The Participatory Period Drama: YouTube Responses to *Bridgerton* as Metatextual Elements

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"If viewers can have serious opinions about historically accurate fashion, then I can have opinions about stereotypical casting and racially biased entertainment," says Gigi of Instagram account @labelladonnahistory [1] in a video titled "Why Bridgerton is Problematic" on the Costuming Drama YouTube channel. The video is a 37-minute-long discussion by six members of YouTube's historical costuming community—often refered to as Costube– airing their criticism of how the Netflix drama, *Bridgerton* handled the subject of race. Released on Christmas Eve of 2020, *Bridgerton* promised to be an Austenian Regency romance with the modern trappings of sequined gowns and Vitamin String Quartet covers of Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy" and Ed Sheeran's "Girls Like You". The series was heavily anticipated by period drama fans in no small part because it diverged from genre-typical all-white casts. The series' promotional materials featured images of Black actors playing members of the English aristocracy—even Queen Catherine, wife of King George III, would be played by Black Guyanese actress Golda Rosheuvel. The series was expected

[1] As many of these YouTubers haven't shared their full names, I will be using first names throughout this essay.

Beacon: UBC Journal of Media Studies, Vol. III (2022) – Available online.

to implement the common theatrical practice known as "colour-blind" casting in which actors are cast based on merit and race is seen, at least in theory, to be irrelevant. Yet, in an interview with the *New York Times,* series showrunner Chris Van Dusen expressed frustration at the use of the term "colour-blind" casting as that would "imply that colour and race were never considered when colour and race are part of the show" (Jacobs). Van Dusen's claim is what catalyzed many of the response videos that appeared on YouTube; with promises of the series addressing race, audience members of colour were led to believe that *Bridgerton* would be a period romance in which they would see themselves as heroines like Lizzie Bennet or Emma Woodhouse. Yet, when the series came out, viewers were left with a feeling of promises unfulfilled and several took to YouTube to express their point of view.

These YouTubers commented on an overwhelming feeling that *Bridgerton* only featured a "diverse" cast, to lure in audiences of colour and pander to white audiences with performative "wokeness." Bridgerton's racially integrated early 19th-century England relies on an alternate universe in which racism, slavery, and colonialism came to an immediate halt in the British Empire when King George III married Queen Charlotte who in this series is portrayed as a Black woman. To those aware of the complex histories of systemic racial violence and oppression inherent in the period *Bridgerton* tangentially engages, this framing storyline felt more than naïve While no one assumed *Bridgerton* would be historically accurate (see aforementioned piano forté rendition of Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy"), they had hoped for a more thoughtful portrayal of race in the series.

These YouTuber responses to Bridgerton—while certainly in themselves interesting—for the purposes of this essay serve as a case study in how audience reception functions in our world

of new media— saturated with interactive digital technology. In this essay, I will be building off of Stuart Hall's infamous concepts of "encoding" and "decoding"—or the process by which audiences produce meaning from media— to argue that the medium supports an audience uses to decode the content they consume— in this example, the platform of YouTube utilized by members of the Costube community—provide the potential for active audiences such as these to alter the original text—here *Bridgerton*. Furthermore, in this essay I will argue that the potential to alter a piece of media through discourse is accelerated when the media in question lends itself to audience involvement—when the content is willing— as is the case with the period drama, a genre in which the content is accepting to alteration by audience members as it already demands active participation, or "buy in", to function.

The YouTubers who responded to *Bridgerton's* intent was not to merely call out the issues they saw with the show, but rather to generate an affective discourse around the series with their respective viewers and with other creators on the platform that provides this audience the agency to intervene with how the series produces meaning. These individuals utilize the affordances of the YouTube platform—which this essay will argue is a "support" that lends itself to producing "affective discourse"—to produce communities with the power to renegotiate the relationship between creator and consumer in the production of the contemporary period drama. The responses to *Bridgerton* this essay will discuss—with their self-reflexivity, fostering of a participatory environment, and firm assertion of fan ownership over the media they consume– participate in the distinct and potent genre of video criticism that is ever-growing on YouTube– from book reviews to video essays. The utilization of this YouTube genre to construct an active audience discourse colliding with the preexisting participatory demands of the period

drama genre allow this discourse to become a metatextual element of the series, merging into the show itself. As the period drama needs its audience, and as audiences become more mobilized through the affordances of mediums such as the YouTube platform to produce in these new genres of commentary video, the contemporary historical drama has already and will continue to become a co-creation of viewers and show creators.

