

Zrinka Stahuljak, *Médiéval contemporain. Pour une littérature connectée*. Paris: Editions Macula, Collection: Anamnèses. Médiéval/Contemporain, 2020. 96 pp. Notes. 14 €. ISBN : 978-2-86589-118-4.

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In *Médiéval contemporain: Pour une littérature connectée*, Zrinka Stahuljak provocatively argues for a “medieval contemporary”: medieval literature, Stahuljak proposes, may act in the present in the mode of “connected literature.” Connected literature is the situation where the contemporary and the medieval meet each other as *dispositifs* through an active network that can emerge for the first time in the present. For example, drawing from her own work she explains how fifteenth-century Burgundian libraries are a form of world writing because they create possible visions of the world. This mode of connected literature produces a horizon of expectations through an organization that is aesthetic, material, political, and effective (p. 90). Such libraries are active in that the books as a material reality of diverse matters create worlds (rather than represent a world) as well as embody the political power of Burgundian Dukes. Inventories of these libraries make and remake worlds by operating outside of our modern genres that we usually impose upon fiction and reality; things are connected in malleable modes of thinking: the Orient is a chronicle of France, while France is a matter of the Orient (p. 63). This kind of library as an active system can extend into other world libraries (Timbuktu, Ottoman), other potential worlds. Thus connected literature has a constant dynamic engagement with the future; it constitutes an “evental history” (“une histoire événementielle,” p. 90) because the connectivity constantly affirms a productive potential between imagination, memory, and material objects, and between these cognitive medieval modes, artifacts, and the contemporary (pp. 65, 68). Such world libraries function as an active network of a collection and historical and fictive narratives, rather than as archives of singular works, authors, actors, or political entities. Stahuljak gives the example of Christopher Columbus, who read Marco Polo’s *Devisement du monde* and was searching for a route to the West to find the Grand Khan; he was also reading crusade treatises, and John of Mandeville’s stories about the Orient (p. 68). In this case of connected literature, the network of fictional and historical narratives causes Columbus to act and imagine, replacing the notion that Columbus is a subject who discovers a new world, his discoveries then documented (pp. 82-83). The active library transcends a singular man and work as a horizon of expectations that is constantly transforming as a network (p. 69).

Stahuljak’s example of medieval libraries focuses on an active connected literature and as such builds upon recent global studies that challenge the traditional narratives of modernity, empires and capitalism, through what Sanjay Subrahmanyam calls the “connected histories” of Afro-Eurasian and American cultures and economies, and of transhemispheric empires.[1] Stahuljak’s relation of the medieval and contemporary brings to mind two concepts that are significant for how I view medieval literature as an active world literature that compels us to question our positionality in relation to the past: “Relation” and “anachrony.” These concepts of Édouard Glissant and Jacques Rancière productively resonate with Stahuljak’s medieval contemporary.[2]

She is aware of her provocation, citing the refusal of scholars to place the contemporary and the medieval together because of the fear that on the one hand, the contemporary will be reduced from its synchronic identity, and on the other, that the study of the Middle Ages will be anachronistic in a negative sense and therefore irrelevant (p. 90). Glissant and Rancière's concepts reinforce the active nature of the medieval contemporary by showing us how voices, history, and cultural artifacts of the past intervene in the present. They describe the temporality of works of art, as well as the movement and entanglement of our existences that form a communal world in which we must see such cultural production. Their views illuminate how the medieval contemporary makes a fundamental contribution as a version of world literature.

Glissant's starting point for his concept of "Relation" is the slave's experience of the "abyss" as the "best element of exchange," an experience of shared knowledge through memory, propelling us into a "freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole." [3] While we cannot all share in this distinct history of colonialism and slavery that is Glissant's starting point in the same manner as someone whose ancestors lived this experience, he formulates a poetics of Relation in which we all must understand ourselves within a "Whole-World" of identities that are made up of such kind of relations: the "idea of the world takes advantage of the imagination of the world, the intertwined poetics that allow me to sense how my place joins up with others." [4] Glissant's "Whole World" and poetics of Relation advocates a plurality as a mode of thought, the multiple against the thinking of One. If power relations govern our intermingling of cultures, how can we think and speak in a mode of generative plurality, a consensual sharing of creolization especially when it comes to a medieval past acting in the present? [5] What forms of the medieval past create such relations? In terms of the medieval contemporary as connected world literature, Glissant's poetics help us identify medieval voices and modes of thinking that intervene in the present to create new pluralistic, relational worlds. For instance, Stahuljak uses the term "temporal palimpsest" to describe how in connected literature networks of relations can continue to be in play in different spaces and temporalities (p. 85). She presents medieval libraries as temporal palimpsests whose impacts might appear in different form and configurations later, as an eruption that renders something visible for the first time (pp. 85-86), such as different world models against the state (p. 89). One might contrast this palimpsest structure, the layering of different temporalities, with Glissant's poetics of Relation that includes the search for duration. He contrasts the "accumulation of sediments" visible in the cultures of the Caribbean and Transnational American poetics with the European poetics of epiphany in which one glimpses Totality in the moment:

We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments. The poetics of duration (another leitmotiv), one of the first principles of the sacred, founding books of community, reappears to take up the relay from the poetics of the moment. [6]

In the introduction to his anthology *La Terre, Le Feu, L'Eau et Les Vents* (2010), an anthology that includes fragments of works in various languages, and from different periods and traditions, Glissant describes how he envisions shards of texts to be drifting in a sea of imagination, some parts of a poem encountering another poem, intermingling with each other to become a common song. This space of the imagination is a field of rivers and folds that incessantly move. [7] The poetics of accumulation—the gathering of disparate voices, times, and forms through the

anthology—captures a relationality of past and present texts that produce new pluralities. Like a river that has various flows and collective movements, encompassing shifts to another direction and sedimentation, relational accumulation has multiple directional vectors—a relational drive as poetics—that creates various layers of voices and complex contacts among texts. Connected literature makes different relations possible through the medieval archive, which is why Stahuljak views the medieval library as “un devenir-monde” (p. 61) that reveals its potentials later, a form of world writing ever generative and creating “creolized” world systems in the Glissantian sense. Silenced voices or worldviews might be heard or appear in the temporal palimpsest of connected literature, just as Glissant’s accumulation and Relation invites us to think of the production of knowledge as in constant interactive movement with someone or something else in which one part may appear at an instant through a dynamic and constantly shifting relation of power and world history. Stahuljak’s connected literature creates Glissant’s open frontier of world history, the “linked histories of peoples” made visible and active through its medieval networks of relations.[8]

Connected literature as active world literature also converges with Rancière’s concept of anachrony, in that it pays attention to the durable nature of the medieval artefact so that it can act in the present. In his now landmark essay “The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth,” Rancière boldly argues that there are no anachronisms, only “modes of connections” we can call anachronies: “events, notions, significations, that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with ‘itself.’”[9] Cultural artefacts might gesture towards the unknowable in their poetic function, and thus be at once of their time and embody different historical times, and can perform as historical agents. Rancière cites the anachronistic status of Rabelais as a non-believer questioned by Lucien Febvre as a potential notion perceived through his narrative art and anachrony in this sense. Such an evental, poetic history based on the formative power of a cultural artefact over time meets Stahuljak’s concern for a theoretical framework of medieval literature that can act in the present and resist ideological medievalisms that might appropriate a homogeneous, static medieval past to advance contemporary ideological projects. While the recent memory of Charlottesville and appropriation of medieval symbols for racial exclusion and white Christian supremacy comes to mind, other examples include longstanding perceptions of supposedly invisible medieval Islamic archives that Marina Rustow critiques in her study of the Cairo geniza of the Fatimid caliphate and its documentary practices, as well as the still pervasive use of the term “medieval” in political discourse for social groups or forms of living that don’t subscribe to global capitalism and monolithic ideals of tradition, heritage or identity.[10] For instance, Western imaginings of the Middle East as mired in medieval tribal conflicts serve arguments of military domination (e.g. some have said that the Obama-Trump strategy to kill people until there was no Islamic State left inside Iraq was “medieval,” thus a Western medieval strategy against a medieval culture), and far-right European fringe groups call for the return of the spirit of national identities (recently examined by Daniel Wollenberg).[11] Stahuljak recognizes these debates and also places her project in conversation with current discussions about the contemporary relevance of medieval literature in the neoliberal discourse of the university (p. 41 ff.). Medieval studies as a discipline has often been called upon to justify its usefulness and impact concerning contemporary issues of concern such as race, gender, or sexuality as well as politicized medievalisms such as the events of Charlottesville and the war in Iraq. Stahuljak opposes a diachronic model of a closed medieval literature of origins, a medievalism that becomes the basis

of universalism, colonial discourses, and neoliberal consumption and functionalism of a One World, monolingual (English) “world literature” (pp. 72, 75).

While she concedes that medievalists must grapple with these important disciplinary issues, Stahuljak also argues that medieval literature can create the contemporary as connected literature in addition to have its value defined as a representation or documentation of the past; she also questions whether its relevance must be “reacting” to the present rather than creating history, as well as be dependent upon methodologies borrowed from other disciplines such as critical race theory, postcolonial studies, or anthropology at the cost of advancing studies in philology, codicology and other material studies essential to the discipline (pp. 43-44). In short, she wants to advance a methodology that has medieval act in the present rather than serve as a foundation for genealogies of or as a reaction to the contemporary, especially at this crucial time when the neoliberal university requires the justifications for the study of medieval literature and culture.

