

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.

Review Essay by Lynn Ramey, Vanderbilt University

Asking how to make medieval literature and the humanities more broadly relevant and central to today's university, Zrinka Stahuljak's *Médiéval contemporain: pour une littérature connectée* comes at a crucial moment. Despite multiple denials (some of them my own) that the humanities are not in crisis, 2020 and 2021 have definitively proven otherwise. Many graduate programs in literature, especially non-English languages and literatures, have been paused across the United States, including at Vanderbilt University where I work, with no projected dates for reopening. Our Dean's office in Arts and Sciences has no one in literature (or history) for the first time, and fatigue has set in as faculty have been asked repeatedly to come up with new and exciting trans-disciplinary programs that have all fallen short, apparently. A five-year trans-institutional initiative funded almost no humanities-focused initiatives, and the few that were chosen were not renewed because the university-wide committee did not see enough opportunities for external funding. The language and literatures departments are being asked to come up with new configurations that focus on contemporary problems like climate change, that may not include doctoral students, that have revenue-generating 4+1 masters programs, and that allow students to major in languages, literatures, and cultures without taking language classes. Our "Grand Challenges" initiatives are resolutely focused on the modern period, despite echoes of these same issues in ancient and medieval studies. This same phenomenon seems to hold true at UCLA where Stahuljak works, including the very phrasing "Grand Challenges" (p. 41). Humanities faculty are being asked to fund their research with external grants that do not exist or that are extremely difficult to get. From where I sit, the humanities— particularly the study of early literatures— are most definitely in crisis.

Zrinka Stahuljak's manifesto, appearing in 2020, almost surely was penned on the cusp of the pandemic, making her insights appear clairvoyant or, at the least, uncannily relevant. Stahuljak traces the differences between French and American approaches to medieval literature and proposes the adoption of "littérature connectée" as a way of drawing on the multi-cultural approaches of the US academy and the French academy's method of combining literature and history to make medieval literature relevant to today's students. She sets two objectives for her essay: "[À] quoi ressemblerait la théorie littéraire contemporaine si elle était écrite par et avec des médiévistes?" and "En quoi la littérature connectée joindrait-elle le passé et le futur dans le présent, et les discours universitaires théoriques aux discours culturels publics?"(p. 12). I would also add that a central question to her work is "Comment lire la littérature non pas comme une conséquence du passé, mais comme une causalité de l'avenir?" (p. 49).

In order to answer these questions, Stahuljak begins with a discussion of the historical connections between literature and history in the US and France. While some of what she writes on the status

of medieval studies in the academy may be painfully evident to many medievalists (for example, literature anthologies often leave the Middle Ages out entirely), juxtaposing how France and the US treat this period differently gives a new perspective. Stahuljak delves into the notions of "civilization," "culture," and "history" with their implications for nation-building, politics, and neoliberalism in France and the United States. She argues convincingly that literature can perform serious work, declaring that "[l]e projet de la littérature connectée est de croiser ces deux dispositifs, le médiéval et le contemporain, le passé et le présent, dans une enquête anamnésique qui nous permet de faire surgir un avenir (autre) grâce au potentiel de la littérature" (p. 56). *Littérature connectée*, suggests Stahuljak, is an approach to research and teaching inspired by the capacious personal libraries of the later Middle Ages. These vast libraries selected eclectically from all genres, time periods, and various areas of the world. Much like a medieval codex that may combine works of fiction, history, and spirituality in a single tome, these libraries reflected the tastes and inclinations of the owners. *Littérature connectée* sees these libraries as a model, with each library as a node in a vast network of textual collections. *Littérature connectée* as a method or approach combines close reading with distant reading, putting together a network of texts that are not defined by time, place, or genre. For Stahuljak, each node or collection of texts is gathered together based on commonality that transcends the languages and specific contexts in which the texts were written.

Stahuljak's essay, while never losing focus on her goal of encouraging an approach to literature that engages students and a wider public, is wide-ranging and could provide discussion on any number of fronts. The three questions I would like to probe further here are: 1) the metaphorical use of network analysis as a model for curriculum development, 2) the tension between presentism and a global Middle Ages approach, and 3) the practical implications for curriculum design.

Network analysis has captured the imagination of humanists. As a methodology, social network analysis promises to reveal relationships or "edges" between different "nodes" (people, texts, etc.), providing us with new insight. The library node that Stahuljak envisions is already a collection of texts, unlike the typical network analysis node where each node is a discrete item (though indeed nodes themselves can be groups of items). With each library functioning as a node of nodes (books), the library node presupposes a connection of some sort between the books internal to the library. Multiple libraries would have edges, or connections, between them.

