal displays and spaces, let’s consider what the commonly used terms ‘creator’ and ‘community’ can mean in our context.

¹ John Durham Peters. “History as a communication problem” in *Explorations in Communication and History* ed. Barbie Zelizer. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 20.

² Henry Rousso and Philippe Petit, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France*, trans. Ralph Schoolcraft (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 31.

Creating the Creator

The creator, for this writing, is the YouTuber historian. Typically, a creator's videos can be watched on YouTube by anyone for free. But no small part of what keeps the wheels of their venture spinning is money. To continue making their products — and furthermore, to continue improving their products — creators often must have several income streams. These might include patrons, paid advertising, and, if the creator manages to attract enough views, patronage from YouTube itself. All three of the creators of this study earn income from at least the first two of these sources.

However, there are other, non financially determined desires in the mix. Indeed, a creator might work for social and personal capital to a degree greater than that of financial capital. But though we do not possess definitive insight into their motives, we can imagine upfront that they could include a range of the human motivational bandwidth. Some creators might possess an energy for entrepreneurial self-invention, while others seek to satisfy their intellectual curiosities. Some might enjoy debate, or else argument, while others wish to form a community, or else influence others. Some might seek to right intuited discrepancies in scholarship, while others shore up established paradigms. And, of course, a creator might contain all of these, overlapping and by degrees.

However, we must note that not all YouTuber historians choose to start a community. Plenty of YouTuber historians are content with making videos, acquiring some patrons, and more or less leaving it at that. Yet as the ability to start an online community has become a relatively simple and viable option — and moreover, one that can 'grow' the creators brand and perhaps enhance their prestige — many of the most popular YouTuber historians have made community building a key part of their venture. This has become an intriguing variant of the YouTuber historian — and thereby of historianship writ large. Therefore, in choosing creators to explore for this study, the first of several criteria was that they must be of this type. All three of the creators profiled in the case studies below are, then, actively cultivating and interacting with an online community.

The second criterion was that they must have reached a notable level of popularity. Each of our three creators has found success, not just in terms of high viewership for their videos, but, in what is a more indicative metric, high subscribership to their channels. The highest of our selection, *Bernadette Banner*, has over 1.5 million subscribers, *Kraut* has well over half a million, and *From Nothing* has over 50,000.

The third criterion was diversity. While all three creators cover historical topics as their primary output, the specific topics that they are interested in, how they present them, and what kind of discussions they provoke — all of which spill into the nature of the communities they form — are all quite different. Their examples can show us a wide yet representative sample of this young social phenomenon.

And young it certainly is. No YouTuber historian that I am aware of has been active for more than fifteen years. (YouTube itself went online in 2005). Very few have been active for over ten. Of our three, one has been active since 2015 (From Nothing), and two since 2018 (Kraut and Bernadette Banner).

We have now seen their names a couple of times, so let's properly meet them. Here are our creators and what they do, in their own words.

1. From Nothing. “This channel’s purpose is to teach and discuss African history and promote its presence in the education system and media such as games, movies, and TV shows, more specifically, Sub-Saharan African history. Africa has a rich and interesting history yet it is often ignored and neglected and pushed aside as irrelevant to the rest of the world’s history. Most of the views and perceptions of the continent are largely negative due to centuries of racism as well as the modern state of Africa. I intend to change that by showing that Africa was once much more than it is today in the form of documentary style videos and animated mapping videos.”³

2. Kraut. “I try to do researched content about various topics ranging from history, anthropology, geography, culture and more and more and more. I have a long list, and yeah I actually have a list of videos that I want to make in the future. I constantly update that list and post it in the community tab monthly. My patrons then vote on which topic comes next. The process by which I currently work is to make a short video (about 12-30 minutes long) followed by a long video (about 1-2 hours long) and to try to do two videos a month. I hope you enjoy what I have made if you want to leave feedback or criticism and you want me to see it, there is a feedback tab on my discord server where I read and take note on what my audience believes should be changed, or what I got wrong, or take suggestions for topics.”⁴

3. Bernadette Banner. “Your friendly neighborhood gateway to dress history.

This channel began as a personal documentation of my reconstruction experiments, as I endeavoured to learn about the history of humans through how their clothes were worn and constructed. Electric sewing machines aren't really my jam, so I tend to take on garment styles that pre-date WWI, using the hand sewing methods and historical machinery that would have been available at the time, as well as bringing those historical sewing methods into the process of making things for 21st century wear.

Making stuff by hand tends to take a while, so between projects you can generally find me here talking about old clothes, looking at old clothes, busting some myths, exploring historical sites,

³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/FromNothing/about>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/c/KrautandTea/about>

investigating dress-related concepts, experimenting with techniques, historybounding, and introducing you to experts who continue traditional crafts.

Have yourself a snack and stay awhile, if you wish. :)”⁵

Before moving to our preliminary discussion of the creator’s community, let me divulge how I came across these three. In 2020 one of Kraut’s videos was shared in a family email chain. I was not previously aware of him, but soon watched more of his videos and became intrigued by his mode of historianship. Soon after my introduction to Kraut, YouTube’s recommender algorithms were keeping my home screen supplied with YouTuber historians. Finding From Nothing was then easy: YouTube lead the way. But finding Bernadette Banner took a more proactive approach. The YouTuber historians fed to me by YouTube were, as far as I could tell, all male, and tended to cover historical topics in politics, geography, war, and economics, though not without a good amount of cultural histories mixed in. Lacking knowledge of female YouTuber historians, I searched on Google for ‘best women YouTuber historians’, or something to that effect. An inelegant method of discovery, to be sure. But within minutes I had found several users sharing links to Bernadette’s videos on Reddit. I then subscribed to her channel. Now the videos of several other female dress historians populate my YouTube home screen, courtesy of the never resting algorithms.

Community in Context

The community of a creator can be said to potentially include anyone active in their social network who supports and consumes their works. The community could then be said to exist across all digital platforms which the creator uses, as well as offline. Many YouTubers, including the three of this study, take advantage of Twitter, Reddit, Twitch, and others social media apps. But for this writing our focus is on YouTube and Discord, with frequent reference to Patreon. These are the three platforms at the core of their operations.

Most of our discussion on the aspect of community will center around Discord, as this is where the majority of the sociality takes place. Discord servers can have both public and private channels as designated by the owner and admin of the server. For many creators, having a server with a large ‘outer layer’ of public channels, and an ‘inner layer’ of private channels — which are reserved for Patreon supporters and other privileged members — functions to support their brand as a YouTuber historian. With a partitioned server — and/or a public server and a separate private server as some creators have — the creator can maintain degrees of both inclusivity and exclusivity.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/@bernadettebanner/about>

However, with the fact of public/private channels and/or servers, we can already see that these communities are not always the cohesive and familiarizing social units that this term often conjures. Sherry Turkle, for example, has voiced scepticism about using ‘community’ to describe online gatherings such as these. She has written: “If we start to call online spaces where we are with other people ‘communities’, it is easy to forget what that word used to mean. From its derivation, it literally means ‘to give among each other.’”⁶ Many scholars in the fields of anthropology and sociology have dropped the term, some replacing it with “digital sociality” to avoid what they see as analytical confusion.⁷ And indeed, if one takes ‘community’ to mean a social unit that is, as Turkle writes, “constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities”,⁸ then the online gatherings around a YouTuber on Discord — which are typically pseudo-anonymous, partitioned, often ambiguous, perhaps parasocial, and for some areas payment dependent — do not reach this high mark.

However, other academic approaches have continued to use ‘community’, often adding a qualifier like ‘online’ or ‘virtual’. These argument tends to share an understanding that “the term community appears appropriate if it is used in its most fundamental sense to refer to a group of people who share social interaction, social ties, and a common interaction format, location, or ‘space’ — albeit, in this case, a computer-mediated or virtual ‘cyberspace.’” As we will see with the communities of our case studies, they are connected, sustained, and discussion based social gatherings, with a “common interaction format” and often with a sufficient level of “human feeling” between members.⁹ In this sense they are indeed spaces where members “give among each other.”¹⁰

They also function as something of a ‘hive-mind’. For, as will become evident below, the products of the creators are also the products of their communities. In other words, the products of the creator are always made with some relation to their community. The creator’s products — given that members of the community have helped shape them, even if in no other way than by their virtual presence — can be filled with a meaning that is especially relevant for that community.

For example, creators often poll their Patreon supporters and/or Discord members to select which topics their next videos will cover. Some creators submit a video’s script to the community

⁶ Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each other, Third Edition*. (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 228.

⁷ John Postill, and Sarah Pink. “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web.” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 145, no. 145 (2012): 123-34.

⁸ Turkle, 239.

⁹ Robert V. Kozinets. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. (London: Sage, 2010), 9-10.

¹⁰ And, as it turns out, what some communities give amongst each other are classified state documents. As I entered the home stretch of this writing the “Discord Leaks” were splashing across the news media. Real consequences indeed.

for comments and suggestions before it is locked. After the video is posted, some accept critiques and make revisions. And many creators have more on their plate than they can handle alone, and so have enlisted members from their community — or others they have met on- or offline and then brought into the community — to help with production tasks. In turn, some members of the community gladly offer their skills pro bono. Furthermore, YouTuber historians frequently collaborate with other YouTuber historians in what becomes a cross-pollination of historical interests and each creator's entrepreneurial reach.

However, in many ways the bedrock of the community are the Patreons. Bluntly, a Patreon supporter, like a patron of old, is someone who is willing to pay a creator to produce the things the patron likes. Yet on a platform like YouTube, success as a creator, financial or otherwise, runs in tight correlation with their popularity. If we take it that one 'votes' with their dollars, then patrons are something like super-delegates when it comes to electing the creator to their status. The incentive for the creator to keep their patrons happy is therefore often quite high. For if patrons become dissatisfied with the creator's products, or if too long passes without the creator posting content, they will likely cease voting with their dollars and start voting with their feet.

Historianship in Orbit?

A certain force is then at play here, perhaps one of gravitation. Creators are pulled between two orbits: they endeavour to be studious YouTuber historians who produce well-researched, even sophisticated and advanced products of historical scholarship, yet they must cultivate a large enough paying fanbase and keep them happy.

For the creator's part, these goals are not always mutually exclusive, the bargain not always Faustian. Nevertheless, there is always a significant weight in these relationships: that of the expectation of (consumer) satisfaction. Which motive rises to the top of a creator's considerations is subject to the shifting of circumstances and the particularities of their individual historian personalities.

On the part of the patron, however, the choice of supporting a creator might be a reflection of their own politics or sense of propriety: the creator might then become something like a proxy, or worse, a general commanding online troops, in on- and/or offline battles. But it might just as often be the case that the patron is simply interested in the topics the creator covers and likes how they cover them: the creator might then become something of a maieutic figure, instilling new knowledge and provoking new ideas. Either way, the patron expects something from the creator.

One obvious risk of this dynamic is that the community becomes an echo-chamber. But to keep things at this point brief, we can say that creators can be held to a variety of standards, be under a variety of demands, and interact with a variety of voices. What historianship can be like under such conditions is what we are after.

What's Ahead

In Chapter 2 we will lay out the conceptual and theoretical foundation of the thesis. This chapter is divided into three sections, where each section considers a category of social and historical factors that have been fundamental to the emergence of the social phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities. The category for the first section is *Media Technology*. Here we will discuss concepts such as mediatization and media-based collectives, as well as what some of the consequences of existing in and through a social media ecosystem are for YouTuber historians and their communities. In the next section we will consider *Political Economy*. Here we will primarily discuss the concept and practice of entrepreneurship in relation to YouTuber historianship, the propagation of YouTuber historiography, and the cultivation of a YouTuber historian's community. In the chapter's final section we will discuss *Historianship*, that is, the full package of a historian: their historian personality, their historiography, and the role of their community.

In Chapter 3 I will describe the method of approach to our subject. Briefly, in each of the three case studies our first stop will be the YouTuber historian. To get a sense of their work, we will view several of their videos in detail. We will analyze these videos with a focus on the ways in which their historian personality is expressed and emerges through their historiography, and, in tight relation with this, their overall method of appeal. After we have gained some understanding of the YouTuber historian and their work, we will view their Discord community. We will spend time in two channels on each of the YouTuber's servers to see the discussions which occur there. From this vantage, we will have a rounder view of the YouTuber historian's historiography, their distinct historian personality, and the life of the communities they have created.

Chapters 4 through 6 are the case studies. First up is From Nothing, followed by Kraut, then Bernadette Banner. These chapters will proceed as per the process elaborated in Chapter 3 and sketched out in the paragraph above. In Chapter 7 we will collect some of our findings and reflect on their significance in light of the research questions posed earlier. But as these questions and any provisional answers inevitably fall back on the matter of historiography, this object deserves further

examination. Therefore, in Chapter 8 we will further our consideration of the YouTuber mode of historiography by honing-in on what might make it unique.

In Chapter 9 we will discuss how one might think about the phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities. We will first think our way in and around two disparate attitudinal stances one might take. This will illustrate the difficulties involved in beholding a dynamic and diverse social phenomenon, like that of YouTuber historianship and community cultivation. However, as throwing up our hands is not an attractive option, we will then consider a pragmatic approach one could take if they genuinely wish to engage with a YouTuber historian and their community. In the tenth and final chapter we will briefly consider four suggestions for further research.

2 — Concepts and Theory

The ideas and objects discussed in the three sections of this chapter will provision us with the conceptual and theoretical foundation of this thesis. The theory driving our exploration is as follows. The convergence of certain social and historical factors have opened a new space for a novel type of historianship to emerge. This novel type of historianship is attended by a novel type of historian personality which produces a novel type of historiography. These novel types are highly amendable to individual expressions, and to that extent they can be differentiated locally. Yet certain similarities across individual expressions are striking. One such similarity is how the novel type of historianship is paired with an intuition that its bearer can attract and retain a community. What this might suggest about historianship on social media, the contemporary role of historiography, and ways in which the figure of ‘the historian’ might be regarded today, is a discussion this thesis hopes to provoke and contribute to.

In what is to follow we will consider several social and historical factors that have opened a space of possibility from which YouTuber historians and their communities have emerged. We will view these factors through the general categories of Media Technology, Political Economy, and Historianship. Doubtless there are others categories that could be included and convincingly shown to exert influence on the social phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities. Yet the three we will look at here are active in relation to our phenomenon in an immediate and highly impactful sense. First up is Media Technology, since without the factors that we will view here we would not have the phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities to discuss in the first place.

Media Technology

Quite a time it is to be alive! The manifold effects of advanced technologies are concatenating to a new degree and in new ways; and nobody quite knows what will come of it. However, what we can say with confidence is that YouTuber historians and their communities are byproducts of the media technologies in and through which they subsist and propagate. But it is trivial to state that YouTuber historians would not exist without YouTube, Patreon supporters without Patreon, and Discord communities without Discord. In this section, then, let’s peer beneath this surface understanding. We will consider ways in which these platforms and various other media

technologies exert influence on YouTuber historians and their communities, as well as how YouTuber historians might bend some of that influence back.

The media scholars Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp assert that even when offline the reach of media into social life has advanced considerably. To capture this notion in a concept, they argue that “the social world is not just mediated but *mediatized*: that is, *changed* in its dynamics and structure by the role that media continuously (indeed recursively) play in its construction”. So even “if we do things without directly using media, the horizon of our practices is a social world for which media are fundamental reference-points and resources.”¹¹ Furthermore, according to Couldry and Hepp ours is an age of “deep mediatization”, where the “latest wave(s) of digitalisation and datafication correspond to phases of deep mediatization, because they are associated with a much more intense embedding of media in social processes than ever before.”¹²

If this is the case for an increasing volume of offline sociality, then the degree of mediatization for those socializing solely in and through online media must be near total. José Van Dijk therefore argues that we must recognize that sociality “is not simply ‘rendered technological’ by moving to an online space; rather, coded structures are profoundly altering the nature of our connections, creations, and interactions.”¹³

With the concept of mediatization, further specified by an understanding that “coded structures” play an integral role in online sociality, we can advance our thinking of what the term ‘community’, and its actuality, might mean in our context. Thinking in terms of a social dynamic and structure that has become changed in key respects from pre-mediatized (or comparatively less mediatized) historical figurations, the communities of our case studies can be thought of as media-based collectivities. With this concept, we can acknowledge that they are “collectivities for which media are *constitutive* in the sense that [they] cannot exist without media”.¹⁴ This takes on a dual-meaning as it relates to both the creators and the communities studied in this writing. As mentioned, they would not exist in their current forms without the platforms in and through which they congregate; but neither would they take the same cast, or indeed have the same essence, without the historical media that forms and informs their intellectual interests. At every point they are reliant on media technologies, old and new.

¹¹ Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 15.

¹² Couldry and Hepp, 34.

¹³ José Van Dijk. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.

¹⁴ Couldry and Hepp, 170.

However, as the entire environment in and through which creators and their communities exist is comprised of media, indeed *is* media, it must be recognized that such “infrastructure[s] of mediated communication” are not “neutral tool[s] but bring with [them] certain consequences.”¹⁵ What are these consequences? Perhaps there are too many to enumerate, at least for this writing. But we will note here that the platforms of this study have structures and architecture, though not in the way of a skyscraper, made of unthinking matter that once built will rigidly exist for as long as its materials keep their structural integrity. Rather, digital platforms are something like power transformers that convert and distribute currents. That is their business. And as businesses, they are designed by teams of engineers as systems to grow, compete, and oftentimes surveil, alongside their most visible function of providing venues for sociality. Furthermore, with the growing role of data based practices in social media (and beyond), and how these practices can and are turned back on us, we can say that “wherever we use a data-based tool, it is already using us.”¹⁶

A creator must therefore acquiesce to the often circular, data based, algorithmic, and business oriented rules of the platforms if they are to succeed. One example of such a rule is the “popularity principle”, which is encoded into YouTube’s software framework. This principle is simple but not easy: “the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you.”¹⁷ Bluntly, YouTubers must cultivate popularity or wither. But upon becoming popular, the algorithms are likely to reward them. For, in turn, a popular creator who attracts and retains users to the platform is generally good for the platform’s business. With this positive feedback loop, YouTube itself can be said to be a patron to creators.¹⁸ YouTube is also in this sense an agent in community formation.

But let’s back up a step to see a few more of the variables that make this so. Van Dijk has identified technology, user agency, and content as the “three fibres that platforms weave together in order to create the fabric of online sociality.”¹⁹ All three fibres are necessary for online sociality to occur. But they are held to different degrees by different agents, and exert their forces in differing and at times opposed ways. YouTube’s technology, for example, conditions the platform so that even though “users feel they have control over which content to watch, their choices are heavily

¹⁵ Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 31.

¹⁶ Couldry and Hepp, 132.

¹⁷ Van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 13.

¹⁸ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 70.

¹⁹ Van Dijk, 36.

directed by referral systems, search functions, and ranking mechanisms (e.g. Page Rank). In other words, ranking and popularity principles rule YouTube's platform architecture."²⁰

Yet the three fibres do not stop at the limits of any one platform. For example, since its earliest days YouTube has never functioned as a closed system. Even early YouTubers demonstrated a strong desire to “embed their video practice within networks of conversations, rather than merely to ‘broadcast themselves’”.²¹ In the words of Van Dijk, YouTube has served as a “gateway to connective culture”.²² The same can be said of Patreon and Discord, both of which integrate their platforms with others as part of their business strategy.

What might this mean in practical terms, for those who are serious about becoming a YouTuber? For one thing, an aspiring YouTuber might be able to use multiple platforms to leverage their popularity on any single platform. For example, a YouTuber with low viewership can utilize Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to drive traffic to their YouTube videos. With growing video views, YouTube's popularity principle might kick in and give them a boost, which in turn might boost their number of Patreon supporters and Discord community members. Through their user agency they can use technology to exert influence on technology (unless the governance of a platform takes direct action against them, but that is another story).

To a significant degree, however, this is all contingent on whether the aspiring YouTuber has what it takes to become popular in the first place, whatever this might entail. A notable gulf between YouTuber historians and academic and professional historians is here revealed. In academic and professional historianship, popularity *qua* popularity is not easily accepted as a mark of one's achievement. If an academic or professional historian has not gained their popularity by means of merit as established by the norms of their institutionalised historian community (more on this in the Historianship section below), then that popularity might be looked at askance. The YouTuber historian, on the other hand, tends to exist in a more or less 1-to-1 ratio with popularity and merit — at least in terms of YouTube algorithms and perhaps some of their viewers.

Nonetheless, though the technology of YouTube can bear down heavily on the YouTuber historian, their user agency is still at hand. They make the ultimate decision of what content to create and where to set their personal standards.

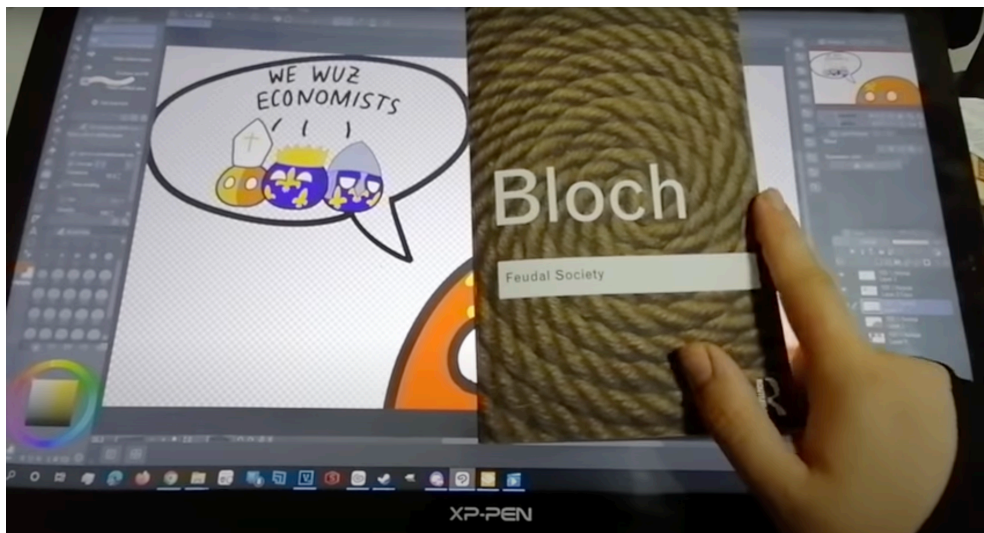
Furthermore, for a YouTuber historian to make their content, a degree of technical proficiency is necessary. Therefore many YouTuber historians might be able to talk about DSLR

²⁰ Van Dijk, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 113.

²¹ Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 73.

²² Van Dijk, 116.

settings, graphics card performance, and tips and tricks for Adobe After Effects as readily as they can talk about the history they impart. They become aficionados, not just of history but of gear and techniques. To get a sense of this, in one of Kraut's videos he cuts to handheld footage of himself holding a copy of Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* (1940) against the XP-PEN drawing tablet where he makes the digital illustrations and animations for his videos.²³



There are at least three layers in this frame worth quickly noting. First, the book by Bloch, a classic of historiography. Second, the XP-PEN, a tool of Kraut's YouTuber historianship. Third, the drawings on the tablet, a staple of his style and of broader internet meme culture (more on this in his chapter). In this single frame we have technology, user agency, and content in a thoroughly mediatized package. The technology in this case is in the form of his tools of creation, the XP-PEN and the camera he is using to film himself, and of course the book. While these are not inherently related to the technology of YouTuber algorithms, they are nevertheless used by Kraut to make forays into the environment of YouTube, and therefore also Patreon and Discord. And this bit of production related disclosure by Kraut is not uncommon with YouTuber historians. Jabari, the creator of the From Nothing channel, has made a video where he takes us on a tour of his home

²³ Kraut, "How Christianity Destroyed the Tribal Family," YouTube (Kraut, July 26, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H03H73tdh6s&t=1027s>, 23:20.

studio.²⁴ Bernadette Banner has made multiple vlogs where she has also shown off her studio, including her editing station²⁵ and filming setups.²⁶

In short, platforms are never a mute space; they are not an inactive *agora*, an inert *stoa*. When users congregate on a platform, its mediatized essence exerts forces. These are forces which are sometimes obvious and sometimes opaque. As Couldry and Hepp remind us: “Social media platforms *feel* like ‘spaces’ where, quite simply, we encounter others, but their existence is shaped by the underlying operations of platform software and its calculative infrastructures.”²⁷ Undoubtedly. But, as we have also seen, the currents channeled by technology flow in two directions. Technology, combined with user agency to produce content, charges how YouTuber’s have entered their mode of historianship and gathered communities. They have used technology to propel their venture; they have seized the initiative left open to them in these mediatized spaces. This leads us to another key aspect of YouTuber historianship in need of addressing, to which we now turn.

Political Economy

*A thorough examination of the relation between ends and means, or between duty and pleasure, will make it clear that more is finally to be learned about life and morality, even in the economic field, from the study of play and of cultural pursuits than from the direct study of economics as ordinarily conceived and in terms of the assumptions usually made in economic discussion.*²⁸

Following the philosophically minded economist Frank Knight’s assertion in the epigraph above, this thesis is in many ways a “study of play and of cultural pursuits”. As we will see in the cases below, creators tend to be playful in their historiographic work and the communities playful in their social interactions. And this work and these interactions are grounded in a cultural pursuit; namely, exploring history. Yet, on the flip side, this is play and a cultural pursuit that also exists as part of a creator’s business endeavour.

²⁴ From Nothing, “From Nothing Studio Showing,” YouTube (From Nothing, November 25, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sHe2ZCIBN8&t=200s>.

²⁵ Bernadette Banner, “A Cosy Victorian-Inspired Sewing Workroom || Tour,” YouTube (Bernadette Banner, November 23, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Psmw7cMtxh8>, 2:54.

²⁶ Bernadette Banner, “A Month of Marathon Sewing [Part 1] || Vlog,” YouTube (Bernadette Banner, April 20, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x53RSP4pnWo&t=12s>, 28:35.

²⁷ Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 134.

²⁸ Frank H. Knight, “The Sickness of Liberal Society.” *Ethics* 56, no. 2 (1946): 82.

Entrepreneurialism is a key element of YouTuber historianship. However, it is not inconceivable that a YouTuber historian could conduct their task without a financial factor in play. Indeed, it appears that some YouTuber historians begin without such concerns, lifted purely by their love of history and desire to share that love. Nevertheless, it also appears that all the top YouTuber historians — in terms of views and subscribers, but also of quality and ingenuity — have integrated a money making component into their craft. Let's then get some understanding of what entrepreneurialism can mean in this context.

A large body of scholarship has identified what is often called 'neoliberalism' as one of the most impactful modes of governance actually existing in the world today.²⁹ At root, neoliberalism is a joining of free market imperatives with a strong yet limited state to protect the functioning of those imperatives. Like any system, neoliberalism increases the chances that those who are disposed to its schema will thrive. The figure of the entrepreneur is one such type that tends to operate in harmony with a neoliberal system. Accordingly, the entrepreneur has loomed large in neoliberal thought.³⁰

Of course entrepreneurialism is not the sole purview of neoliberalism. Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurialism existed long before neoliberalism was conceived, and it is likely they will continue to exist whenever neoliberalism loses its present grip. Nonetheless, in the thought of F.A. Hayek — the Austrian polymath³¹ pivotal to what some scholars have called the "Neoliberal Thought Collective"³² — we can glimpse an example of how entrepreneurialism plays a significant role within the greater vision:

there can be no doubt that the discovery of a better use of things or of one's own capacities is one of the greatest contributions that an individual can make in our society to the welfare of his fellows and that it is by providing the maximum opportunity for this that a free society can become so much more prosperous than others. The successful use of this entrepreneurial capacity (and, in discovering the best use of our abilities, we are all entrepreneurs) is the most highly rewarded

²⁹ See, for example, David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).; Angus Burgin. *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).; Philip Mirowski. *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. (London: Verso, 2013).; Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, et al. *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* ed. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).; Quinn Slobodian. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).; Gary Gerstle. *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).; Pierre Schlag. "The Neoliberal State." In *Twilight of the American State*, 94–133. University of Michigan Press, 2023.

