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Editorial board statements

# “What might a journal be?” Reflections from the *postmedieval* editorial board

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The inaugural meeting of *postmedieval*'s new editorial board was held over Zoom on April 19, 2021. Prior to the meeting, we circulated questions about the challenges, aspirations of academic publication. Specifically, we asked:

What are the horizons of an academic journal? What do you see as its possibilities for collaboration, experimentation, and ethical engagement? How might a journal work to transform peer review, scholarly communication, and academic writing and publishing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of current journal publishing, as you've observed it from your own field? How might inclusion and diversity be practiced by an academic journal? What does it take to reframe dominant historiographic narratives or theoretical paradigms? How might a journal bring different moments of historical time into meaningful contact? How might the terms “medieval,” “postmedieval,” “premodern,” or “nonmodern” differently determine what a journal does? How do the material conditions of *postmedieval* (for instance, that it's owned by a for-profit company) and the hegemonic provincialisms in which it's embedded (the monolingualism of its contents, its basis in Anglo-American academia) affect what it might do? What



infrastructures of commonality are necessary for interdisciplinary exchange in a journal's pages?

Here, members of the board elaborate on their responses.

## **Jack Chen**

East Asian Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Virginia

Over the last few years I have been involved in humanities labs at my university: limited-term collaborative and experimental communities that think through a set of related questions and readings. I have found the experience to be intellectually liberating and challenging, creating opportunities to converse with scholars working across a wide range of disciplines, from the usual suspects in literary studies, history, and philosophy, to media studies, sociology, computer science, economics, and architecture. This has changed my own understanding of the kind of scholar I might be, particularly as much of my previous work has been addressed to the small number of Anglophone scholars working on medieval Chinese literature. I bring this up because I hope that *postmedieval* might serve as a virtual laboratory space, both fostering real collaborative work and creating a public record of theoretical experimentation. I see *postmedieval* as an occasion for community, a means and not an end, a generative space; I see our work as embodying an ethos of generous conversation, as bringing into dialogue those who might not see themselves as medieval scholars with those who are primarily rooted within medieval archives, as expanding and querying the notion of "medieval," and as seeding the field with ideas and possibilities that will enlarge the thought of what we do.

## **Afrodesia McCannon**

Liberal Studies, New York University

In 2015, the cover of an issue of *postmedieval* sprung at me from a conference vendor's table. It portrayed a photograph of a heavy-set Black man in a coat of armor. I am indebted to it for introducing me to the founding members of the Fellowship of the Medievalists of Color. The journal was awake for this important moment in medieval studies. Unlike many journals whose content I often feel is predictable from issue to issue, I'm never sure what is coming next in *postmedieval*. Each issue's ability to surprise has made it one of my favorite journals to read.



Most journals have a signature, a brand of sorts; writers learn what kinds of works have a higher chance of being published in a particular journal. In and of itself, carving out your niche is not inherently a bad thing. In many ways, we are presently trying to establish *postmedieval*'s own future signature and its place in academic discourse. However, I've seen this kind of branding lead to monotony and stagnation. Writers attempt to alter their work to fit the journal, editing out the material, tone, and formats that they deem will be unacceptable, so the journal (and the field) progresses at a slower pace than it could—if it progresses at all. The recent discussions about diversity and inclusion have taught us how the array of experiences we bring to our work can feed the vitality of medieval studies. Instead of pursuing writing that fits the journal, I would like to seek work informed by the writers' diversity of experiences. We are all post-medieval. We investigate the past while we negotiate the present, and that is what I believe informs, complicates, and makes profound our work. Instead of repressing those aspects of ourselves that do not fit—regardless of how relevant they are to our work—I would like *postmedieval* to celebrate as much of the scholar as they want to reveal.