One of the main issues with network analysis, however, is the selection and formatting of the data that goes into the network. This step is crucial to data scientists as well as digital humanists. Long and Baker suggest that data organization should be among the first considerations, urging scholars to invite appropriate "members of marginalized communities to participate in the structuring of the data before its analysis."^[1] The central importance of design in the creation of a digital collection is also the first concern addressed by a group of interdisciplinary scholars who met at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media in 2017 to discuss the importance of argument in digital history. According to their white paper, the act of choosing sources to digitize is an act of scholarship, making an argument that "reconfigure[s] the historical record," making visible structures and persons that may have been occluded before.^[2] The selection, organization, and presentation of any collection of works reflect the priorities of the collector, and Stahuljak acknowledges this as she describes the library of the late medieval dukes of Burgundy, Philip the Good and Charles the Bold. Their book collections show an imperial bent as they incorporate

works that come from or are set in areas ripe for imperial expansion (p. 62). In selecting a library, one must then understand the goals of the collector. For Stahuljak, to avoid the trap of eurocentrism and/or orientalism, one must select a pre-colonial library, perhaps from Persia, India, or the Ottoman Empire, and then use distant reading to study that library in relation to libraries from Italian cities and Eastern European monarchies (p. 85). But would the scholar using this approach actually avoid the trap of eurocentrism, orientalism, or any of a number of future concerns, including racism? If literature, as Stahuljak opines, creates the future, would these libraries not already contain elements of what they will produce in future societies? Is there any set of texts, or library, that would escape this trap? Librarian Nina de Jesus equates libraries with institutional oppression. While her examples are drawn from public libraries originating in Canada and the USA, her argument compels us to also think about the oppressive potential of libraries (archives, etc.) from all time periods and places.[3] Given the importance of selection for any archive, the exact makeup of Stahuljak's proposed libraries and the relationships between the texts should be clearly stated. Though some insight could come of performing network analysis on uncleaned and somewhat random data, an archive that is well-formed and intentionally designed from the outset will produce more reliable results in network analysis.

Which books, texts, cultural artifacts to include then? Stahuljak rightly exposes the problems already inherent in comparative literature curricula, selection of works to read chief among them. Too often, works are chosen to be representative classics of non-European cultures by people who are outside of the culture of production and who are usually modernists (pp. 78-80). Further, works are grouped together for study by the time period when they are produced or by arbitrary notions of genre. Then, narratives are constructed around "influences" and "transmission" that tend to reinforce linear thinking and colonial or nation-state agendas. Stahuljak suggests putting texts that had no possibility of contact in dialogue. Rather than isolating our work by labeling it "presentist" when addressing today's issues, the interplay between past, present, and future should be a central preoccupation. Going against the notion of a "global Middle Ages" that would privilege a certain time period across the world, Stahuljak argues that looking at the writings of various cultures at the same chronological moment would not prove fruitful as such comparisons obscure the asynchronous unfoldings of world histories and refusing the opportunity of putting the past into dialogue with the present and future (p. 88).

Stahuljak positions *littérature connectée* as a way to "set up an encounter between the medieval and the contemporary" because "[p]ourquoi serait-il plus logique de faire des choses «transversalement» que «transtemporellement»?" (p. 90). Envisioning a global Middle Ages does not, however, suggest doing things across space rather than across time, nor would it preclude a role for literature in creating the future. Global medieval studies would simply propose that we can better understand our own position as a subject today by studying the past (or present, for that matter), and that the past is incomplete without trying to see the world as an interconnected whole. Global medieval studies acknowledge that there was a diversity of cultures, histories, and stories in the world at the same time. We may not know exactly when or how people interacted, but it is certain that people from different backgrounds did come together, on purpose or by accident, as they traded, traveled, fought, and worshipped. Isolating our study of the medieval past to a particular area in Europe, or any one part of the world, misses the spectrum of possibilities and flattens the past, and there is already so much missing from the medieval historical record. The fact that world cultures and literatures were doing different things during the period from 500CE

to 1500CE does not necessarily imply a comparison of apples and oranges, or an inappropriate juxtaposition of nations at different points in cultural cycles. The focus on *deep* time, we have argued, helps upend the narrative of progress that is all too often centered on the West. While the West tends to see race embedded discretely in linear time, "Time across the globe, by contrast, produces the recognition that modernity itself is a repeating transhistorical phenomenon, with a footprint in different vectors of the world moving at different rates of speed." [4]