³⁰ See, for example, Slobodian, 234.

³¹ For Hayek's intellectual life, see Bruce Caldwell. *Hayek's Challenge: An Intellectual Biography of F.A. Hayek*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³² See Mirowski and Plehwe, et. al. *The Road from Mont Pelerin*.

activity in a free society, while whoever leaves to others the task of finding some useful means of employing his capacities must be content with a smaller reward.³³

The idea of a market driven by entrepreneurs, or even a society predominantly comprised of entrepreneurs, is one of the great attractions of neoliberalism. As the economic historian Philip Mirowski writes, with biting dark humour in light of the many Austrians and Germans who formed the core of the early “Neoliberal Thought Collective”: “the *Führer* was replaced by the figure of the entrepreneur, the embodiment of the will-to-power for the community, who must be permitted to act without being brought to rational account.”³⁴

Yet this sort of imagination has proven influential to the thinking of otherwise oppositional political groups, who have then made their various ways towards accepting neoliberal theories and arguing for neoliberal policies. From the American “New Right”, who wished to “make every man a capitalist” in a fit of anti-elite contempt for ‘cosmopolitan intellectualism’,³⁵ to leftist French cosmopolitan intellectuals, who raged against any hint of governmental “subjectification”³⁶: the idea of such creative “will-to-power” and the liberation it suggests has been a heady tonic. No surprise, then, that the perceived self-made mastery of the entrepreneur has also proven seductive to anyone who thinks they have a shot of making something of themselves as a creator with the use of platforms like YouTube, Patreon, and Discord.

But underneath the surface excitements prompted by the personal possibilities of entrepreneurial emancipation perhaps we can also detect strains of stultification. For Mirowski, so far the story of this century is

the story of an entrepreneurial self equipped with promiscuous notions of identity and selfhood, surrounded by simulacra of other such selves. It tags every possible disaster as the consequences of risk-bearing, the personal fallout from making “bad choices” in investments. It is a world where competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity a sign of weakness [...] It replaces the time-honoured ambition to “know yourself” with the exhortation to “express yourself,” with everything the bunco shift in verbs implies.³⁷

In a similar vein, Nick Couldry sees the kind of “self-branding” entrepreneurialism found on social media as little better than that of reality TV.

³³ F.A. Hayek. *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. ed. Ronald Hamowy. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 144.

³⁴ Philip Mirowski, “Postface: Defining Neoliberalism” in *The Road from Mont Pelerin*, 444.

³⁵ Alan Crawford. *Thunder on the Right: The “New Right” and the Politics of Resentment*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 293.

³⁶ Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora. *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*. (London: Verso, 2021).

³⁷ Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste*, 92.

A logic of ‘self-branding’ prima facie offers a route to voice and recognition, but each is on offer *only* on the terms that govern a competitive market of appearances. In that respect, the language of self-branding is honest, but in another respect it is not, when it forces those spaces of possible reflection, play and sociality into becoming domains for realising entrepreneurial benefits.³⁸

Certainly, in their work, play, and cultural pursuits, the YouTuber historian makes choices and takes actions, some of which are likely to be motivated by their market. Yet it is difficult in the extreme to say which of their choices and actions are caused by themselves, and which are the effects of chains of causation that might stretch back indefinitely in time, but certainly are set in motion by market factors and incentives in an immediate and more relevant sense.

To be sure, markets impose on both individuals and societies certain modes of education and selection. As the historian Thomas Haskell writes: “In the circular manner that often holds between institutions and character, the practices and traits of personality that the market presupposes as a condition of its existence, it also induces and perpetually reinforces.”³⁹ And yet, as he continues:

The market teaches not one but many lessons. Some, of course, serve the interests of those who benefit most from the market’s existence; but others cut against the grain of interest, creating, for instance, the very possibility of perceiving the beneficiaries of the market as a “ruling class,” whose authority stems neither from nature nor God, but merely from mutable circumstances of the sort that human beings can hope to understand and influence.⁴⁰

Today, angst aimed at elites and experts is commonplace. In Western democracies such sentiments have readily taken hold across swathes of public opinion.⁴¹ Yet even under such circumstances, elites and experts might still and often be afforded some degree of respect, maybe even some degree of deference. But any degree of respect and/or deference might often have less to do with the accreditations of the expert, or with the institutions they work within and for, and more to do with the high value such societies today place on knowledge *as* knowledge. As the philosopher Ernest Gellner wrote:

Modern society is the only society ever to live by, through, and for, sustained, continuous, cognitive and economic growth. Its conception of the universe and of history, its moral and political and economic theory and practice, are all profoundly and inevitably coloured by this. It is entirely fitting and natural that such a society should begin by placing knowledge at the very centre of its philosophy, and making it sovereign.⁴²

³⁸ Nick Couldry. *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*. (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 131.

³⁹ Thomas L. Haskell. “Persons as uncaused causes: John Stuart Mill, the spirit of capitalism, and the ‘invention’ of formalism” in *The Culture of the market: Historical essays* ed. Thomas L. Haskell and Richard F. Teichgraber III. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 496.

⁴⁰ Haskell, 502.

⁴¹ For varying discussions of these matters, see Tom Nichols. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).; Martin Gurri. *The Revolt of the Public and The Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*. (San Francisco: Stripe Press, 2018).; Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. (New York: Pegasus Books, 2020).

⁴² Ernest Gellner. *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History*. (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), 117.

Yet ‘the sovereignty of knowledge’ does not always equal ‘the sovereignty of the experts’. In fact, often quite the opposite. Entrepreneurs of knowledge might indeed perceive the “beneficiaries” of a knowledge economy (i.e. experts) as being a “ruling class” whose authority stems from “mutable circumstances” that can be understood, influenced, challenged. Into this frame steps the YouTuber historian.

The three we will see below are more or less deferential, at times maybe even reverent, of the experts (the academic and professional historians) whose work they rely on. Yet, as I asserted in the section above, the affordances of YouTube, Patreon, and Discord have given them ample opportunities to assert themselves, their historian personalities, in various historical discussions. There is a kind of power in this. And through their entrepreneurialism they have seized the initiative.

What has been argued so far is that there is a complex of technological forces, market factors, and internal drives active within an individual YouTuber historian. This matrix of variables and contingencies complicates any attempt at a simple story, psychological or otherwise, of how an entrepreneurially minded person might approach a market, such as that of history on YouTube. But to further help us gather our thoughts on these matters, we can turn to the scholar Tim Christiaens. Christiaens has argued that many critics of neoliberal entrepreneurialism have failed to either notice or properly take into account that across neoliberal thought, as well as economist’s thinking on entrepreneurs more generally, the conception of what an entrepreneur is or can be is far from monolithic. He writes that “An upgraded version of neoliberalism studies should thus emphasize the diversity of entrepreneurial subjects.”⁴³ For Christiaens, this is perhaps best seen through entrepreneurial approaches in the creative industries. In these fields, entrepreneurs are often moved by factors other than base utility-maximization or cost/benefit-analyses that are characteristic of degrading and manipulative markets.

Christiaens has identified four different modes of entrepreneurialism captured by neoliberal and other economic thought. It is possible that all of these modes might be active, to greater or lesser degrees, in a YouTuber historian. But let us here focus on just one: the massively influential “Schumpeterian perspective” (as in Joseph Schumpeter). According to this mode, the “entrepreneurial spirit reveals itself” by “establishing a new style or form that will dominate in the

⁴³ Tim Christiaens. “The Entrepreneur of the Self beyond Foucault’s Neoliberal Homo Oeconomicus.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no. 4 (2020): 12.

field for years to come”.⁴⁴ In what could be described as a burst of Schumpeterian ‘creative destruction’ each of the three creator’s of this study have developed their distinctive styles — of rhetoric, discourse, aesthetics, collaboration — and modes of historianship over the years of their activity. Their styles have become indicators of both their historian personality and their entrepreneurialism.

Whether or not the three of this study “dominate” the field is less certain. But what is clear is that they have found their style to be one conducive towards achieving entrepreneurial goals. A sure sign of this is that they have been able to attract and retain a community. Their communities are living proof of their entrepreneurial success. By the community’s very existence, the creator has demonstrated that their mode of entrepreneurial historianship ‘works’.

Without established institutional affiliations or directives, YouTuber historians have let their historian personality grow under their own lights. The twinned energies of their entrepreneurialism and home grown historian personality — their willingness to take the risks of autodidactic scholarship and put themselves front and center as historian personalities in an emerging market — opens a way for them to take on the timbre of a voice of authority. In other words, through the affordances of YouTube, Patreon, and Discord, they have been provided with the chance to become regarded as someone worth listening to. It is then too much of a simplification to say that their individual creativity “is constrained by free market competition, to which people are expected to adapt”.⁴⁵ Their agency, their not insignificant degree of freedom of choice — their ability to endeavour towards the Delphic injunction to ‘know thyself’ *and* the ostensibly neoliberal injunction to ‘express thyself’ — has more latitude, more in-between positions, than such a determinist view would allow. For one thing, their type of entrepreneurialism is not dependent on venture capital. They earn their creator income from what amounts to small donations from people who like their work. They are thereby able to have a more intimate and communal connection with their benefactors, often to the advantage that all involved might share in the time-honoured striving for *Bildung*, that is, deep personal cultivation.

But here things might be getting starry-eyed. To be sure, greater room for a creator’s agency does not dispel many of the concerns that writers in the vein of Mirowski and Couldry have highlighted in regards to the vagaries of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, much less to neoliberalism writ large. It only, by greater or lesser degrees, complicates them. But as these matters concern the

⁴⁴ Christiaens, “The Entrepreneur of the Self beyond Foucault’s Neoliberal Homo Oeconomicus”, 13.

⁴⁵ Christiaens, 15.

subject of this writing, we can say that a YouTuber historian is someone who was not content to be a spectator. They had something to say. The entrepreneurial aspect, as a strictly pecuniary element, might well be tangential to this side of their ambition.

Historianship

But what is it that YouTuber historians have to say? That of course depends on the individual YouTuber historian. But generally, and obviously, whatever it is they have to say has something to do with the vast territory called history. This vast territory is their market, their content, their primary zone of interest, their challenge. It is what makes them YouTuber *historians*, providing them a distinct area within the expanding space of YouTuber ‘creatorhood’.

Today there are YouTuber philosophers, YouTuber literary critics, YouTuber political pundits, YouTuber chefs, YouTuber yogis. There are YouTuber types, such as YouTuber gamers and other kinds of YouTuber streamers, who more or less do not preexist the platform. But of the YouTubers who adapt (or appropriate, if you prefer) a preexisting profession or body of knowledge to the form of the platform, they will have at least a basic notion of what that profession or body of knowledge is outside of and apart from YouTube. In ways large and small, subtle and obvious, that profession and the figures which comprise it exert influence on the YouTuber’s practice. For YouTuber historians this figure is ‘the historian’.

What, then, is an historian? An historian is someone who undertakes a sustained inquiry into people who lived and events which occurred in the past, and tells others their thoughts on them. That, really, is it. Of course the approaches taken to this task are legion. Yet historians in this most basic and fundamental sense have been around since at least the ‘Golden Age’ of Athens and Han Dynasty China.⁴⁶ However, the role of ‘historian’ did not become a profession until the 19th century — at least in the West.⁴⁷

The historian Rolf Torstendahl has identified two general senses of what can be meant by professional historianship. For Torstendahl, “In the first sense, a professional historian is one who is employed and paid for writing history; in the second sense a professional historian is recognized by other historians (the community of historians) to be admitted among them.”⁴⁸ Since the 19th

⁴⁶ See Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ For example, the position of historian in China was both endorsed by Confucian precepts and had a longstanding placement within the state bureaucracy. See Yü Ying-Shih. “Reflections on Chinese Historical Thinking” in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüsen. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 152-72.

⁴⁸ Rolf Torstendahl. *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7.

century, the communities that have been the most officious and authoritative recognizers of professional historianship in the second sense are those found within the academy. Within the academy, the two senses of professional historian merge.

However, in the environment of the academy it is really the second sense, the communal sense, that carries the most weight. As Torstendahl writes: “Professionalism has to be of an elitist character. The very idea of a profession and professionals is bound to some specific knowledge and/or skill which is not a common property but something that takes considerable effort to become acquainted with and to pick up, often through years of training.”⁴⁹ The academy has been the dominant guardian and guarantor of this high mark of professionalism. To the extent that professional historians who operate solely in the second sense work outside of the academy, they also work outside of the historian communities encamped there. Therefore it might often be unclear which standards, if any, they uphold.

Indeed, it takes a community to formulate and uphold a system of normative standards. For professional historians of the academy, the system of normative standards is comprised of two general categories. These are what Torstendahl calls “minimum demands” and “optimal norms”. Using the analogy of games, Torstendahl describes minimum demands as being of “a single purpose, namely to make clear the frames of the game.”⁵⁰ In other words, minimum demands are akin to a rule book, by which a referee allows or disallows a goal. Does the work of history lack logical consistency? Does it make claims that are impossible to verify? Is it marked by deficient internal coherence? Is it simply a repackaging of already well-covered material?⁵¹ These are common minimum demands, held by various academic professional historian communities. Often, they are basic enough to suggest a relatively strait forward path for agreement in and between historian communities.

Optimal norms, on the other hand, are above and beyond the referee’s assessment. Rather, they are an assessment of skill, performance, quality; of what makes a work of history ‘good’. Typically, a good work of history is one that is said to provide new insights. What a new insight could be will be further discussed in Chapter 8. But here we can note that, to a notable degree, optimal norms are subjective judgements. They are grounded in and are the product of a community of historians. Optimal norms are then the true drawbridge of admittance to that community. This is where the “elitist character” of professionalism really comes into play. Optimal norms can often be

⁴⁹ Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*, 12.

⁵⁰ Torstendahl, 23.

⁵¹ Torstendahl, 25.

less obvious or ‘common sensical’ than minimum demands. They can also be subject to ideological cant.

Herein we can begin to see that, due to the greater level of subjectivity with optimal norms, along these lines is where fragmentation of the academic historical profession has become most pronounced. Historian communities have bloomed and decayed, often and largely in relation to their optimal norms and how many adherents to them they manage to accrue. Herein we might also see where a community’s optimal norms survive on the strength of its powers of explanation, novelty, and other not wholly subjective features.

Together, minimum demands and optimal norms form an interlocking set that dictates what is admitted as ‘an historian’ in the eyes of the academic communities which formulate and uphold them. As Torstendahl writes: “Anyone could, in principle, adhere to the norms of the academic community and thus become recognized as a community member. In actual fact this may be difficult for those without the right background in the formation of scholars throughout universities.”⁵²

Certainly, there is often more than a little reticence on the part of academic historians in recognizing as valid historians operating solely in the first professional sense. The academic historian Margaret Macmillan, for example, tells us that “It is particularly unfortunate that just as history is becoming more important in our public discussions, professional historians have largely been abandoning the field to amateurs.”⁵³ As MacMillan uses the term, an amateur appears to be the opposite, not so much of professional in the first sense, but of professional in the second sense, i.e., academic historians, or those who have managed to become accepted by an academic historian community. MacMillan does not deny that amateurs might produce good works of history; only that for the most part they do not. Insufficient conveyance of complexities, sweeping generalizations, one sidedness or outright falsehoods — these are the sins of which amateurs are too often guilty. In other words, amateurs too often fall below minimum demands, but more importantly don’t meet optimal norms, at least as MacMillan (perhaps voicing the sentiments of her particular academic historian community) conceives of them.

The historian John Lukacs, however, saw things a bit differently. “Popular interest in history”, he wrote, “preceded the teaching of history in schools and the emergence of professional historianship; and there are many reasons to believe that it will survive them, too.” For Lukacs, this bodes well for the amateur historian:

⁵² Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*, 37.

⁵³ Margaret Macmillan. *The Uses and Abuses of History*. (London: Profile Books, 2009), 35.

This kind of amateurism — let us keep in mind the original broad and commendatory meaning of the word *amateur* — does not mean a reversion to the older tradition of history being but a branch of literature, to the older, at times admirable, at other times unprofessional English tradition of history writing by leisurely men and women of letters. It means something else: the representative incarnation of *authentic* interest in history, and the consequent difference between two aspirations: one authentic (“I am interested in history; I want to pursue the interests of my mind”), the other bureaucratic (“I am interested in historiography; I want to be recognized as a professional historian”). Of course the two aspirations may coexist within the same person; but we ought to be discriminating enough to recognize their differences.⁵⁴

We cannot categorically state that every YouTuber historian enters their role with such an “authentic” interest in history. Some might merely be cashing in on an emerging market, some might be charlatans or trolls. But if these types exist, it is likely that they do so marginally. It appears that YouTuber historians, and certainly the most popular ones, could only do what they do if they had a real love for the study and transmission of history. Entrepreneurial (in a pecuniary sense) though some of their ambitions may be, many YouTuber historians have not been able to turn their work into their primary source of income; they have not been able to quit their day jobs. Yet year after year they continue on as YouTuber historians. Perhaps they are hopeless dreamers. But this would hardly seem to be sustainable if not for an authentic interest in history. And this interest is one that is shared and affirmed by their communities.

YouTuber historians, then, suggest an intriguing type of amateur historianship. Indeed, by Tordenstahl’s descriptions, they meet professionalism in sense one: they are paid for their work. Sense two is trickier. YouTuber historians, to my knowledge, have not been accepted as historians by a community of historians. Or they have — but only a community of *YouTuber* historians, not one of academic historians. Certainly, there are many reasons for this non acceptance. But as we have discussed above, a key reason is surely that the YouTuber historian’s community is unlikely to have the same level of minimum demands and optimum norms as their accepted counterparts. But this does not mean that they are entirely without a system of normative standards.

A YouTuber historian’s community tends to be comprised of history buffs, and often other YouTuber historians. With their hobbyist passion, these community members can be erudite in their readings, and possess a notable level of sophistication in their understandings of the historical events they discuss. Put simply, they make it so that a YouTuber historian cannot get away with anything. In this way, the YouTuber historian’s community holds them not just to minimum demands of logical consistency, verifiability, and so on, but to an optimal norm of breadth in sourcing, skill in analysis, and overall communication of the history they are imparting. Taken as a unit, then, the YouTuber historian and their community are nodules of professional historianship, or

⁵⁴ John Lukacs. *Historical Consciousness: The Remembered Past*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), xxxii.

at least approaching something like it. And, as we will see, YouTuber historians and their communities glean much if not most of their material from academic historians. In many respects they thereby come to absorb the minimum demands and optimum norms of the academic communities they consume, albeit at times obliquely and by degrees.

Today it is perhaps easier than ever for one to embark on the all-too-human endeavour that is the historian's task. In the sections above, we have seen glimpses of how new means have opened up spaces of possibility for individuals to pick up this role. Affordances of media technology, notions of entrepreneurial initiative: these currents flow into the phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities in a fundamental way. But what perhaps gives the signature spark to the phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities comes down to the very nature of historical inquiry. As Torstendahl writes:

History, in its ambiguity, is engaging both as a 'past reality' and as an effort to account for events and processes, and this ambiguity invites confusing discussions on what 'history' tells us. Thus, historians are in a way producers of exactly the kind of knowledge which interests a broad public. This public feels that it also has an insight into the subject matter of history, which competes with that of the historians. No wonder that the broad public can regard itself as able to judge what would be good history and interesting questions quite as much as historians may do so.⁵⁵

YouTuber historians are historians who are *in* the public, as well as historians who are *of* the public. They embody this combination in ways that professional and academic historians seldom do, encased in their prestige positions and inaccessible to mass audiences as they typically (and at times necessarily) are.

But as the historian Ludmilla Jordanova writes, the past is “essentially open-ended, and diverse accounts of it are in the public domain, available for numerous uses.”⁵⁶ YouTuber historians and their communities offer us a playful yet often sophisticated example of one of these numerous uses. As we will see, they are a lively instance of the essential open-endedness of the past, and the emerging and novel modes of historianship this fact breeds.

⁵⁵ Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*, 33-4.

⁵⁶ Ludmilla Jordanova. *History in Practice: Third Edition*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 180.

3 — Method

Below are three chapters, one for each creator and their community. Each chapter is comprised of two main sections. The first section will focus on the creator, the second on their community. In the first section, after a short introduction of the creator, much of our discussion will center around specific videos of their output.

All of the creators of this study have many videos on their channels. As of this writing (April 2023) From Nothing has nearly 130, Kraut nearly 40, and Bernadette Banner just over 130. As space is a concern, I have chosen to privilege depth over breadth. This means that we will look at just several of their videos in detail, though we will not exhaust even these. However, through describing and then analyzing these videos, as well as considering other videos in passing, we will gain a rounded sense of their output.⁵⁷

We will first look at the earliest videos listed on each creator's channel, then we will move on to more recent works. In most cases, we will view the video that has become the most popular of each creator's output in terms of views. We will also view videos which are examples of the creator's collaborative efforts, which often includes direct input from their community. From these examples, we can gain a sense of the creator's evolving approach to YouTuber historianship.

After describing each video, we will reflect on it with a brief analysis. The creator's historian personality emerges from their historiographic work; it is expressed through their videos. This expression can come variously: via their rhetoric, aesthetic choices, production skills, historical scholarship, and much else. For each creator, then, and even for each video, we will be attuned to these elements. Simply, our approach to viewing the creator's videos is a flexible one; the videos themselves are the guide.

Yet in following prior scholarship of analyzing YouTube content, our approach, while remaining flexible to the unique elements of each video, will view them in light of two categories: basic characteristics and method of appeal.⁵⁸ In terms of basic characteristics we will note things like: how long is the video?; how many views does it have?; and basic aesthetic features like: what kind of graphics or illustrations are employed?; how developed is the production?; what kind of music is used? — essentially, what does the video look and sound like? Closely related to these basic characteristics, we will also discuss the YouTuber historian's method of appeal. In the main,

⁵⁷ However, I have watched most of the videos on their channel to better familiarize myself with each creator,

⁵⁸ Matt Evans. "Information Dissemination in New Media: YouTube and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 3 (2016): 332.

this will entail the rhetoric they use to convey the historical topics each video covers. But to refine this category, we will view their rhetoric in order to see whether they lean towards an empirical (logos) or visceral (pathos) discourse — or a blending of the two — in their historiographic conveyances.⁵⁹

When it comes to the analysis of their historiography, I also draw inspiration from the literary scholar Rita Felski. In a way similar to what Felski has called “postcritical reading”, my approach has been to be concerned less in separating “the text itself” and “the lives of readers”, but rather in “the question of where and how the two connect.”⁶⁰ In other words, I have watched the creator’s videos as an intrigued and active participant. In a similar vein, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: “All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text [or YouTube video]. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it.”⁶¹

However, as Gadamer continues, “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” So when it comes to discussing what I have identified as the video’s basic characteristics and method of appeal, this comes from my having watched each video, as Felski would put it, “less in a spirit of reverence than in one of generosity and unabashed curiosity.”⁶² My aim is not to “diminish or subtract from the reality” that is each video studied, “but to amplify their reality, as energetic coactors and vital partners in an equal encounter.”⁶³ After all, many people have watched these videos and then wished to discuss or debate them or topics related to them with the creator’s community. It is therefore necessary to take the creator’s videos seriously; to view them as historiographic works that gain their vitality from active viewing, discussion, participation.

Similar to how we viewed the creator’s video, our discussion of their community will begin with noting some of its basic characteristics. Then we will describe and analyze in greater depth two channels on each creator’s server. The channel’s we will look at are ones relevant to topics of historical discussion. When applicable, we will view one public channel and one private channel, i.e., a channel reserved for Patreon supporters or other special community members.

⁵⁹ Evans, “Information Dissemination in New Media”, 336.

⁶⁰ Rita Felski. *The Limits of Critique*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 178-9.

⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. *Truth and Method: Second, Revised Edition*. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 268.

⁶² Felski, 181.

⁶³ Felski, 185.

Our approach to describing the community takes a page from “netnography”. As the portmanteau implies, netnography takes traditional practices of ethnography and orients them for use on the net. This approach puts to the fore an understanding that “online social experiences are significantly different from face-to-face social experiences, and the experience of ethnographically studying them is meaningfully different.”⁶⁴ The concepts of mediatization and media-based collectivity discussed in the chapter above are just two reasons that point to why this is so.

A benefit of the netnographic approach is that it is highly customizable. This is necessary in order to keep up with the rapid changes of what in netnography circles is called “technoculture”, that is, the sites in which “technology consumption and culture meet”.⁶⁵ A netnographer is encouraged to consider their practice as “a piece of open source code that allows [them] to do something, rather than some sort of procedural doctrine to be followed.”⁶⁶ However, malleable though netnography is, the “nucleus” remains constant. As one pioneering netnographer has put it, “this is what netnography is: social media-related, immersed, technocultural, using common texts, concepts, and procedures. Beyond that, the possibilities are unlimited.”⁶⁷

In regards to both immersion and procedure, I have been a Patreon supporter of From Nothing and Kraut since May 1, 2022. For Bernadette Banner I have been a Patreon supporter since February 1, 2023, as she came onto my radar later. I have supported each creator at a high enough level to gain access to the private channels on their Discord servers. For From Nothing and Kraut, I have been active on their Discord servers since May 2022. Though I have been active on Bernadette’s server for a shorter period (since February 2023), I have still spent many hours there. I have downloaded the Discord app on my laptop and smartphone, allowing for maximum time with the communities.

Also in regards to immersion, as time permitted I read or listened to the history books that either the creator and/or some of their community members found inspiring.⁶⁸ Some of these books

⁶⁴ Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography*, 5.

⁶⁵ Robert V. Kozinets, “Netnography Today: A Call to Evolve, Embrace, Energize, and Electrify” in *Netnography Unlimited: Understanding Technoculture Using Qualitative Social Media Research* ed. Robert V. Kozinets and Rossella Gambetti, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 6-7.

⁶⁶ Kozinets, “Netnography Today”, 20.

⁶⁷ Kozinets, “Netnography Today,” 8.

⁶⁸ For example, for From Nothing I listened to the audiobook version of Michael A. Gomez. *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval Western Africa* read by David Sadzin (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: Tantor Audio, 2020) 19 hours and 41 minutes. For Kraut, Francis Fukuyama. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* read by Jonathan Davis (Newark, New Jersey: Audible Studios, 2011). 22 hours and 34 minutes., Francis Fukuyama. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* read by Jonathan Davis (Newark, New Jersey: Audible Studios, 2014) 24 hours and 1 minute., and several others from his canon. For Bernadette Banner, Elizabeth Wayland Barber. *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years - Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* read by Donna Postel. (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: Tantor Audio, 2019) 8 hours and 57 minutes.

were directly cited as the source material for the creator’s videos, while others had generated discussion on various channels of the server. Either way, reading these books was helpful in several respects. As the creator is concerned, reading what they read helped me understand where they were largely drawing their knowledge and inspiration from. As the community is concerned, reading history books either directly mentioned in chats, or ones concerned with reoccurring topics of various chats, helped me further immerse myself in their interests. This also accorded nicely with the historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s argument that “To understand how a knowledge of the past is communicated in an age of mass media, it therefore becomes necessary to understand something of the way in which these conventions have been formed, and the way in which they shape the stories that can be told about the past.”⁶⁹ Part of the conventions of YouTuber historians and their communities come from traditional historiography; the rest they supply themselves.

