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"You need to remember the bad **** as well:" Playing with Serious History in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Reenactment and Living History[1]

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Introduction

Attend any one of the numerous early medieval Reenactment and Living History (RLH)[2] events that take place across the UK, such as the Jorvik Viking Festival in York, or Tamworth Castle's Saxon festival "Aethelfest," and you will witness the engrossing spectacle of the early medieval English and Scandinavian pasts in action.[3] Through the collective efforts of RLH practitioners to embody the material remains and identities of these periods of the past, such events create an environment in which the temporal plains of past and present are "collapsed" into one another in order to give life to the historical and archaeological records.[4] These environments are designed to be both entertaining and educational family friendly events, giving individuals of all ages the opportunity to learn something new while also enjoying a day out.[5]

While these ideals of edutainment may be the expressed intensions of those organizing such events, however, how they are achieved in practice remains a topic of debate. What shape, for instance, does the early medieval take within these temporally collapsed settings, and how fully are the collected remains of the period imitated? Take for example pitched battles and warfare, the performance of which forms the focal point of most early medieval RLH events.[6] Described within Old Norse and Old English literature in ways

[1] The terminology of "Anglo-Saxon" and "Viking" will only be used in the context of the participants' comments, and I will otherwise use the terminology of "early medieval English" and "early medieval Scandinavian" will be used. I also give warning that this article discusses the distressing topics of rape and slavery, which some readers may find triggering.

[2] The definition and application of the terms "reenactment" and "living history" are diverse and often conflicting. See: Amanada Silva and Joseph Polizzi, "Women Living History: An Exploration of Transformational Learning in a Living History Group," *Journal of Transformative Learning* 7, no. 2 (2020): 57-70. In this research however, I hold each term to define separate spheres of the same leisure time activity. "Reenactment" defines the performance of warfare and militaristic activities. In turn, "living history" presents the performance of everyday aspects of the past, such as crafts, skills, and ways of life.

[3] "Jorvik Viking Festival," York Archaeological Trust, accessed June 6, 2023, https://jorvikvikingfestival.co.uk/; "Aethelfest," Tamworth Castle, June 6, 2023, https://www.tamworthcastle.co.uk/aethelfest.

[4] Vanessa Agnew, "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and its Work in the Present," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007): 299-312, 309.

[5] See for instance the promotional material found on the websites referenced in note 3.

[6] Mads Daugbjerg, "Battle," in *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, ed. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathon Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (London: Routledge, 2020), 24-8, 24.

such as “the judgement of bloody spears” and “slaughter place,” the medium of RLH sees these intensely traumatic experiences repackaged as a form of light entertainment for all the family to enjoy.[7] The reasons are, of course, self-evident as to why a battle could not be imitated like-for-like as part of an RLH event, but the matter nonetheless raises the broader question of what capacity the medium of RLH has to manage traumatic aspects of the early medieval past. In concurrence, it brings into question the motives of the RLH practitioners themselves, and their willingness to seriously deal with such difficult historical matters as part of their leisure activity.

In this article the above questions are explored within the findings of my PhD project which investigated how RLH practitioners of the early medieval English and Scandinavian pasts remember the peoples they perform. The study centered around a series of focus groups held with early medieval English and Scandinavian RLH practitioners, and in the context of this article, focus will be on those aspects of the participants’ discussions pertaining to the matter of how to remember difficult aspects of the early medieval English and Scandinavian pasts, such as violence, rape, and slavery. In so doing, I will argue that participants from across the focus groups were highly empathetic in the way they grappled with these complex aspects of the early medieval past. Such empathy stemmed from the respect held by participants for the humanity of the early medieval peoples they perform, and it enables them to deal with these topics in a balanced, critical, and self-reflexive manner.