Participatory Authenticity and Period Drama Audiences

The period drama, specifically the Regency period drama, is a genre that, with the success of films and television adaptations like BBC's 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* series, continues to draw in filmmakers and writers and remains immensely popular. To understand the role of audiences in this genre, we must first accept that period dramas, no matter how invested in "accurately" representing the past, fundamentally reimagine history— reproducing something entirely new in their wake. History when put to television and transformed into content will, and can only be, a representation that merely signifies the events or time period it addresses. Representations of history in the period or historical drama are, "stylized, spectacularized, and stretched beyond the moment of their actual temporal expiration" as Inna Arzumanova writes of the BBC series, *Peaky Blinders* (272). Period dramas, such as *Peaky Blinders*, Arzumanova argues are, "not only dialoguing with history but rewriting it, and offering these edits for contemporary consumption"; In acknowledging this genre's vocation of rewriting history for audience consumption that we can begin to locate how audiences participate in the period drama and why this genre has often been a normative force in presenting history to the public (272). The betrayal many viewers claim to have felt when watching *Bridgerton* because it had promised to be a race conscious period drama, which this essay will further explore, has much to do with the

way in which the period drama genre typically sanitizes history for its viewers. While *Bridgerton* —from its flashy colours to its pop soundtrack—made no promise to be a piece of gritty realism, Van Dusen's claim that race was "part of the show" suggested to viewers that unlike many period dramas, the complex, multifaceted, relationships between race and power in Regency England would not be reduced to what Arzumanova refers to as "convenient backdrops" as has occurred so often in this genre (272). Period dramas, which frequently reimagine history as a fantastical playground for their viewers—especially white viewers who can easily imagine themselves living comfortably in many of the historical setting put to screen—to consume, have rarely encouraged these audiences to think critically about "the social issues, discourses, and identity politics" the characters depicted participate in (Alley-Young 167). Writing about *Downton Abbey*—perhaps one of the television series that most epitomizes the period drama genre in its contemporary iteration—scholar of mass media, Gordon Alley-Young asks of this series' representation of history, "Will DA [Downton Abbey] audiences think of Edwardian-Georgian Britain as a period of benevolent aristocrats, contented servants, modern women, and gay freedom?" concluding that such whitewashings of history "make it more difficult for audiences to realize the histories of real Edwardian-Georgian people, the work of whom likely made privileged version of history possible" (169). Alley-Young's observation not only draws our attention to the type of sanitization native to the period drama genre—one in which many of identity-based struggles are whitewashed– but equally to how viewers are complicit in that process; Alley-Young asks what audiences "will think" of history after watching the show. The period drama offers its viewers its own reworked picture of history, yet in order for that mass media reimagining of history to function and subsume the "realities" of the history it refers to,

viewers still must, however difficult, consent to this representation. It is the necessity of viewer participation in period dramas that make them a genre ripe for audience remediation.

In order for the period drama to transform history into narrative, it must involve its audience. Drawing on Stuart Hall, these events—history as we understand it to have occurred—can only take on meaning and become useful once they first are "appropriated as a meaningful discourse" and therefore "meaningfully decoded" (47). When Alley-Young asks of *Downton Abbey* what viewers will make of its sanitized Edwardian Britain or Arzumanova wonders what worlds fans of *Peaky Blinders* "are conjuring up" both questions point us to the reality that period dramas negotiate meaning production with their viewers. As these series attempt to offer their viewers a historical imaginary they could step into and imagine themselves in, they are necessarily forced to require audience discourse as part of their meaning production process, or as Hall writes, "The event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event," (46). The period drama is a negotiation of historicity with audience members—its viewers must "say yes" to the representation of history it offers. These series or films often receive criticism on the grounds of historical accuracy; for example, viewers and critics alike frequently comment on historical dress mishaps or divergences from acknowledged history[2]. Despite the debates over historical accuracy in the period drama, historical fiction scholar Laura Saxton presents an alternative metric for understanding these period pieces—authenticity. Saxton defines authenticity as "the audience's impression of whether it captures the past, even if this is at odds with available evidence" and argues that as historians have moved away from the belief in a