But here we can also see that our netnographic approach mingles with that of a more conventional historian’s approach. Discord is, essentially, a digital archive of correspondences. A stock-and-trade of conventional historianship is ‘mastery’ of an archive. I make no claims of mastering the archive that is a creator’s Discord server. Even a modest server can contain hundreds of hours worth of sprawling conversations across many channels. A comprehensive capturing of even the pair of channels we will focus on for each server is largely beyond my grasp — especially as most of these channels are active and the sociality on them is ongoing. However, Discord provides adequate search tools. Keywords can be searched on specific channels and searches can be refined by specific criteria. It is also possible to go to the beginning of a channel and scroll forward to get a sense of its ‘life’ over time.

Through these affordances, I have made myself familiar with the channels we will view. I have spent many hours on them and viewed hundreds of conversations, enough to spot reoccurring topics and themes. We will discuss some of these below. In short, like an historian in an archive, the foundation of my approach was simple but effective: I sat and read.

As the ‘historian of the present’ Timothy Garton Ash once wrote:

During some of the dramatic debates between the leaders of Czechoslovakia’s “velvet revolution,” in the Magic Lantern theater in Prague in November 1989, I was the only person present taking notes. I remember thinking, “If I don’t write this down, nobody will. It will be gone forever, like bathwater down the drain.” So much recent history has disappeared like that, never to be recovered, for want of a recorder.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki. *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*, (London: Verso, 2005), 17.

⁷⁰ Timothy Garton Ash. *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches, and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), xvi.

In the case studies below, what we will witness, discuss, and analyze, is, of course, not as momentous as events in central Europe during the last two decades of the 20th century. I am not suggesting we are witness to a revolution in historianship, velvet or otherwise (though perhaps a playful rebellion?). But it is now more or less common sense that whatever occurs online is ‘forever’, captured like an insect in amber. For many platforms, built as they are on digital calculative infrastructures, this is true in a significant sense. However, with the glut of information and knowledge that surges across the world at the speed of electrons and the speed of photons, for the human observer far more is missed than what is noticed, let alone understood. There is a high chance that much of what we will see below will disappear into “digital ether.”⁷¹ Therefore, the cases studied below are conducted in the spirit of a ‘history of the present’. The whole of my method is geared to better view how communities of people are exploring history, in the present.

A note on ethics: The research for this thesis has been conducted in accordance with the guidelines set forth by Sikt (the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research). What this means for our context is that I have not collected any personal data, neither in the text of this thesis nor in my research notes. Furthermore, to protect the privacy of the individuals I have studied, the only names that will appear are those of the YouTuber historians — and here only the names they have chosen to use on social media. No names of Patreon supporters and Discord members will appear in this writing, including usernames. In addition, I have paraphrased the conversations I witnessed on Discord and have never quoted them directly. Only approximate dates are given for the timing of these conversations.

⁷¹ Anthony Patterson and Rachel Ashman. “Getting Up-Close and Personal with Influencers: The Promises and Pitfalls of Intimate Netnography” in *Netnography Unlimited: Understanding Technoculture Using Qualitative Social Media Research* ed. Robert V. Kozinets and Rossella Gambetti, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 245.

4 — From Nothing

“Greetings, denizens of the empire. It’s Jabari here.” So begins a typical video from the YouTube channel From Nothing. The empire to which we are greeted is “a haven for history buffs to come together and include Africa into the beautiful history of mankind.”⁷² The channel’s creator, Jabari, is an American of African descent with a passion for learning, sharing, and discussing the diverse and all-too-often neglected histories of the African continent. It is in part from this historical neglect that we can understand Jabari’s impetus to create From Nothing, as well as the meaning behind the channel’s name: Jabari often sign-off his videos by saying “and always remember: we don’t come from nothing.”

Neglect - Ancestry - Identity

“Black History Before Slavery”,⁷³ the earliest video on the From Nothing channel, and the first of a two-part series, is a roughly eight minute personal statement from Jabari. This video has been viewed over 130,000 times and, despite its spartan production, it remains one of the channel’s most popular.

The video begins with a quick greeting then gets right to the point. Jabari states: “This video revolves around my history as a black American, and how I am basically taught my history, as well as how most other black Americans are taught their history, and what they think of themselves.”

The aesthetics throughout this video are kept to a minimum. What we see is a slideshow of images, with a song from the soundtrack to the film *Blood Diamond* (2006) underscoring Jabari’s voice. The images follow and illustrate whatever Jabari is saying in a more or less a 1-to-1 representation of his statements. So, for example, as Jabari states the opening lines we see a picture of black schoolchildren reading in a classroom, perhaps in the 1950s or ‘60s. The imagery serves as visual reinforcement to his spoken words in something of a pedagogic manner. Due to the spartan visuals in this video, I will focus less on what we see and more on what Jabari says.

After his opening lines, Jabari continues:

So unfortunately in most Western countries, black people are usually the minority, and they are usually taught that their history began at slavery. And obviously that was a little bit of an exaggeration, you know, we don’t sit in the classroom and have some white dude walk up to us and say ‘your history began at slavery’, but, that is what we are taught. We’re taught that - we’re not taught that anything

⁷² <https://www.fromnothing.info/forum>

⁷³ From Nothing, “Black History before Slavery?”, YouTube, April 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LRZjwCINY>.

happened before slavery, we're just taught what happened during slavery, and what happened after slavery, and that's about it.

Furthermore, from Jabari's perspective, people typically refer to Africa simplistically and reductively as just 'Africa', despite the continent being the second largest on Earth in terms of both landmass and population.

Jabari continues, telling us that "If something comes out of France, you're not going to say 'it's European,' you're going to say 'it's French.' If you eat some really good chocolate, you're going to say 'this is German chocolate,' you're not going to say 'this is European chocolate.'" Jabari then sets up a potential future video, saying he will explore why this disparity is the case. But he lets it suffice in this video to state that part of this disparity is due to slavery, an institution which did much to annihilate identity, as well as European colonization in the 18th/19th centuries, often known as the 'scramble for Africa'. As Jabari sees it, these historical events have led many in the African diaspora to not really care where they came from, "because most of the time we think that we came from some very poor tribe in the middle of the jungle that danced around fires nightly."

Having now set up what he sees as some of the major problems facing understandings of Africa and African history, Jabari pivots back to his personal experiences:

Throughout my time on this Earth, I've always been very into history. Anytime there was a movie with a knight or a samurai, any sword fighting, any bows, any archery, I was all over it. I wanted to see it. I was interested. If it was a game I wanted to play it, if it was a movie I wanted to watch it. As I got older, I started to think, why - why don't I ever see Africans represented in these types of things? why don't I ever see the beauty of mankind and their history represented from Africa? why is it always Asia or Europe that has to represent these really amazing things that human beings have done in the past? At this point, I was about 13 or 14 years old, and I thought that Africans were a bunch of stone age primitives who wore loincloths and accomplished nothing more than a neolithic level of technology. Over time, these views quickly changed and made me very, very, very interested in the history of Africa...

Jabari tells us that this interest "compelled" him to create an account on ancestry.com, to "at least trace back the American portion of my lineage".

Upon taking a genetic test and receiving the results he says that "Overall, it was an extremely exciting experience." We are then shown the results of Jabari's genetic test. We see that he is 90% African. But specifically the test suggested that he is 23% from the Mali area, 21% from the Cameroon/Congo area, 16% from the Nigeria area, 10% from the Benin/Togo area, another 10% from the Ivory Coast/Ghana area, and trace percentages from other regions of sub-Saharan Africa.⁷⁴

Jabari tells us that he is excited, because these are regions and peoples that he has researched, and he has a deep interest in their histories. He says that he intends to make videos on

⁷⁴ There are percentages from Europe as well, but this is not the focus for Jabari here.

all of the peoples of these regions. But, “for the sake of not making this video too lengthy” he will now talk only a bit about Mali.

Believe it or not, Mali actually has one of the longest, extensive, well-documented, and recorded histories out of any other sub-Saharan African nation, Ethiopia being another one of the big contenders. Contrary to what most people teach about sub-Saharan Africans, the Malians were actually literate. They have thousands upon thousands of books, actually many being discovered today dating back to the 1200s.

He shows us a few pictures of what are ostensibly some historic books of Mali, and explains that these manuscripts covered everything from recipes for food, to mathematics, astronomy, and “even texts from famous Greek and Roman writers”. Jabari tells us that Mali was also home to Mansā Mūsā, who at one point was the richest person on the planet. Mansā Mūsā famously gave away fantastic amounts of gold while on *hajj* to Mecca in the 1320s. So much gold did he give away that the economy of the Mediterranean was “left in shambles” due to a sharp drop in the price of the yellow metal. In short, “The accomplishment of this kingdom and its rulers put West Africa on the map, literally.” To drive this point home we are shown the iconic image of Mansā Mūsā as depicted in the Catalan Atlas (though we are not told that what we are seeing is the Catalan Atlas). The video ends on this image of Mūsā, as text is superimposed on top telling us to “Stay tuned for Part II”, and Jabari thanks us for watching the video.⁷⁵

From this first video one can immediately sense Jabari’s passion and enthusiasm for African history. His tone, though predominantly calm throughout, noticeably ramps up when he starts to relay information about medieval Mali. But in relation to his passionate enthusiasm, we can also sense a desire for a personal connection to the history; and relatedly, a desire for self-discovery. His method of appeal therefore incorporates empirical elements, but for a largely visceral orientation.

For Jabari, his personal connection and sense of discovery comes most explicitly from ancestry. A relation to history at the level of genetics can understandably become all the more compelling for those who, like Jabari has articulated in this first video, feel that the histories of their ancestors have been inadequately studied or understood, and are generally felt to lack representation in the culture at large.

⁷⁵ I will note here that he signs off these first two videos — both of which are from 2015 — using a different name and a different channel title: Human Behaviours. But by the third oldest video on the From Nothing channel — “Top 5 Reasons Why Afrocentric People are Toxic (from a black perspective)” from 2017 — he uses the name Jabari and the From Nothing channel title.

Jabari has made at least two subsequent videos, one in 2019⁷⁶ and another in 2020,⁷⁷ dedicated to discussing the results of his ancestry.com test as such. In these videos, he reviews the updates ancestry.com has made to his profile. He has expressed his thoughts on the changes to his ancestry percentages with piqued interest and good-humour. Yet he has also received a wave of negative comments attacking his reliance on ancestry.com. He therefore made a follow-up video in 2020⁷⁸ discussing the validity of — and ultimately defending — genetic tests in general.

There is much more to say about ancestry, genetic testing, and Jabari’s approach to these matters. But what will suffice for this writing is to note that Jabari launched his foray into historianship in large part via his ancestry. I know of no other YouTuber historian who has approached their venture in this way.

Part II of “Black History Before Slavery”⁷⁹ contains the same spare aesthetics as Part I, and has roughly the same runtime. The video begins with images of Jabari’s ancestry test results, but the focus now is on relaying historical info about some of the other ethnic groups in his genome. He does this in the same way as in Part I: listing facts and showing images to illustrate what he has said.

In this video Jabari covers Mali, the Kingdom of Kongo, and Nigeria. After telling us a bit more about medieval Mali, then about the Kongo — with much focus on their chequered relationship with the Portuguese — he tells us about Nigeria:

Nigeria historically has been one of the most ethnically diverse as well as highly populated areas in the world. Out of all these ethnic groups, the largest and most influential have been the Hausa, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. Historically, the Hausa practiced the Islam faith, and were divided into many loosely centralized states. These states would later be conquered by Fulani invaders, and annexed into the Sokoto Caliphate. Like the Malian Empire, the Hausa states were known for being very literate, as were most other Muslim countries at the time. The Hausa were also known for their full body armour.

We see a picture of several men wearing this colourful armour — “which consisted of thick layers of padded cotton” — atop horses which are also kitted-out. After this brief exposition on the Hausa, Jabari shifts to the Igbo. He tells us a bit about them and their role in the Nri Kingdom, as well as in the Nigerian-Biafran war.

⁷⁶ From Nothing, “How African Are African-Americans?,” YouTube, March 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjYtyQrL8N4&list=PLivC9TMdGnL_d4wrOkn1vsLwtvZEsGVms&index=4.

⁷⁷ From Nothing, “DNA Results Updated with Surprising Results!,” YouTube, July 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_kF70Szd_o&list=PLivC9TMdGnL_d4wrOkn1vsLwtvZEsGVms&index=3.

⁷⁸ From Nothing, “How Reliable Is a DNA Test?,” YouTube, August 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIXoWJw8QTI&list=PLivC9TMdGnL_d4wrOkn1vsLwtvZEsGVms&index=2.

⁷⁹ From Nothing. “Black History before Slavery? Part II.” YouTube, May 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53M9Yuv--zk>.

In this video — and, indeed, in all of Jabari’s videos — he uses a conversational style of report. His speech sounds largely unscripted; it feels organic and spontaneous. In large part due to his casual rhetoric, Jabari comes across as fluid and personal. Moreover, he comes across as eminently relatable. He gives the viewership of his videos general items of historical interest to consider, and does so in an approachable and unpretentious manner.

But though this particular video’s mode favours listing the general over the specific, via the few specifics Jabari does choose to mention, we can see glimpses of his personal interests coming to the fore. For example, when mentioning the Hausa, the detail he chooses to focus on is Hausa armour. The Hausa are indeed known for a rich textile culture and tradition; what scholars have denoted as a distinct “Hausa-style” has proven durable.⁸⁰ Yet it is not the general Hausa-style that Jabari describes — which he doesn’t mention at all — but their armour.

Jabari has made another video dedicated to African armour, “Did Africans Warriors Wear Armor?”⁸¹ from 2020. This video also features Hausa armour, among the armouring techniques of several other African peoples. He has also made a series on African weapons, which he began in 2020 and continued into 2022. These videos are among his most popular, particularly the one on African armour which has nearly 77,000 views.

Though Jabari covers diverse aspects of African history — indeed, on balance the majority of what he covers is not about weapons, armour, or warfare — this theme is nonetheless one that he returns to. He thereby positions himself as a generalist in African history, but something of a specialist when it comes to African arms, armour, and warfare. This aspect becomes a key feature of his personality as a historian. As we will see, it is also one shared by members of his community.

Jabari has not shared the sources for either of the parts of this series. We are then unable to assess them on the basis of his choices of scholarship, as well as to the degree of his adherence to, or synthesis of, that scholarship. But what we can see is that, with these first videos, Jabari has compiled a bundle of information, then cast it into the commons of YouTube. Even with these early videos, he was able to generate a level of interest in both African history and himself as a YouTuber historian of that history.

⁸⁰ Sarah Worden. “Clothing and Identity: How Can Museum Collections of Hausa Textiles Contribute to Understanding the Notion of Hausa Identity?” in *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* ed. Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 232.

⁸¹ From Nothing, “Did African Warriors Wear Armor?,” YouTube, March 31, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bHp8Zef4RI&t=260s>.

“Top 5 Reasons Why Afrocentric People are Toxic (from a black perspective)”⁸² is the third video on the From Nothing channel. It has been viewed over 117,000 times, making it another of the channel’s most popular offerings. In this video we can see how Jabari, at the outset of his YouTuber historian career, responded to criticism. But the criticism he is responding to here is not of the constructive kind. The criticism Jabari felt he must make a video to address is what he describes as Afrocentrism.

Near the start of the video, Jabari tells us: “Just to warn you guys ahead of time, this is gonna be somewhat, not completely, but somewhat of a rant video.” He continues,

If you are a regular, you probably already know that my agenda with this channel is to spread knowledge of ignored, neglected, and misunderstood aspects of black culture and history. Not just to black people, but to everyone of every race and from every part of the world. However, there tends to be a toxic trend among many black African enthusiasts, or Afrocentrists, trying to assert outrageous claims towards our people, and our history. Unfortunately, comments like these tend to find a home in my comments section, every day. These comments do more harm than good, and to make the world, and our own people, have even less respect for our culture and history, and make channels like mine, which actually bear factual information, less credible. Especially to random viewers, who come here seeking knowledge.

He shows us a screenshot of one of these comments. Indeed, the commenter seems to be making a conspiracy laden point regarding blacks and indigenous Americans. But the next screenshot Jabari shows us is that of a commenter thanking him for making his videos, to clear up their own confusion regarding African history. Jabari says that “random viewers” who come across his channel are so “shrouded” with “psuedo-historic, Afrocentric information that they don’t even know what to believe anymore.”

Due to this, Jabari has made this video to go on the offensive against Afrocentrists. He does so by telling us five things “that annoy me the most about Afrocentric people.” The video counts down from five to one of what Jabari sees as some of the most problematic aspects of Afrocentrism. These are: 5) “Acting as if theres a global conspiracy”, 4) “Using the Bible and religion as a tool”, 3) “Egypt and Nubia are the only parts of African history worth mentioning”, 2) “Trying to steal the history of others”, and 1) “Fighting racism with racism.”

Jabari expounds on these five aspects of what he considers Afrocentrism, and finishes by telling us:

⁸² From Nothing, “Top 5 Reasons Why Afrocentric People Are Toxic (from a Black Perspective),” YouTube, July 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWKbs1YthYs&t=599s>.

I love all human beings on an individual basis, and until that individual loses my respect, he or she will continue to be loved by me regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. If you believe that someone is inherently inferior to you in any way strictly due to their skin color, then you are an idiot, plain and simple.

But now comes a surprise. Though he has finished giving us his top five reasons, Jabari says he will show us a “bonus clip”.

The title of this bonus chapter is “You sound white”. He tells us that one of the most “confusing and infuriating” things he has had to deal with on his channel are the people “not just black people, but whites too, but mostly black people, who are so fixated on the fact that I sound like a ‘white boy’ [which he enunciates to emphasize the silent-h] that they completely ignore my content, completely ignore everything in the video, because all they can think about is the fact that I talked like a white person.” He shows us screenshots of six such comments, all accusing him of secretly being white. But, he now says, “if you fit into this category, I got a few words for you.”

We cut to webcam footage of Jabari in his home studio. He says, with caricature emphasis, “Ay yo YouTube, this your boy Jabari here. I’m back at it again with another video for y’all” before pausing and shaking his head. He continues:

No. no. See, that’s what y’all don’t get. That’s not me. Just because I don’t talk that way doesn’t mean I’m not black. Okay? I talk the way I talk because speaking proper English is something that makes me feel comfortable. And what makes me feel comfortable is completely irrelevant to what you think I should sound like, or what you think I should talk like. So here you go, idiots. Here I am. In the flesh. Are you satisfied? It’s people like you who hold our race back, conforming to some stupid stereotypes, some stupid social norms, and ignoring your own individuality. Walking, talking, and acting like idiots just to impress people and be “accepted” as a black person. What y’all need to do is wake up, grow up, and help your people instead of criticising them for expressing their individuality.

Jabari, typically calm and mild mannered in his videos, shows clear frustration here, even anger. Beginning with the line “It’s people like you” he becomes even more animated in his gesticulations. If the first part of the video leaned toward mustering empirical evidence to debunk Afrocentric claims, in this later part of the video Jabari has gone further into visceral territory.

Animation and Collaboration

“Gods and Goddesses of The Yorubas: Part 1”⁸³ has been viewed nearly 64,000 times since it was posted in April, 2021. This nine minute video exemplifies how Jabari has developed his method and style as a YouTuber, as well as giving us insight to his relationship with his community.

⁸³ From Nothing, “Gods and Goddesses of the Yoruba: Part 1,” YouTube, April 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zi491BUKmRc&t=384s>.

But before we begin discussion of the video proper, we will immediately notice a significant difference from the style of the earlier three videos discussed above: we are now greeted by an animated avatar of Jabari. This avatar wears a blue dashiki and is standing in an illustrated room full of decorative African motifs and objects. Jabari speaks to us through his avatar, who moves his lips, glances around, and has his dreadlocks sway in convincing enough mimesis of the cadence of Jabari’s speech.

The avatar has become a defining feature of the From Nothing brand. This feature spans Jabari’s keen interests in both African history and video production. He has even occasionally added seasonal elements to his avatar. For example, in his video “When Africans Ruled India” from December 2021, his avatar wears a red Santa cap and a decorated Christmas tree stands in the corner; in “The Spooky Traditions of the Ekpo Society (African Halloween)” his avatar wears an Ekpo mask.



Turning back to “Gods and Goddesses”, we watch and listen as Jabari’s avatar tells us that:

Over the years a lot of you have been requesting more content on the folktales and mythology of the African continent. While this is not my strongest area of expertise, I finally decided to dive right in nevertheless. One of the things that I love the most about making these videos is that not only can I

spread this valuable knowledge to the world, but I also learn a lot of new things myself in the process. So it's always a treat to dive into yet another new topic in addition to tracking into this uncharted area of my expertise.

He then says that this video is made in collaboration with the YouTuber historian HomeTeam History. Jabari tells us that he will be covering the Yoruba orishas (deities) Shango and Oshun, while HomeTeam will cover Ogun and Oya. He tells us a link to Part 2 will be included at the end of this video, and we are encouraged to check it out. We are, of course, also encouraged to subscribe to HomeTeam's channel, a friendly (and expected) bit of reciprocity between creators.

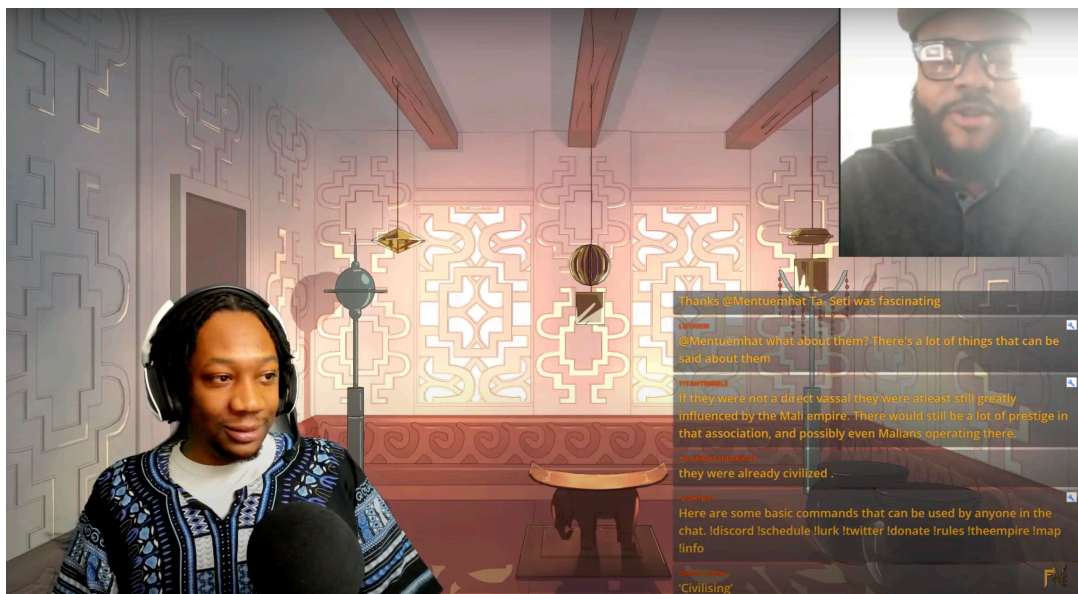
With the video's intro finished, we fade out from Jabari's avatar and fade in to the From Nothing logo, underscored by the channel's musical signature (another feature of Jabari's maturing production). Following this, we fade to an illustration of a regal looking black woman, reclining and holding a peacock feather fan. Jabari tells us that "Oshun is the goddess of the Niger River. As with other orishas, she is associated with a particular set of ritual colours, hers being white, yellow, and gold, and sometimes coral." From here the video proceeds in much the same way as the earlier videos described above, with Jabari listing facts about the two orishas and showing us images to aid these facts.

At the end of the video we return to avatar Jabari. He reminds us to check out HomeTeam's part of the series. He also informs viewers that he will be hosting a livestream with HomeTeam where they will be discussing "African history research and sources, as well as a general Q & A." Text information appears on the screen around avatar Jabari. This is for his weekly game streaming schedule, as well as another feature that Jabari has made a regular addition to his video: a list of the names of his \$5 (per video) patrons as an "exclusive shoutout". He thanks us for watching, tells us that a link to his sources can be found in the video's description, and signs off with his signature "and always remember, we don't come from nothing."

As of April 2022, Jabari has had three livestreams with HomeTeam, each over two and a half hours in length. During these chats they discussed topics such as the historiographical sources that have shaped their thinking, going into considerable analytical depth. For example, in the livestream "Interpreting African History Sources and Q&A"⁸⁴ from April 2021, which followed their collaboration on the Yoruba gods and goddesses video, Jabari and HomeTeam engaged in an amiable disagreement on how they have interpreted different sources. They indicate that they have had various discussions off-camera, and have come into disagreement about aspects of West African history. They continued in respectful discussion of their disagreements and held forth with their

⁸⁴ From Nothing, "From Nothing and Hometeamhistory - Interpreting African History Sources and Q&A," YouTube, April 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCbZh4Nt_Yg&t=942s.

interpretations, as well as how they had each differently compared secondary and primary sources. Aside from this case, they tell us that they have found themselves to be mostly in agreement in their interpretations of other subjects in African history. However, they note that as they continue to grow and expand as historians, more disagreements will likely arise. This, they state, is entirely to be welcomed.



Jabari has made cross-creator collaboration a cornerstone of his career. In 2022 he started the “South of the Sahara” project. This project is a collaborative effort “to bring together numerous history content creators in a collective attempt to spread and promote African history in a largely positive and interesting light.”⁸⁵ So far, “South of the Sahara” includes fourteen videos made by as many creators. Jabari also participated in the YouTuber historian Kings & General’s “Project Ukraine” — the largest collaboration of YouTuber historians to date — which sought to raise money for Ukrainians in need after Russia’s February 2022 invasion.⁸⁶ And on the first day of 2023, Jabari announced via his Discord server that he was beginning another “mass collaboration” project. This was #UntoldBlackHistory, released in February (to coincide with Black History Month in the US) and to date includes twelve videos by twelve creators.

The Empire

⁸⁵ https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLivC9TmdGnL8HeSXft9g__6-XRtisNeQu

⁸⁶ From Nothing, “How the Soviet Union Compares to Colonial Africa #ProjectUkraine,” YouTube (From Nothing, April 24, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IimWVECRnHM&list=PLaBYW76inbX4jqNGixaoL1xQ_pMwNGIXG&index=17.

Upon patronising From Nothing on Patreon, one can immediately have their Discord account linked to The Empire. Here, patrons are fittingly given the role of @Vassals to denote their status as paying supporters of From Nothing. As is common with Discord servers, The Empire contains a channel with the rules of the server, a channel that list the roles members can have on the server, and a channel for announcements, where Jabari, with his singular @Ohene role, can message all members of the server at once.