As a practice, RLH is “at its core” a performative “act of make believe.”[8] It is an exciting and immersive activity, allowing individuals to tangibly enact the past through the body. These embodied materializations of the past are achieved via the development of an “impression,” that is, a set of kit consisting of various historical tools, weapons, and clothing. By taking on these impressions, individuals can in turn animate historical crafts, identities, peoples, cultures, and events. It is in this way that RLH presents a “body-based

[7] “Njáls saga 26 (Gunnarr Hámundarson, Lausavísur 13),” ed. Robert D. Fulk in *Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. 5, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Kari Ellen Gade and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 1204-1319, 1251. “Battle of Winchester 860,” *Heritage Gateway*, accessed January 10, 2022, https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=1554202&resourceID=19191.

[8] Lara Rutherford-Morrison, “Playing Victorian: Heritage, Authenticity, and Make-Believe in Blists Hill Victorian Town, the Ironbridge Gorge,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 3 (2015): 76-101, 91; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

discourse" with the past, as it is through somatic and emotional experience that a simulation of the past is achieved, and an individual comes to be "doing pasts."[9]

While the medium of RLH might itself be playful in nature, however, it is inaccurate to assume such playfulness is consistently emulated within the aims and objectives of the RLH practitioners themselves. Though camaraderie, relaxation, and entertainment are undeniably key points of the pastime's appeal, it is also the case that the concept of historical enquiry forms an integral focus of those active within the leisure activity.[10] These, at least, were the findings of the research project aspects of which are to be explored here.

The project concentrated on one overarching question: how do reenactors and living historians of the early medieval English and Scandinavians remember, or in other words make sense of, the peoples they perform? How did these peoples live? How did they look, what were their social norms and world views, and what was the nature of their cultural interactions? Furthermore, what is their historical significance, and what relevance do they bear for our present societies? In exploring these questions via the focus groups, a key overarching theme that arose was the shared understanding among the participants that to be an RLH practitioner is to also be an educator of the public. Rather than being an insular interaction with the past, RLH is instead for these individuals an inherently public facing leisure activity, and it is always with their audiences' historical education in mind that the participants construct their performances of the early medieval. It was in tandem with this sense of responsibility towards the public that the participants perceived their personal interactions with the early medieval past to be historical in nature. This is to say that to be able to educate their audiences on the period, it was vital for the participants themselves that their performances are "correct," "realistic," "authentic," and grounded in "evidence."

In being presented with the themes of historical enquiry and public education within the data set, the study was required in turn to explore the extent to which the participants were successful in achieving their ideals of historical research. Provided its reliance on the somatic and emotional experience of the individual as a means of interacting with the past, the medium of RLH has widely been argued to be inherently flawed as a method of historical enquiry. Accepting the fact that all human experience is socially and temporally

[9] Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?," *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 327-39, 330; Jay Anderson, "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 290-306; Anne Brædder, Kim Esmark, Tove Kruse, Carsten Tage Nielsen and Anette Warring, "Doing Pasts: Authenticity from the Reenactors' Perspective," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017): 171–92.
[10] Stephen J. Hunt, "Acting the Part: 'Living History' as a Serious Leisure Pursuit," *Leisure Studies* 23, no. 4 (2004): 387-403, 388.

dependent, it is the concern that RLH succeeds only in producing subjective, nostalgic, and thereby warped, perceptions of the past for the individual.[11] Increasingly, however, such criticisms of RLH have begun to be countered by a growing body of research championing the potential of the medium as an innovative "embodied" method of historical enquiry capable of facilitating fruitful interrogations of the past.[12] It is towards this body of research that the study findings contribute.

Over the course of the study, it was found that participants regularly exhibited those critical, evidence-led, self-reflexive "modes of memory" advocated for within historical education in the way they understand the periods of the past they explore via RLH.[13] A key concept to this argument is empathy. Understood here as an integral "second order concept" within historical theory, "historical empathy" captures the effort to promote compassionate relationships with the past.[14] Not to be confused with a sympathetic alignment with past experiences as one's "own," empathetic conceptions of the past instead encourage individuals to recognize the unique socio-temporal contexts of past societies, and promotes a respectful acknowledgement of the shared dignity of these past human experiences.[15] Thus, as an embodied method of history, RLH bears the unparalleled potential to promote such empathetic relationships with the past. For the purposes of the present article, this argument is to be illustrated via the example of participants' management of traumatic aspects of the early medieval past.

