
Essay cluster: Grounds for a trans-regional
medieval studies, beyond the global

Afterword: Motions of global periodization

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I would crack between my teeth the candied shell of an artificial fruit, and a burst of light would illuminate my palate with a taste of black-currant or pineapple: all the colours, all the lights were mine, the gauzy scarves, the diamonds, the laces; I held the whole party in my mouth. I was never attracted to paradises flowing with milk and honey, but I envied Hansel and Gretel their gingerbread house: if only the universe we inhabit were completely edible, I used to think, what power we would have over it! (de Beauvoir 1959, 7)

The seductive promise of the ‘global’ is an illusion: a sphere can never be seen in its entirety at once, not without distortion. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Simone de Beauvoir (1959) writes about herself as a child who eventually realizes she is not the center or the whole of existence. She tries to devour the world, to absorb the outside into her self-constitution. Confronted with a world whose bounds exceed the reaches of even what she can expand her mouth to consume, she fills her childhood with cry

after cry, each marking her existential crisis. Our attempts to capture everything, to see and hold the whole world at once, can only lead to calamity.

At the heart of this cluster of essays is the realization that we cannot grasp a sphere without halting its most valuable property, that is, its natural inclination to move. As a framework for the Middle Ages, the 'global' becomes structural, a scaffold through which to hold the past; and as such, it never loses the potential for centers of power to reformulate and recast their imperializing nets. As a method, however, the 'global' becomes an entry for exploration that never rests too long before shifting focus, thus maintaining a humility of *not*-knowing in the pursuit to know.

The proposal of expanding one's horizons to sharpen one's viewpoint is generally good advice, whether in reference to scholarly methods or simply living an enriched, more meaningful life. As Xiaofei Tian puts it in her contribution to the cluster,

by looking at historical and cultural phenomena across the cultures and societies of the world that bear fundamental similarities[...] yet present different trajectories of development, we gain valuable perspective on the primary objects of our study, and we become aware of a larger picture, within whose framework we can acquire a better understanding of both the uniqueness of a given culture and the commonality underlying cultures and societies.

But of course, as iterated in Sharon Kinoshita's essay, one needs to be cautious 'against the distortions of using our own disciplinary training as the base, or basis, for 'encompassing' other cultures.' Kinoshita is citing Djelal Kadir, who uses the metaphor of the drafting compass to emphasize how the 'foot' is the inevitable center of the drawn circle. Kinoshita transforms the metaphor to imagine the 'foot' not as an imperializing center, but a stabilizing center of scholarly integrity as one reaches out in new disciplinary directions. For Kinoshita, the circle that is drawn around the point is not under the dominating gaze of the foot, but an orb of influence in its own right; after all, the compass has two feet, each working together to bring the shape into being.

To be global, the circle must become a sphere, a process that engulfs the center in three-dimensional space. The surface is left center-less, but orientation is paramount. Both the position of ourselves and the perch of the globe render a viewpoint from which we make meaning. Only by turning the globe and reorienting ourselves will new or nuanced viewpoints emerge. Further, as a spatiotemporal concept, the global Middle Ages brings the dimension of time into our sphere, thus reminding us of the inherent distortions in whatever orientation we take: not only are we incapable of visualizing the four-dimensional continuum of spacetime,



we are also—as matter—continually reshaping its geometry. As Einstein has taught us, gravity exists within the relationship between the curvature of spacetime and the matter that interacts with it. In other words, we can find the force that grounds us within the dynamic and dialogic movement between ourselves and that with which we engage.

In this sense of constant motion and reorientation, the concept of trans-regionality pinpoints precisely the aims of the global medieval as a methodology instead of a structure: to transgress and undo the oppressive restraints of linearity.¹ Spacetime is also an important concept in Xiaofei Tian’s analysis of the global Middle Ages, where it helps to parse how ‘multiple temporalities exist in different places of the world and also within one culture for different observers.’ Complementing Geraldine Heng’s generative proposition that the global Middle Ages allows us to see multiple modernities in what we call premodernity (Heng 2015), Tian suggests that ‘multiple medievalities’ also materialize. For Heng and Tian, a global Middle Ages is not only concerned with synchronous histories across geographies, but also with comparative developments across time, in which medievalities and modernities signify common technologies or social practices across cultures at different historical moments, thereby upending the notion of European progress over and against ‘the rest.’ Engaging with Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett’s discussion of the way ‘medieval’ always points to ‘modernity’ (2016, 11), Xiaofei Tian proposes that appropriating the ‘medieval’ as a concept detached from Europe ‘affords the opportunity to free it conceptually from its purely historical ground and make it useful for comparative study. In this way we would indeed “resuscitate ‘medieval’ as a theoretical term divorced from teleology and the spectre of an inevitable modernity” (quoting Davis and Puett 2016, 11).’ The movement of the Middle Ages into modernity and the modern into premodernity invites us to rethink *when* and *where* the Middle Ages happened (we are *still* medieval; they were *already* modern back then!). But Raha Rafii has recently made the important point that ‘it is still Western conceptions of European achievements that set the standards of what is of historical importance in the first place, of what is worthy of tracing through time’ (2023, 48). When a global Middle Ages transforms the meaning of medieval to indicate a quality of development attached to technology, social practices, or economic systems, a temporal line of progression—defined by a European norm—can still be discerned even as it overlaps and winds across and within space.

While Xiaofei Tian calls for the agility of ‘medieval’ to mean more than an ‘exclusively European historiographical category,’ Rebecca De Souza suggests that doing so is neither possible nor preferable. De Souza makes the compelling case that the meaning of medieval—as a European timescale that *also* signifies colonial history—holds significance in non-

1 For a sustained exploration of how the global Middle Ages can serve a process of undoing Eurocentric periodization, see Lomuto (2023).