[2] In fact, much of what the "Historical Costuming Community" on YouTube produces videos about is the accuracy of dress in period dramas

single empirical historical truth, an audience's ability to believe in the historicity of a piece of media—its authenticity— is more valuable for analysis than a piece's accuracy (128). Authenticity is not only a historical aesthetic, but a complex effect produced by the piece's congruence with a viewer's past encounters with representations of the past and their personal background; thus, authenticity relies on an audience to determine it and the creator of the period drama to produce it (Saxton 141).

When it comes to period dramas, Saxton's ideas of audience participation in authenticity are met by media scholar Henry Jenkins' widely acknowledged idea that fans need "emotional realism" in the media they consume. Emotional realism is the plausibility of a story based on its "general conformity to the ideological norms by which the viewer makes sense of everyday life," and is necessary to retain a fans' closeness to and appreciation of a text (Jenkins 107). Fans of the period drama are simultaneously determining the authenticity of a text based on their own understanding of history and their familiarity with the period drama genre while determining the narrative's plausibility based on their lived experience. There is a closeness between these two phenomena— authenticity and emotional realism— for fans of this genre. It is an acute desire to see the tropes of the period drama play out in a way that feels relevant to one's own life yet does not break the suspension of disbelief in the period being represented—it is a balancing act that centers the audience in the creation of works of this genre.

When viewers of *Bridgerton* took to YouTube to express their concerns over the way the series handled the subject of race, a commonly brought up issue was that *Bridgerton*'s flimsy alternate history approach felt inauthentic to both viewers' lived experience and understanding of the past, resulting in a feeling of betrayal based on the promise of a race-conscious period

drama. When asked about the alternate universe *Bridgerton* inhabits in the aforementioned panel, "Why Bridgerton is Problematic", Christine of the Instagram account @Sewstine discusses the fact that slavery still existed in England in the year the show is set and would continue until 1833 (Costuming Drama). She goes on to question how the undiscussed institution of slavery ended in *Bridgerton's* alternate history in contrast to the circumstances under which it was abolished in reality, and wonders aloud why none of the characters seem to mention what must have been a massive event in their lifetime, specifically in the lives of the series' Black characters. She goes onto acknowledge that while the series is, of course, a light-hearted romance, ignoring the realities of this history was not only poor world-building but negligent, stating, "If they don't want to go into that much detail at least talk about it [race] more" (Costuming Drama). It is vital to note that Christine's discussion of the show's historical universe suggests a belief that the lack of authenticity, as defined by Saxton, in *Bridgerton*'s portrayal of race relations in early 19th century England does not merely shatter the suspension of disbelief required in the period drama genre but does real-world harm through glossing over realities and traumas[3]. Yet, the creators featured in the costuming panel also make clear that authentic representation of people of colour in a period drama does not mean only placing these characters in stories of trauma. To them, authentic historical representation of people of colour (POC) in period dramas is telling stories that feel real and relatable to the audiences who are being represented in these stories.

[3] The video "Bridgerton and the Problem of Pastel Progressivism" on channel Princess Weekes presents another valuable authenticity critique of the alternate universe of Bridgerton, arguing that it ignores the presence of real Black people in European courts in the 19th-century.