Participant Information

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a body of data collected between 2020 and 2021. 21 participants (thirteen men and eight women) took part in the study, and they were divided into five focus groups.[16] The societies contacted were diverse in

[11] Jonathon D. S. Schroeder, "Nostalgia," *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, ed. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathon Lamb and Juliane Tomann (London: Routledge, 2020), 155-8; Agnew, "History's Affective Turn;" Alexander Cook, "The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History," *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 487-96.

[12] Katherine M. Johnson, "Re-Enactment's (Em)bodying of History," PhD diss. (University of Sydney, 2016).

[13] Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 31; see also Peter Seixas, "What Is Historical Consciousness?" in *To The Past: History Education, Public Memory, & Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth W. Sandwell (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012), 11-22.

[14] Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Progression in Historical Understanding among Students Ages 7-14," in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (London: New York University Press, 2000), 199-222, 199.

[15] Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 206.

[16] Each focus group was provided a code name consisting of a letter of the alphabet (E through to I). In turn, for means of anonymity, each participant was code named to each group and provided with a name beginning with the letter assigned to each group. For example, members of group E appear within the text

the specific peoples and periods of the early medieval past they perform, with some focusing either on the "Anglo-Saxons" and "Vikings" in isolation, while others accommodating for the performance of both. The age range of the participates was between 21 and 63. Participants were also diverse in their level of formal history education, with 19% possessing no GCSE or equivalent in history, 29% with a GCSE, 33% an A-level, and 19% an Undergraduate degree.

Peoples Deserving of Respect

The participants' discussion of traumatic topics during the focus groups arose organically and was entirely unprompted. In the case of participants ERIC, EDGAR, and F1, their identification of these themes was coupled with broader statements on the need for honesty and objectivity in the way the early medieval English and Scandinavians are viewed. In wanting to avoid being selective in their understanding of these peoples, each of these individuals believed RLH practitioners should not shy away from challenging topics within their performances. Equally, it was also their view that such matters should only be performed on the condition that they are approached with no ulterior motive other than to depict the realities of the period. In addition, there needs to be adequate acknowledgement of the gravity of these events. Participant F1 expressed his view using the example of right-wing groups "looking for their roots" within idealized conceptualizations of the early medieval. Though he was adamant in his rejection of such racist endeavors, he no less felt it his "responsibility" as an RLH practitioner to "inform people" and tell them "about honest ideas," and this included issues of race:

> F1: [. . .] if there is racism open up and say that it existed but it's not, something to be proud of, it's not something to idealize, so it's the responsibility to portray everything honestly [. . .] but at the same time focus on, what it was really like don't glamourize the things that don't need glamourizing.[17]

ERIC and EDGAR's expression of a similar view came when their group were asked to summarize their discussions. In response, EDGAR felt it necessary to stress the importance of remembering the early medieval period "accurately:"

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as EDWARD, ERIC, ETHAN, and EDGAR. For means of clarity, "society" is used only in the context of an RLH society, while "group" is used to describe the focus groups. For details on the structure of the focus groups, see my thesis *Embodied Objectivity or Affective History?: Remembering the Early Medieval English and Scandinavians via the Medium of Reenactment and Living History*, Ph.D diss. (University of Lincoln, 2024).

[17] Where appropriate, the participants' comments have been edited for means of clarity. Ellipses in brackets indicate where statements have been abbreviated. Words italicized represents verbal emphasis.

> EDGAR: Not just individuals but events as well [. . .] there was some bloody horrific stuff that happened back then. There is *genocide*, *war*, *disease* [. . .] it just gets, *so* glossed over. You need to remember the bad shit as well.