European, colonized spaces. De Souza shows how anticolonial resistance in the Philippines, for example, has mobilized the medieval ‘in order to deride the social formation and culture imposed on the archipelago by Spanish colonisers.’ Attempting to neutralize the politicized category of the Middle Ages and appropriate it for a global Middle Ages framework would eclipse, De Souza persuasively argues, ‘established practices in both post- and decolonial thought and popular culture of conceiving of and appropriating the Middle Ages as something purely European, precolonial, and often undesirable.’ In other words, inclusion only works when you want to be included: forced inclusion is oppressive. Indeed, De Souza makes the important point that ‘the precolonial or pre-Columbian Americas continue to be examined through long-standing local periodisations specific to their history, including indigenous concepts of time. “Medieval” has not emerged as an operative term in scholarship, outside the limited scope of global Middle Ages.’

We assume the need to have terms that will unify us or enable us to dialogue, but why? Is it not possible for us to connect while using our own terms? We can find an elucidating analogy in the way bilingual or multilingual spaces do not divide but rather enrich our experiences. Multidirectional translation becomes the mode of operation, instead of accommodation toward the center (what De Souza calls ‘accommodationist diversification’). We can receive in one language and respond in another, or move between languages as we dialogue. After all, the global medieval as a method is about dialogue; it is about expanding the scope of scholarly inquiry to better understand our still-small-enough questions, not about bringing the world under the grasp of Euro-American Anglophone knowledge production. As Tian puts it, ‘if we respect and embrace differences, then we would naturally accept that one size does not fit all, and that disparity and contrast have just as much value as similarity and resonance in understanding human history.’ The totalizing effect of a programmatic, or umbrella, global Middle Ages activates, as De Souza writes, ‘a global frame [that] can obscure local specificity. Therefore according to Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997), global historical issues have to be considered first and foremost in their local manifestations.’

Xiaofei Tian’s suggestion that we use juxtaposition to focus our scholarly investigations offers one way of keeping the local in view. Rather than look at two points for comparison, which, Tian reminds us, cannot escape a binary model of study that seeks ‘presence and absence or possession and lack,’ juxtaposition offers the scholar multiple points of comparison and cross-analysis. The digital Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP), founded by Geraldine Heng and Susan Noakes, and the Cambridge University Press book series *Elements in the Global Middle Ages* that they co-edit offer realizations of Tian’s notion of juxtaposition, where expert-



driven studies of various societies around the world during the period c. 500-1500 can defamiliarize and shift centers. Although comparison is fundamental to juxtaposition, Tian argues that ‘it is more of an outlook, a knowing, and an awareness than of any formal comparative study. In other words, it is not necessarily something that always needs to be, or even could be, worked into an article or a book. And yet, the knowledge of parallels and analogies deepens and enriches scholarship.’ Juxtaposition keeps the globe in motion, constantly turning and reshaping our relations to time and space, and perpetually re-grounding our centers of gravity. We must still remember, however, that this method is not clear of individual scholarly bias. De Souza cautions that global medieval studies, whether comparative or focused on interconnections, relies on ‘the individual researcher to make an ethical decision on what to study, which runs the risk of substantial bias emerging in scholarship.’ Of course, no scholarship is free of bias, the fact of which should not be hidden behind the guise of objectivity.

The global as method insists on the imperative of reorientation. And reorientation should always circle back to remake and transform the self. Jan Volek reminds us that the Eurocentrism of ‘medieval’ is one rooted in reference to ‘the Carolingian Empire and the British Isles with the more recent addition of the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean basin.’ Even as the ‘topography of medieval studies’ has shifted through frameworks such as Mediterranean studies or the global Middle Ages, Eastern Europe has remained out of view, thus leaving ‘Europe’ as a static category synonymous with ‘Latin culture, Christianity, and the legacy of Rome.’ These are core ingredients in ‘the notion of European insularity and distinctness, whereby the study of the Middle Ages has reflected, supported, or supplied key components for the construction of whiteness and colonial ideology.’ Thus, Volek’s call to consider Eastern Europe—a region he calls ‘a proverbial crossroads’—not as peripheral but as equally constitutive of what *Europe* means will ‘challeng[e] the persisting myths that identify medieval Europe as a heritage site for whiteness.’ Transforming the notion of Europe itself, Eastern Europe shows a medieval world in motion, where the ‘ongoing interactions and exchanges between the Asian steppe, the Muslim Middle East, the Greek-speaking Byzantine world, and the Latin West’ are brought to the foreground. We can thereby undo the harmful idea that people of color are out of place in the Middle Ages, and only showed up under the imperialist thumb of Europe in the early modern period.

The global Middle Ages is an institutional project more so than an epistemological one, and so its politics can easily recede into and behind the walls that make and install power. As I have argued elsewhere, it is individual scholars who can transform the global Middle Ages into a tool

for cracking and eventually tearing down those walls. As Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power have put it, ‘global’ is ‘subject to perpetual redefinition according to the needs of different peoples and times’ (2018, 89). Through their concept of ‘globalizing cosmologies,’ we can view simultaneously the disconnected geographies and cosmological histories of Aztec Mexico and the late medieval Latin West to ‘reimagine the global as a flexible and culturally specific concept, the precise understanding of which shifts through time and space without ever losing its imaginative power’ (2018, 90). As a method, instead of a framework, for engaging the past, the global Middle Ages sets us, and that which we study, into constant motion. More so than attempt to encompass the world, the global Middle Ages should make available the notion of spacetime in our historical analysis, which ultimately moves us beyond the global, seeking stability not in a stationary foot but in the ever-shifting relations *between*.

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