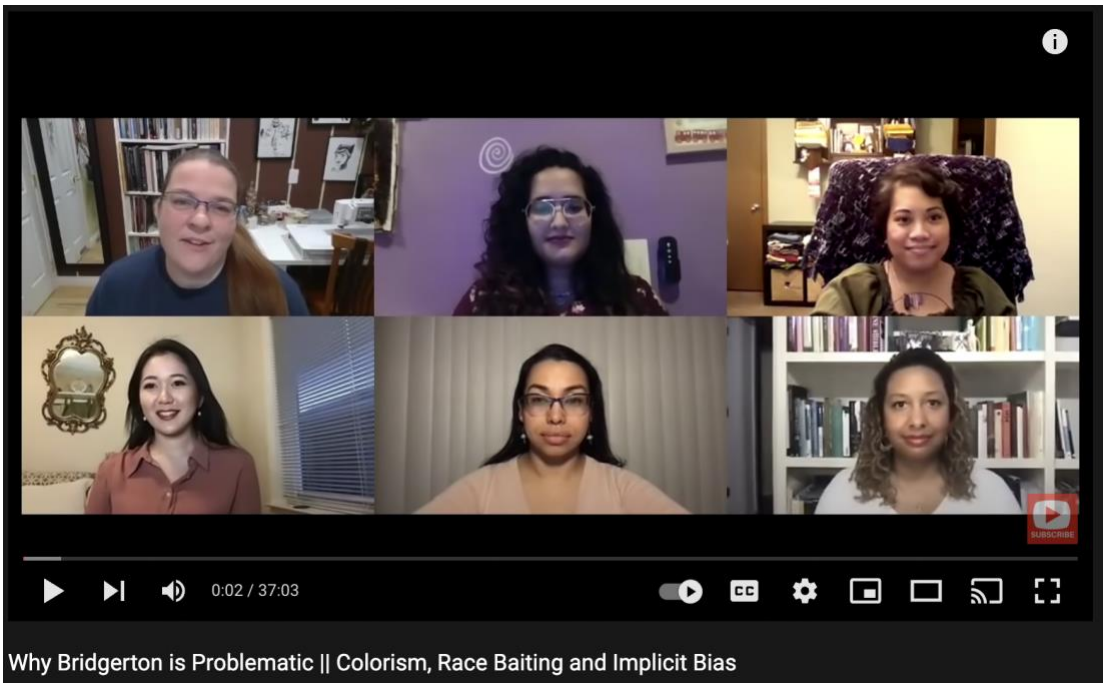


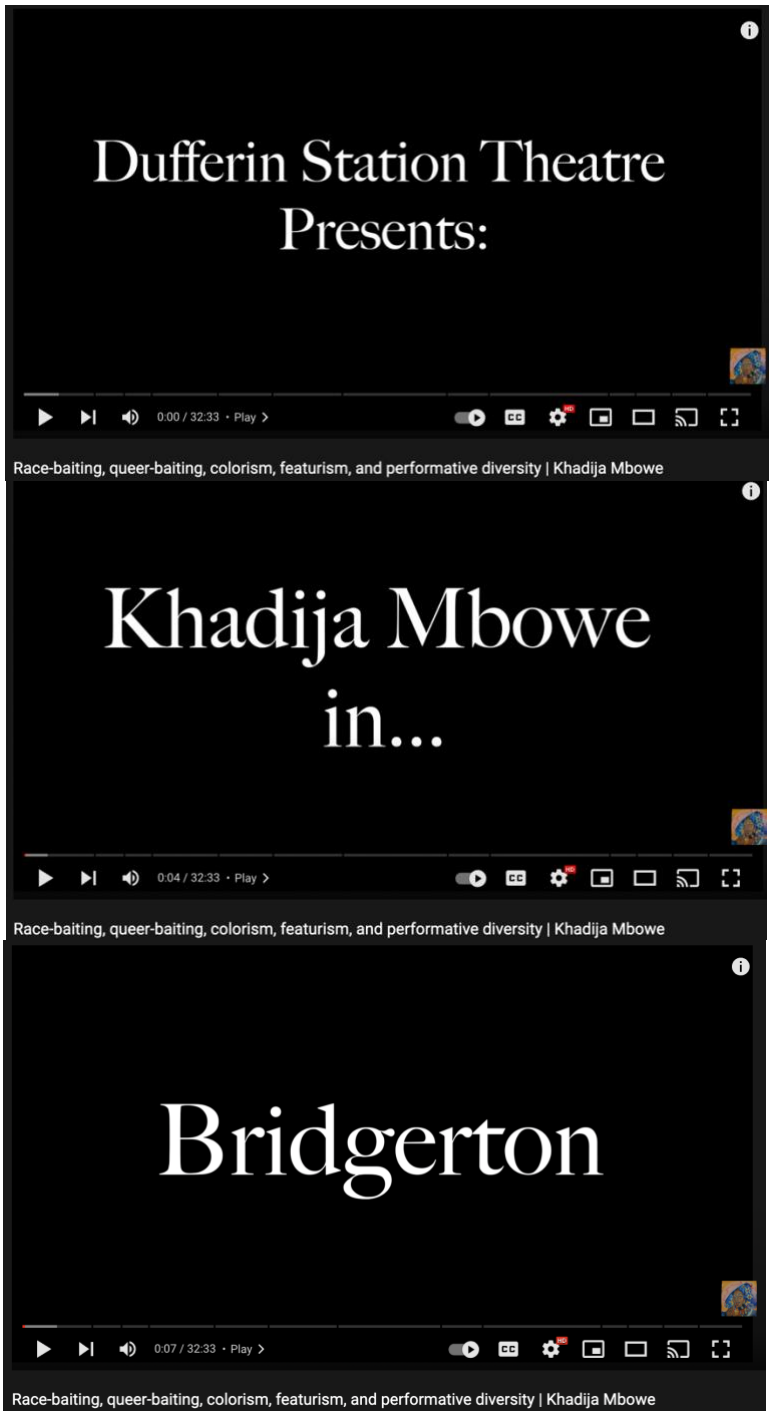
Figure 1: Panelists from Costuming Drama video, *Why Bridgerton is Problematic || Colorism, Race Baiting and Implicit Bias*, 2021.