Explaining himself in this way, it was clear that EDGAR equated historical accuracy with presenting the past in its entirety. Opposed to selectively picking and choosing the aspects of the early medieval we find most appealing, EDGAR believed we must accept every facet of the period, no matter how uncomfortable these realities may be. ERIC contributed in support of EDGAR's comments by detailing how traumatic events should be framed as part of an RLH performance. Chiefly, it was the view that the harrowing nature of these events is not to be trivialized. ERIC drew reference to the "Monty Pythonesque" performance of slavery he had witnessed at early medieval RLH events in order to illustrate his point:

> ERIC: it shouldn't [be] displayed comedically [. . .] everything should be displayed, but everything should be displayed with respect to the context, of the time. So if I saw [. . .] a properly done slaver, with, err, even with someone else being the slave, I wouldn't have a problem with it if there was no, joking around [. . .] because [. . .] you're not getting comedy out of it or you're not getting, some kind of display out of it apart from displaying what is actually happening.

In a sense, the ideals of objectivity voiced here by participants ERIC, EDGAR, and F1 are reminiscent of those Rankean conceptualizations of history as a neutral reporting of the past.[18] When considered on a deeper level, however, it becomes apparent that their emphasis on objectivity was borne out of their respect for the continuing relevance of early medieval lived experiences. It is now well attested that in many popular spheres of society the medieval is regularly depicted and perceived as a time so alien to our own as to make it almost entirely unrelatable. "Othered" both in their customs and practices, early medieval ways of life can seem strange, illogical, and backwards when compared with modern ways of living. Simultaneously, the medieval can also appear as a time of "spectacle" and "myth," consisting of heroes, maidens, dragons, and adventure; marvelous tropes which only help to enhance the peculiarity of the period.[19] In contrast to these trends, however, the individuals surveyed above hold an alternative relationship with the early medieval on account of their RLH activities. It is one indicative of the "humanistic" form of historical thought promoted by Jörn Rüsen, as these individuals

[18] John Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), 18.

[19] Angela Jane Weisl, "Spectacle," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 231-38; Martin Arnold, "Myth," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 165-72.

reject fantastical concepts of the medieval world by remaining keenly aware of the fact that the early medieval was a real period of time experienced by real human beings.[20]

Making such an acknowledgement helps bridge the gap between past and present on a human level, and here it helped these individuals to deconstruct the stereotypes which surround the medieval. Apropos traumatic aspects of the early medieval, it assisted these individuals in making the realization that the severity of early medieval traumas are equal to their occurrence in the present. Consequently, careful thought must therefore be given to how these aspects of the period are communicated. ETHAN neatly articulated such a humanistic relationship with the early medieval past when airing his grievances over the continued association of the phrase “rape and pillage” with the “Vikings.” It was something which for him needed to “die a death,” and his frustrations concentrated on the jovial tone with which he saw the phrase used. These comments prompted an insightful interaction between ERIC and ETHAN in which they challenged the idea that the passage of time in and of itself should somehow diminish the inherent trauma of these events:

> ERIC: [. . .] it’s another example of “oh it happened 1000 years ago so it’s not, somehow, impactful”.
>
> ETHAN: It’s not okay to joke about it because it’s not a thing that has gone away. And just putting it with a picture of someone dressed as a Viking, doesn’t mean those words don’t have, a bit of a value [. . .] and, a bit of weight behind, what it represents today.

In these comments, ERIC and ETHAN identify and contest the perceived otherness of the early medieval on a humanistic basis. Regardless of when and where the act of rape occurs, the abhorrence of the act should never be in question. The early medieval is no exception, and its otherness in many of its social and religious aspects should not morph it into a temporal setting derelict of contemporary relevance. Concerning the reasons as to why much of wider society is incapable of recognizing this fact, ETHAN believed the causes lay with the oversimplified or “dumbed down history” he saw permeate popular depictions of the medieval past. By consuming such material, it was ETHAN’s view that most of wider society fail to value the humanity of the medieval world, and as result, lack the appropriate emotional response when presented with horrific aspects of the period:

> ETHAN: If your first instinct when you see Vikings [. . .] is to go, “*oh look, rape and pillage*” like that’s a cheerful thing [. . .] something’s gone wrong in the way you look at history.