Jabari has customized the details of The Empire to reflect his interests in African history, particularly that of pre-European colonization. So, for example, alongside the role of @Vassals, members can also be @Amradofo, which are server moderators, @Griots, if they “consistently provide quality information and positivity”, @Smiths, if they are a YouTuber with at least 1,000 subscribers, @Nomads, which is a role given to all new members, and several others consonant with the theme. There is also the #main-court channel, where new members are greeted. Here, the server’s bot announces a new member by stating “The city gates slowly creak open” as (the username of the new member) “is allowed safe passage into The Empire From Nothing!”

The Empire contains over two dozen channels. One of these is a channel where members can ask Jabari questions, and another channel where Jabari answers these questions. Here we can see that members have genuine interest in hearing what Jabari thinks on all kinds of topics, both historical and personal. As Jabari answers these questions in bulk, it is interesting to read his responses to the random cascade of inquiries. For example, in one of these bulk responses he replied to a member asking for his opinion on the best textual sources to use for mapping the Eastern Bight of Benin; the next question was from a member wondering if Jabari plays online card games. Jabari had thoughtful answers for both.

Aspects of his historian personality comes to the fore in many of his responses as well. For example, when asked if he was interested in getting a degree in sub-Saharan African history, Jabari replied that though he had at one point considered it, academia is a system he has strong feelings against: he much prefers, and thinks he does a better job, in researching and relaying history from the relative leisure that the From Nothing venture affords.

Yet another channel is for members to pool sources, usually in the form of sharing .pdf files or other links. On this channel, and the related channel #research-questions, a communal feeling is evident. Here, members often enthusiastically post historical queries, express problems they’ve had in doing research, and share download links to historical scholarship, many of which are academic books and journal articles. And, of course, there are memes, .gifs, and irreverent inside-jokes, liberally posted throughout.

#court-of-vassals

#court-of-vassals is a channel restricted to patrons active in the server. Jabari started this channel in 2018, when there were only several active patrons in The Empire. The earliest discussion here began when Jabari released a series of map images of western Africa on which he had overlaid coloured areas to indicate the successor states of the ancient kingdom of Ghana. He told the *@Vassals* on the channel that this was a teaser for a mapping video he would soon release. Three members — perhaps the entirety of the patrons on the server at the time — quickly replied to the images expressing their interest in the topic.

One member, responding to Jabari's post, though not adhering strictly to the subject of ancient Ghana or map videos, posted several screenshots of an article — about Kushite history and the possible origins of weaponry that flourished in the Sahelian region — that they recommended Jabari read. Jabari wrote back that he found the ideas in the article interesting, but had further questions as to whether a firm conclusion could be drawn that, for example, the quilted armour found in other African regions was indeed Nubian in origin. At this point the conversation consisted of Jabari and two other members — one of them a fellow YouTuber historian who covers the history of the Americas — as well as another member who flitted in and out of the conversation. The member who posted the article mentioned that they had also sent it to another YouTuber historian, and Jabari and the others members in the conversation agreed that this other YouTuber was one whom they mutually admire.

But then Jabari shared a screenshot of a lengthy negative comment that was posted to one of his videos. This commenter, who Jabari says had been spamming his videos with agitated comments over the last couple of days, was critiquing the nature of Jabari's sources. Specifically, the commentator wrote that Jabari's reliance on magazine or newspaper articles, as opposed to works of 'real' (academic?) scholarship, reveals that Jabari has no clue about methodology, or even epistemology. The fellow YouTuber in the chat responded to Jabari's screenshot post, and seemed to agree with the principle of the commenter's critique, but not its application to Jabari's work, and much less to its hostile tone. Jabari then lamented that the sources he would like to use are behind paywalls, so he must hunt for free options. However, he wrote that he does take care in choosing free sources, making sure that they are from legitimate institutions like the BBC and PBS. The fellow YouTuber historian and Jabari then commiserated on the struggles of their craft. For example, they compared their approaches to using Wikipedia. Jabari wrote that his tactic is to pay

close attention to the references in the Wikipedia articles, and to read those carefully before citing the Wikipedia article itself. He wrote also that he searches for a third source to check against the Wikipedia article, to add another quality-control measure to his research. The fellow YouTuber agreed with this basic approach, and added that he has been active in editing Wikipedia articles that he has found deficient. The conversation went on from here, meandering through mentions of historical African trade routes, tax reforms in the country of one of the members, and the Meroe-Nubian wars.

A few days later, Jabari did indeed release a preview of the mapping video he teased in his first post. This has become a standard function of this patron only channel, that Jabari will post early-releases of his videos for his patrons to watch and comment on before they go live on YouTube. Scrolling through #court-of-vassals, one can see that the sequence has often been that Jabari posts a work-in-progress, then chats with two or three members (who are most often regulars) about all kinds of matters relating directly or indirectly to its content. In between his video postings and the discussions these sparked, other members would spontaneously raise topics, most of which related to historical subjects, and have free-ranging discussions of which Jabari popped in and out.

A noticeable reoccurrence has been that the patrons on the channel seem to care about the health and status of From Nothing, and like to offer their advice towards keeping Jabari's venture buoyant. For example, in 2019 one member recommended that Jabari stop making videos that dive into controversies. Specifically, in this member's opinion the channel was being dragged too far into battles against Afrocentrists. The member was concerned that From Nothing was becoming less a YouTube African history channel and more a YouTube politics channel. It seemed to the member that all of Jabari's core supporters were on the same page regarding Afrocentrism, so better to simply make videos about African history from a non-Afrocentrist perspective. Jabari replied that he for the most part agreed. He then listed topics he was considering making videos on. Jabari and the fellow YouTuber historian then began to discuss these topics. The member who made the initial comment was pleased to see that Jabari was thinking positively, and further suggested that Jabari ignore negative comments on his videos and focus instead on the constructive ones. The member then wrote that From Nothing's supporters would argue against the naysayers on Jabari's behalf, leaving him with more time to do his work. Jabari agreed to this in principle, but nonetheless wrote that some comments are hard to ignore. Jabari, the fellow YouTuber, and the other member, then discussed how best to approach acerbic or ideologically charged YouTube comments: better to delete or allow to remain? Some comments are indeed distractions, they seemed to agree, and should therefore be deleted.

Supporters on this channel also share in the excitement of Jabari's successes. One example of this also came in 2019. Jabari posted a screenshot of an email he received from a local radio station that wanted to have an on-air interview with him. Several members quickly replied with messages of support and congratulations.

However, since around March of 2022, the activity on #court-of-vassals has tapered off. It was now typical that when Jabari posts an early-release video, no substantial discussion would follow. It appears that these conversations have moved to different areas.

#history-discussions

#history-discussions is a public channel of The Empire. Discussions here tend to be longer and more in-depth, and enter interesting and often eccentric areas.

Jabari started this channel in November of 2017, but it wasn't until January of 2018 that sustained activity began. The first substantial discussion was initiated when a member of the server asked a multi-part question: what would other members change in history if they could? what might the effects of the change be? and why would they want to make the change in the first place? It took a couple days after the initial post, but Jabari was the first to respond. Jabari and the inquiring member then chatted for about an hour. The conversation evolved from their chatting about how history might have unfolded if the Sahara had been fertile instead of a desert, and if Africa had not been colonized by Europeans (the tentative change to history Jabari would wish to make), to how another YouTuber historian had, in Jabari's opinion, made a video on this topic which imagined this alternative history poorly. Over the course of this conversation, Jabari and the member mentioned topics such as the Swahili language, Indian Ocean trade routes, and the British versus the Mughals in India. The exchange ended with Jabari sharing a link to the Wikipedia article for the so-called Anglo-Zanzibar war of 1896.

2018 was a very active year for this channel, and activity on it has remained at a high level since. Throughout 2018, there were initially five to six regular participants (with Jabari also making frequent appearances), who would frequently chat long into the night. Sometimes the chats would end with a member announcing that they were tired and going to sleep, perhaps to pick the thread up again the next day.

In the multithreaded discussions that arose from these late night conversations, there were specific themes of interest which repeatedly surfaced. One such theme — and one that is very much

in line with the mission of From Nothing — was dismay over the popular neglect of African history. An example of this is a discussion where two members in particular mutually expressed their frustration over what they consider to be neglect on the part of historians towards ancient Meroitic and medieval Malian texts, which have languished untranslated in archives. They chatted about how such texts are crucial for better understanding the history of Africa, and both expressed annoyance that difficult to translate texts from other societies, such as the Mayans, seem to receive more popular interest and the attention of historians. In one of the multiple conversations where these untranslated African texts were mentioned, both members also noted that they enjoy arguing online against those who belittle or ignore African historical achievements. They noted further — and seemed to bond in the relating of their experiences of this — that they had engaged in online arguments where the opposing side had the advantage of more knowledge of history. These occasions were deeply frustrating experiences both members agreed, and ones that in large part pushed them towards stocking up their knowledge of African history.

Another recurring theme is that of phenotypic traits across time and space. For example, Cheddar Man — a Mesolithic human skeleton found in the British isles — has been invoked six times by several members in several different conversations from 2018 to 2022. For some background, the ancient DNA from Cheddar Man was used by researchers to reconstruct what he might have looked like. The analysis revealed that his skin pigmentation was dark, or black as we might call it today. This finding, according to members in these conversations, caused outrage amongst white supremacists (Jabari has been asked about his thoughts on racist reactions to Cheddar Man in the #questions-for-ohene channel as well). Several members found the bigoted apoplexy in the face of this evidence amusing. Yet they also found it frustrating that Cheddar Man is not better known, and that light skin tones are so widely believed to be the default type that it is necessary to specify and defend that Cheddar Man had dark skin in the first place. There seemed to largely be a consensus amongst the regular members on this point.

Other examples on the theme of historical phenotypes include mentions of depictions of Jesus across cultures and time, the range of skin tones Mestizos or Latinos might have, the Moors, and whether they could be considered black or not, Meghan Markle, and whether she could be considered black or not, and many discussions of the tricky linguistic-ethnic group of Bantus and their expansion across Africa (mentioned over 1,700 times on this channel). These discussions often mix in notions of ancestry, genetics, and linguistic groups. For example, the word ‘ancestry’ has been mentioned 461 times in this channel. Many of the discussions where this word appears include

both critiques of ancestry testing, as well as some members expressing the desire to know more about their ancestry.

As is commonplace with Discord conversations, the stated theme of the channel, as well as initial topic of individual chats, can often and quickly veer into non-sequiturs. Frequently, a chat might stray away from an initial topic, then return to it after having toured other territories. For example, one discussions from 2018 that began as a chat about historic phenotypical traits evolved into an exchange of self-disclosures between two members. After other members had left the conversation to attend to things offscreen, the two remaining members starting discussing personal matters. But after expressing themselves to each other — their issues having nothing to do with the topic of phenotypic traits — they caught themselves, and joked that Jabari would ban them from the channel if they continued off-topic for too long. They then switched to a more on-topic conversation; namely, lamenting that in their opinion National Geographic has been consistently bad at covering African history. The conversation then turned into a long exchange about the racial makeup of the Americas, particularly Brazil. By this point, Jabari joined the conversation, as did the two members who had left earlier. The five of them then discussed many topics, such as what might be the best term for American Indians, with one member having very strong opinions on the matter; and why they think comparisons between chattel slavery and indentured servitude are invidious, with the same member also having strong opinions on this. They then moved on to mentions of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, HomeTeam History, and much else.

By mid 2018 the channel was become busier as more people joined The Empire. With more voices came more topics of discussion. For example, for several months topics of Central and South America histories were being brought up as frequently, if not more than, those of African history. The YouTuber historian of the Americas (mentioned above in #court-of-vassals) was now active in this channel, and became a major voice, sharing many links to videos, articles, maps, and long posts on history, politics, languages, and much else. The same core group of around five members were still active on this channel, but now conversations were somewhat less intimate as many others participated. Interestingly, individual's posts were also getting longer, perhaps as members jockeyed to make their points seen.

Specifically, weapons and armour is a favourite topic, not at all surprising given Jabari's keen interest. Swords have been mentioned 349 times, but this number does not quite do justice to the excitement this topic generates, as well as the many pictures and links members share of these artifacts. For example, in 2021 a member posted several pictures of traditional West African Manding swords. The member mentioned that they were hoping to acquire one at some point. With

a degree of connoisseurship, seven members discussed the blade: its history, variations, defining details, trade, and even compared it with *talwar* swords from India.

Often underpinning the discussions on this channel, we can see that members have high interest in historical and contemporary historiography. For example, Ibn Battuta has been mentioned 89 times, and Ibn Khaldun 33. Sometimes a member will share a screenshot of these medieval historians' writings — for example, in 2022, when one member shared a snippet from Khaldun. The *Ta'rikh as-sūdān* and *Ta'rikh al-fattāsh* — internal chronicles of medieval West Africa — have also been brought up often.

Michael A. Gomez — professor of History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at NYU — has been mentioned 42 times, and overall has generated much discussion. His 2018 monograph, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, in particular has come up for robust discussion (Jabari has recommended this book as well). Interestingly, some of Gomez's views in this book were used on both sides of an argument in 2022. Several members engaged in a heated exchange about potential medieval Malian transatlantic voyages, and two opponents both cited and showed a general respect for Gomez. There was also long discussion in 2021 of the four reviews of this book, and the reply by Gomez, published in the *The American Historical Review* (volume 124 Issue 2, April 2019). One member who had access to the journal avidly read through the academic critiques and rebuttals. The member then reported their thoughts on the matters to the channel, as well as pasting parts of the texts into the chat to share them with others.

There are many things one could say about this channel, and indeed The Empire as a whole. But one item that stands out — and really, I argue, becomes dominant — is the members' great hunger for history. I must here admit that in my descriptions of the discussions above — and the descriptions of the discussions in the servers of the other YouTubers below — I have been 'editing' them for clarity; though I have done my best not to change the meaning of what members say. This is because discussions on Discord are often hard to follow, chaotic, and spontaneous; with misspelled words in nearly every post, memes and internet-speak jokes laced throughout, and points made that often go unnoticed or are ignored. It is not uncommon that members will largely write past each other, saying what they would like to say rather than really engaging in a true discussion. The reverse, however, also occurs. But whether the conversation is shallow or deep, direct or oblique, what is clear on this channel and throughout the Empire (and, again, on other servers) is that members are conversing about topics in history for hours at a time, for days on end.

These trends have continued on this channel up to the present. Many more new members have joined, as some have left the server altogether. But by late 2022 most of the first regular members on this channel were less active here, replaced by a new group. Jabari himself has become largely inactive on this particular channel. Yet nearly all of the first crew of regular members from the channel's advent in 2017 are still very active on the server at large into 2023, now having engaged in many hours-long, at times intimate, at times heated, discussions with familiar voices for five years.

Kraut’s videos are essayistic. Each one is crafted to make a concrete case and conclude with a clear point. Most of his videos are within a ten to twenty minute runtime, though a handful are between forty minutes and an hour. But he has made two three-part series’ comprised of one- to two-hour long episodes, clocking in at around four hours for each series. Such sustained and ambitious content is in large part the product of his readings, typically that of multiple books on whatever topic he is covering, and his synthesis of their content.

But Kraut has also assembled a canon of authors and works that he frequently draws from. At the top of the stack are Francis Fukuyama and Daron Acemoglu. Their views and theories can be detected, both implicitly and explicitly, across the majority of his work. Largely in harmony with their scholarship, Kraut also likes the works of the *Annales* school of historiography, with their emphasis on long-term continuities and the slow transitions of institutions. The *Annales* co-founders Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre are present both in spirit and in specific sourcing across much of Kraut’s output. There is also Karl Popper, Kraut’s favourite philosopher.⁸⁷ From Sir Karl’s description and analysis of what he termed ‘historicism’ in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944) and the two volumes of *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), Kraut finds many of the ideas in which he grounds his understandings. Then there is Tim Marshall, a British journalist who has written several historically minded books on geopolitics — such as his *Politics of Place* series, including *Prisoners of Geography* (2015) — which inform Kraut’s thinking on such issues.

While chatting on a live-stream with a fellow YouTuber, Kraut described his work as “very long, in depth videos about social structures of societies throughout history.”⁸⁸ This is a handy and concise summation of his gathering of Fukuyama-Acemoglu-*Annales*-Popper-Geopolitics. And as these sociopolitical and institutionalist minded writers have been commended for their powers of explanation, so too through Kraut’s videos can we see that he is a believer in the study of history, so constituted, to inform and instruct. But there must be some measure of discipline, some ethical standard, for such wide-ranging and explanatorily-minded scholarship. And so Kraut believes that the study of history is something for which one must have the proper respect. As he put it while chatting with another YouTuber on a live-stream, “I love seeing the past for what it is: the past.

⁸⁷ Kraut, “A Little Q&A Stream,” YouTube, August 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jzCo3o2bBI&t=2s>, 17:49.

⁸⁸ Destiny, “Chatting w/ Kraut - Departnering, Vaush, Online Politics, and More,” YouTube, September 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kfDsF640Aw&t=2523s>, 41:50.

Many people have a problem with doing that.”⁸⁹ In many ways Kraut does strive for a respect of the past, and the slow, often circuitous, often bizarre ways in which institutions have wound up in the present. But such was not always the case. Kraut’s entrée into being a YouTuber was within the platform’s sphere of the amateur political commentariat. His time there did not end well.

The Cultural Despair of (Online) Politics

Kraut used to go by the name Kraut and Tea. His online avatar was the iconic painting of the poet Heinrich Heine as rendered by Mortiz Daniel Oppenheim — though now with the ‘Deal With It’ pixelated sunglasses adding the final touch. The videos from this period are quite different in tone, style, and argument than his comparatively more measured and restrained history videos. They are highly visceral, and express a kind of shoot-from-the-hip style of political punditry.

I bring this up because there are at least a couple items worth mentioning so that we can get a wider view of Kraut’s work, his approaches to community, and the historian personality he has more recently entered. Indeed, this phase remains a part of his personal history, and has some bearing on the history content he now creates. However, this is a thorny chapter with many claims and counter-claims. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, I will refrain to Kraut’s public statements on these matters.

Kraut was a prominent member of a media-based collectivity known as the skeptosphere. These were self-described skeptics, which in practice meant that they were politically charged atheists. Around the time of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election the alt-right came onto the scene. The discourses the skeptics engaged in became both more coarse and more urgent. So-called (and so-tarred) Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) were in open season, and the skeptics huntings of those they judged to be on those sides of the debate became more vigorous. This multi-fronted skirmishing led to some regrettable alliances; namely, that between various members of the skeptosphere and alt-rightists.

The theory of ‘race realism’ entered these streams and quickly became a lightning rod. Race realism (or biological racism as its critics often call it) is the belief that there is scientific evidence that supports, justifies, and makes necessary racism. Many of the skeptics were not up to the task to counter this ideological weapon. Revealingly, some were indeed on board with carrying it into battle.

⁸⁹ Eristocracy, “Kraut Interview | Anti-SJW Youtube, Shoe0nHead, History & Leaving it all Behind” YouTube, April 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex6ObygcW74&t=3027s>, 1:04:50.

For Kraut, the alt-right and race realism proved a bridge too far, an unwelcome element in his community and on the internet at large. He fought against this wave as one, if not the first, in his community to do so. He created a Discord server (different from the one we'll be looking at here and since deleted) to muster supporters against adversarial YouTubers. But this would blow up in his face. In a video he later released to explain why he no longer discusses politics on YouTube, Kraut showed graphs from his channel's analytics report from the 2017-2019 period: he had lost nearly all of his subscribers.⁹⁰

In a live-stream Q & A Kraut discussed the drama. Between long drags on his vape pen he expressed feelings of the loss of his community and the fallout to his career. Now in a place of greater comfort, removed from this personal crisis by a year or so, he told the viewers that it was painful leaving a community behind, painful leaving behind people he thought were friends. And even though the political sphere on YouTube as he experienced it really had nothing to do with genuine political commentary — was really “a braindead cycle of egos fighting other egos” — he still feels that “I miss the community to a degree, I miss talking to some of these people.”⁹¹

He has also discussed why he broke with his former ways in at least two live-stream interviews with other YouTubers. In one of them, he says “It's a very narcissistic thing being on YouTube”. But he follows this by saying: “When someone from political commentary YouTube comes to me, I treat them like trash. And I do it because it's amusing to me.”⁹²

For those who watch Kraut today, his past antics may be a stumbling block as they wonder how to assess his new material in the glare of the old. Kraut himself realizes this. He has said that when other YouTube historians make a factual error they are gently pointed out. But for him: “When I make a mistake, because I used to be in the political commentary sphere, all the fucking goblins crawl out of their dens.”⁹³ This anxiety is in part well-founded: according to Kraut, he and his family were at one point doxxed by an alt-right YouTuber. He also alleges that he had a stalker harassing him for a couple of years during this time.⁹⁴

As we will see shortly, Kraut has turned the page on this chapter of his life. He seems to have learned from his experiences. But there is a tension here. He says in the Q & A, “I dread the

⁹⁰ Kraut, “Why I no longer make Political Commentary,” YouTube, April 22, 2021, 1:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS-Mxeu_570&t=915s

⁹¹ Kraut, “A little Q&A Stream,” 2:00:01:13.

⁹² Eristocracy, “Kraut Interview | Anti-SJW Youtube, ShoeOnHead, History & Leaving it all Behind”, 41:40.

⁹³ Eristocracy, 21:55

⁹⁴ Eristocracy, 1:12:43

idea that I could tell people what to think. I don't want that. I find that scary. And the fact that I may have done that in the past scares me as well."⁹⁵ Nonetheless, it appears that the desire to influence is still a big thing for Kraut. What to do after making charged political commentary? Apparently making long-form videos about *longue durée* history. But before advancing to these heights Kraut would tour some of the grimmest moments of the 20th century.

Do No Evil; Do Know Evil?

Kraut went offline for a while in 2017 and 2018 after the crack-up with his community. But he had talent as a YouTuber so he came back to the platform, now with a different purpose. Gone was the Tea, what remains was just Kraut. The meme-Heine was eventually replaced by a whimsical fat parrot. He delisted his older videos to clear the way for his new content.

In his late 2018 videos Kraut examines the decay of several democratic institutions, and with an eye to his present moment. Between September and November of 2018 Kraut posted four videos on, respectively and in order, the descent of Italian democracy into Fascism,⁹⁶ a tour of the Mauthausen concentration camp,⁹⁷ the descent of Taishō era Japanese democracy into imperial militarism,⁹⁸ and why he thinks the Allied bombings during WWII were justified.⁹⁹ A heavy load, and it got no lighter with another video,¹⁰⁰ in between the ones on Japan and the Allied bombings. In this video, Kraut deploys Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* and the interdisciplinary minded works of the *Annales* school against all manner of teleological and eschatological historiography (or historicism as Popper put it).

The late 2018 videos give us an overview of the formative attempts of Kraut as a YouTuber historian. These videos are also something of a bridge between his political pundit personality and his historian personality. For one thing, it seems obvious that these videos reflect the dark place Kraut found himself in his personal life. Relatedly, they are also his reaction to the low state of

⁹⁵ Kraut, "A little Q&A Stream," 47:38.

⁹⁶ Kraut, "Yesterdays Tactics on Modern Media," YouTube, September 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPGzF3Jk8-Q&t=677s>.

⁹⁷ Kraut, "Scars of History: Remember Their Names," YouTube, September 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e2AB9ZOLVE&t=187s>.

⁹⁸ Kraut, "Imperial Japan: The Fall of Democracy," YouTube, October 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voo0CpPcE0c&t=1420s>.

⁹⁹ Kraut, "Scars of History: Allied Bombings Were Justified," YouTube, November 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voF7KCOM6eY>.

¹⁰⁰ Kraut, "History Does Not Repeat," YouTube, November 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t14YtjN8_s.

politics in the still early days of the Trump administration and the energized alt-right. For example, both the video on Italian Fascism and the Mauthausen tour are at various points overlaid with footage of the infamous Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia of August, 2017.

Kraut sees lessons in the dark pages of the last century and admonishes others to take heed of their similarities with recent and ongoing events. Yet, in the old Kraut and Tea fashion, they also serve as explicit arguments against the alt-right and sympathetic forces; forces that had both personally hurt Kraut and were running riot on- and offline. To this end, there is perhaps also an edge of score settling here. Was this history as therapy for Kraut? An opportunity for entrepreneurial historianship? Or just yet another argumentative salvo against his ideological foes? Whatever the degrees of self-therapy, entrepreneurial initiative, or reorganized punditry, let's see what he has shown us.

The first of his late 2018 videos is "Yesterdays Tactics on Modern Media." This is a twelve and a half minute long essay on the rise to power of Italian Fascism. To date it has been viewed over 430,000 times. Kraut opens the video in the mode of drama. Quite literally, as his voice-over commences saying: "In the play that is Italy's story of the 20th century there are two chapters of such significance that they are known beyond the bounds of the Italian social and cultural sphere." Under his voice we hear low droning and ominous music. We see mono-colored newsreel footage of the Italian peninsula, then crowds cheering as Mussolini gives a Roman salute.

After this brief prologue Kraut states the primary thesis of the video. As he sees it, there is more to be learned about "how a civilized people turn into savages" from the comparatively less studied example of Italy in the 1920s than from Germany in the '30s and '40s.

To begin illustrating this argument, he continues with the dramatic framing as curtains appear and close on the fading newsreel footage. The curtains reopen to reveal an image of the iconic statue of Mussolini's head which adorned the facade of his headquarters at the Palazzo Braschi in Rome. The Italian word 'SI' (yes), which covered part of the facade behind the Duce's visage on the Palazzo, fills the screen. Theatre seats animate up from the bottom of the frame to complete the composition. Kraut says: "If it were a play to be shown in theatres its title ought to be *Me Ne Frego*" as these words appear in red.

“marked in history books as the day that Italian democracy ended” — without serious difficulty. In Kraut’s telling, the black mass heckled their critics with *Me Ne Frego*, dodging any accountability for their crimes. He says:

So in the end, the remaining parliamentarians, the king, and the public, simply didn’t give a damn anymore, and accepted the thuggish rulers, simply because they were thugs who kept getting away with it. So the violence *was* called out, it *was* condemned. But because the thugs kept engaging in violence, and because of that people simply adopted it to be the new social reality.

The video continues in this vein. Kraut moves on to illustrate his argument for Italian Fascism being the example of greater import for our times by differentiating it from others — namely Germany and the “swift, brutal government takeover”; Japan and the “infiltration of institutions”; and Spain with its “national bloodletting”. For Kraut, the difference lies in that the Italian Fascists enveloped their society through a “gradual conditioning of the Italian people to accepting the unacceptable”. Kraut then further rhetoricizes the point by switching registers to speak from the perspective of Fascism:

I, the fascist, have a sacred mission, and your principles, they are nothing but ‘muh constitution’ that stands in the way of the greater good for which I am willing to sacrifice the blood of the impure. And if you try to hold me to account to the standards of ‘muh constitution’, my response is a simple Me Ne Frego. But more than just my response, my goal is to get you to respond with Me Ne Frego when you see me do harm to others.

Kraut has done an interesting thing here, speaking from this imagined perspective of Italian Fascism and augmenting it with a contemporary internet meme. ‘Muh constitution’ is a favourite of various alt-rightists. It is meant to mock anyone thought foolish enough to respect and uphold the restraints of the Constitution in the face of demographic shifts (of the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy type) and the perceived destruction of traditional values. Alt-rightists themselves often gleefully blend contemporary memes and iconography from historical events, But here Kraut’s framing of the violence signified by *Me Ne Frego* alongside current alt-right meme warfare serves as a tactical rhetorical bridge between the historical content of the video and contemporary events. He uses their idioms to mock the malicious use of those very idioms.