"The characters of colour, the extras in the background, are just kind of sprinkled throughout the entire show and they're mostly just decorative," explains Khadija Mbowe in her video "Race-baiting, queer-baiting, colourism, featurism, and performative diversity". Mbowe's video takes an overview of various issues she had with *Bridgerton* centered around the topic of representation, primarily the representation of Black characters. The video is broken into short, titled chapters, each one breaking down a different subject, for example: "colourism" or "stereotypes". While Mbowe's video focuses less than others on the history the show sets itself in, many of her points center on the intersection of authenticity and representation. Here, Mbowe's interpretation of authenticity is informed by her own experiences and knowledge of the period drama's genre conventions. When *Bridgerton* promised to be a race-conscious period

drama, viewers such as Mbowe expected to see some of the "handsome, clever and rich"[4] leading ladies infamous in this genre to be Black; yet instead, as Mbowe describes, most of the representation of POC in the series is "just decorative." Mbowe begins her video taking on a playfully dramatic English accent, imagining herself in the world of *Bridgerton* as Daphne, or a similar character, asking aloud, "The duke wants to dance with me?". This short comedic segment follows title cards that read "Dufferin Station Presents: Khadija Mbowe in Bridgerton." While this segment might first read as just a silly intro (a common YouTube trope), it belies a significant theme in much of the critique by POC YouTubers of this series. In their YouTube responses, these viewers make clear they didn't want merely another historical drama that puts people who look like them in the background; they wanted to see themselves as the protagonists. In ignoring this desire after making promises to fulfill it, *Bridgerton* felt not only like a betrayal, but inauthentic. There is an intersection of historical authenticity with the need to thoughtfully represent people of colour in period dramas, specifically as the period drama genre relies on tropes and fan expectations. In looking at period drama fan-created videos on YouTube, Chris Louttit, a scholar of 19th century literature's collision with contemporary pop culture, describes the most defining quality of fans of this genre as an understanding of "how key generic tropes or conventions are presented in varied ways" (180). When Mbowe imagines herself as starring in *Bridgerton*, it is because the period drama is known for its strong and witty female protagonists, and when viewers of colour were promised a period drama that was marketed to them specifically, they expected to see people of colour living out these genre tropes. To fulfill the promises made through initial marketing, *Bridgerton* needed to present a historical

[4] To quote Jane Austen's Emma.

representation of race that felt authentic both to the actual history of its setting and to the genre conventions of the period drama.



Figures 3,4,5, "Khadija Mbowe in...Bridgerton", Khadija Mbowe, *Race-Baiting, Queer-Baiting, colorism, Featurism, and Performative Diversity*, 2021.