Every field should have a journal that functions as a space where new ideas can first appear, a place of experimentation, a platform for vanguard thinking. I imagine *postmedieval* continuing to be a journal where work can be published that might otherwise find a hard time being placed—either because it is too new, or hybrid, or not fully readable as traditional scholarship, or not written by traditional scholars, etc. In *postmedieval*, the hierarchies and traditions of our field should give way to the force of ideas and allow those ideas to develop.

The nature of new, experimental, and groundbreaking work, however, is that you don't know what it is or where it will appear until it materializes. As a member of the editorial board, I see my task as finding and encouraging that new work. Doing this will take being social, being curious, pushing my boundaries, and eavesdropping on new and established voices to see past the limits of my imagination of what *postmedieval* can mean.

## Myra Seaman

Department of English, College of Charleston

Co-editing *postmedieval* across its first eleven years gave me a close-up view of what a journal might be and what it might do. Medieval studies today looks very different than it did in 2010, and *postmedieval* helped catalyze many of those changes, among them: significantly increasing opportunities for and the status of collaborative, cross-disciplinary scholarship; showcasing grad student and para-academic authors; advocating for medievalists as theoretical and methodological trailblazers; assuming broad interdisciplinarity; ethically monitoring the present



effects of our ways of engaging with the past; and experimenting with unorthodox modes of academic expression.

Along with such positive moves came regular reminders of the various kinds of barriers that hinder innovation. Above all, those holding the financial and legal reins rarely agree to do things differently “on the ground”—to vary format, to provide public access, to adjust processes to suit changing needs. I also learned how hard it is to modify a formula that many (readers, authors, guest editors, publisher) find satisfying. For instance, we had no intention of becoming an almost exclusively special-issue publication, but we were inundated with fantastic proposals for issues straightaway, and these wound up driving conversations within the field in ways books simply take longer to do. It was difficult to move out of that mode once it became self-sustaining, and while it enabled the journal editors to encourage broader representation within each issue, the predominance of certain already dominant voices made it harder for scholars working in smaller sub-fields to feel confident they would be heard.

When the journal began, its identity was unique; over the years, as other journals in medieval studies modified their practices, *postmedieval* has lost some of its distinction by maintaining its original vision. The deliberate reorientation of the journal’s mission during the transition to its new editorship has positioned it to lead the field in new directions, challenging embedded power structures within academia broadly and medieval studies specifically by innovating and manifesting sustainable alternatives. This requires using the journal’s established reputation to sponsor voices not regularly heard (based on institutional, geographic, linguistic, and other hierarchies) speaking on topics and in vernaculars not widely acknowledged as essential to medieval studies. Doing so involves risking the discomfort or dissatisfaction of its established audience. Those who have felt that each issue spoke directly to their immediate interests may resist the challenges of listening beyond their scholarly home. This sort of expansion also requires the editors to actively seek out scholars, artists, and activists working outside of the central spaces of academic publishing. Such action necessitates working against institutional habits within academia. *postmedieval*’s new editorial leadership immediately undertook some difficult self-reflection (on the state of the journal, on their own affiliations and identities) and purposefully sought to expand its horizons by revamping its editorial board. Board members will be ambassadors to geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary spaces not yet effectively served by the journal. Their perspectives and connections will help broaden possibilities for *postmedieval* and, as a direct effect, for medieval studies.



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## Adam J. Goldwyn

Department of English, North Dakota State University

Many of the institutions and practices of academia have come under richly-deserved scrutiny for the obstacles they have long placed before scholars because of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other identities, and even for things like prestige and location. Academic journals, too, bear their share of responsibility for creating and perpetuating these conditions. But in a media environment saturated with misinformation and that too-often prioritizes the pithy, the unmediated, and the ephemeral, academic journals and the other institutions that comprise the academy retain an important role in cultivating and disseminating trusted and durable information. The key going forward is reforming these methods to open the gates barring entry to the production of knowledge and to expand the possibilities of what constitutes publishable knowledge. Several practical steps can help: a journal can strive to make peer review a vehicle for improving articles rather than rejecting them, can use digital publication methods and open-access platforms to increase the circulation of ideas rather than seal them off behind paywalls and print issues.