With this, we enter the video’s final stretch, as the coverage shifts to the consequences of the Fascist’s conditioning: the brutal occupation of Italy by the Germans in 1943. Footage of Mauthausen as filmed by Kraut is shown. He explains that this was the main camp where Italians were interned and murdered, except for Italian Jews who were mostly taken to Auschwitz. The video ends with a fade-in of the tiki-torch march in Charlottesville, now replacing the footage of the memorial to the victims of Mauthausen.



Kraut concludes the video pointedly and with an appeal. He says that though he believes most people will stand up to injustice, there are those out there actively working to make apathy and cynicism the dominant mode of societal discourse. Down this way lies catastrophe. The concrete historical examples we have just seen show us why. He ends by saying this: “Be aware of that, when you encounter those who wish to force upon you to accept what you would usually deem as unacceptable.” The Charlottesville footage plays, then fades to the subscription info for his Discord, Patreon, and Twitter.

Kraut has delivered a sharp warning, bolstered by use of archival material, rhetorical registers, a literary sensibility, and, perhaps most importantly, his commanding voice. His voice is the foundation of this video’s persuasive argument, and, for the most part, for all of his videos. The contours of his accent — a blend of German and British — sound well practiced, and go far in glossing over grammatical errors and awkward phrasings. Yet in this particular video it is not just his voice, but how he uses it in tandem with his rhetorical combinations of logos and pathos.

Kraut draws us into his argument by exploring a historical moment that many will have heard of, though most will not be familiar with the details. By invoking these details he attains a level of credibility and sophistication: he appears to have done deep research. The details flow into the reasoning (logos) of the argument, serving as the empirical evidence: the *Me Ne Frego* mantra, the string of high-profile assassinations, the Fascist takeover, the German occupation. Finally, he enfolds us in the feelings and emotions that such dire history demands, as he brings us to the

uncertainties of the present moment and his direct appeal to us, the viewers. Moreover, he imprints this all with a sheen of authenticity as he uses his own footage of Mauthausen, and mentions that he had been chased offline by “people who didn’t want me to make videos like this one.” He speaks from experience, one is lead to think, so his warning must carry weight.

Yet by way of crafting an argument he has turned a complex history into a simple and digestible lesson. Through just a little research one will find that the rhetorical flourish of the “black mass” is an elision. Academic scholarship of the *venntenio* (the two decades of Italian Fascist supremacy) has shown that the hordes of fascists were far from an undifferentiated mass.¹⁰¹ But it is the visceral use of the dramatic framing that becomes interesting here. Kraut uses *Me Ne Frego* as a metonym for the amorality and catastrophic consequences of fascist actions, which he then compares and relates to the mass of uniformed troopers at Charlottesville, as well as other ideological arsonists online — ones whom he has had personal experience with. From the heat of his personal ordeals, and that of the political turbulence in which he became involved, his exploration of the traumas of Italian Fascism seem to bleed into his own experiences. This video — and all of those from late 2018 — is then something like a personal statement that is historically sourced.

To this point, however, it is unfortunate that Kraut has not disclosed his sources for this video. At least one other member on Discord asked for them in 2020, yet so far nothing has been offered. As we are unable to understand this work better on the grounds of Kraut’s research, we will have to leave this matter inconclusive.

Collaboration and Countryballs

As far as I know, the late 2018 videos were created solely by Kraut in his moment of isolation following the break with his community. In his video “Why I no longer make Political Commentary” he expresses pride at having built his channel back up again entirely by himself.¹⁰² Now, however, he has regathered a sizeable following, and assembled a collaborative community comprised of creators from around the world.

Kraut, as he freely admits, is not the most skilled of illustrators. So several creators have gladly contributed more detailed and elaborate illustrations and animations for his videos, as well as

¹⁰¹ Matteo Millan. “The Institutionalisation of ‘Squadristo’: Disciplining Paramilitary Violence in the Italian Fascist Dictatorship.” *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 4 (2013): 551–73.; Ruth Ben-Ghiat. “Response to Matteo Millan: Mapping Squadrist Violence.” *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 4 (2013).

¹⁰² Kraut, “Why I no longer make Political Commentary,” 1:40.

assisting with voice-overs, editing, and other production tasks. Hence, Kraut's videos have truly become the products of a communal effort. So much so that he has at times had to close the door to others asking if they could assist, as he often receives more 'applicants' than his projects can accommodate.

Since Kraut's video "What Americans dont understand about Public Healthcare",¹⁰³ posted in July of 2019, and to date garnering over 2,270,000 views, Kraut has used a style known as countryballs. Countryballs is a motif popular on YouTube and around the internet. It is very simple: creators draw a circle — or a ball if rendered to appear 3D — that is filled in with the pattern of a nation's flag, and given anthropomorphic traits stereotypical of that nation.

In his Q & A stream, Kraut answered a user who asked him about the adoption of this style. Kraut noted that he was a fan of the YouTuber brain4breakfast — a popular YouTuber historian with a geographic bent who made videos using countryballs and died in 2019. Kraut liked brain4breakfast's videos and style and wanted to keep it going.¹⁰⁴ As countryballs are easy to draw — and indeed, their crude simplicity are a big part of their appeal — they have worked for Kraut as a useful tool for his development as a YouTuber historian. They gave Kraut — and any YouTuber who uses them — a palette of easy to reproduce images to play with.

Countryballs also facilitated a path for greater collaboration. The simplicity of the style makes them amendable to customisation and diverse applications, so that many creators can work on them individually and then combine their illustrations and animations into a more or less aesthetically uniform work. This collaboration based on countryballs has become foundational to Kraut's output. One of the most explicit examples of this can be seen in his video "The Folly of Liberal History."¹⁰⁵ In the roughly five minute outro for this video, Kraut explains that he had "an accident with a deep fryer" that left him with burns on his arm and chest. Due to this he was unable to work, so most of the illustrations for the video were drawn by one of his collaborators.

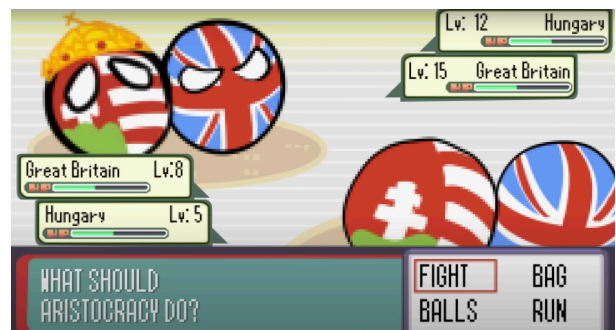
But the outro continues, with Kraut giving a "special shout-out and thank you" to one of his collaborators from South Korea — "one of the best artists I have hired for more than a year" — who not only contributed countryball illustrations to Kraut's videos but also helped teach Kraut to become a better illustrator. As Kraut explained, this creator had been informed that they must do their two years of mandatory military service for the Republic of Korea, and so will be on a hiatus

¹⁰³ Kraut, "What Americans Dont Understand about Public Healthcare," YouTube, July 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1TaL7OhveM>.

¹⁰⁴ Kraut, "A little Q&A Stream," 31:49.

¹⁰⁵ Kraut, "The Folly of Liberal History," YouTube, June 30, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w38t-NhrADM&t=733s>.

from collaboration. Kraut expresses that *their* door will always be open for future collaboration; and, as he says, “yes, that’s a we, not just me, because it’s not just me saying thank you and wishing you all the best, but everyone in our small little group of creators and friends that formed over the last two years.” We then hear six audio messages from members of this group of creators and friends. They individually express their wishes that the creator has an easy time while in the military, and say they look forward to his return. One of them says, “you have some very artistic, well designed, unique balls. Your balls, they are standout from the rest. Your balls, they are immediately noticeable to be your balls” before laughing and wishing him the best. Written works of history have their acknowledgements section, but I have not come across one that expresses sentiments quite like these.



Further examples of the collaborative and communal nature of Kraut’s maturing work abound: they exist in all of his videos from roughly the last two years. But let us turn now to see how these videos are made in regard to Kraut’s scholarship; and particularly, how this relates to his personal canon.

On Kraut’s Canon

If Kraut was figuring out his style and the mode of being a YouTuber historian in the late 2018 videos, he has since adopted a more consistent aesthetic expression through countryballs. Alongside this, he has incorporated a reoccurring theoretical, conceptual, and inquisitive basis

through the key texts that form his canon. The texts and authors that Kraut admires and frequently uses, mentioned above, are evident in and across his post 2018 videos.

Kraut has become better at listing the source material for his videos. In “Trump’s Biggest Failure”¹⁰⁶ from October 2019 — which, as one would not guess from the title alone, is a telling of Chinese history, roughly stretching from Confucius to Trump’s trade war — Kraut included the sources at the end of the video itself.¹⁰⁷ Since then, the sources for some of the videos have been put on Discord in the channel #video-sources (though this has been inactive since September 2021). But to date, and most commonly, Kraut has listed the sources in the description area below the videos on YouTube. He has done this more or less consistently since “America’s foreign Entanglement”,¹⁰⁸ posted in November, 2019.

Of the 18 videos where sources are named (as of late 2022), nine include at least one, and sometimes several, of Kraut’s canonical authors as a source. But if we remove from this list the videos he has made that are not strictly directly about historical events as such,¹⁰⁹ the tally is then nine out of 16 videos. Furthermore, if we consider the two three part series’ (“The Turkish Century” from 2020 and “The Mexican-American Border from 2021) as one video each, which is justifiable as they largely share the same sources across their episodes, there are now 12 videos, nine of which are steeped in Kraut’s canonical sources.¹¹⁰ In fact, it is accurate to say that of the videos Kraut has made since the first episode of the Turkey series — “From Hittites to Atatürk”¹¹¹ posted in March 2020 — all have used at least one book from Kraut’s canon.¹¹² Therefore, if one wonders where Kraut gets his foundational ideas, they are to be found in these texts. At least one member on Discord has pointed this out explicitly, and it seems to have become more or less common knowledge amongst his fans. And Kraut himself does not hide his reliance on these authors, as he has encouraged others to read them in both his Q & A and in interviews with other YouTubers.

¹⁰⁶ Kraut, “Trump’s Biggest Failure,” YouTube, October 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhMAT3BluAU>.

¹⁰⁷ For example, the sociologist and Oxford professor Stein Ringen’s *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (2016).

¹⁰⁸ Kraut, “America’s Foreign Entanglement,” YouTube, November 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhXFgKEkwbU>.

¹⁰⁹ “Why Noam Chomsky is garbage” from 2021 and “The Origins of the Greek debt crisis” from 2022.

¹¹⁰ Indeed, both of these series’ use books from Kraut’s canon: Tim Marshall’s *Prisoners of Geography* for the Turkey series, Acemoglu’s *Why Nations Fail* and Fukuyama’s *Political Order and Political Decay* for the Mexican-American border series.

¹¹¹ Kraut, “The Turkish Century | from Hittites to Atatürk,” YouTube, March 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgjiJHV8P0w&t=3s>.

¹¹² Excluding the Chomsky and Greek debt crisis videos, as well as another video on the Cold War era Finnish President Urho Kekkonen (which does not list its sources), and the “message from Iran” he made in part as a collaborative response to the ongoing civil unrest in that country.

Kraut does, however, also read books specific to whatever topic he is covering. For example, in his three part series on the Mexican-American border, in addition to books by Fukuyama, Acemoglu, and Marshall, he lists over ten titles, and a few other documents such as the *Mexico 2019 Crime and Safety Report: Nogales* issued by the U.S. Department of State.

Nevertheless, what we can see is that Kraut typically takes his starting point directly from the texts of his canonical authors. These serve as the foundation and inquisitive launching pad, as well as a source for further empirical examples. But from the beginnings provided by these texts, Kraut then adds additional secondary scholarship, pursues his own interests, and thereby crafts the essayistic reflections that he delivers to the public.

For example, we can see this in the series on the Mexican-American border. Kraut begins the first episode — “A Tale of two Colonies”¹¹³ — with a prelude wherein he discusses the stark differences between Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. These are two cities that share a name, demographics, and much else, but they could not be more different in the overall quality of life of their citizens. These discrepancies are due entirely to which side of the international border they fall, and are borne of historical contingencies that reverberate in contemporary politico-economic realities. An archeology of these discrepancies is what Kraut wishes to accomplish in this series; so by starting with contemporary Nogales — here to function *in media res* — he has chosen an evocative point of departure. However, he did not find this example through his own independent inquiry, but from that of Acemoglu and his co-author James A. Robinson’s scholarship in *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (2012).¹¹⁴ Throughout the series, Kraut follows their lead as well as their conclusions. He takes examples from their work and translates them into his own rhetorical style. For example, in *Why Nations Fail*, we are introduced to the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim thus:

In Mexico, Carlos Slim did not make his money by innovation. Initially he excelled in stock market deals, and in buying and revamping unprofitable firms. His major coup was the acquisition of Telmex, the Mexican telecommunications monopoly that was privatized by President Carlos Salinas in 1990. The government announced its intention to sell 51 percent of the voting stock (20.4 percent of total stock) in the company in September 1989 and received bids in November 1990. Even though Slim did not put in the highest bid, a consortium led by his Grupo Corso won the auction. Instead of paying for the shares right away, Slim managed to delay payment, using the

¹¹³ Kraut, “The Mexican American Border | A Tale of Two Colonies,” YouTube, December 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPs6tjXsf7M&t=2249s>.

¹¹⁴ Acemoglu and Robinson write: “Why are the institutions of the United States so much more conducive to economic success than those of Mexico or, for that matter, the rest of Latin America? The answer to this question lies in the way the different societies formed during the early colonial period. An institutional divergence took place then, with implications lasting into the present day. To understand this divergence we must begin right at the foundation of the colonies in North and Latin America.” This is exactly what they proceed to do, and Kraut follows them closely. See Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 9.

dividends of Telmex itself to pay for the stock. What was once a public monopoly now became Slim's monopoly, and it was hugely profitable.¹¹⁵

Here is Kraut, in the third episode of the series, "From War to Wall",¹¹⁶ introducing the same:

Carlos Slim made his fortunes when the PRI [Partido Revolucionario Institucional] rebranded as a free market party and started privatizing Mexico's national industry. When the PRI conducted its privatizations, it didn't put the state owned companies up for sale to the public, but sold the shares mostly to cronies, crooks, politicians, and executives close to the government, in backroom deals. Sometimes the same crooked executives who had run these sectors as public officials ended up owning them privately. In many cases, the means and ways public companies became private is dubious at best. Carlos Slim bought up a majority of shares in the Mexican telecom. But the deal he made to get those shares is curious to say the least. He didn't buy the shares with any capital. Instead, he made a weird deal in which he ended up owning the majority shares, and by that extent the telecommunications networks of Mexico, while the profits made by the shares would gradually over years pay the original selling price of the shares, while the company grew in value. One can only imagine the greasy poles climbed, and backroom deals made for this arrangement to have even been made possible in the first place, a transaction that in the United States would almost certainly be considered as illegal. But nonetheless, this is how Carlos Slim ended up owning the Mexican telecom, which he expanded into a total monopoly over phone providers in Mexico.¹¹⁷

What is immediately apparent is Kraut's favouring of a rhetorical bombast that is not to be found in the restrained and polished style of Acemoglu and Robinson. To use a video game analogy, he takes their work as the vanilla game, then mods it to suit his gameplay. In such moments, of which there are many in his *oeuvre*, his method of appeal tilts from the empirical to the visceral.

It seems clear that Kraut has proven adept at translating history to a mass audience. But as we have seen, he is often not content with simply parroting the lines of his canonical authors. For example, returning to his discussion of Nogales, Kraut brings up Claudia Pavlovich, who at the time of the video's release was the Governor of Sonora. We are told of the corruption that continued in the Mexican state unabated under her tenure. Pavlovich was elected in 2015, and is therefore not mentioned in *Why Nations Fail* (2012). Here, we can see that he has then taken the cue to talk about the Nogales' from *Why Nations Fail*, but has gone beyond its time-bound strictures. So, while his canon most often sets the template and foundation for his work, this is a template and foundation from which he then branches off to find extra scholarship and do his own digging. He then often incorporates this extra scholarship into his canonically informed world view.

¹¹⁵ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 39.

¹¹⁶ Kraut, "The Mexican American Border | from War to Wall," YouTube, June 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uek04Jw15kY&t=4217s>.

¹¹⁷ Kraut, "The Mexican American Border | from War to Wall," 1:08:14.

Kraut and Discord

Kraut has two servers connected to his YouTuber activities. The first is Der Server, the main server for both Patreon members and the public. Comfy Office, the second server, is for higher tier Patreons only, and often functions as something of a communal workshop for Kraut's YouTube videos.

Der Server

Taken together, Der Server is a large and lively forum for a variety of social interactions. In what is likely a spectre from Kraut's political pundit past, Der Server does attract trollish individuals in ways unlike the other servers in this study. This means that Der Server can at times seem to be a blend of genuine fans who wish to connect with others and discuss their interests in good faith, and those who try to spoil these discussions and create an atmosphere of mayhem. Another study might look at this segment of Der Server's population, but here we will focus on the more positive and constructive interactions. Due to space constraints we will also not go into the many roles, rules, and channels that comprise Der Server, which are indeed quite extensive and intricate.

However we will note that Der Server is transparent in its statistics, which not all Discord servers are. The channel `#server-stats` is dedicated to listing these. The server's bot — comically named Al Gore's Rhythm — automates this task, publishing daily up-to-date results of member count and server traffic. As I write in spring 2023, there are just over 12,000 members of Der Server, which has been fairly consistent throughout the period of this study. Compare this with the roughly 1,200 Patreon supporters Kraut has and we can see how many Discord members come to Der Server without paying.

The first channel we will discuss is `#history` which is open to the public. Next, we will view `#video-discussion` on Kraut's second server, Comfy Office, where upper-tier Patreon supporters have the chance to discuss Kraut's projects with Kraut.

#history

A “History enthusiast chat” as the description reads, this channel is a catch-all for those wishing to discuss anything related to history. In *#history*, discussions are often initiated by a member posting a question, a speculative thought, or even dropping a mini essay on a topic, sometimes complete with a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Other ways members have sparked discussions include posting links to videos of other YouTuber historians, or to Wikipedia articles. Some members have uploaded archival photographs or images of historical events to commemorate anniversaries, such as the Battle of the Somme or the founding of the USSR. At least one member has posted their own photos from a trip to an archeological site. At least two members have shared a selection of propaganda posters from the WWI and WWII periods.

The *#history* channel, however, did not start out as a history channel. Scrolling back to the channel’s beginning in 2018, it appears as if agreement on the primary topic was unclear. From 2018 into 2020, most of the postings had to do with geology (members uploaded pictures of rock formations, volcanoes, tectonics, and other items of geologic relevance) and geography (maps, map videos). As relating to discussions of maps, this would sometimes lead to a member asking about historical circumstances, like the status of Crimea or Kashmir, and how such disputed regions are represented by various maps. But the focus was only nominally about (human) history.

In 2020 at least five members drifted into a discussion of African and Indian politics. Then, a couple of members posted that they were confused as to the purpose of the channel. It was noted that the channel was on the verge of obsolescence, of becoming a “dead chat”. In April 2020 one of the server’s staff intervened, and for about a day a lively discussion ensued as to what direction the channel should take. But this discussion tapered off without any concrete agreement, and within a day the channel was again full of maps. However, about a month later a member uploaded a photo of two passages from an unnamed book about Anglo-Irish relations (regarding early seventeenth century English “settler colonialism”, their attacks on the “ancient Irish social system”, etc.). The member asked if anyone from Ireland could confirm the passages. A member responded affirmatively, as did another. An exchange on this topic between two members — though, not the member who had originally posted the query — continued into the next day, and with notable testiness. In the following days, a member shared a YouTube link to a lyric video of an Irish partisan song, *The Wearing of the Green*.¹¹⁸ Another member then commented that this Irish song was

¹¹⁸ The chorus goes: “For the wearing of the green/for the wearing of the green/ they’re hanging men and women for the wearing of the green.”

appropriated by neo-confederates in the American South, and shared a YouTube link to said song, *The Wearing of the Grey*. Members in this discussion then voiced their revulsion towards the Confederacy before changing the topic. But from this conversation onwards, though maps would still frequently appear, the general topic had moved into discussions of history, or at least history related matters, more than anything else.

The diversity of topics is broad, but there are recurring themes. For example, there have been several long discussions about genocides. The first of these began when one member mentioned an interest in the study of genocides, and then held forth with a handful of members who came in and out of the discussion over the next day. At first the discussion was broad, as members chatted about genocide in general, and what historical events might be considered genocidal. Were French actions in Algeria a genocide? Did the Ottomans commit a genocide via their long-standing practice of taking children from other ethnic groups as slaves to become soldiers in the Janissary corps? that is, before the Janissaries themselves were violently disbanded in the 1820s as the Ottoman military modernized (perhaps this was a genocide on top of a genocide)? Members' opinions on these questions varied.

These discussions tended to end abruptly after members had had their say. Alternatively, these discussions sometimes obliquely slid into another topic. In the latter case, one example came when the discussion of genocides and potential genocides moved onto the Russian Civil War, with a specific though brief nod towards anti-Bolshevik perspectives of the conflict (i.e., of how the White's recorded the history). Another member then pulled things back directly to the topic of genocide, sharing a link to an article from a peer-review journal (the *Journal of Genocide Research*: "Genocide in nineteenth-century Algeria") and an article from the English language Turkish news channel, TRT World.¹¹⁹ One member replied, stating why they thought the article (it seems they were speaking only about the one from TRT World) elided the complexities. The member who posted the initial articles thanked the member who responded, and suggested that they continue the discussion by directly messaging each other so as not to dominate the channel. With this, the topic of genocide dissipated and members moved on to other matters.

But discussions of genocide would pop up again about a month later. This was initiated when a member asked for help in debunking a set of Holocaust denial claims: that "only" around 300,000 Jews died; that these deaths were unintentional, from Typhus or starvation due to the diminishing resources of the later stages of Germany's military setbacks; that the gas chambers are

¹¹⁹ "As Paris celebrates VE-day, Algerians mourn genocide carried out by France" from May 8th, 2020

a lie. Interestingly, it did not seem that this member needed much help in debunking these claims, as they were able to do so on their own, and demonstrated a decent degree of familiarity with the Shoah. But by bringing up the topic, one of the same members who was engaged in the genocide topic earlier reappeared, and both members then discussed the matter before agreeing on the uselessness of arguing with Holocaust deniers. Then again, about a month after the Holocaust discussion, another one, this time about the Armenian Genocide, was held. Here things got heated. For at least three days, several members held forth in arguing strenuously against another member who seemed to be downplaying the genocide, based on sources the others thought to be dubious. One member in particular posted line after line, including image uploads from several pages of a book on the topic. Much of the discussion centred on the qualitative value of various sources. There were also expressions of frustration from multiple members over the ongoing refusal by the current Turkish government to acknowledge the genocide. Tones became sharp. Insults were hurled in all caps, and Pepe the Frog emojis were scattered throughout. Yet the discussion also became somewhat scattered, as members interjected other actors and events; for example Slobodan Milošević and Kosovo, and to what extent the Japanese government has acknowledged and apologized for Nanking (regarding the claims that they had not, made by Iris Chang in *The Rape of Nanking* (1991)). The tensions of this discussion did ultimately deescalate, however, with at least one member openly expressing regret that they had not argued in a more reasonable tone.

It is clear that the endlessly controversial topic of genocide is a popular one on this channel. To date it has been mentioned in 124 posts. To give this number some context, the word ‘war’ is mentioned in 288, ‘empire’ in 131, ‘Rome’ in 67, ‘communism’/‘communist’ in 30/18, ‘tribes’ in 42, ‘slavery’ in 37, ‘Caesar’ in 33, ‘independence’ in 29, ‘colonialism’ in 28, ‘imperialism’ in 26, ‘capitalism’ in 21, ‘Napoleon’ in 19, ‘Hitler’ in 18, and ‘vikings’ in eight. Kraut himself is mentioned in 38. There is a fair amount of overlap amongst these categories.

Both the Holocaust (mentioned in 26) and the Armenian Genocide (mentioned in 21) have been brought up at least twice since the occasions we have looked at above.¹²⁰ For later mentions of the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, the members involved in the first conversation were not involved in the second, or at least not to the same degree. But from what I have observed, these conversations tend to be some of the longest and some of the most involved, in terms of members

¹²⁰ The Cambodian Genocide and the Ukrainian Holodomor are also mentioned, but sparsely: in two and five posts respectively. The word ‘famine’ is mentioned in five posts as well, with one of these relating to Ireland. Ireland (mentioned in 20 posts), like the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, is another topic that has been brought up more than once, with discussions centring around grim events, such as Cromwell’s invasion, the Irish Civil War, and the potato famine.

offering arguments and asserting documented research. Kraut himself is passionate about this topic, so no surprise that those who come to the server carry on with them.

But there are ways other than invoking the organized horrors of the past to get a discussion going. When I first started browsing #history after becoming a Patreon supporter, one of the first interactions I witnessed was that of a member who needed help in deciphering a letter. They had uploaded a photo of said letter, which was in English, though the cursive handwriting made it difficult to read. Another member quickly replied with their attempt at decipherment, and the member who uploaded the letter was impressed and pleased. The two members then briefly chatted — it turned out that the member who asked for help was writing a paper and the letter was a primary source — but otherwise the matter was left there. About a week later, the same member who uploaded the letter uploaded another document, this time one written in German. The member asked if someone could translate the title, and the same user who helped with the cursive letter volunteered again.

I have only given a taste of what kinds of topics are raised on this channel. From discussion about the inbreeding of the Ptolemaic dynasty, to whether it would be better to live under the Shah or the Ayatollah in Iran (or, alternatively, under Mosaddegh, had he not been removed from power in 1953); from the etymology of the word ‘port’, to the ups and downs of Albanian nationalism — topics are diverse, multivariate, and often possessed by a kind of erudition.

Some members are clearly savvy in both digital and analogue research. It is common that specialist academic literature on any given subject will be submitted in a spirit of knowledge sharing for the benefit of all members, or as evidence if a discussion turns into a battle of claims. But it is also just as common for a member, oftentimes the same member who submitted the specialist literature, to link to an online news article, a YouTube video, a Wikipedia page, or other online resource.

Kraut himself has not engaged in discussions on this channel, though the @Head Admin has on occasion. Since this channel is one that is open the public, it appears that some members are not even that familiar with Kraut’s work, having joined the server incidentally, or through an invite from a friend. But as a final note to this section before we move on, it is interesting to see that when Kraut is mentioned, it is just as often to critique his work as anything else. In other words, many members, as the hobbyist-scholars that they are, do not blindly defer to Kraut’s scholarship or opinions.

#video-discussion

This channel was started by Kraut in 2022. Almost immediately members began to post. One of the first was from a member pointing out a typo and a production error in one of Kraut's videos. A few months later, another member posted a lengthier comment on the script Kraut had released to his Patreon supporters about the upcoming video comparing the Kingdom of Kongo to modern Saudi Arabia. The member thought that Kraut was not clear about the relations of the French, Belgians, and Portuguese to Kongo around the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884. Kraut replied, asking the member if they thought he should go into more detail about this. The member responded that they left it up to Kraut, but only as long as he didn't mistake actions taken by the French with that of the Portuguese in Kongo. Another member seconded this, and Kraut responded with an updated paragraph from the script, which both members liked.