Audiences Who Talk Back

By taking to YouTube with their responses to how *Bridgeton*'s creators navigated representation and race in the Netflix series, these video creators do more than provide commentary on the series; they utilizing the medium of YouTube to create a discourse around the series with real power. Roland Betancourt, art historian and scholar of new media, suggests that YouTube's platform simultaneously falls under two definitions of medium: medium as a "condition of possibility" that those who engage with it can define and redefine, and medium as the literal space videos can inhabit (216). The YouTube responses to *Bridgerton* are employing this duality; they use the platform as a space to take advantage of its "conditions of possibility" or the medium's specificities[5], to create videos whose conventions give them effective power to transform the content of *Bridgerton*. The effectiveness of an audience's remediation of a work's meaning relies on not only what I have termed the "willingness of the content"—which I have established as present in the period drama genre—but also the conventions and affordances of the medium that audiences are utilizing to engage with that content—in the example of these responses to *Bridgerton*, YouTube. Stuart Hall proposes that while messages that audiences decode from a work are autonomous from those encoded by producers, "the entry and exit of the message" remain reciprocal (47 & 52); what is encoded by producers, in nearly every case, has "the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (52). Viewers produce unique meanings from the content they consume but these

[5] Medium specificities of YouTube might include access to a comments section or the tendency towards short form to medium length content.

interpretations typically remain within the supporting frame encoded by the original producers. In this section I intend to argue that it is not merely the affordances of the content—the encoded meanings— that structure how audiences receive and transform a work, but equally the affordances of the medium they employ to respond to that content—such as these period drama fans using YouTube to air their grievances— that determines how affective this audience intervention is, or depends on, as Adrienne Shaw succinctly asks , "What types of uses do they[interactive media technologies] lend themselves to? What types of interaction do they encourage?" (597).

In the response and analysis videos that were produced in response to *Bridgerton*, there is a clear intent by these YouTubers to participate in an acknowledged broader conversation about the series happening on the platform and to produce content that is generative of further discussion from their commenters and other content creators. This section will look at the self-reflexive behavior of these YouTubers—their acknowledgement of their roles as creators and their position in the broader conversation occurring in their "ecosystem" on the platform—that is fostered by the medium support of YouTube. Furthermore, I intend to argue in this section that the genre of videos these YouTubers participate in—the critique video which we might also associate with the rise of the video essay on the platform—is defined by creators directly positioning themselves as co-owners and co-creators of the media they build discourses upon, in this case *Bridgerton*.

The participatory nature of these *Bridgerton* response videos is central to how they are functioning in relation to the original series. These creators are keenly aware that they, as Chris Louttit puts it, "have not only audiences; they are also part of a developing genre whose trends

and developments shape their own fan creativity" (181). The YouTubers commonly mention other videos contributing to the discussion around *Bridgerton*: for example, Mbowe makes direct reference to Noelle's statement in the CostumingDrama panel that "you're not responsible for the first thought that pops into your head, *society* is […] But you are responsible for your second thought and your actions afterwards". These creators are acutely aware that they are not alone in making their argument, that they are participating in collaborative discourse. The creators also draw their viewers into the conversation around the series by addressing them directly, maintaining a conversational tone, and breaking up their denser analysis with moments of levity. While Mbowe dives into high-level concepts about racial representation in media that imply a background of academic training, she intersperses these analyses with direct addresses to her audience and comedy. One can see this technique in action when the creator interrupts herself when her lighting changes due to the sun and the video is sped up with the on-screen text reading "*rambles about libra rising vanity*" or when the video changes to black and white as she fake cries about not seeing women like her represented in media, concluding with the on-screen words "representation matters" (Mbowe). The CostumingDrama video being a panel immediately conveys a conversational tone as the participants engage with each other and concludes, similarly to the Mbowe video, with a request for viewers to comment their thoughts below the video. The genre of video criticism these YouTubers take part in is defined by its participatory nature, both in the creator's content and the conversation they aim to generate.