[20] Jörn Rüsen, "Forming Historical Consciousness—Towards a Humanistic History Didactics,” *Antíteses* 5, no. 10 (2012): 519-36.

At a latter point of their discussions, ETHAN went on to provide a personal anecdote which illustrated the gulf he felt between popular modes of thinking about the early medieval and his own. His comments came as a consequence of EDWARD airing his frustrations at his experience of the Viking Age slave trade being equated with the "industrialized" and "abhorrent" transatlantic slave trade. While EDWARD did not deny the trauma of the early medieval slave trade, his frustrations lay with how the historical analogy neglected the unique socio-temporal contexts of each of these instances of slavery. Therefore, EDWARD was adamant that we don't "put modern values on history," or rather, we need to avoid observing the past though the lens of our own subjectivities and experiences.

Though the rest of group E were broadly in agreement with EDWARD's comments, ETHAN sought to qualify his statements by highlighting the practicalities which can serve to complicate adhering to these principles within a public setting. He alluded to a time he had been asked to advise a theatre group planning to perform "Vikings in a modern setting." While ETHAN did not object to the idea in principle, where his concerns arose was when they indicated they would be threatening to sell people into slavery in Ireland as part of the performance. Interestingly, where ETHAN's despair at such an idea originated was from his understanding that Scandinavian raiders had sold Moroccan slaves in Ireland.[21] Bearing this understanding, ETHAN felt it was entirely irresponsible for the theatre performers to toy with the idea of early medieval slavery in this way, provided the intuitive comparisons that can be drawn between these events and the sale of African peoples as slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, ETHAN detailed how the theatre performers' failure to recognize such risks was as a direct consequence of the ill-informed relationship they held with the peoples they were looking to perform comedically:

> ETHAN: [. . .] because they didn't *understand*, the history and why it was relevant and what it connected to [. . .] both in a historical and a modern context, meant that [the performance] was vastly inappropriate, horrifically offensive, to, a lot of people, and I said no I'm not doing it, and I will not change my stance on that, unless you can guarantee that that is a joke that will not be made. Because, if you are going to tackle that area of history, it needs to be done right, it needs to be done appropriately, it needs to be done objectively.

[21] ETHAN appears here to be drawing reference to an account given in the eleventh-century *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* of a Viking raid on Morocco in the 860s. For discussion see Caitlin R. Green, "A Great Host of Captives? A Note on Vikings in Morocco and Africans in Early Medieval Ireland & Britain," 2015, accessed May 23, 2019, https://www.caitlingreen.org/2015/09/a-great-host-of-captives.html.

The challenge struggled with here by members of group E is the contentious relationship between "history" and "memory" as methods for remembering the past. EDWARD advocates for the implementation of contextualized thinking: making sure not to allow the emotionally charged memories of the transatlantic slave trade to influence our understanding of Viking Age slavery. For ETHAN, however, the application of this historical rhetoric is not always straightforward, particularly within the context of a public performance. It is an issue which Michael Rothberg captures with his concept of "multidirectional memory." With this term, Rothberg argues that it is common for individuals to experience and receive traumatic events via their existing knowledge of similar events across space and time, with little consideration for historical context.[22] As such, when applying these trends of popular modes of memory to the present example of performing acts of early medieval slavery, it therefore becomes apparent that it is difficult for the RLH performer to manage how an audience receives the performances they produce. In concurrence, and in echo of the comments of ETHAN noted already, these trends also serve to further illustrate the fact that the early medieval is not a historical environment in which traumas can be performed without consequence.