Within the specific field of medieval literature, which has its foundations in the nationalist narratives of the nineteenth century, this also means re-imagining the medieval: medieval studies has become (to quote the title of Barbara Tuchman's famous book) not just 'a distant mirror,' but an increasingly warped one. The pressing question of our current scholarly moment, then, is what does medieval studies look like when it is unmoored from the political and cultural ideologies that spurred its initial development but hinder its long-term viability – both as an academic discipline and as a source of meaning and knowledge? To me, this is what the 'post' means in *postmedieval*, and the journal's role is to create that space. We will find in that space the perspectives and experiences of those medieval people historically excluded from the discipline's grand narrative(s), and those perspectives will be written into the scholarly tradition by those who have for too long been excluded.

## Steven Swarbrick

Department of English, Baruch College, CUNY

As BIPOC scholars and their allies work to confront white supremacy at many levels, it is increasingly important that journals work to raise up marginalized and minoritarian voices. *postmedieval* is in a unique position to do that. As a journal that has worked to uproot entrenched orthodoxies, I see it poised now to imagine, once again, what else and what more medieval/early modern studies



can be. We are, as a field, witnessing several critical interventions in medieval and early modern thought, including Black and indigenous counter-histories, asexual and trans readings, and ongoing reprisals of the literary toolkit: questions of rhetoric, form, historicity, and so on. To the question, ‘what might a journal do?’, it could begin by capturing the force of these new (and renewed) dissident vocabularies. Echoing Jacques Derrida’s notion of the ‘university without condition,’ as well as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concept of the ‘undercommons,’ it could begin by envisioning an unconditional journal or journal to come (Derrida, 2001; Harney and Moten, 2013). I am leaning on the prefix post- in *postmedieval*’s title to give the sense of a journal that commits itself to being in transit—that is, sent but not yet arrived. A journal without condition seizes on the not yet, both as a challenge to the institution of academic publishing (with its suffocating restrictions, including the austere contraction of financial support) and as an act of love.

*postmedieval*’s founding co-editor, Eileen Joy, argues that ‘there is almost no act of anti-institutionality that does not also aim at a reform of the institution, and therefore also represents some sort of investment in, and even love for, that institution’ (Joy, 2014, 13). Joy notes that while there is urgent need for ‘institutional critique, and even occasional radical departures to the Outside,’ such departures ‘are forms of love for the institution’ (Joy, 2014, 13), not for what it currently is, but for what it can be. Let us be cautious here. Commercial publishers like Palgrave also have ideas about what a journal can be. It can be “open-access” for example, but at a jaw-dropping price (\$2780 per article). Never has the Open been more closed. Clearly, this version of open access is not sustainable, unless by “sustainable” we mean a monoculture of writing and thinking locked behind institutional paywalls. To answer to the prefix post-, a journal such as *postmedieval* must find new para-academic ways of fostering and disseminating radical thought, by which I mean wild, free thought. This is not a rejection of the publishing world, or of the university. The para- is, to cite Joy again, ‘a position of intimate exteriority, or exterior intimacy’ (Joy, 2014, 12). It’s about love, but a love for the unforeseen.

From its inaugural issue, ‘When did we become post/human?’, *postmedieval* has been asking not only what medieval and early modern studies currently are, but what they can be. The journal has always been forward-looking, so it is no wonder that the current theoretical landscape (of posthumanism, ecomaterialism, disability studies, animal studies, queer philology, affect theory, critical race theory, trans studies, and more) now resembles *postmedieval*’s earliest forays. To maintain that forward look, I would like to see *postmedieval* continue its work of engaging discourses that are still on the horizon of thought. The most vulnerable members of our humanistic institutions are already doing this work. Let’s work with them. Let’s meet outside. For what could be, tomorrow?