Figure 2, *rambles about Libra rising vanity*, Khadija Mbowe, *Race-Baiting, Queer-Baiting, colorism, Featurism, and Performative Diversity*, 2021.

"The panel is meant similarly to when you tell your friend they did something that bothered you and they ask you to point it out next time it happens," states Noelle at the beginning of the CostumingDrama panel, recognizing that her audience might perceive the video they are watching as a "canceling" of *Bridgerton*. These video responses to *Bridgerton* are self-reflexively aware of who is making them, what they are doing, how their audiences might respond, and the nature of the YouTube platform. Mbowe, for example, begins her video with a thanks to her audience for watching and subscribing, saying, "what gives you the nerve […] the nerve to gas me up like this?" and in doing so makes it clear she knows there is the potential that her 962,605 followers' eyes are on her. In another video on this topic, "The Liberal Escapism of Bridgerton" by Maia of channel Broey Deschanel, one can see a similar self-reflexive acknowledgment of the role of the creator. Maia begins the video with a disclaimer in the form of title cards that state that the video will contain her, as a white-passing individual, discussing

the topic of race. In this short video insert, the viewer can see how these creators are deeply cognizant of their place in the broader conversation occurring around this series and how their own identities inform that role. A similar acknowledgement appears at the beginning of the CostumingDrama panel in which Noelle, the moderator, acknowledges that she is white and so her role in the discussion will not be to contribute but to "make space" for the five costumers of colour she is hosting. These acknowledgements not only recognize the position of the creator/creators in the broader conversation but also an understanding of the expectations held by these viewers that individuals with power, such as Noelle as a white woman, will attempt to uplift disenfranchised voices and maintain specific standards of behavior those viewers. The specific dynamics of audiences demanding creators “make space” and are “held accountable” on social media platforms such as YouTube, often associated with what is colloquially termed cancel culture, is too large of a subject for this essay to adequately address. For my purposes what is notable about this viewer/creator dynamic is the way in which it forces the creator to acknowledge the presence of an active audience. This can be seen again in the Broey Deschanel video, under which, Maia writes in a pinned comment, "This is one video where I'm gonna beg you guys to watch the full thing before you disagree with me haha, please!! (also sorry, I know BIPOC and POC is redundant, got confused with the terminology!)". In this comment, she demonstrates her understanding not only of the presence of her viewers, but that they will take it upon themselves to hold her accountable to their expectations in the videos she produces (Broey Deschanel). The self-reflexive nature of the actions of creators in these videos (and in

creators' paratextual content such as comments[6]) is a critical genre specificity in how these *Bridgerton* response videos function and made use of the medium supports of YouTube.

Finally, these video responses to *Bridgerton* are explicit in their stance that the individuals making them have a role in guiding the series. This claiming of media by fans through critique is a defining quality of fan culture identified by Jenkins, who describes how fans assert a "cultural authority" expressed through "claiming a moral right to complain about producer actions challenging their own interest in the series property" (87). While Jenkins does not present fannish critique as a form of ownership as an especially powerful force (118), the creators of the YouTube videos discussed in this essay perceive the impact of their commentary as having the capacity to create genuine change. Mbowe states at the end of her video that she is hopeful for the series' second season, set to debut spring of 2022, because of her belief that the creators will take the fan feedback, proclaiming "I'm not the only one saying this stuff, it's not brand new news, I think they'll take a lot of this stuff and work on it for the next season". Nami of the CostumingDrama panel expresses a similar and poignant sentiment, reflecting on the video she and other panelists are making and asserting the power of fan critique:

> You need to understand we aren't attacking this or attacking you for liking something that isn't perfect. We come at these things that we love because unless we take the time to point out the flaws in the things we enjoy, we won't get better things. This version of Bridgerton wouldn't exist today if nobody cared about racial representation in historical fantasy; it wouldn't exist. And if we don't criticize the problems with Bridgerton we will

[6] Studying the viewer comments on these videos was beyond the scope of this essay but is a subject that is very worthy of further exploration.

> never have shows with Asian representation or with dark skinned POC representation or non-tragic POC lead love stories. (CostumingDrama)

These period drama fans who have taken to YouTube to express their issues with *Bridgerton*'s handling of race have a firm belief that their videos have the capacity to create change—and in this assertion, they define this positioning of themselves as not only viewers but co-owners of the media they are consuming as one of the fundamental affordances YouTube provides them.