Intertwined with global medieval studies, Stahuljak finds, are ahistorical enquiries that privilege contemporary problems. Chief among them are studies about race in the Middle Ages. Stahuljak writes:

Sans même aborder le débat sur la pertinence ou la non-pertinence du terme de «race» pour l'époque médiévale, il est important d'y voir la pulsion généalogique et téléologique par laquelle on voudrait rendre le Moyen Âge moderne et actuel, car il serait indispensable à l'historicité même du contemporain. ... Ces approches cherchent leur raison d'être dans le contemporain, mais ne participent pas à sa création, ni ne proposent aux autres disciplines de nouvelles méthodes ou sujets, à la place, elles leur en empruntent. (p. 44)

For Stahuljak, these studies find their meaning only in so far as they explain something about our present moment. Though she decries being overly concerned about "presentism" elsewhere, here she finds that the appearance of the term race in the 17th century casts some doubt on its appropriate use in discussing medieval contexts (p. 44). While it is true that the term race is not commonly employed in the Middle Ages, basing the study of an idea on the existence of a term is fraught. For one thing, we know that much of the Middle Ages has been lost to us, so any sort of definitive statement that the term race was not used until the modern period is potentially incorrect. In other contexts, the term race was used to talk about breeding animals as early as the 15th century; that it was eventually applied to humans is telling. Even contemporary historians of race look to 15th century Spain's laws concerning the clarity of blood.[5] David Nirenberg summarizes and dismantles anti-medieval race arguments. He adds his own findings about Jews in fifteenth-century Spain, stopping frustratingly short of declaring race to be applicable, saying only that "more work needs to be done." [6] In my own work, I see the exchange between past and present, with the Middle Ages acting exactly as Stahuljak suggests it does, creating the present:

Race theory helps us understand the Middle Ages, but race theory itself could not be developed without the long history that the premodern era offers. The relationships that formed during the colonial period between dominant and dominated are rooted in that long history of questioning the humanness of those who differ from a socially defined norm: physically, culturally, religiously, and so on. [7]

Ideas like race cannot be seen as limited to any one period or place.

Here, the juxtaposition between the American and the French academies would have been telling, since Europeans have long claimed that race is a uniquely modern, American problem and preoccupation that has been unfairly applied to European contexts where race is not a concern. Some scholars have questioned France's claim to a race-blind society for decades.[8] The 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the globe, and particularly in France, definitively

exposed the inaccuracy of that objection. Furthermore, French intellectuals were important to the formation of Black Studies in the US, even if it is only now that these ideas return to France and underscore the systemic racism found there, as well.[9][10] Literature does create the future, and problems like racism are not exempt. As I have stated elsewhere, medieval discussions (and literature) around skin color shaped the racist discourse of the future:

By locating racial or even racist ideas in the very origins of the western Europe, it becomes clear that the scientific racism that developed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in Europe was not an unfortunate, chance development in the history of European civilization. Instead, the concept of racial difference began in the infancy of European civilization. Scientific racism was the inevitable outcome of the centuries of thought that preceded it.[7]

Stahuljak goes on to state her objection to race studies, "In other words, such approaches hold that the contemporary cannot be understood if we do not look to the past—the medieval past—concerning an idea or contemporary problem, like race (p. 44). Yet the problem with this position is precisely that "race" is not uniquely a contemporary problem. In his study of medieval and modern race-thinking, Cord Whitaker notes that "In order to understand the relation between medieval race-thinking and modern racial ideology, one must understand that past and present exert mutual influence on one another." [11] Geraldine Heng explains that the importance of including the Middle Ages in a history of race is not to privilege the present and its preoccupations, but rather because we cannot excuse the atrocities of the past simply because they are temporally removed, "...the refusal of race destigmatizes the impacts and consequences of certain laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period, so that we cannot name them for what they are..." [12]

If the study of race poses a problem for Stahuljak, what other ideas are off-limits? In terms of the "Grand Challenges" that American universities are exploring as ways to connect scholars from different disciplines, should medievalists really demure simply because the word race is not attested, even as virtually every other marker of racial thinking was present from at least the Middle Ages? If we are looking for ways to make our study of literature more relevant to our students and colleagues, why would we eschew this topic in particular?