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## Sam Lasman

Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge

In a recent conversation I had with an oceanographer, she and I were both struck by the loneliness of academic work in the humanities. The norms of collaboration, co-authorship, and mutual engagement not only encouraged but often required at research, publication, and presentation stages in the sciences are largely absent in the humanities. Humanists continue to fetishize the lone toiler walled off by stacks of books, so nested in subfield minutiae that all conversations tend towards shallow comparativism at best, sheer monologue at worst. Loathe as I am to advocate for any concession by the increasingly embattled humanities to an increasingly hegemonic set of disciplines, this solitude of our academic culture strikes me as an especially ironic failure. After all, we are scholars of collectives and societies, engagers with multiplicities of truths and believers in the dangerous limitation of the singular perspective. Many medievalists in particular work with texts that defy theoretical assumptions based on the singular author of bourgeois modernity. Heteroglossia, anonymity, mouvance, the palimpsest, the macaronic—these are often precisely the features that have drawn us to our strange and thrilling sources. A more collaborative model, I think, allows us to confront a number of pressing issues.

Privileging the polyvocal over the monologic invites those so often excluded from academic discourse to challenge prevailing models, to interject new sources and readings, to expose the limitations of oppressive paradigms and suggest liberatory alternatives. Finding ways to bring those outside the academy into our conversations is crucial, through efforts such as broadening access to our research, championing public humanities work, and expanding our sense of what the journal article should be and which audience(s) it might address. In creating a collective space of discussion and experimentation, we can engage with the past not in order to burrow further into it, but rather to explore how it might guide our visions of the future. As an editorial board, I hope we are able to foster and promote such spaces and such work at *postmedieval*.

## Sarah Ifft Decker

Department of History, Rhodes College

I recently came across an interview with an actor, which he gave shortly after playing a leading role in a film set in the late seventh—early eighth centuries (Dawson, 2018). During the interview, the actor began by stating that he had an interest in the medieval period, and then continued by listing a maddening array of misconceptions about the medieval past. As a historian of



the legal structures that shaped economic life in the medieval western Mediterranean, I was particularly taken aback by the assertions that there was no law or trade from the fall of the Roman Empire until the dawn of the Renaissance. Myths like these matter—and not only because they are deeply frustrating to medievalists. They matter because efforts to clearly delineate between past and present, to relegate all injustice and scarcity and violence to a distant and quasi-fantastical past, makes it easier to ignore or diminish the very real inequalities that shape the contemporary world.

Misconceptions like these are not rare, particularly as they are perpetuated by myriad non-scholarly but eminently accessible representations of the medieval past: films and television shows; popular history books sold at affordable prices; free online articles; even TikTok videos. In contrast, the excellent scholarly work that undermines or even obliterates such myths is often inaccessible to a wider audience. Books published by academic presses generally come with higher price tags than those published by trade presses; courses and lectures offered by professional academics can be expensive; and journals—*postmedieval* included—are often trapped behind paywalls.

What, then, can a journal do in order to make the cutting-edge work of academics—work with the potential to transform how most people see the medieval past—accessible to a wider audience? Such a task seems especially crucial as humanities education is undermined by both university budgetary cuts and political moves like the banning of critical race theory.

Part of what we can do is to think beyond the digital or print pages of the journal itself. Paywalls might make full-length articles inaccessible, and in any case general audiences might not necessarily seek out such content. But we can also share knowledge and communicate with a wider audience through blog posts, podcasts, and Twitter.

We can also work to shape and portray *postmedieval* as a virtual space that welcomes creative scholarship that meaningfully addresses the ways in which the medieval past matters in the present. We can use the pages of this journal to offer a vision of an engaged, interdisciplinary humanities that values a critical approach to the world around us, past and present. We can commit to publishing work that reflects the diversity of the medieval world: a world that extended beyond Europe; a world that encompassed people of many faiths; a world in which people of different social strata worked in ways both familiar and unfamiliar; a world marked by complex ideas around sexuality and gender that differ from our own yet remind us that fluidity is not new. We can help to shape an understanding in the present of an infinitely complex, diverse, and global medieval past.