In the year that this channel has been live, there have been around a half-dozen members who have regularly discussed topics here. Interestingly, some of them are quite vocal in their disagreements with Kraut. One, for example, has expressed an overall admiration for Kraut's work, except on the several videos Kraut has made on Russia. This member began with a post in which they made several sharp ad hominem attacks against Kraut, before pivoting at the end to say that, overall, they like much of his work. It was a bizarre message, and several other members asked the member for clarification. The member replied that there was some alcohol involved in the post, and that it was best to stay away from their laptop while drinking. Another member asked for a sober translation of the post. The next day, the member did post a clearer explanation. The member went so far as to call Kraut's work amazing and very likeable, but again, except when discussing Russia. The member believes that Kraut is possessed by Russophobia which skews his content. The member gave a brief rundown of the problems they have with each of Kraut's videos on Russia, again mixing both praise and insults.

This particular conversation ended there, but about a month later the same member posted again with a reflection on Kraut's video "A Critique of Realism". The member thought the video was fantastic, but, yet again, took issue with Kraut's take on Russia. They gave a long comment on Putin, the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, and the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. They shared several images of opinion polls from Ukraine showing the changing popularity of these leaders over the last decade. These images and statistics came from the

Ukrainian Sociological Group, and the member shared a link to their website. Several members thanked the member for providing this information.

Kraut did not partake in this conversation. He has been more active in other channels on this server, such as #topic-suggestions and #chill. Nonetheless, we can see on #video-discussions that members are not shy in giving feedback to Kraut, positive, negative, and whatever in between.

6 — Bernadette Banner

Bernadette Banner is a graduate of New York University with a degree in theatrical production. For a time she worked as a costumer designer for Broadway productions. More recently she has moved to London, where she works with the School of Historical Dress. In 2018 Bernadette embarked on the YouTuber side of her career.¹²¹

The proceeding years saw her ascend to become one of the most viewed and subscribed-to YouTuber historians operating. She has over 1.5 million subscribers on YouTube and over 1,500 thousand supporters on Patreon. As further indication of her successes we can note that, of the three YouTubers of this study, she is the only one to have a Wikipedia page.¹²²

Yet another indicator of her ascendancy came in 2022, when she published her first book, *Make, Sew and Mend: Traditional Techniques to Sustainably Maintain and Refashion Your Clothes*. In this book, which is a compliment to and extension of her YouTuber activities, Bernadette offers a step-by-step and well-illustrated resource for those interested in making clothing and accessories using traditional pre-electric sewing machine techniques.

But whether she is making YouTube videos or trying her hand at book-based authorship, there is a guiding mission which orients her work. As she puts it in the opening of her book:

This whole online hand sewing business began as a personal endeavour to learn more about the history of humans through an attempt to reconstruct the clothes they wore. But very quickly I began to understand that, despite the technological advancements that now make certain aspects of modern society easier and more efficient, sometimes that efficiency develops to a fault: Modern manufacturing favours speed over craft, quantity over quality. Just because we do things faster or cheaper or with fancy machines nowadays doesn't necessarily mean that we do things better — and indeed, the definition of the word *better*, in this case, is neither an objective one, nor does it qualify a singular goal. Certainly our capability for mass production today is better, but speed often results in a sacrifice of quality: cheapness, a sacrifice of fair worker compensation and quality of material; overproduction, a sacrifice of mindful consumption. In our efforts to progress into “better,” the 21st century has seen the explosive rise of a trillion-dollar fashion industry responsible for more greenhouse gas production than all the shipping and aviation industries combined.¹²³

In other words, Bernadette's sartorial inquiry into the past comes in the form of a challenge. And it is fitting that, given Bernadette's keen interest in the dress of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, the challenge she highlights is a continuation of one of the most significant challenges of

¹²¹ <https://bernadettebanner.co.uk/about>

¹²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernadette_Banner

¹²³ Bernadette Banner. *Make, Sew and Mend: Traditional Techniques to Sustainably Maintain and Refashion Your Clothes*. (Salem, MA: Page Street Publishing, 2022), 7.

that period: Might the progresses of industrial production and market forces deliver benefits in one hand and injury in the other?

Rumps, Frocks, and High Fantasy

The earliest video on Bernadette’s YouTube channel, from April of 2018, is “Reconstructing an 18th Century Rump”.¹²⁴ This roughly nine minute video begins with the Baroque atmosphere of a Brandenburg Concerto by J.S. Bach. Out of the refined airs of Bach’s harpsichords and higher mathematics, Bernadette greets us with tongue-in-cheek, saying “Dear viewer, I am in desperate need of a rump.” She then explains that she had previously reconstructed a dress from the 1780s, “entirely by hand, using materials and techniques that, as far as my knowledge permits, would have been used when the original dress was created.” But, though she finished making this dress, in the sense of historical accuracy it was still incomplete because she neglected the “all important understructures.” Hence this video, to “embark on a journey, to reconstruct a late 18th century rump.” She then shows us a couple of photos of her modelling the dress, but with folded towels in place of a proper rump.



We are less than a minute into this video, but already get a feel for Bernadette’s historian personality. She is light and funny; quick to joke, but serious when it comes to historical accuracy. She is also physically front and center. This is of course largely unavoidable for someone who makes videos to demonstrate their handcrafts. Nonetheless, it is a different mode of YouTuber

¹²⁴ Bernadette Banner, “Reconstructing an 18th Century Rump,” YouTube, April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hx8pgx9hRZE&t=496s>.

historianship, with a different range of effects than what we have so far seen. Unlike Jabari, who rarely appears in his videos (aside from his avatar), and Kraut, who so far never has (although he has in several livestreams), Bernadette always uses a camera to record herself as she talks, drafts, cuts, sews, and goes through the processes of her projects. From the start of her YouTuber career, she directly embodies the history she produces.

We now see Bernadette filmed from a low-angle as she walks towards the New York Public Library. She tells us: “Any project, I’m convinced, is doomed without a foundation of good, solid research. And so this is where I’ve begun.” We see shots of Bernadette in the library, typing at her laptop, pulling a book off the shelf. As this b-roll of Bernadette plays, she tells us that:

While there are many fantastic blog posts and articles out there documenting the process of rump making, I’ve directed my search specifically towards primary sources for drawings and verbal descriptions, mainly because I’m hoping to do the reconstruction using historically accurate methods and materials. And so I’ve focused my search on contemporary evidence, looking for clues to use in forming my own interpretation.

She then gives a disclaimer that this video will not be a tutorial, nor will it be a definitive guide for how to make a rump. This is “because unless a divine 18th century seamstress published this holy grail, no such guide, sadly, exists. We are all merely interpreting, and I hope that this experiment will inspire you in your own investigations.”



The video moves on from here. First, Bernadette discusses her research. She shows us a cartoon from 1785, “The bum shop”. Though a caricature, she tells us that this cartoon nonetheless gives insight into the varying shapes and designs of the rump. She points out one particular pattern of rump hanging on the wall in “The bum shop” that she will now draft.

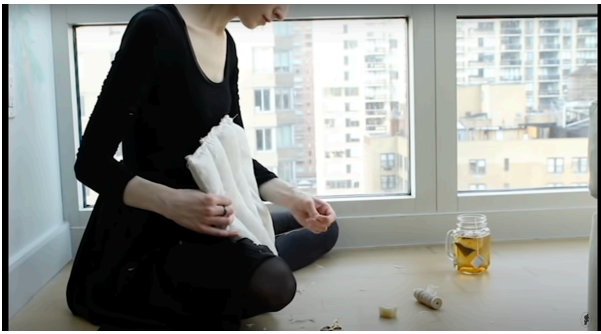
Bach’s concerto has been playing throughout. It underscores Bernadette as she relays her method and process and we see her work. But this is a lengthy process, so she uses a time-lapse to

speed things along. We see her racing through backstitching the pieces together, as text at the bottom of the screen tells us that this step took 74 minutes. She continues the voice-over narration as things get more technical. She fells (or “whipstitches”) and trims the underside of the seam allowance (“that is, the side with the long continuous lengths of backstitching”). We are shown the finished seam, which “is quite sturdy, and has been naturally pressed in handling so it doesn’t need any ironing.”

The next stage is pouncing, which is when a design or pattern is transferred from the draft paper to the fabric. We follow Bernadette through the process of taking charcoal, grinding it with pestle and mortar, and putting the powder in a square of lightweight muslin tied up with a linen thread. Now, with pouncing bag ready, she tells us “today we’d probably pick up a pouncing wheel and start to prick the holes into the lines. However, I can’t recall coming across any references to this process in my research. I do know, however, that a simple straight pin would have been readily available, and sufficient at poking holes. And it’s a method that I’ve seen used in painting from the 16th century, to pounce guidelines onto the surface before applying paint. So this is what I’m getting up to now.”

Finished with the pouncing, we move into the second to last stage: stuffing. Again, we are given some historical background. Bernadette tells us that “as far as materials go, there’s an overwhelming amount of contemporary reference to cork rumps, or cork cutters, in association with women’s understructures.” We are shown what look like two 19th century cartoons, in both of which are mentioned cork as a material for rumps. But Bernadette does not have enough cork at her disposal to try this method. Looking for other options, she tells us that “the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, the amended version of Diderot’s encyclopaedia from 1785, has several entries for women’s understructures described as being stuffed with crin, or horsehairs, stitched between two layers of fabric.” But Bernadette has no horsehair either, so she has simply “butchered” an old pillow to reappropriate the feathers. This might be justified, however, through an expansive interpretation of the *Encyclopédie*’s reference to an understructure as a “small mattress” (a ‘*petit matelas*’ as text on the screens tells us) — “but again, this is only deduction.”

We now see Bernadette quilting, as she sits by a window looking out on New York City. Several camera angles are used to show the details of her work and the progress of the rump. Text on the screen tells us that this step took nearly six hours.



At the end of the video, after the rump is complete, Bernadette tells us: “Now I am sure, dear viewer, that you’ll have some thoughts of your own regarding this process, your own sewing experiences, or may have come across some valuable research that I’ve missed. I do hope you’ll write me a reply. I would so look forward to hearing from you. Until then, remaining yours truly, Bernadette.” The final shot is the rump on the dummy in the window, as “Yours Truly, Bernadette” in scripted font appears on the screen and the concerto reaches its coda.

As an early video in her YouTuber historian career this is an impressive effort. At the forefront is Bernadette’s obvious skill and knowledge in historical dressmaking. But aside from this, her video’s presentation is already quite professional. The videography, while still shaky and overexposed, is more than good enough to relay the process of her craft. The same can be said for the editing, selection and animation of the illustrating images, and the sound levels of the underscoring music. We can also see her professional approach in the video’s description area. In an organized list she has shared her material sources, “Useful Tools for Those So Inclined”, the image and music credits, links to digital versions of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* and the *Weekly Miscellany* pamphlet, as well as the volume number for those seeking the former in the New York Public Library, and, of course, her Patreon page and other social media accounts. She has been consistent in providing this documentation throughout her career.

This first video was quickly followed with another, “Reconstructing and Antique Edwardian Mantle”,¹²⁵ which is similar in approach and execution. Bernadette describes the stages of construction, shows us the steps of each stage, and explains her research and consultation of contemporary literature. These first two videos each received between 200,000 and 400,000 views. But already with her third effort, “Making an 18th Century Inspired Summer Dress”,¹²⁶ Bernadette

¹²⁵ Bernadette Banner, “Reconstructing an Antique Edwardian Mantle,” YouTube, May 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUYLt3QxlDo&t=67s>.

¹²⁶ Bernadette Banner, “Making an 18th Century Inspired Summer Dress,” YouTube, June 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6E_wqz0C3M&t=621s.

had a video that topped 1 million views. Early in this video, Bernadette shows us the book she is basing the dress's pattern on; one by renowned clothing historian Janet Arnold (the words 'of course' pop on the screen as Bernadette mentions Arnold and shows us the book). Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* series — which over the course of its multiple volumes covers in great detail women and men's fashion designs from the 1500s through the 1940s¹²⁷ — is a source Bernadette uses frequently.

Bernadette is often painstaking in her adherence to past practices. The long hours of sewing and pouncing that electric technology has rendered obsolete becomes an act of will and appreciation. Indeed, making an article of clothing like a rump in the 21st century is an anachronism at every point. In this way, truly — and unlike the representations of the past found in books and in films — her approach is a physical connection to the past; one that produces a touchable, wearable object.

But we should note here that Bernadette does not sell the clothes she makes. Rather, she makes them as one-off pieces for the purposes of personal and historical exploration. She has transformed her personal and historical explorations into explanations, which she now readily shares with her audience, inspiring them to follow her lead and start learning how to sew and make their clothes using traditional techniques.

Yet she is not a total purist. The bodice of the summer dress, for example, she did sew with an electric machine, and she also added other modern details like a zipper. This dress, as she made clear in the video's opening, was "inspired" by the 18th century, and was meant to bring "historical silhouettes into modern fashion", rather than be a strict reconstruction of them. Throughout this project she mixed new and old techniques, though still tended to prefer traditional ones when she could.

In a similar vein, her rhetoric is a reflection of the sensibilities she combines in her historian personality. She often speaks in a period style, more or less of the Victorian-Edwardian, but she is not imprisoned in this schtick. Bernadette blends in contemporary jokes, hashtags, and other internet or cultural idioms. She does not let her affectations interfere with the functional flow of descriptions or explanations. Often, then, an empirical method of appeal is at the fore, at least in some of her videos.

But Bernadette also enjoys fantastical explorations, and has undertaken several explicitly non-historical projects. For example, in 2018 she released "How I Made the Autumn Fairy Leaf

¹²⁷ After being out of print for years, this series is now republished by the School of Historical Dress. See <https://shop.theschoolofhistoricaldress.org.uk/product-category/books/?v=79cba1185463>.

Cape”,¹²⁸ in which she explained how she made this piece, which she had previously unveiled on Instagram. As the title indicates, this cape was made of leaves (made of fabric, lightly covered with glitter) and had fairy wings (contributed by a fellow crafter). A bit later, Bernadette also made a video explaining how she made a “Winter Witch Hat” which drew its inspiration from the one worn by Professor McGonagall in the Harry Potter films.¹²⁹ In projects and videos such as these, Bernadette mixes historical techniques and fashions with fantasy, often to varying degrees. For the Fairy Leaf Cape, fantasy was the stronger ingredient. But in others of her imaginative projects historical accuracy is still a determining factor. For example, she has made a series of videos dedicated to the project of making a “Lady Sherlock Holmes” outfit, which included a “Final Feature”¹³⁰ video where Bernadette theatrically modelled the ensemble. Though recreating the costume of a fictional character, and, additionally imagining a female version of this character, in making this outfit Bernadette nonetheless largely adhered to the dressmaking techniques and styles of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s day.



As a one last example of Bernadette’s fantastical explorations, we can highlight a video she released in 2022 — one with “0% whatsoever actual educational content” — where she made

¹²⁸ Bernadette Banner, “How I Made the Autumn Fairy Leaf Cape,” YouTube, September 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Hgvr3fVVp8>.

¹²⁹ Bernadette Banner, “Revisiting Abandoned Projects: A Winter Witch Hat,” YouTube, October 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mb-jPY7Skk4&t=41s>.

¹³⁰ Bernadette Banner, “Lady Sherlock Holmes || Final Project Feature,” YouTube, July 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E94L4EggTnc&t=107s>.

herself a “lady-dwarf beard” (i.e., a ‘beard’ she made by braiding her hair across her face).¹³¹ This was done in part from a challenge requested by a fan, and as a response to the lack of lady-dwarf beards in Amazon’s “The Rings of Power” series.

This video, besides showing us another playful side of Bernadette’s style and imagination, also disclosed another feature worth mentioning. Midway through the video, Bernadette included a paid sponsorship for Discord. She acts in this commercial in what appears to be a secret-agent bit as she shows us her own server as a selling point. She tells us that members on her Discord “even set up their own Zoom theatre company, which is just absolutely the most wholesome thing.” In this video, though an anomalous one in her output, we can nonetheless see a degree of her entrepreneurial success, as well as her expansive historian personality.

Let’s move towards looking at two of Bernadette’s most popular videos. But first, we will take a detour through historybounding: an approach to dress and personality that was sparked largely through social media, and of which Bernadette is a leading figure.

Historybounding

Historybounding is the practice of “wearing historical, or historically inspired, clothing in your modern, everyday life”,¹³² as Morgan Donner, the YouTuber who coined the term, puts it.

Emerging from and combining practices and trends such as Historical Costuming¹³³ and the sphere of YouTube known as CosTube (as in cosplay), practitioners of historybounding — in the vein that we have already seen with Bernadette — take past fashions as a foundational element of their style, but are otherwise open-ended in their interpretations and mixings. As the writer and historybounding enthusiast Matthew Maniaci writes: “The point is not faithful recreation but rather the construction of an aesthetic.”¹³⁴ In line with this end, and as the practitioner Dandy Wellington argues, historybounding is to be understood as “vintage style, not vintage values.”¹³⁵

¹³¹ Bernadette Banner, “Giving Myself the Lady-Dwarf Beard That Rings of Power Denied US,” YouTube, November 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXl6Hlcsbm8&t=270s>.

¹³² Morgan Donner, “Historybounding || Wearing Historical Fashions in Your Everyday Wardrobe,” YouTube, September 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYzeFK07leY&t=70s>.

¹³³ See Sarah Spellings, “Why Painstakingly Re-Crete an 18th-Century Corset? Why Not?,” Vogue (Condé Nast, November 22, 2021), <https://www.vogue.com/article/historical-costuming>.

¹³⁴ Matthew Maniaci, “Historybounding: A Blast from the (Sartorial) Past,” Medium (Thing a Day, October 2, 2021), para. 9.

¹³⁵ Brian Sheridan, “Dandy Wellington: ‘Life Is an Occasion,’” The Syncopated Times, May 23, 2020, <https://syncopatedtimes.com/dandy-wellington-life-is-an-occasion/>, para. 27.

For some, like Maniaci, the practice is mostly “something fun we do to take our minds off the raging inferno that is the modern world.”¹³⁶ But for others, though in many ways complimentary with Maniaci’s mode, historybounding is also a form of activism; one often combined with an entrepreneurial venture. Like we have seen with Bernadette — and her challenge to fast fashion — as well as with Dandy Wellington — who also has a successful social media oriented career, where he uses the hashtag #StyleAsResistance — historybounding has become a market.

But the historybounding market is also something of an anti-market, if what is meant by ‘market’ is taken in strictly material and salable terms. Historybounding emphasises a ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos, and a rejection of the mode of fashion as mere commodity. Rather, the practice upholds a mode of fashion as a method for care and conscious intention — conscious intention in terms of both one’s consumption and the constitution of one’s sense of self.

To be sure, historybounding can be seen as a form of explicit self-branding. In a strong sense, the personality of the historybounder is both the means of production and the product. As mentioned above, Bernadette does not sell the clothes she makes. She does not need to, because she has turned herself and her works into a coherent and persuasive whole. She has thereby attracted viewers who enjoy her enough to financially contribute to her work and lifestyle. Patrons pay her because she is who she is. And a large part of who she is emerges from her style. Her style — which she has described as “Academic, Victorian, Witch”¹³⁷ — becomes both an expression and extension of her historian personality. But coming to her personal style, she has said, was a years long process of experimentation and learning. Yet, in the end:

When you find your true style, when you find the style that you really feel good in, and you feel that expresses yourself really accurately, you have a different sort of confidence about you, you exude this sort of power. And so I think that, people are not quick to mess with you, when you sort of walk down the street, like a Victorian on a mission — or whatever it is that your style is.

It is surprising, out-of-the-ordinary, to see someone on a city street dressed like a “Victorian on a mission”. Such sights and behaviours run counter to norms of contemporary dress as well as temporal sensibility. Because of this, wearing such clothing in public requires a high level of self-confidence. It then also becomes an indicator of community.

Like old-school DiY punks with foot-high liberty spikes, historybounders — whether they sport celluloid collars and straw hats or Elizabethan kirtle dresses — often stick together and support leading personalities in their communities. Bernadette’s book, for example, features notes

¹³⁶ Maniaci, “Historybounding”, para. 19.

¹³⁷ Bernadette Banner, “Why Are You Dressed like That?” Embracing Bygone Styles with Rachel Maksy and Morgan Donner,” YouTube, February 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BdnsB4RTcU&t=61s>.

of inspiration contributed by several influential historybounders — most of them specialists in the dress of different eras, such as the above mentioned Dandy Wellington (jazz-age) and Yang Cheon Sik (Joseon Dynasty era Korea). Historybounders also create groups on Facebook,¹³⁸ meet up in person, and congregate on Discord, as we will see below.

Of course much more can be said on historybounding. But let us now return to Bernadette Banner, and see how she has carried this practice through some of her most popular videos.

Friendship and Forgery

The quotes from Bernadette in the section above are from her video of February 2020, ““Why Are You Dressed Like That?’ Embracing Bygone Styles with Rachel Maksy and Morgan Donner”. This 20 minute video has since been viewed nearly two million times, putting it within Bernadette’s top 15 most popular videos.

In this video, we find further expressions of Bernadette’s approaches to both her historian personality and her community. But we must also note that this video is an instance of paid promotion. The mobile-game makers of “June’s Journey” — a “glamorous hidden object game straight from the roaring 20s!”¹³⁹ — sponsored this video so that Bernadette and her fellow historybounding creators Rachel Maksy and Morgan Donner could meet in Boston to make it. The paid promotion parts of the video, however, are mentioned only briefly at the beginning, and the actual discussion and demonstration of the game comes only at the very end. But no matter what financial or promotional incentives might have drawn these three creators together in Boston, this video appears to be a genuine statement of their intentions, as well as a statement of their solidarity.

The video begins as we see Bernadette preparing her day’s outfit. She tells us, “We just naturally assume that because we’re now in the present, we have technologically advanced, such that, our clothes are better, our technology is better, our methods are better and more superior, and our clothing is more comfortable and more practical. That is not necessarily true.” After delivering this last line, we cut from the b-roll of Bernadette’s preparations to see her sitting in an armchair by a fireplace. The remainder of the video follows from here, as each of the three creators sits by the fire and speaks their mind regarding their approach to wearing historical clothing in the present. As

¹³⁸ Jillianne Hamilton, “Historybounding: The Hobby You Didn’t Know You Needed - the Lazy Historian: Fascinating Stories with Sass from the Past,” The Lazy Historian | Fascinating stories with sass from the past, July 14, 2022, <https://lazyhistorian.com/historybounding-the-hobby-you-didnt-know-you-needed/>.

¹³⁹ <https://www.wooga.com/games/junes-journey>

they speak, we cut to scenes of them, each dressed in their own distinctive period styles, walking around Boston together and posing as they take pictures.

Though this video is comprised of individual interviews and is not a discussion amongst them, their answers reveal a shared set of experiences and a broad agreement on a several issues. Each of them, for example, has had to deal with unwelcome attention and comments while dressed in period clothing in public. However, this long into their practice, they all feel confident enough to shrug off such commentary. They value historical clothing and dressmaking techniques for the superior material quality too much to let the negativity of others push them off course. Moreover, their love of historical dress is inseparable from their belief that dressing as they do allows them individually to, as Maksy puts it, “tell your own narrative and express yourself.”

For Bernadette, her practice becomes part of her belief that, today, people are quick to forget that “modern society runs on profit, it runs on capitalism, it runs on efficiency. It doesn’t necessarily run on practicality.” Historical dress, contrary to popular belief, is both more practical than people think, as well as more environmentally sustainable. So:

When you have devoted your life to studying or exploring or having an interest in historical dress and looking into how these clothes were produced, and the methods they were produced with, and how they were worn, and how they were loved and treated and cared for, you sort of have no desire to go into a high street shop.

The benefits of historical dress, these creators argue, can be enormous, both on a personal and a societal level. The sense of personal empowerment one can achieve is real, as through her practice Bernadette has learned that: “Things are possible. You don’t necessarily have to conform to very rigid, specific set beliefs and rules of society. You can express yourself. You are allowed this freedom in your life.” The video ends with a blooper reel of the three creators goofing around between takes and generally enjoying each other’s company.



The final video we will view is Bernadette’s most popular: “Buying a Knockoff of My Own Dress: An Educated Roast (actual fire used for Scientific Purposes)”,¹⁴⁰ released in November 2019 and to date receiving over seven and a half million views.

In this nearly 25 minute video, Bernadette tells us it has come to her attention that a fast fashion website has been selling a knockoff version of a 15th century style dress she made, even going so far as to use a picture of her modelling the dress. This dress was the subject of a two-part series she made in 2018, and took her over 250 hours to make by hand. “We hear about this all the time,” she tells us, “artists having their work knocked-off without permission left and right, and nobody really having any power over doing anything about it.” But Bernadette tells us she is “not angry at all, for you see, I smelt meat. And I did what any other cunning online creator would do when presented with the possibility of fresh, juicy content — I bought the dress.”

The dress finally arrives, after going through a backorder and other hassles. Bernadette films herself opening the package. To no surprise, the dress is a disaster. Comparing the bought dress side-by-side with her handmade dress, the gulf in quality is vast and immediately apparent. Bernadette then cuts a piece from the dress and burns it, to see if it actually burns or simply melts. It burns a bit, but mostly melts, indicating that, as she suspected, the dress is made mostly from synthetic fibres, i.e., it is mostly plastic.

The remainder of this video is, in the main, a long ethical “rant” by Bernadette; but one which explicitly looks to history as a guide. After telling us that fast fashion and the textile industry at large are destroying the environment (for which she includes links to a host of articles) she continues that:

Basically, the whole point of this experiment [of reconstructing the 15th century dress] was to expose the reality of how much garments cost, how much labor goes into things, how much materials cost, and the quality that can come out of it, versus the concessions that are made in terms of ethics, in terms of labor, in terms of quality of material, in terms of durability of material, to get something that is not flattering, will not last you, but is cheap. It makes me really mad. So how did we even get here? How did we even get to the point of exploiting people and literally dressing ourselves in plastic, that shreds and then ends up in landfills, and then destroys the environment? Where did we go wrong? How did people do clothing in history before we ended up here, and how can we go back there, maybe? Clothing took time, there were, I mean, if we’re going before machinery, before sewing machines, it took time to make because you had to do it all by hand, it took, I mean, everything. Everything took time to make, from the weaving of the material, which was done by hand, that would have cost you a lot of money, it was so valuable. In fact so valuable that even in high-fashionable elite, like, court-dress, beautiful silk brocades, there’s like piecing everywhere, on the front of garments, just unashamed piecing because fabric, especially those expensive silks, were hugely valuable, and there was no point in wasting them because they were so expensive.

¹⁴⁰ Bernadette Banner, “Buying a Knockoff of My Own Dress: An Educated Roast (Actual Fire Used for Scientific Purposes),” YouTube, November 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J80J4oaGVnY&t=14s>.

Bernadette said at the beginning of this video that she was not mad. But, on further reflection, she now clearly is. Her speech continues on these lines for another few minutes. She is speaking unscripted. Her passion for and knowledge of historical dress and techniques moves her speech. Here her empirical evidence, though key, is background to a visceral mode of appeal.