Becoming Bridgerton and Audience Power

These YouTube responses to Netflix's *Bridgerton* take part in YouTube's ever-growing video criticism genre and through taking advantage of the participatory demands of the period drama, define it as a mode with real power to not only change mass media content, such as *Bridgerton,* as not only consumers but as creators. It is vital to note that I believe that the democratizing power of interactive platforms such as YouTube have been frequently overstated by academics over the past twenty years, as Darin Barney et al. argue in their influential book, *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, it is "not at all clear that being allowed to participate amounts to being allowed to appear as one wishes to appear, to have an equal share, to think, to disagree fundamentally, to oppose, to abstain, to dissent, to deliberate, to judge, to decide, to organize, to act, to create something new, or to do any of the other things we might suppose a political being ought to be able to do" (31). It is a skepticism of the radical agency participation affords an audience that leads me to argue that audience participation is directly impacting and distorting the way texts are read, rather than focusing on audience's ability to

affect the way in which the film industry produces series such as *Bridgerton*. It is undeniable that audiences are transforming into co-creators of the media they consume through their remediation of the original works, especially when those pieces of media require a negotiated or consenting relationship from their audience. The YouTubers I have discussed throughout this paper, in their responses and their utilization of the platform, have produced something that is becoming *Bridgerton*, taking part in the work of *Bridgerton*. Louttit presents the work of fan activity in the era of convergence as "transformative" and "affective" of the original work; this is precisely what these YouTube videos are, which, once again, is vital to contextualize in the genre of the period drama and its affordances (181). The period drama genre relies on an audience "who must be convinced that a fiction is plausible, and who take on an active and participatory role in determining whether they find a representation to be authentic," and therefore the active or participatory viewer cannot be separated from the original media they consume; the period drama cannot exist without audience buy-in, without audiences seeing the work as authentic (Saxton 141). Further, Jenkins writes, "The expectations and conventions of the fan community also shape the meanings derived from the series"(88); in directing the fan conversation around *Bridgerton*, specifically around the show as it relates to historical authenticity, creators such as Mbowe, the participants of the Costuming Drama channel, and others produce a discourse through which audiences can "decode" the meaning of the series through their use of YouTube's medium supports, medium specificities which then inform the framework through which that decoding can occur. These YouTubers' videos are — for the individuals who watch them, their thousands of followers —becoming metatextual elements of the Bridgerton series; *Bridgerton* is not a complete work without this added commentary that

informs how viewers consume the series. While a viewer watching the series on their sofa at home is not taking part in *Bridgerton*, these YouTube videos, through their guiding of audience interpretation in combination with the participatory nature of the period drama, are merging into the series. It is at the intersection of the affordances of YouTube critique videos and the required participatory role of the audience in the period drama genre —the willingness of the content to be decoded by viewers—that these YouTubers are able to become co-creators of the series they are commenting on, Netflix's *Bridgerton*.

If these YouTubers are creating content that is merging into *Bridgerton*, this has weighty implications for the contemporary period drama genre and for understanding the agency of participatory audiences more broadly. Louttit expresses that film adaptations of works such as those of Jane Austen (Regency period dramas) are benefitted by their writers taking a more fannish approach, mimicking the techniques of fan video creators in how they approach texts (183). Instead, rather than period drama producers merely becoming more fannish in their approach, I suggest that they must become acutely aware of their position as co-creators with fans of their products. Mbowe and other YouTubers who responded to *Bridgerton* assert the need for authentic, thoughtful representation of POC on screen in this genre—not merely representation for appeasement, but to see themselves as the heroines of these stories. As these creators' videos merge into the text of *Bridgerton*, they gain the power of setting the terms of the conversation, just as they have on YouTube—and therefore show creators must listen to these voices in order to know the needs they will have to meet. In these videos, there is something profoundly hopeful, the empowerment of the viewer as equal creators of the media

they consume— the contemporary historical drama has become a negotiated final product at the intersection of fans and formal producers.

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