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## Emir O. Filipović

History Department, University of Sarajevo

For better or for worse, academic journals are still one of the most important instruments through which researchers communicate their work to other colleagues and the wider reading public. In that sense, it is crucially important to maintain and develop this interaction between the authors and their readership in as many creative ways as possible. This would mean not only focusing on subjects and cutting-edge articles that would appeal to many different people, but also not being afraid to try out imaginative and inventive approaches to academic writing and publishing which could attract new authors and readers, helping the journal to grow even further. One of the more important issues in the current landscape of academic journals seems to be the fact that so many periodical publications resemble each other, both in content and in production, which makes it imperative for a journal like *postmedieval* to continue to stand out with the implementation of new and fresh ideas. Obviously, there are always certain limitations to this, but expanding into other areas of the globe by reaching out to non-Anglo-American authors, topics and publics, might particularly benefit the journal and its readers in the long run. In this way we could promote both inclusion and diversity, as well as being able to lean on a global community of scholars who are not afraid to collaborate and experiment in order to reassess the prevailing historiographic narratives and question theoretical paradigms that dominate the field. This would also provide the journal with a broader range and more opportunities for open discussions since the terms “medieval,” “postmedieval,” “premodern,” or “nonmodern” are perceived differently in different parts of the world and our understanding of them is constantly evolving. It would be fascinating to follow the process of this intercontinental and interdisciplinary exchange on the pages of *postmedieval*. The work that has been done so far by the new editorial team makes me confident that the journal is heading in the proper direction.

## N. İpek Hüner Cora

Department of Turkish Language and Literature, Boğaziçi University

The rapid digitalization and possibilities of digital printing / online access have drastically changed the pace of publication. Many journals keep appearing and disappearing in this fast-paced world, while scholars have to have strategic publication plans considering impact factors, turn-around times, online accessibility, peer-review processes.



While the digital age has effectively changed the pace and impact of publication, its impact on the form and content of the articles has remained rather limited. In many instances, what is published is still the academic article in its centuries-old form, save for the DOI numbers and hyperlinks. Don't get me wrong, I do not have anything against the academic articles, my point is exactly the opposite: both the production and reading of academic articles have been very significant in the upbringing of many scholars. What I want to emphasize is what we can do to develop the ways we publish, reach out to academic communities and beyond. I believe making the academic content more accessible beyond the expert scholars in a discipline would be a great step towards a more engaged scholarship. This, of course, should not necessarily mean writing simpler or shorter articles, but supporting the articles with new forms of publications, such as blog posts, podcasts, infographics, etc. Integrating these formats into academic publication would not only be more inclusive but also pave the way to new scholarly communication and collaborations. Such an interactive mode would also facilitate a dialogue with the contemporary discussions of the world, making academia relevant to daily life and politics.

Academic journals should also aim to create a safe space for scholars who want to expand the genre of academic journal article in other ways. Interdisciplinary approaches and experimental methodologies should be able to find a home to themselves and they should be acknowledged as academic contributions, no less. Creating a safe space for experimental, collaborative, and interdisciplinary research should also be practiced as a part of the peer-review process, making sure that research articles acknowledge the academic output by a variety of scholars, not only paying lip service to the most famous and privileged works of the field. I feel good about being on the *postmedieval* board, as I believe *postmedieval* is committed to these ideas.

## **Lara Farina**

Department of English, West Virginia University

As one of the outgoing editors of *postmedieval*, I recently had the pleasure of reviewing applications for the journal's future editorial positions. This was a particularly valuable opportunity for Myra Seaman, Julie Orlemanski, and me to get a sense of how *postmedieval* is perceived by scholars working in a variety of disciplines and locations. During my time as editor, the editorial team worked to ensure that the journal remain a multi-disciplinary publication, following the precedent that Myra and Eileen Joy had set from *postmedieval*'s beginnings in 2010. Since all of us had scholarly specializations in medieval English literature, however, our view of the journal's multi- and inter-disciplinarity was limited.