But after this part of her rant she returns to her main point that “somewhere along the line we just lost sight of the fact that clothing, craftsmanship, is supposed to be an investment.” She does not see anything elitist in this injunction. Rather, she sees the slower changes in fashion detectable in earlier periods as being more conducive to sustainable and durable clothing that could benefit all. To this end, imparting such knowledge and such skills, she has realized, has become one of her critical tasks.

I kind of now feel like I have a responsibility now that there are lots of people following me on the internet for the fact that I do stuff with clothing, to pass on this ability to recognize craftsmanship, to pass on basic skills for working with clothing, whether or not you actually want to start making your clothes yourself — which is fantastic, absolutely, do it. [...] If you read any 19th century sewing manual, they go on and on and on about the importance of darning, the importance of mending, and they sort of stress into the reader, who is supposed to be teaching people, because a lot of these are teaching instructionals, how to recognize faint spots in fabric so that, rule number one is to darn a patch before it turns into a hole — if something turns into a hole its like, what are you doing? Are you even paying attention to your clothing? We’ve completely lost that, that ability to fix our clothes.

The video ends with Bernadette speaking at length about how these kind of knock-off goods hurt other crafters, effecting their ability to continue with their craftwork and sell items of quality and deeper meaning.

With this, we will now turn to look at Bernadette Manor, the Discord server associated with her YouTuber channel, where a community of historically minded crafters has gathered.

Bernadette Manor

Bernadette Manor, like Bernadette’s YouTuber career, was started in 2018. This server, unlike the others we have seen so far, is entirely private: to gain access, one must be a Patreon at least at the Apprentice level (60 NOK/month). In addition, for those willing to support Bernadette at the Seasoned Time Traveller level (235 NOK/month), access to an even more private server can be gained, as well as to a monthly virtual Q & A with Bernadette, among other benefits.

We will be looking at the main server, where Patreon supporters at the Apprentice, Journeyman, and higher levels have access. One of the main functions of the server is so those who are fans of both Bernadette and crafting can have a common forum. Here, members congregate to

support each other and share their knowledge in various craft projects. Perhaps in large part due to this clear sense of purpose, the server tends to be more orderly than the previous two which we have discussed. This is in some ways reflected by another difference from the server's we have seen: Bernadette's Manor, in keeping with her Victorian mannerisms, does not have a rules channel. Rather, it has one which lists proper #server-etiquette. On this channel, one of Bernadette's supporters has posted a brief list of etiquette. This list includes common sense items, such as an injunction to respect others, as well as more specifically helpful suggestions, such a recommendation for those wishing to use sarcasm or wit to try using an "/s" or "/j" at the end of their post so as not to be misunderstood. Also unlike the other server's we have seen, in Bernadette's Manor there are no roles that one can either be assigned or self-assign. Neither does this server use a bot.

But as with the other server's viewed in this study, on Bernadette's Manor there is much sociality occurring across a spread of channels. There are two main groups of channels: one for channels adhering to the topic of "craftthings" the other for channels of "not craftthings". These groupings are self-explanatory, in that the former includes channels such as #sewing-discussion, #works-in-progress, and #yarnstuff, while the former includes channels like #here-be-floofs (where members share pictures of their pets being cute), #memes, and #sensitive-discussion (where members can express personal issues and find sympathy).

We will look at two channels of Bernadette's Manor. The first is #introduce-thyself, one of the general text channels where new members are encouraged to do just that. The second is #resources, one of the craftthings channels where members share their historical research.

#introduce-thyself

The first chats in this channel were between Bernadette and some of her early fans. As the channel's name suggests, members, upon joining the server, were encouraged to give a bio of themselves and their interests. Bernadette was the first to post. As an icebreaker, she mentioned that she never, under any circumstances, takes milk in her tea. For the next couple of hours, around two dozen members introduced themselves, and, picking up Bernadette's cue, mentioned their drink preferences. Unsurprisingly, all of the members expressed their passionate interest in history and fashion, and most of also mentioned their journeys toward incorporating traditional crafting techniques into their skillset. As well, many wrote that they are into cosplay, which is how they first

became interested in both crafting and historical dress. Cosplay has been mentioned over 60 times on this channel, and over 370 on the server at large.

Over the next few days, after the initial high volume of introductions subsided, the activity on the channel slowed but also became a bit more intimate. A subgroup of the new members continued to engage in introductory small talk and the disclosure of their interests. As the server was still new, there was also a suggestion by a member of other channels that Bernadette could add, such as #travelogue, so that such discussions on such topics could migrate so as not to block up any one channel. Bernadette agreed, and more channels were soon added.

A significant portion of the members also made known to the group that joining an online community was a new experience for them. Many expressed their wish to simply talk more about sewing, knitting, embroidery, and other crafts with like-minded people. Relatedly, in their introductions members often disclosed their skill level. Many have noted that they already have long experience in crafting, sometimes sharing pictures of a project they have been working on or have just completed. Some have told the group that they have more experienced with knitting, while others specialise in sewing, embroidery, crocheting, and so on. As well, there are many members who have disclosed that they are beginners. As these new members introduce themselves, previous members have often greeted them and shared messages of support. For a handful of members, within an hour after first meeting on this server, they were already direct messaging each other pictures of their handicrafts, as well as sharing tips and general knowledge to the group.

This basic activity on this channel has continued to the present. The pattern is often that members introduce themselves, engage in conversation with the members who respond to their post, and then move on to different channels. However, there have been a handful of members who regularly come back to this channel to greet newcomers. For example, one member has posted over 120 times here between 2019 and 2020. Another example of this channel's regulars was in 2019, when a new member mentioned that they were from Sweden. Another Swedish member who has been a regular and often greets new members, expressed their amusement (in Swedish) that it seemed to them that more Swedes were joining the server. Another regular on this channel, also a Swede, joined in the conversation, and the three conversed in Swedish for a few minutes. A similar 'Swedish' introduction took place around two months later with the same two regulars.

Bernadette herself infrequently makes appearances on this channel. Since 2018, she has posted here only 29 times. Starting in late 2022, however, she has been making more regular visits in the form of giving a general message of greeting to new members. But whether she is active on this channel or not, her presence is felt in other ways. She has been mentioned over 330 times on

this channel, with members frequently noting that she has been a significant source of inspiration for them. Several members who indicated that they were just beginning to learn how to sew wrote that Bernadette was crucial towards their decision to take up the hobby; and many experienced crafters have noted that they draw inspiration from Bernadette as well.

To date, the activity on this channel has been steady as new members have joined the community. Newcomers, when they introduce themselves, nearly always get a response from veteran members. Sometime the response is a simple ‘nice to meet you, glad you are here’, while other times, dependent on how much the new member has shared, the response will be one of follow up questions or a specific comments that turns into a conversation. In short, the sociality here is warm and welcoming.

#resources

This channel, like *#introduce-thyself*, dates from late 2018 and the beginning of the server. Bernadette was also the first to post here, sharing a link to the Facebook page of the *Archeological Textiles Review*; specifically, their forthcoming volume focused on early modern knitting. Two members quickly responded with excitement, the second of which also shared a link to a review of a monograph written by an academic historian on a related topic — *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (1994) by Elizabeth Wayland Barber. A third member replied, expressing admiration for that book; then a fourth member recommend another book by Barber — *The Mummies of Ürümachi* (1999). All the members expressed their appreciation of Barber’s works.

Perhaps the most common way a conversation on this channel is started is when a member posts that they are doing research, or are in the midst of a historical recreation project, and are wondering if others know of good resources on the topic. For example, about a week after the advent of the channel, one member asked if anyone could recommend a good general resource for learning more about historical dress. Two members responded, the first posting the links to the publisher’s website for two books, the second mentioning a book that had been influential to their research (though, unfortunately, the member noted, this book — Nora Waugh’s *The cut of women's clothes 1600-1930* (1968) — has long been out of print). The inquiring member thanked the others for their suggestions. The next day, Bernadette seconded one of the book recommendations made the day before — James Laver’s *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (1969). She noted that it

was one of her course texts in university, and though she had some criticisms of it, she let the member know that it is a good place to start. But she also added a recommendation — *20,000 Years of Fashion* (1967) by François Boucher — though cautioned that this is an in-depth read. Two members responded to Bernadette's post, thanking her for the recommendations, the second writing that she had just bought one of the books mentioned in the discussion.

Another common type of post is for a member to recommend a book or books, or mention a book that they are currently reading or have just ordered. Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* series has been mentioned several times in this way, with a couple of these posts coming in the form of a member excitedly sharing that one of the volumes had just arrived in the mail. Similarly, some members have posted pictures of books they have been excited to find for a good price in a used-book store. As is common on the other servers, the issues of pricing of various books has been raised repeatedly. Several conversations have occurred where members compared the prices of books across Amazon, Ebay, Abebooks, and elsewhere. This becomes especially interesting here, as many of the historical dress books members in this channel are after are technical guides which instruct one how to reconstruct historical dress. Given the niche appeal of such monographs, many have either been long out of print or are editions actually from the Victorian, Edwardian, or other periods. In other words, members here are sometimes searching for actual primary sources, which do tend to command high prices. There are, of course, ways around this, and finding and sharing these is a primary goal of this particular channel. Often, a member will post a link to a YouTube video, museum website, or other online resource that has digitized such otherwise hard to find information. Some members post their finds as soon as they come across them, for the benefit of the group.

There is certainly a high degree of generosity here. For example, one member posted a long list of books that they thought would be a help for those interested in shift/chemise patterns. The member had organized the list into a section for the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, and even gave page ranges for the relevant sections in the books. Another member has amazingly posted over 3,100 times on this channel from 2019 until the present, sharing links and images to all kinds of helpful historical knowledge.

But despite the more functional resource sharing aspect of this channel, there has also been substantive discussions. In 2019, for example, a member posted a series of photographs of women wearing everyday clothing, from the 1920s through the 1950s. These photographs included women protesting outside of a Chicago hotel where Christian Dior was staying in the late 1940s, two British women riding motorcycles in the 1920s, an Australian woman delivering bread in the 1940s, and

even a group of girls in the Hitler Youth in 1938. The member noted that they wanted to share what they had found in the library that day. The member also noted that what they had posted more or less exhausted their local library's fashion and fashion history book selection. Another member responded with a suggestion that they might check their local county archive, as in this member's experience a search there had turned up fascinating resources. One other member responded with some information they had (quoting from a book) about why the women in the photograph were protesting against Dior.

To date Bernadette has posted 19 times in this channel. However, though she has posted in this channel considerably less than in #introduce-thyself, her posts here are longer and more engaging. For example, in 2019 one member queried the channel to see if anyone knew of a good resource for 14th century women's headwear. This query went unanswered, but a few hours later another member asked if any members had resources for historical teenager wear. There was no activity on the channel for a few days, but eventually Bernadette gave a long response to both queries, including sharing a link to a digitized manuscript provided free online by BnF Gallica to the first query. Later in 2019, several members engaged in a discussion about dress pockets. A member had first asked if anyone had a good source on hanging/external pockets, and three other members replied with a mix of further questions, links, and various images. Bernadette replied that she was aware of a new book that was coming out on just this topic: *The Pocket: The Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (2019) by Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux. The member who first posted the query wrote that they were very pleased with all the responses.

7 — Research Questions Revisited

We have now seen examples of how historianship is instantiated in the works of several YouTuber historians. There is much to consider about this phenomenon and its potentials, and we will expand our analysis further in the next chapter. But here let's briefly gather some thoughts in light of our research questions.

RQ1: *How is historianship instantiated in a YouTuber historian's videos, that is, their historiography?* Whether a creator is interested in the history of sub-Saharan Africa, the Mexican-American border, or dress silhouettes from the age of Victoria, such works are made to inform and share knowledge, yes, but they are also made to entertain. Internet culture, including memes and pop cultures jokes, are used liberally, and blended with the history being discussed. But the YouTuber historians we have seen are also more than mere entertainers. While they often lace their works with entertaining elements and a degree of playfulness, this does not bar their work from rising to a certain level of historiographic sophistication and erudition. Part of this comes from the academic and professional historiographies they read and absorb, part from their own sensibilities, and part from the encouragement — and the expectations — of their community members.

RQ2: *What does this mode of historiography look like as it proceeds through the platform ecosystem of YouTube, Patreon, and Discord?* YouTuber historiography is predominantly a visceral breed. A bundle of aesthetics and rhetorical choices are combined, at whatever degree of conscious intention, to engage and retain audiences. Some of this might have to do with the YouTuber historian's entrepreneurial drive: they use a visceral method of appeal to benefit from the popularity principle, as YouTube's algorithms tend to boost the visibility of splashy, visceral videos.

But while a YouTuber historian's visceral method of appeal can be expressed in various ways, a reoccurring one is in the form of polemic. Of course academic and professional historiography might contain polemical elements, and plenty are explicitly written as polemics. But with Jabari, Kraut, and Bernadette, a significant part of their *oeuvre* argues specifically against something, such as white bigotry and Afrocentrism, ideological arsonists on- and offline, or fast fashion and crass commercialism.

A conspicuous degree of polemical content can often go hand in glove with creating a community. Communities often define themselves both positively and negatively, that is, by what they are for and what they are against. The three creator's profiled above have all unfurled their banners and let others know where they stand. In doing so, they have primed their ventures to be

fertile sites for communal formation. This is a condition accelerated and a capacity expanded by media technology such as YouTube, Patreon, and Discord.

RQ3: How are online communities engaging with the YouTuber historian's historiography?

As we have seen, many community members like to discuss either the same topics or ones closely related to those the YouTuber historian covers. In this sense the community is made in its creator's image. However, as we have also seen, members like to assert their own thoughts and independent research. Some of the liveliest channels are ones for general history discussions, and here the YouTuber historian's work tends to take a backseat.

However, on most servers there also tends to be a core of community members who frequently comment directly on the YouTuber historian's videos, and, when given the chance, enthusiastically participate in their creation. This is certainly the case with Jabari's community and with Kraut's. But now on Bernadette's server, a new channel, #the-comments-section, was added in April 2023. In short order it found lively sociality. Bernadette messaged her members that she would make it her habit to enter that channel on the day when she posts a video so that she could chat and receive feedback as her community members watched and reacted to the video.

But as we have also seen, the Discord communities are engaging not just with the historiography of the YouTuber historian, but with that of academic and professional historians. Indeed, all the Discord servers we have seen are repositories of historical scholarship. Each has at least one channel dedicated to sharing sources, often in the form of links or downloadable .pdf files. Alternatively, sharing a source might be as simple as telling other members the title of a book and its author. But whatever the method, through these discussions and disseminations communities come to assemble something like their own canons. Kraut is an obvious example, as he has gathered and asserted a canon in ways that other YouTuber historians typically have not. Nonetheless, we have seen that in Jabari's community Michael A. Gomez's *African Dominion* is a standby. For Bernadette and her community, Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* and several works by Elizabeth Wayland Barber are touchstones.

In light of this canon cultivation, to a notable degree YouTuber historians and their communities remain attached to historical precedent. They are often bibliophiles. They relish books, which have not changed in basic formatting for centuries. And they frequently employ the works of academic and professional historians as a load-bearing wall for their practices. Therefore, they are not an outright replacement of conventional modes of historianship. Rather, they are something like a parallel and a hybrid. Perhaps some are a touch rebellious, and certainly most are more playful than their academic and professional counterparts. Yet they are not without a degree of

complementarity. And in one sense they carry on the oldest traditions of historianship: reinterpreting and retransmitting the historiography of those who came before them.¹⁴¹

RQ4: *What might what we have seen suggest about the contemporary figure of ‘the historian’?* If this study has shown anything, it is that there are many people who hunger for both community and historical understanding. We have seen three creators who, in an entrepreneurial spirit, have seized on the essential open-endedness of the past, channeled it to their benefit, and have found many people willing to contribute to their venture. But by this undeniably commercial act, patrons demonstrate a level of care. They care about the study of history, maybe they also care to an extent about the well-being of the creator. Over the course of this study, both Jabari and Kraut had periods of non productivity due to illness. Nevertheless, many Patreon supporters stuck with them, even encouraging them to take time off to relax. Even in these lull periods the social interactions between the creators and their community members did not stop; they would still chat on Discord and send messages through Patreon. The care, then, runs in both directions. For every time the YouTuber historian makes a video, that is a choice. When the Patreon supporter continues their subscription, the Discord member continues engaging in discussions, that is a choice. And these choices involve both an exploration of history and an act of sociality.

As the scholar Ann Rigney has noted, for historiography in the digital age, the novelties of networked media technology call for “conceptualisation not in terms of a fixed product made by a single agent, but in terms of information flows, social networking, and participation.”¹⁴² YouTuber historians and their Patreon supporters and Discord communities are striking examples of such a reframing.

¹⁴¹ “Is that all it is to be a historian? To read over the shoulder of another person reading?” Patrick Boucheron trans. Willard Wood. *Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear*. (New York: Other Press, 2018), ePub version, Chapter 5, Para. 5.

¹⁴² Ann Rigney. “When the Monograph is no longer the Medium: Historical Narrative in the Online Age.” *History and Theory* 49, no. 4 (2010): 116.

8 — Historiography Reconsidered

In the section on Historianship in Chapter 2 we discussed ways in which, overall, YouTuber historians and their communities differ from academic and professional historian communities. But now that we have seen examples of YouTuber historianship we can further hone-in on some of the specifics which differentiate their historiography from that of the higher-level orders that they so often utilize.

One such specific, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is the presence of entertainment. As Torstendahl writes:

Entertainment may be a by-product of professional history, but more often it is not. History as entertainment is cultivated mainly as a commercial aspect of history-writing, and those who write history for its commercial potential are often not professional historians. Sometimes entertaining qualities are cultivated for educational purposes. The crucial criterion is not whether the author bears the title of professor or not, but rather whether the work provides a contribution to the growth of knowledge. Sheer repetition of what is already known is not a professional contribution to history, however attractive a form the presentation may take.¹⁴³

An emphasis on entertainment, over and above a “contribution to the growth of knowledge”, is a widely recognized indicator of what is often called ‘popular history’. In this light, YouTuber historians are not much different from legacy popular history outlets like the History Channel and publishers of the type of history magazines found near grocery store checkout lines. But there are significant differences between the historiography of YouTuber historians and these varieties. Indeed, the differences here might be just as significant as those between YouTuber historians and academic and professional historian communities.

When it comes to contributing to the growth of knowledge, YouTuber historians might well offer more opportunities and vantages of a more studious character than those of the legacy modes. A signal part of this potential stems from the currents of participatory sociality infused in the YouTuber historian’s practice. As we have seen, a YouTuber historian’s historiography is a highly interactive species. Unlike a popular history magazine article or TV documentary, YouTuber historiography is made with an orientation to community member’s participation. The entertainment factor of YouTuber historiography might then recede a step or two into the background in light of their desire to be taken seriously by a community of history enthusiasts. Through such social interactions and participatory underpinnings, YouTuber historians are well-positioned to contribute to the growth of knowledge.

¹⁴³ Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*, 207.

However, what could be meant by “growth of knowledge” needs further unpacking. For example, as Torstendahl uses the phrase, and as he relates it to professional historian communities and their system of normative standards, knowledge only truly grows when it leads to new insights. But what a new insight can be is often an open category. For example, must a new insight only be an analysis of previously un-discussed or ‘lost’ documents? or can it also be a novel way of interpreting documents which are already well-known? Apart from the interpretation of documentary evidence, might it be an original framing of actors, events, and their relations? How about the novel application of theories, new or old, to historical narratives?

Moreover, it would appear that as a matter of definition, what a new insight will ultimately be, given that whatever fills this category is still in the future, is unknowable to practitioners in the present. In other words, new insights are subject to the open future, which is always beyond our purview. As they cannot be deduced from existing knowledge, they then fall largely into the territory of imagination.¹⁴⁴ This opens the category of new insight up to diverse interpretations.

That is, unless certain categories of new insight are barred by fiat of a historian community’s system of normative standards, what might be called a paradigm. Indeed, the answers various historian communities might offer to questions such as those posed above tend to fall on paradigmatic differences between what is regarded as “proper” history and what is regarded as “philosophy of history”.¹⁴⁵ The two modes are often housed in different academic departments, that is, they are of different communities. Different intellectual approaches then seldom come into sustained contact. For reasons such as this, some historians have argued that “there should not be a single dominant, exclusionary model of acceptable history that establishes the professional identity of the historian and serves as the institutional charter for such crucial practices as vetting graduate students or hiring and tenuring faculty.”¹⁴⁶

But these disputes, while related to our discussion, take us beyond the immediate focus of this chapter. For our context, we can advance our thinking about the difference between YouTuber historian’s historiography and that of academics and professionals generally, as well as what could be considered a new insight, through a relatively more tractable dyad. For this we will turn to the distinction between the “historical past” and the “practical past” as drawn by Michael Oakeshott.

¹⁴⁴ In this way, new insights are not dissimilar from economic and technological innovation and capitalist dynamism. Inspiration for this paragraph comes from Jens Beckert. *Imagined Future: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹⁴⁵ Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe, 40th Anniversary Edition*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), xxxi.

¹⁴⁶ Dominick LaCapra. *History and its limits: human, animal, violence*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 35.

For Oakeshott, the historical past is “the conclusion of a critical enquiry of a certain sort; it is to be found nowhere but a history book.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, this is the past that comes from sustained and dispassionate study, characteristic of that found in the historiography of the academic and professional echelons; it is more towards what we have called an empirical method of appeal. The “practical past”, on the other hand, maps onto what we have called a visceral method of appeal. With this mode, Oakeshott imagines a shop where “a counter has been set up at the back door” so that people may peruse the history kept in its storehouse. A practical past is more of a ‘living past’, one with a “vocabulary of symbolic characters” such that it is

not a collection of exploits but of emblems; not evoked in a procedure of critical enquiry into the authentic character of a not-yet-understood survival, but merely recalled as unproblematic images; and valued, not for an historically understood past which may be inferred from them, but for their present usefulness.¹⁴⁸

Oakeshott makes clear that the two modes are not impermeable. Even within the same book an historian can enter into “consideration, for example, of what it was ‘like’ to be within the walls of Constantinople in the late April of 1453”.¹⁴⁹ As well, other scholars have noted that there are “innumerable shades” between the two modes.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, one mode might well be more dominant in one’s practice. It seems evident that the three YouTuber historians we have seen above are predominantly operating in the mode of practical past. Their historiography is not exactly dispassionate.

A notable entertainment factor and a visceral method of appeal on one hand, the growth of knowledge and new insight on the other. Are these categories mutually exclusive? Must the former always be in tension with the latter? It is widely accepted that knowledge — such as ‘life’ lessons, empathy, ideas — can be learned from works of fiction, which, no matter what else they might be, are a form of entertainment, and often a visceral one. Yet history, which in theory can encompass the entirety of human experience over time and across space, includes no shortage of horrors, no shortage of important insights. Perhaps these weighty issues are the primary reason why history and entertainment are often an uncomfortable pair, especially in academic and professional historian communities. Their study is not to be trivialised by being dressed in entertaining clothes.

¹⁴⁷ Michael Oakeshott. *On History and other essays*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 33.

¹⁴⁸ Oakeshott, 40.

¹⁴⁹ Oakeshott, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Silke Zimmer-Merkle. “History and technology future: Where history and technology assessment come together” in *Historical Understanding Today: Past, Present, and Future* ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 184.

But here we can see another curious fuzziness to the borders of Oakeshott's two modes. Academic and professional historians, to the extent that they strive for what he has described as the historical past — does their mode of critical inquiry not also often assert a present usefulness? Indeed, is not the growth of knowledge and new insight not useful in the present? Currently, a dispassionate accounting of the past is falling out of vogue.¹⁵¹ For example, in an anxious age such as ours, the academic historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage have argued that historians and historiography have a unique and critical role to play. For Guldi and Armitage,

assigning responsibility, finding concomitant recommendations about how the earth should be reformed to prevent greater catastrophe still [...] requires skills of working back and forth between past and future, discerning multiple sources of causality and ranking them, examining them from different perspectives and experiences to offer the fullest possible account of how the catastrophe came to be and therefore what is owed to whom. That kind of thinking about the past, compiling cases for possible vectors of reform, has always been the purview of neither science nor economics but of history.¹⁵²

Though YouTuber historian's historiography is seldom as polished or as rigorous as that found in academic and professional communities, these general kinds of active interests in the past are becoming more evident in both spheres. For some of these communities they are coming to be seen as an optimal norm, maybe even a minimal demand.

So far we have established that the YouTuber historian mode of historiography is marked by an entertainment factor, a visceral method of appeal, and a degree of playfulness to their historian personality, in ways that are not usually accepted in academic and professional historiography. Admittedly, we have largely looked for a bright side to these factors. But there are certainly also dark spots. A crank can be entertaining. Pugilism for its own sake is also a visceral method of appeal. A troll might use playfulness as a method of manipulation. And so on. That academic and professional historians do not try to squeeze a level of entertainment out of their works, or lean towards visceral appeals or playfulness, is then largely for the best.

Yet as Henry Rousso writes: "What historian, however disinterested, has not dreamed that his advice would one day be listened to — if not heard?"¹⁵³ In this desire, many academic, professional, and autodidactic YouTuber historians alike might well be venturing out from the same inner space. The quest to construct some semblance of order over history, some degree of authority

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Emma Green, "The Right Side of History," *The New Yorker* (Condé Nast, March 7, 2023), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-education/the-right-side-of-history>.

¹⁵² Jo Guldi and David Armitage. *The History Manifesto*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 64.

¹⁵³ Henry Rousso. "Applied History, or the Historian as Miracle-Worker." *The Public Historian* 6, no. 4 (1984): 67.

to interdict the otherwise meaninglessness of temporal mutilation — this Promethean position may strike deep to the core of bootstrapping amateurs and tenured academics alike.

Clearly, YouTuber historians have the potential to make a difference in historical understanding for many people — perhaps on average more than an academic historian working under conventional frameworks has a chance of reaching. Temptations, much like those that Rousseau intimates, thus beckon. In the next chapter, then, let's think of ways that one might variously accept or reject the phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities; and, if one is so inclined, how they might best navigate in and through these spaces.

9 — Concluding Discussion

As the historian James Banner reminds us, “As in life itself, provisionality remains the hallmark of historical interpretation.”¹⁵⁴ In this chapter, then, we will leave matters largely open-ended. But this does not mean we should take a passive or ambivalent stance. Indeed, there are defensible attitudes that can be held regarding what we have seen; there are inferences, however tentative, that can be drawn.

So we will view the phenomenon variously. We will take the idea of “frames of acceptance” and “frames of rejection” from the historically minded literary scholar Kenneth Burke. For Burke, these frames denote modes of acceptance or rejection of historical circumstances; they are attitudes. The critical difference between the frames is what comes in for emphasis.¹⁵⁵

As viewpoints onto the phenomenon, the frame of acceptance is more optimistic and the frame of rejection is more pessimistic. Or, phrased differently, the former is more apologetic of the phenomenon while the latter tends toward the offensive. Herein lies the importance of emphasis. In the first frame we will consider some positive potentials of this new mode of historianship; in the second frame we will consider some negative ones.

At times, these frames might seem to negate the merits of the other. That is by design. Incommensurate views on a complex social phenomenon are a byproduct of that very complexity. With phenomenological cases like that of this study there is often more to be learned in the light of disagreement and disparate views than by attempting to synthesise an attitudinal consensus.