Stahuljak’s connected literature as a medieval contemporary insists on Rancière’s integrity of the agentive medieval artefact and resists ideological medievalism of cultural appropriation. She emphasizes the durability of the medieval library as essential to its activity as world writing, for instance the medieval library resists the imposition of anachronistic generic categories. She explains that connected literature as a medievalist enterprise of doing world literature proposes a “dialectic of explication of text and expansion of scale” (p. 82). The medieval library embodies this scalability as well as a different notion of network that nonmedievalists of world literature might not be attentive to; a medieval library does not form a network in the sense of a single text or “biome” (cf. Shih and Beecroft) but rather the network constitutes the texts of the collection. Each medieval library in turn embodies a network that varies in number, themes, and internal nodes that allow for close readings, or a reading from a distance (p. 82). Her point is that every medieval library constitutes its own discourse and possible articulation of a world. Further each network is active in a performative, political, or aesthetic sense as a “situated network” in which world history makes history (p. 83). This is her point about how a library makes Christopher Columbus and his world rather than Christopher Columbus discovered a world.

Stahuljak’s connected literature enacts a Glissantian relation between medieval and the contemporary to produce a world of new possibilities, a “network of the future,” and “archive of the possible,” (pp. 57, 62, 65) and reject paradigms that advocate for ideologies of Oneness. Glissant’s “Relation” as Shu-mei Shi reminds us, functions both as an “intransitive” and transitive verb: our existences are relational, but a poetics of Relation as world literature can bring certain entities into relation.[12] What Stahuljak crucially brings to this view is how medieval texts and culture act when brought into relation with the contemporary. For instance, the phenomenon of “*désoubli*” (borrowed from Valère Novarina) occurs through the palimpsest of connected literature: it is the emergence or eruption of the undocumented or “unremembered” that never had the occasion to be remembered but intervenes in the present through the encounter of past and present, e.g. potential world models of the active medieval library that become visible against a given model of state or nation (p. 86). Just as Rancière describes how an anachrony means that a work escapes any identity and contemporaneity with itself, Stahuljak proposes the medieval and contemporary as a relation that act on each other (p. 87), thus making it clear that this structure is not about a “resurgissement” of a text or artwork but the appearance of

something now that has never happened in the past but whose potential has always existed in the mode of connected literature.

To flesh out her intervention in the discourses of world literature and medievalisms of ideological appropriation, it's useful to situate Rancière's anachrony against a medievalism that has most often been in the public sphere. Medievalism commonly understands modern cultural responses and practices that relate to the European Middle Ages in addition to creative reenactments of tournaments, the trajectory of neogothic architecture in Britain and its colonial empire, or political and artistic movements based on medieval conceptions of communal craftsmanship. Crusading calls and symbols such as "Deus vult" and images of knighthood appropriated for contemporary white supremacist ideologies might be seen as both of and outside of its medieval time in that such cultural artefacts act in the present to justify certain ideological actions. Crucially left out of this medievalism is the formative power of art in anachrony. People appropriate the cultural artefact or medieval thought for their own concerns rather than allow the art to make history. In Rancière's account the form of the cultural artefact enables anachrony. The ability of an artwork to step outside its time follows Hannah Arendt's idea of workmanship constituting the worldliness and durability of a work of art, as a useless reified object of human artifice that cannot be reduced to a consumable, reproducible, or expendable thing.[13] Shih further clarifies that this durability of an artwork's worldliness is its literariness, an attention to language and form.[14] In his analysis, Rancière is careful to point out how Rabelais' supposed anachronism as an unbeliever emerges out of a literary form, parody, thus making possible a thought outside of time. He also shows that Lucien Febvre's efforts to call Rabelais an unbeliever who masks his belief in parody as a "sin of anachronism" is a poetic act. That is, historians use rhetorical devices to create a supposed objective history in which such a sin is not possible, and history a fact: Rabelais could not have been an unbeliever, his non-belief is not an object of history (p. 34). In a similar sense slogans such as "Deus vult" deployed for the White Christian Right groups in North America and Europe are removed from the form of their usage in medieval times to affirm a providential history, or Joan of Arc as a Christian warrior is negated of her complex status in historical documents and hagiography. Thus we see how the durability of an artefact resists cultural appropriation: the latter uses an idea or an artwork for its time rather than embodying something outside of its time.