How accessible the journal was to people in other fields remained something of an open question, and one that applicants readily answered.

What became clear is that many medievalists outside the field of English regard *postmedieval* as a ‘theory’ journal and see that orientation as a barrier to its engagement with their own fields. The investment in critical theory, combined with a predominant focus on European cultures and the editors’ North American location, was frequently cited as limiting the journal’s reach and potentially hampering its function as a venue for a globally-distributed medieval studies. I wish neither to contest this perception nor to suggest that scholars and students of the medieval in many disciplines are not making use of critical theory and methods inspired by critical cultural studies. What I want to do instead is put *postmedieval*’s publication of theoretically informed scholarship into a larger context: namely, the journal’s commitment to experimentation.

To my mind, that commitment to experiment has been the core of the journal’s mission and identity. The use of new kinds of criticism (like queer and trans studies, critical race theory, ecocriticism, new materialism, disability studies, etc.) is but one facet of the journal’s support of alternative forms of study. True to its name, *postmedieval* has also encouraged a capacious approach to the temporality of the medieval. ‘a journal of medieval cultural studies’ has meant for us not just the study of cultures c.500–1500 but also of medievalisms of many kinds, of interactions between the medieval and its others, and of the continuing manufacture and reconstruction of the ‘medieval’ as a temporal category. We have happily included articles on Late Antique, Early Modern, present day and other cultures, which, besides their relevance to an issue’s topic of inquiry, always draw attention to the medieval as a relational category and often suggest alternate ways of conceptualizing historical time. Recent conversations about the ‘global Middle Ages’ and its implications as a category of study afford us further opportunities to scrutinize the habits of periodization in humanities disciplines—as well as the parameters of the disciplines themselves. Most notably, trans-national research projects may give us further understanding of how both periodization and disciplinary divisions work as socio-political *strategies*, laying bare the ethical stakes of working within our fields of study.

I’m heartened by *postmedieval*’s new commitments to establishing relationships with geographically diverse authors and researchers working in less represented areas of medieval studies. But I hope that new contributors and guest editors can also find in the journal a place to explore alternative forms of working with their customary archives, whether the experiment be a temporal recontextualizing, or a ‘flirting’ with new bodies of theory (to use Anna Klosowska’s term, 2011), or some serious play with the form and style of scholarship. For the last of these options, would-be contributors may find inspiration in Chris Piuma’s ‘dystranslation’ of the works of the *Pearl* poet, Matthew Gillis’s re-writing of Augustine’s *Confessions* as horror-fiction,



Rebecca Clark's use of a comic-book format to think about the author's body as described in Hoccleve's 'My Complainte,' or the multi-media reconfigurations of Staffordshire Hoard in the 'Hoarders and Hordes' issue (Piuma, 2015; Gillis, 2014; Clark, 2017; Overbey and Williams, 2016). I could list many other dazzling submissions, as well as entire issues devoted to new critical modes. However, since my purpose here is not to insist on continuance but rather to celebrate what is yet to come, I will conclude with some prompts for the imagination of future *postmedieval* projects. What if...

Articles were conversations between two or more scholars working in different fields, revealing misconceptions, incongruities, and persistent obstacles to dialogue as well as shared agendas, knowledges, and potential collaborations?

Authors explored alternative uses of their bodies in scholarly production—other, that is, than tapping away at a Qwerty keyboard? Drawing, calligraphy, recorded speech and/or gesture, staging, or object creation are a few possibilities.

Guest editors sought contributions (and not just responses or afterwords) from people working in non-Humanities fields, and they reflected on how 'expertise' was established, rethought, or dismantled in the making of a journal issue?

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