However, we need not leave things hanging with these two largely oppositional frames. To round out our view we can add a third frame, one in the mode of what Burke calls the “comic corrective”. “In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*.”¹⁵⁶ Rather than a dialectal synthesis between the frame of acceptance and the frame of rejection, this frame is an attempt at pragmatism. In thinking our way towards how a comic framing could be cultivated, we will consider ways in which a self-observing individual can identify the ‘best’ of a creator, their works, and communal discussions, and thereby get the ‘best’ out of the phenomenon.

¹⁵⁴ James M. Banner Jr. *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 226.

¹⁵⁵ Kenneth Burke. *Attitudes Toward History*. (Los Altos, California: Hermes Publications, 1959), 20-30.

¹⁵⁶ Burke, 171.

When it comes to the study of history, understandings and interpretations are always subject to revision. Before us lies an unknown future, behind us an ever-changing past. It is part and parcel of this fact of reality that, as the historian Georg Iggers writes, “Perhaps we can see in the history of historiography an ongoing dialogue that, while it never reaches finality, contributes to a broadening of perspective.”¹⁵⁷

YouTube historians and their communities are participants in this ever-changing, ever-renewing endeavour. In their own often idiosyncratic ways, do they not also contribute to a broadening of perspective? Through videos on YouTube and discussions on Discord, communities can come into being, set their own rules and standards, and have long and open ended contact. Here, many voices bring together many perspectives. Discussions can at times be conciliatory, at other times aggressive. Sometimes they are simply confused and confusing. But they are discussions nonetheless. And as these are communities comprised of history buffs, what might often occur is a refinement of any one individual’s historical understandings as each member brings their own knowledge to the table. The knowledge of the individual is thereby augmented by the knowledge of the group. When more perspectives are introduced, and more knowledge shared, individuals have the chance to broaden their perspective and truly grapple with history.

As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin writes: “The historical approach is inescapable: the very sense of contrast and dissimilarity with which the past affects us provides the only relevant background against which the features peculiar to our own experience stand out in sufficient relief to be adequately discerned and described.”¹⁵⁸ Truly, the historical approach can engender a sense of proportion, a sense of what it is to be human, an affective richness, in ways vanishingly few other intellectual pursuits can. As history is a subject which concerns us all, and is therefore open to us all, the historical approach is something akin to a natural right. It is as if by birthright of our historical consciousness and the “inescapable” historical approach that people today explore the history of our kind.

And yet the times in which we live are also marked by mis- and disinformation, less than trustworthy news media, a confounding mess of what a follower of Guy Debord would call

¹⁵⁷ Georg G. Iggers. *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 16.

¹⁵⁸ Isaiah Berlin. “Political Ideas in the 20th Century” in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* ed. Henry Hardy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

“spectacle”. In a society flooded by falsehoods and vapid ephemera, many people hunger for things of deeper import. As the historian John Lukacs writes,

The sources and the conditions of the present appetites for history may be deeper than curiosity about this or that in the recent past — perhaps even deeper than the desire to acquire more knowledge. They involve the appetite for encountering some things and some people who were *real*.¹⁵⁹

The YouTuber historians we have seen, and many others like them, give people a sense of things and people who were real. Part of this is via the history they impart. But a large part of the realness also comes via their historian personality. The two parts are often complimentary. As actors with a genuine passion for history, and unencumbered by the rigidity and distance of academicism, they themselves are, in a significant way, ‘real’.

However, the medium of YouTube videos is not one that suggests longevity. A well made and popular YouTube video might continually attract viewers for a number of years, but in the long run? Given the ephemerality of social media content, it seems unlikely that a YouTuber historian will obtain anything near the staying power of historians who produce histories in the conventional way, that is, historians who write books. Nonetheless, like countless historians who have largely been forgotten save for antiquarian interest, YouTuber historians make a difference for people living in the present.

In this study, we have seen Jabari, who seeks to right historical disparities in the historiography of African peoples. He has allowed strangers to participate in the self-discovery of his genetic ancestry, as well as taking a firm stand against both white bigotry and Afrocentrism. We have seen Kraut, who produces lengthy, semi-original video essays on such topics as the horrors of the 20th century, a long view of Turkish nationhood, and why the nation-states of the U.S. and Mexico are so drastically different today. He has experienced how fickle some YouTube communities can be, yet from his crisis he came back stronger. And we have seen Bernadette Banner, who combines her technical skills and historical understandings to recreate historical dress and suggest alternatives to current practices. Let’s expand on her for a moment longer.

Bernadette attended an elite American university, but she brings her accumulated knowledge to the public via YouTube. Her attention to detail, her Victorian-Edwardian affectations mixed with contemporary internet-speak, her clear position on certain issues — all feed into her historian personality and thus her historianship. And this historianship comes with a practical message. The message is that, yes, you too can learn invaluable skills and make a change in your life. She reminds

¹⁵⁹ John Lukacs. *The Future of History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 69.

us that people have made their own clothes under conditions far more difficult than what we know today. And here Bernadette has utilized one of the great technological affordances available today: instantaneous communications across vast distances. Having trouble pouncing an undercarriage? Need tips on improving your cross-stitching technique? In Bernadette's Manor, all you need do is ask. There is a community there who delights in sharing their knowledge and discussing such topics.

For a sharp social critic like Christopher Lasch, the overall situation in the West is grim. Both the markets and the state have become largely incapable of repairing "the fabric of public trust" which they have, in their distinctive yet intertwined ways, degraded.¹⁶⁰ What is needed is a homegrown emphasis, a more conducive space for civil life, which

requires settings in which people meet as equals, without regard to race, class, or national origins. [...] Even the pub and coffee shop, which at first appear to have nothing to do with politics or the civic arts, make their contribution to the kind of wide-ranging, free-wheeling conversation on which democracy thrives".¹⁶¹

Are the spaces hosted by YouTube, Patreon and Discord, and populated by creators and their communities, not something like this? To be sure, such platforms are beholden to market forces. Nevertheless, do they not offer at least something in the way of a reasonable enough venue for public discussion, deliberation, debate, controversy — and, crucially, a setting where people can meet as equals? Of course, this largely depends on the platform. But perhaps more crucially still it depends on the community which takes advantage of the platform.

Each of our three creator's has opened themselves up to the internet, a dicey proposition. Yet they took risks and found rewards. Granted, a portion of the rewards come in the form of money. But perhaps the greater part of their reward are the communities they have formed. Their enterprise thereby becomes an asset not just for them but for many. With so many voices, perspectives on history can be broadening from the narrow confines of gratuitous erudition and recondite minutia that are hallmarks of the academy. History in this space can come to be both more relevant and more interesting.

Certainly, it is easy to be cynical about YouTubers and social media based communities, especially when the former embarks on semi-academic pursuits and the latter is a semi-anonymous collectivity. But in times of strained social cohesion and a debased mediascape, might these kind of spontaneous gatherings not offer a glimmer of positivity?

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Lasch. *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 100-1.

¹⁶¹ Lasch, 117.

A Frame of Rejection

So far, this writing has neglected to use the term ‘influencer’. It is time we did. YouTuber historians, whatever else they might be, are social media influencers. This type of actor comes with baggage that is less than conducive for the study of history. Inescapably, an influencer must to some degree be an entrepreneur: they must care about their cashflow, even if they do not always care about profits. As the economist Ludwig von Mises reminds us: “The interests of the entrepreneurs can never diverge from those of the consumers. The entrepreneur prospers the better, the better he is able to anticipate the desires of the consumers.”¹⁶² The YouTuber historian, therefore, in anticipating the desires of their consumers, is only as good as their patrons and their community, and vice versa.

Under such conditions, what is to keep the work of a YouTuber historian from being uncritical? What is there to prevent it from becoming no more than junk history ordained by brute aggregation of preferences? Shorn of guardrails, members of a YouTuber’s community might discuss, debate, and occasionally correct matters of fact. They might have some notions of minimum demands and optimal norms. But none of this need necessarily lead to better scholarship on the part of the creator, or deeper knowledge on the part of community members. Alexander Pope knew the score: “A little learning is a dang’rous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring”.¹⁶³ But what the poet perhaps could not have foreseen was the scope, scale, and speed with which media technologies like YouTube, Patreon, and Discord have transmogrified the Pierian Spring into a Soda Stream.

There is little to keep a YouTuber historian and their community from descending into an anarchy of personalities. Alarmingly, all a YouTuber needs is a solid base of supporters. They can afford to lose dissenters or diverging opinions here and there. They might even benefit from this. For once a creator finds their niche, they can expand their operations by satisfying (and via their personality, embodying) whatever desires dominate that space. The YouTuber might then have a smaller community, but it will be one that is more hardcore. The community will become a ‘closed society’, arrested in their intellectual development, parochial in their historical understandings.

¹⁶² Ludwig von Mises trans. Ralph Raico. *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition, Third Edition*. (San Francisco: Cobden Press, 1985), 165.

¹⁶³ From Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism: Part 2*:
A little learning is a dang’rous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

For while it is true that “entrepreneurial activity can be motivated by its own intrinsic rewards, the rewards of mastery, competence, and accomplishment”¹⁶⁴, it is certainly also the case that the “market, by its nature, is neutral toward intellectual merit.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, in the marketplace of intellectual pursuits on social media, such as that of the study of history, chances are high that the loud will prevail over the scholarly. This tension might even be at play within an individual creator. Whether consciously or not, a creator might find their historian personality a divided-self as they tamp down, or in some cases outright circumvent, their ‘better angels’ in order to win an argument, bolster their authority, or do whatever it takes to succeed in the wild west competition of YouTuber stardom and Patreon patronage. The competitive ethos of a market — in this case, one that is perhaps made all the worse by its underlying calculative infrastructures — taints, or even overrides, the kind of measured judgements and wise interdictions that are necessary for proper historical discourse and the creation of knowledge.

Worse still, YouTuber historians and their patron/community members might not quite realize what they are becoming. A kind of ‘OnlyFans’ effect might be at play. Like the notorious content subscription service, a YouTuber historian’s patrons could become accustomed to getting exactly the content they most desire, on demand. They are then not so much connoisseurs of good history, but entitled consumers. And what they consume is bespoke history, tailored to their whims, kind to their conceits.

Clearly, there are looming problems for the YouTuber historian mode of historianship. It might at times provoke a broadening of perspectives, and degrees of healthy discussion, but it is ultimately a pale reflection of true scholarship. Despite the many problems of the modern academy, it remains the best institution, the best tool, we have for engendering robust knowledge. As the sociologist Philip Rieff writes: “If the university is not the temple of the intellect, then it is not a university. In the temple, as its servants know, there are no students’ rights, except the right to be well-taught. A university is neither a political democracy nor an oligarchy; it is an intellectual aristocracy.”¹⁶⁶

For Rieff, the “cult of personality” that has come to run rampant both within and without the academy is disastrous for teaching and learning. Teachers, more often than not, debase their work when they ‘go public’. A degree of separation between the academy and daily life is therefore a

¹⁶⁴ Robert Nozick. “Why Do Intellectuals Oppose Capitalism?” in *Socratic Puzzles*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 284.

¹⁶⁵ Nozick, 285.

¹⁶⁶ Philip Rieff. *Fellow Teachers/Of Culture and Its Second Death*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 6.

necessary condition, for “societies are not vast academies.”¹⁶⁷ But YouTuber historians, with their degrees of mimicry of academic and professional historians slander this distinction. Worse: some viewers, and some YouTuber historians, might come away thinking that there *is* no valid distinction.

This is deeply unfortunate, for the kind of knowledge that passes through social media (or what passes *as* knowledge on social media) is often a knockoff version of the real article. It is what the scholars Kenneth Cmiel and John Durham Peters call “promiscuous knowledge”. For Cmiel and Peters, promiscuous knowledge is “the ongoing negotiation between elite knowledge producers and those outside the formal system or with no formal accreditation.”¹⁶⁸ A worrisome artifact of contemporary life, promiscuous knowledge

emerged with distrust of the professional project and a decline in the prestige of experts. Promiscuous knowledge is, quite literally, the unholy blend of the profane and the professional, the outsider and the expert. It is marked by professional’s inability to maintain the “purity” of knowledge production amid its continued necessity.¹⁶⁹

Indeed, without incentives to do otherwise, some YouTuber historians might be no more than mountebanks, perusers of promiscuous knowledge which they ransack and repackage for their own rewards. The difference, then, between YouTuber historians and academic and professional historians can be the difference between the raw and the cooked. YouTuber historians, lifted by their raw historian personalities, can succeed at the expense of the analytical rigours, the slowness, the cool dispositions of an intellectual aristocracy that are the strengths and gifts — and perhaps even the highest purpose — of the academy. With flash over sophistication, bluster over nuance, a YouTuber historian can assert an historical understanding that, even if not outright wrong, is in a deeper sense lacking in nutrients. In the competitive market of YouTuber historianship, historical knowledge and historical understanding are things to be quickly and promiscuously assembled and posted. Therefore, even a ‘good’ YouTuber historian (and let’s here maintain that the three of this study are indeed good YouTuber historians) is a contributor to this unfolding perplexity.

A Comic Frame

Scathing stuff, that frame of rejection. We can then note with some relief that the comic frame is a variant of the frame of acceptance. But rather than looking outward and attempting a

¹⁶⁷ Rieff, *Fellow Teachers*, 17.

¹⁶⁸ Kenneth Cmiel and John Durham Peters. *Promiscuous Knowledge: Information, Image, and Other Truth Games in History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 223.

¹⁶⁹ Cmiel and Peters, 224.

reinvigorated apologia or a fresh mustering of optimism — which ultimately might lead to an endless cycle of point-counterpoint between the two frames or a ‘game of equivocations’ — the comic frame is a tilt toward an inward view. Our aims here are pragmatic. We seek to envision how an individual can approach the phenomenon of YouTuber historians, their work, and communal discussions, and exist with them ‘in the round’.

The comic frame accepts the social phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities as is. It does not try to raise or lower them, or wish that they were something that they are not. Yet it is not a last resort in the face of an impassive force. Rather, it entails an active and agentic attitude. In the spirit of pragmatic philosophy, this frame foreswears “the promise of total solutions and wholesale salvation for piecemeal gains.”¹⁷⁰ To this end, our comic frame is one that is open to an individual’s freedom of thought and self-reflection.

We will construct our frame in three pieces, to accommodate the YouTuber historian, their historiography, and communal discussions. First, let’s consider how one might approach an individual YouTuber historian. The philosopher Hilary Putnam tells us the following:

I want to urge that there is all the difference in the world between an opponent who has the fundamental intellectual virtues of open-mindedness, respect for reason, and self-criticism, and one who does not; between an opponent who has an impressive and pertinent store of factual knowledge, and one who does not; between an opponent who merely gives vent to his feelings and fantasies (which is all people commonly do in what passes for political discussion), and one who reasons carefully.¹⁷¹

Here Putnam is discussing how, in a pluralist environment, one can come to have meaningful conversations, and even longstanding relationships, with those whom they strongly disagree.¹⁷² Through recognizing in an interlocutor the set of virtues Putnam has included, one can still find a basis for appreciation of their view, even if one detests it.

In the frame of rejection, we alluded to the notion that the kind of virtues listed by Putnam can get swept out to sea by the riptides of more competitive or even aggressive affects. An entrepreneurial YouTuber historian, who does their work entirely in the public sphere, and in an environment beset by often less than trustworthy calculative infrastructures, might indeed find the expression and cultivation of such higher order virtues difficult, maybe at times very difficult. But even in such an environment, valuing and expressing such virtues is not impossible. It is not a foregone conclusion that one must outright capitulate, must ‘sell their soul’, in order to succeed.

¹⁷⁰ Sidney Hook. *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 4-5.

¹⁷¹ Hilary Putnam. *Reason, Truth and History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 165-6.

¹⁷² For those interested, here Putnam is alluding to the sharp ideological disagreements between himself and his Harvard colleague, Robert “Bob” Nozick.

Society, technology, economics, and whatever else, are weighty factors. But they do not, in every instance, at every moment, determine ones actions *tout court*.

If a YouTuber historian values and strives for such virtues then they will become a part of their historian personality. A viewer can recognize them in their historiographic expressions. Through the YouTuber historian's videos, messages to Patreon supporters, discussions on Discord, live streams, and other communications, a YouTuber historian exposes themselves to their patrons, community members, and a general public, in ways and to an extent that academic and professional historians do not. It then becomes possible to get a sense of the degree in which the kind of virtues named by Putnam are active, and are indeed held to be virtues, by the YouTuber historian.

The responsibility to be a good historian, which is undoubtedly aided by striving toward the virtues that Putnam has listed above, falls on the YouTuber historian and them alone. Only they can make the ultimate decision of what kind of historian they want to be. But for an individual approaching the YouTuber historian, simple questions can be asked to get a sense of the choices they have made in this regard. Are they open and amenable to feedback? Do they readily admit to and correct their mistakes? Are they clear and upfront about their research and sourcing? Do they give vent to their fantasies and feelings in a way that is improper for an historian's task? To this last question, it can be useful to consider the distinction between their empirical and visceral methods of appeal, especially if it appears that the visceral appeal is overrunning the empirical. Asking these kind of questions, as basic as they are, can be helpful in identifying the virtues of the YouTuber historian, and therefore whether or not they are worth listening to.

The second piece of our comic frame, closely related to the first, is a way to think about the YouTuber historian's work as a form of historical scholarship. Let's consider this injunction from the historian Constantin Fasolt:

Historians never treat knowledge of the past simply as knowledge, no matter how good it is. They treat it as a point of departure for further expeditions. Only slackers take good books [or videos] as an excuse to rest. Historians worth their salt leave them behind the very instant they are published and resume the long march to history's final destination.¹⁷³

History's final destination is a horizon: an unreachable point that moves with the viewer. "As you move closer, you find more space between the thought and the expression. Meaning will only reveal itself to those who look at the horizon and stop to recognize that no horizon can be reached."¹⁷⁴ The recognition of this eternal unreachability — which, at its best, is also a recognition

¹⁷³ Constantin Fasolt. *The Limits of History*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 14.

¹⁷⁴ Fasolt, 150.

of an imperative for a good measure of humility, of intellectual openness — is another way to identify the virtues listed by Putnam, particularly in this case open-mindedness, self-criticism, and a hunger for factual knowledge.

Up to this point we have put most of the responsibility on the shoulders of the creator. Yet we must note that the principle of Fasolt's injunction works best when it is held both by the historian and their reader/viewer. For, as James Banner writes: "While historians bear responsibility for presenting the past as well as they can, those who read [or watch] it bear an analogous obligation to approach the past with an understanding that what they read [or watch] is only a partial reconstruction of it."¹⁷⁵

If one wants a rule of thumb, let it be this: Don't be a slacker. History is a subject that, if one is serious, is a lifelong inquiry. Watching, enjoying, and even at times being inspired and influenced by a YouTuber historian's takes on history is not inherently wrong. It is, however, wrong to leave things at that. And if a YouTuber historian is simply reducing history to entertainment and nothing more, perhaps they are best avoided.

This brings us to the third and final piece of our comic frame. As we have seen, a Discord community can be a place of prolonged discussions. In these discussions, there are sometimes areas of agreement, at other times areas of sharp contentions which never quite reach resolution. Both kinds of discussions can be made better or worse, largely depending on the members who are engaging in them and the tones that are struck. Certainly debate, even argument, can be fun, especially with people whom one has become familiar. Ideas and facts, about history or whatever else, can be learned from such engagements, where people are willing to stake claims and defend turf. But in some discussions, and especially ones online, when people are apt to lose their inhibitions in a fury of keystrokes, matters can get heated to the point of diminishing returns. In such situations, the best thing to do is leave. I have seen this on The Empire server, where a particularly heated exchange between two members cooled as one member announced that they were frustrated and leaving. And on Der Server I saw a discussion where member's agreed that there was no point in arguing with Holocaust deniers. Disputes on topics like this expend energy, inflame passions, and accomplish little to nothing worthwhile.

Good conversation is a form of art. In a text based and thoroughly mediated format such as Discord, there are unique challenges that must be kept in mind. For example, through text, which is without the benefit of body language and verbal tone, how can one ensure that their sarcasm or

¹⁷⁵ Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past*, 268.

jokes are taken as such? As we have seen on Bernadette’s Manor, in the #etiquette channel, there are pointers and suggestions for just such quandaries. But differences aside, in most conversations certain principles can still be applied, no matter the format.

The statesman and skilled conversationalist Benjamin Franklin has left us with some advice. With “modest Diffidence”, Franklin learned, one could dispel the “Air of Positiveness to an Opinion” that so often caused conversations to become stuck and unpleasant. For Franklin, “as the chief Ends of Conversation are to *inform*, or to be *informed*, to *please* or to *persuade*” then the use of qualifications — such as ‘I imagine that’ or ‘I might be mistaken, but’ or ‘It seems to me’ — to indicate that one is open and non dogmatic about their points is a likely way to keep a conversation both interesting and flowing.¹⁷⁶ Small measures these may be, and depending on the circumstances easier said than done. Nonetheless, this is one way for an individual to approach a YouTuber historian’s Discord community, and perhaps get the best from it.

With this, we have our three-sided comic frame. We have a series of basic attitudes that one can cultivate and recognitions that one can keep in mind if they wish to take advantage of what is offered by a YouTuber historian and their community. And, if one is indeed interested in history, wants to challenge their own knowledge, and interact with diverse historian personalities, why not take advantage of such offerings?

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin Franklin. *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue* ed. Alan Houston. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

10 — Four Suggestions for Further Research

The social phenomenon of YouTuber historians and their communities bursts with opportunities for further study. I have now said my piece, so I will be brief in recommending avenues of future research that I suspect would lead to novel insights.

1. *Go Big*

As the philosopher Martin Jay writes: “Historians, in short, can learn reflexively from the history of historiography with all of its vicissitudes.”¹⁷⁷ Certainly YouTuber historians and their communities are one such stitch in the fabric of historiography, as I have been arguing here. But furthermore, as M.I. Finley writes: “The time has perhaps come, in the considerable introspective activity now being carried on among (and about) historians, to add to the questions, What is history? What is historical explanation? a third, What is the effect of the study of history? I might rephrase it, *Cui bono?* Who listens? Why not?”¹⁷⁸

My approach in this thesis has been a relatively singular one, relying on my own judgements and research of a small sample size; i.e., deep data over big data. But to get at the salient questions posed by Finley, larger scale studies of YouTuber historian’s and their communities are called for. This could (and at some point should) include YouTuber historians who work in languages other than English. A balance between quantitative and qualitative research, perhaps following the work of Lev Manovitch’s cultural analytics,¹⁷⁹ could be fruitful here. Likely more generalities of YouTuber historiography than those I have highlighted could be identified.

2. *YouTuber Historiography for Teachers*

As I have been arguing, YouTuber historians and their communities, for good and ill, are a kind of anarchy when it comes to the (re)production of historical knowledge. As well, those who follow YouTuber historians and become members of their communities tend to be in the high-school and college age group. In other words, many people are learning history from YouTuber historians

¹⁷⁷ Martin Jay. “Historical Truth and the Truthfulness of Historians” in *Integrity, Honesty, and Truth Seeking*, ed. Christian B. Miller, and Ryan West. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 267.

¹⁷⁸ M.I. Finley. “The Ancestral Constitution” in *The Use and Abuse of History*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 59.

¹⁷⁹ Lev Manovitch. *Cultural Analytics*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

at the same time as they are learning it from high-school teachers and undergraduate history professors. A study that views YouTuber historiography through the lens of pedagogy would then be interesting and of practical importance.

Following the work of a history and education specialist such as Sam Wineburg,¹⁸⁰ perhaps new strategies could be developed for dealing with the glut of historical knowledge — of which some is indeed good and some indeed dubious — that will inevitably catch the attention and imagination of many young minds. The popular YouTuber historian Mr. Beat actually is a high-school history teacher. As far as I can tell he is a good and responsible one, both in the classroom and online. This indicates that YouTuber historiography need not be a menace to classroom instruction. But as with much else in contemporary life, the situation is difficult: teachers need to be smart in how they deal with such alternative forms of knowledge production. Outright ignoring YouTuber historians, therefore, is not a great option.

3. Fan Studies

The relatively new field of research that is fan studies could certainly find areas of interest in the type of communities I have profiled above. Their lens of inquiry could lead to interesting answers for a host of questions. For example, what is it to be a ‘fan’ of Medieval west Africa; or Francis Fukuyama’s narrative of political order and political decay; or Edwardian petticoats? Furthermore, how do history ‘fan’ communities compare with other fan communities? Are their discussions similar to those of communities who discuss Star Wars trivia, the Tolkien legendarium, or Lovecraftian lore?

4. Historical Game Studies

Many YouTuber historians are also avid gamers, and in some cases moonlight as streamers. Jabari, for example, goes through periods of streaming at least once a week, and sometimes more. Kraut frequently talks gaming with his community on Discord, and his server has integration with the online game store Steam. Bernadette Banner’s community and the historybounding members found there often overlap with cosplay practitioners, which though not always related to gaming certainly share affinities with gaming culture. As well, most of the YouTuber historian’s Discord

¹⁸⁰ Sam Wineburg. *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone?)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

servers I have seen contain at least one, and often multiple, channels devoted to gaming talk and streaming. And this is something of a natural fit, for, as one journalist has put it, the user interface of Discord looks like it has “been crafted by an extremely overcaffeinated 17-year-old Counter-Strike player.”¹⁸¹ In short, for a significant percentage of history buffs in the communities of this study, gaming culture is their *lingua franca*.

Why are history based communities so intertwined with interest in video games and gaming culture? Perhaps one reason lies in that video games often take historical events, actors, and artifacts as their source material. Indeed, video games have become a novel way to interact with history. As one scholar has noted, “It is no longer far-fetched to speak of individuals whose first and/or most prolonged exposure to the Thirty-Years’ War, tribal *rites de passage*, or Norse mythology is through games rather than books or grandparents.”¹⁸² Yet as games are developed in the complexes of a market economy, “what emerges from these reappropriations is neither a recreation of the past in game form nor a simple representation of them.”¹⁸³

Games “have the potential to foster an explicit and significant engagement with history”; and yet “to talk about ‘historical games’ [...] is to ask what claims to truth underpin the notion that these games *are* historical, and what ‘specifically real events’ they purport to represent.”¹⁸⁴ Clearly there is much to study here. Therefore a new subfield has emerged: historical game studies. New lines of inquiry have been proposed, which endeavour to “avoid becoming stuck in unproductive dichotomies about what is or is not, or can or cannot be, history — instead viewing history as a shared cultural process spread across multiple forms, practices, social domains, and stakeholders.”¹⁸⁵

In sum, I am sure that looking at YouTuber historians and their communities through a historical games studies lens would be fruitful and provoke further questions.

¹⁸¹ Alex Hern, “Discord: why Kanye West turned to chat app’s users for help,” *The Guardian*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/03/discord-why-kanye-west-turned-chat-app-users-help>, para. 5.

¹⁸² Sun-ha Hong. “When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual.” *Games and Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 2015): 36.

¹⁸³ Hong, 40.

¹⁸⁴ Nick Webber. “Public History, Game Communities and Historical Knowledge.” Paper presented at the Playing with History: Games, Antiquity and History Workshop, *DiGRA and FDG Joint International Conference*, Dundee, August 1-6, 2016, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Adam Chapman, Anna Foka & Jonathan Westin (2017) Introduction: what is historical game studies?, *Rethinking History*, 21:3, 361.

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