Finally, in practical terms, what would a course or curriculum in *littérature connectée* look like? How do we put together discontinuous cultural productions and present them in our research and teaching? What tools do we use to do close reading and distant reading at the same time? Is there any one professor who could do all of these things? Without addressing these questions, *littérature connectée* uncovers problems and provides a theoretical solution, but the implementation remains daunting. Perhaps the answer is indeed in the multi-disciplinary teams and "Grand Challenges" that administrations encourage, but medievalists must step up to explain their research to trans-institutional committees that cannot see "ce que le Moyen Âge fait surgir dans le contemporain, ce que le contemporain fait surgir du Moyen Âge" (p. 87). Thinking back to my own institution, can this work be done in language departments, or, realistically, in any language that is not the dominant language of instruction at an institution? How would we need to reconfigure national language and literature departments to facilitate this work among faculty and students alike? Many institutions are trying new approaches in departments combining languages, literatures, and

cultures. Is a doctorate in medieval French literature a priori missing the mark? If so, provided that we are once again given the opportunity, how should we train graduate students to function in multi-disciplinary institutions, knowing that tomorrow's "Grand Challenge" consists of a node in a network of texts that is currently unknowable?

The need for rethinking language and literature instruction is urgent. U.S. colleges and universities cut 651 foreign language programs between 2013 and 2016, with the biggest drops in French, Spanish, German and Italian. French lost 129 programs, followed by Spanish at 118, German at 86 and Italian at 56. Enrollments in French courses declined by nearly 36% and in German by 40% between 1990 and 2016.[13][14] Stahuljak's essay could provide a starting point for curricular redesign. I would like to see this essay in English (and other modern languages) so that it could be widely shared for discussion with other humanities programs in the US and elsewhere. The implications of Stahuljak's argument apply equally to our pre-modern colleagues in other disciplines, including anthropology, history, and global literatures. Many departments are redesigning programs right now to meet the capitalist and neoliberal agendas of their institutions, and a discussion group would be welcome. Finally, perhaps more quickly than Stahuljak even imagined when publishing this, concrete examples of redesigned courses and curricula are the logical next step. We are being asked to rethink the future of humanities, and as Stahuljak convincingly argues, medievalists have an essential role to play.

NOTES

[1] Seth Long and James Baker, "The Elusive Digital / Critical Synthesis," in Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein ed., *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

[2] Arguing with Digital History working group, "Digital History and Argument," Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, white paper, Nov. 2017. <https://rrchnm.org/argument-white-paper/> (accessed June 9, 2021).

[3] nina de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression – In the Library with the Lead Pipe." <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

[4] Geraldine Heng and Lynn Ramey, "Early Globalities, Global Literatures: Introducing a Special Issue on the Global Middle Ages," *Literature Compass* 11/7 (2014): 389–394, p. 341.

[5] George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[6] David Nirenberg, "Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain," in David Nirenberg ed., *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 232-264, p. 161.

- [7] Lynn Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 32.
- [8] Pap N'Diaye, "Questions de couleur. Histoire, idéologie et pratiques du colorisme," in Didier Fassin and Éric Fassin, eds. *De la question sociale à la question raciale ?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), pp. 37–54.
- [9] Associated Press, "Black Scholar: It's Time France Confronts Its Colonial Past | Voice of America - English," Mar. 13, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/black-scholar-its-time-france-confronts-its-colonial-past> (accessed Jun. 09, 2021).
- [10] Guy Sorman, "Black Lives Matter in Paris: An American Movement in France," *France-Amérique*, Sep. 10, 2020. <https://france-amerique.com/en/black-lives-matter-in-paris-an-american-movement-in-france/> (accessed May 31, 2021).
- [11] Cord J. Whitaker, *Black metaphors: how modern racism emerged from medieval race-thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), p. 8.
- [12] Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 23.
- [13] Dennis Looney and Natalia Lusin, "Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report," *Final Report*, p. 92, 2016. <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Research/Surveys-Reports-and-Other-Documents/Teaching-Enrollments-and-Programs/Enrollments-in-Languages-Other-Than-English-in-United-States-Institutions-of-Higher-Education> (accessed May 31, 2021). See Table 1a.
- [14] S. Johnson, "Colleges Lose a 'Stunning' 651 Foreign-Language Programs in 3 Years," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 22, 2019. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-lose-a-stunning-651-foreign-language-programs-in-3-years/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

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