

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

Response by Zrinka Stahuljak, University of California, Los Angeles

I am very grateful to H-France and its editors for organizing this forum on my programmatic and admittedly short book. I am that much more beholden to the attention and generosity of four colleagues, one historian and three literary scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, who have remarkably different intellectual profiles. It is an honor to engage with their diverse perspectives, which, because of the book's brevity, have shed light on the half-said and the implied. It has been particularly gratifying that the reviewers have immediately put *Médiéval contemporain* to work in thinking with it through their research projects and, at other moments, defending their previous positions as part of a robust scholarly debate. What is perhaps the most remarkable, and to which I can only fail to do honor here, is the degree to which each of the reviewers, while selecting different angles and emphases of the book, has echoed, anticipated, and already responded to the questions posed by one or more of the others. In many ways, I will provide less an author's response than a roadmap connecting the threads and highlighting the answers and avenues of research that colleagues have already offered each other and the H-France Forum's readers.

The book was written in France and in French to provide insight into contemporary disciplinary and institutional tensions within the American university and offer perspectives for medieval studies in a globalized world beyond national boundaries. Perhaps it would have spoken more to French than to American academia had it not been for the onset of the pandemic and the racial reckoning in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder that have shaken the US and France in 2020 (the book was finished before these events). In unison, the reviewers recognize that the book comes "à point nommé" (Dittmar) and is "clairvoyant or, at the least, uncannily relevant" (Ramey). In response to these contemporary issues in academia, they also recognize the effort 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" (Galvez). Indeed, *Médiéval contemporain* offers a theoretical framework that can resist both ideological medievalisms and contemporary ideological projects with an approach *between* the medieval *and* the contemporary, rather than *from* the medieval *to* the contemporary. *Médiéval contemporain* embraces the world as a paradigm, replaces the study of singular works and literary genres with (library) clusters and a multi-centered approach, and engages non-linear, non-chronological, asynchronous, asymmetrical, and heterotopic comparison. In line with this, reviewers observe that this method of systemic juxtaposition and comparison is a clear departure from the diachronic method of literary study. They point to this method as a break with the national (and colonial) categories of literary analysis and literary history, and highlight its potential for pluricentric study of early world literatures, to "help us identify medieval voices and modes of thinking that intervene in the present to create new pluralistic, relational worlds" (Galvez).

I greatly appreciated the fact that the reviewers immediately recognized the potential of this short book. “Connected literature” would be the new term to describe literature as a *dispositif*, as a historical actor, where imagination and memory, medieval cognitive modes, become artifacts and events, while at the same time opening our present to itself through these medieval, rather than contemporary, modes.

If the reviewers all agree that this challenge is welcome, they also express that the book’s program and method are demanding and the course yet to be fully charted. It is a Herculean, but feasible, task, implies Dittmar. It is full of promise, expresses Galvez. In her rich analysis and comparison to thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, she offers a powerful and compelling reading of *Médiéval contemporain* alongside Édouard Glissant and Jacques Rancière. Indeed, another term to use instead of “connected literature” (inspired by the “connected history” of Sanjay Subrahmanyam), could have been “literature of relation,” in acknowledgement of the profound influence behind this book, Édouard Glissant’s “poétique de la relation.” *Médiéval contemporain* dialogues with Glissant through plural modes of thinking and it executes Rancière’s anachrony through the concept of anamnesis, inspired by Jean-François Lyotard, and its performance of anamnestic reading. That there were race and homosexuality and Islamophobia and disability before the existence of these words, just as Rabelais was a non-believer, is the point of Jacques Rancière’s piece on “the modes of connection.” In my most recent work, I have added “fixers” to that list of terms, a distinctly late twentieth-century journalistic term, but whose *dispositif* brings out – from medieval written sources – the silent voices of middle figures, the oral histories, and reinscribes the profession of interpreting into the history of translation and literature.[1] While they open us up to new avenues in research, anachrony (the lack of identity of time with itself) and anamnesis (the lack of identity across time) also avert the fallacy of evolutionary logics, against which David Nirenberg has warned repeatedly.[2]

The book’s methodology thus invites the study of race, not as a genealogy of European origins of race, but as a comparative *dispositif*: what was race within different historical and regional contexts, e.g. in Spain versus England versus different parts of Eastern Europe, in the western versus the eastern Mediterranean? Hannah Barker has recently published an integrative comparative history of slavery for the eastern Mediterranean, between Genoa, Venice, and the Mamluk sultanate, showing a common culture of slavery alongside a wide spectrum of races and thus bringing to light the complexity of construction of medieval race: “In the late medieval Mediterranean, racial categories were used inconsistently because different genres constructed them differently... Studies of racism in medieval slavery have generally limited their analysis to black and white rather than engage with this complexity. I argue that the complexity of the medieval framework of race was essential to the medieval framework of slavery.”[3] Aiming at this complexity and central to *Médiéval contemporain* is a non-teleological, non-linear, non-diachronic historical study in order to enable integrative comparison, whether in different parts of the world at the same time or in the same part of the world at different times.