These participants are keenly aware of the social impact of performing the traumatic realities of the early medieval in the temporally collapsed setting of RLH, as their discussion indicates. Moreover, from their vantage point as RLH practitioners, these participants can critically receive unsympathetic and sensationalized narratives of the early medieval past. In so doing, these individuals can, in turn, self-reflexively evaluate what the early medieval past truly means for our contemporary societies. These self-reflexive questions were broached directly by H1 and H2. H1 raised the topic within the context of genetic research highlighting the extent of Irish ancestry among early medieval Iceland's female inhabitants.[23] Accurately identifying the role of slavery which likely brought many of these women to Iceland, H1 considered the "awkward" issue of how to communicate these new traumatic realities within the origin story of Iceland, describing it as a "little cloud on the horizon." Intrigued by H1's comments, H2 followed up by explaining how such an issue was representative of the wider challenge facing the memory of the early medieval Scandinavians. Above all, it was the issue of how we are to balance the popular appeal of the "Vikings" with the need to acknowledge the "absolutely horrific" deeds they committed:

[22] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[23] Angar Helgason et al., "mtDNA and the Origin of the Icelanders: Deciphering Signals of Recent Population History," *The American Journal of Human Genetics* 66, no. 3 (2000): 999-1016.

> H2: [. . .] they were [. . .] involved in the slave trade, *abducting* people, like mass murder, purely for profit [. . .] so under this very thin "oh they're really cool [. . .]" it's like, yeah they're basically finding unprotected, *civilians*, *murdering* them all and stealing all their stuff for no reason *but pure wealth gain*.

By critically reflecting on the popular memory of the "Vikings" in this way, H2 thereby came to ask the question of what exactly it is people are "celebrating" when idealizing the deeds of early medieval Scandinavians that raided across Europe. It is a question which captures the inherent bonds between past, present, and future in how we make sense of the world around us, as H2 confronts the issue of what resemblance the popular promotion of the "Vikings" bears for the shape of our own communities.

Conclusion

The key argument of this article has been that the success of participants in critically and self-reflexively contending with traumatic aspects of the early medieval past stemmed directly from the empathy they hold for early medieval English and Scandinavian lived experiences. By remaining ever conscious of the human dignity of the early medieval peoples they perform, the participants surveyed in the study in turn recognize the delicate and complex factors faced in remembering the traumas of the period. Such thinking enabled them to avoid unhelpful narratives of the medieval as a mythical other, and instead motivated them to compassionately manage these matters, both within their historical context and towards their legacy within the present. While the concept of the "Middle Ages" might itself be invented, the period itself was no less a lived one, and this important fact is no more apparent than within the embodied medium of RLH.

Alongside these observations, another overriding argument has been that the participants' critical, self-reflexive, empathetic modes of memory were nurtured specifically through the embodied method of historical enquiry defined by RLH. Despite the overly affective and somatic nature of the medium, participants were by no means impeded in their ability to realize the historical ideals of which they promoted. Instead, the participants seen here are successful in maintaining a critical distance with the periods of the past they interact with in RLH.

The study findings are significant for several reasons. In the first instance, the findings further emphasize the need to reassess the position of emotion and physical action within the process of historical enquiry. On a wider societal level also, the value of a popular leisure activity which can promote equally critical and empathetic perceptions of human experience across time cannot be underestimated. Especially when set within the context of increasing xenophobia in global politics, the worth of a historical pastime which can

produce discerning members of society is invaluable. To promote the potential of RLH as a method of historical enquiry does not ignore the shortfalls which still afflict the activity, and there is still much work to be done to refine the practice. In equal measure, however, these pitfalls should not work to negate the phenomenal achievements of RLH practitioners. Far more than simply collecting facts and figures about the past, the work of the historian centers around the critical frames of mind with which they interrogate the past, and the clear desire among RLH practitioners to adhere to these principles should be supported.