To cite a medieval Francophone example of cultural anachrony and connected literature, we can consider Kaija Saariaho's opera of 2000, *L'Amour de loin*, with a libretto by the refugee Amin Maalouf who fled the Lebanese Civil War and settled in Paris. Based on the twelfth-century troubadour Jaufré Rudel's canso of far-away love and his medieval biography transmitted in chansonniers, Saariaho and Maalouf evoke the medieval soundscape of the troubadour song without quoting its melodies and Jaufré's Occitan song directly; as Judith Peraino describes it in her powerful analysis, medieval song remains "at a distance, as it were, a palimpsest, much like the bleed-through of Occitan words in [chansonnier] W's French translation of the song." [15] In the canso attributed to Jaufré "Lanqan li jorn," the troubadour sings of his beloved and unrequited love, including references to the land of the Saracens, a detail that suggests he participated in the Second Crusade. The geography of desire embodied in the love song maps onto the Christian spiritual geography of crusading desire: here and there, West and East, with the Holy Land as center. The opera translates the medieval trope of far-away unrequited love as a sonic palimpsest through "shared contours" [16] and fragments of the Occitan lyrics, connecting

the global politics of medieval Christendom activated by the crusades to the contemporary global situation of exile experienced by refugees. Jaufre's beloved Countess of Tripoli dreams in Occitan of leaving Tripoli for her homeland of Toulouse, a counterpoint to Maalouf's own biography and postcolonial Francophone experience of self-exile, as he dreams of Tripoli rather than Toulouse.

In contrast to this anachrony of medieval lyric, politicized medievalisms of appropriation enact what Rancière critiques of the Annales school: the creation of a History in which anachrony is not possible. As a sort of pendant to the Annales school's empirical history, politicized medievalisms create a history that negates the agentive nature of cultural artefacts forged from its material and historical contexts—such as troubadour song and manuscripts that emerge through contemporary palimpsests—and make it identify with the current moment, opposing Rancière's notion of anachrony as meaning that “escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with itself.” [p. 47]

If these politicized medievalisms act in the present to create division and universal One world histories, connected literature brings Glissant's poetics of Relation into play by bringing back the network of medieval libraries that articulate modes of thought that have been traditionally pushed apart or distorted by ideological medievalisms mentioned. The mode of the active medieval library provides a material and non-universalizing active network of world writing that can emerge in the present in its articulation of several discourses (political, economic, historical, religious).

Thus connected literature acts in relation to such politicized medievalisms of Oneness that negate Rancière's anachrony. It does so by placing in relation the medieval and contemporary in a manner that maintains the anachrony of the medieval, the pluralistic and heterogeneous medieval library as an assemblage of texts, genres, writings, voices, material objects. Connected literature makes a strong case for the study of the Middle Ages as world literature, a discourse in which we create ever new and changing relations to each other to create world history, or rather world histories.

NOTES

[1] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Aux origines de l'histoire globale: Leçon inaugurale prononcée le jeudi 28 novembre 2013” (Paris: Collège de France, 2014). See also: *From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), Vol. 2 of *Explorations in Connected History*; and *Mughals and Franks*. Vol. 1 of *Explorations in Connected History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2] I acknowledge that I have been in productive dialogue with Helen Solterer on these two figures. See her forthcoming article on Rancière's notion of anachrony and Villon that also addresses Glissant's anthology.

- [3] Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1990); *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 8.
- [4] Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 120; *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 74.
- [5] *Poetics of Relation*, p. 34.
- [6] *Poetics of Relation*, p. 33.
- [7] Édouard Glissant, *La Terre, Le Feu, L'Eau et Les Vents* (Paris: Galaade: 2010), p. 15.
- [8] *Poetics of Relation*, p. 33.
- [9] Jacques Rancière, "The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth," In *InPrint* 3.1 (2015): 21-52; p. 47. First published as *Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien*. In *L'inactuel psychanalyse et culture* 6 (1996): 53-68.
- [10] Marin Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
- [11] See Peter Van Buren's 2018 article "The Tragedy of the U.S. 'victory' in Iraq," in <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vanburen-iraq-commentary/commentary-the-tragedy-of-the-u-s-victory-in-iraq-idUSKBN1FF2XW>, and Daniel Wollenberg *Medieval Imagery in Today's Politics* (Arc Humanities Press, 2018).
- [12] Shu-mei Shih, "World Studies and Relational Comparison." *PMLA* 130 (2015): 430-438, p. 436.
- [13] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958. 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 137. Shih, "World Studies," p. 437.
- [14] Shih, "World Studies," p. 437.
- [15] Judith Peraino, "Sonograms of Desire: Medieval and Modern." *Paragraph* 41.1 (2018): 26-41, p. 38.
- [16] Peraino, "Sonograms," p. 38.

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H-France Forum

Volume 16, Issue 4, #3