As Dittmar points out, there are other concepts—and terms—for which *Médiéval contemporain* invites the elaboration of *dispositifs* in systemic juxtaposition (asymmetric, asynchronous, and heterotopic), in counterpoint to the scholarship along the continuum of ideas from the medieval to the modern or contemporary: “nation” (“*état-nation*”) and “genre,” both of which have been the

pillars in the construction of genealogies of European literature from the Middle Ages to the present. Doudet also observes the book's effort to think within the time span of the long Middle Ages, a choice I made in order to push back on locating in ever earlier periods the inception and the invention of "modernity," gestures which reinforce the evolutionary and teleological impulses. These categories and terms have a distinctly modern (national and colonial) resonance and their conceptual framework, I have become convinced in the wake of writing *Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation*, creates a veil over our understanding of the past.[4] It is for these reasons that I analyze medieval (European) literature as active, productive of (new) worlds, and that, as Dittmar states, I break with "la tradition barthésienne qui postulait l'intransitivité des lettres."

A short book perhaps leaves more questions than it answers. How might the Herculean task of connected literature be put to work historically, institutionally, disciplinarily, my colleagues have asked?

Historically, Doudet argues, the cognitive efficacy of fiction and the communicational power of rhetoric should be studied with more attention, but I believe this can be done only by breaking from non-medieval categories and dominant analyses especially by modernists like Malraux. Then we may be able to see connected literature of the Middle Ages not as peddling the end of times (eschatology), but as opening up a future. In other words, we have to emancipate ourselves from the ingrained thinking of chronology, historical determinism, and modernity and embrace the non-modern categories and the epistemic and cognitive modes that they help us see. We also have to emancipate ourselves from seeing literature only as representation. Thus, *Médiéval contemporain* is neither a call nor an attempt at network analysis, or digitization, which trace what happened (based on the remaining sources), rather than what could have or will have happened.

Disciplinarily, I am in complete agreement with Doudet's challenge to the term medieval. It is a matter of convenience to address the European public with a well-known term (notwithstanding the publisher's prerogative for title selection). But medieval is not a scalable term: if the addressee is the European public or the public working on the European scale, then medieval can remain a heuristic term. However, in relational contexts, in contexts of the world(s) where the scale exceeds Europe and designates Europe as one of the centers, or as another center's periphery, medieval can hardly be a universal term. Our disciplines and fields will address this once a scholarly consensus emerges on the terminology and the occasions for its use; it may very well be that we agree to use medieval only to refer to the European and closely related contexts, while preferring another term for global use, such as "early."

In the meantime, we can act institutionally. As Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS), a major research center in North America with an almost sixty-year history, I have enacted a global studies approach.[5] We have put together a Graduate Certificate in Global Medieval Studies that innovates the UCLA curriculum.[6] We are in the process of updating our Center's name to signal our inclusive mission and commitment to broad, diverse scholarship, knowledge systems, and audiences. What drives these initiatives is the premise that all areas of the world are equally epistemologically and methodologically productive, including those that have been underrepresented and understudied. We have taken up the challenge of regional world systems, that is of the plurality of early worlds, by creating a collaborative platform

of research axes and providing transdisciplinary training based on exchange of methodologies and epistemologies, rather than principally in the narrative of spatial contiguity and/or temporal continuity.[7] What are methodologically either cognitive dissonances or concordances are epistemologically a range of shared and global phenomena in an unconnected world or weakly connected worlds. In other words, methodology and comparison connect distinct and separate areas of the globe. Connected methodologies and research axes thus enable transspatial (non-contiguous) study but also transperiodic (non-continuous) study of the early worlds. This approach provides the Center with an inclusive and innovative model of combined disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

What unites the five of us in this H-France Forum is the struggle not only to render the connected literature of the time period we study relevant to the present, but in doing so also to reform the foundations of our fields. Whether we study unconnected worlds or weakly connected worlds of the early periods, disciplinary methodologies and our institutional action as scholars of the early worlds are key. And this is where connected literature comes in.

NOTES

[1] Zrinka Stahuljak, *Les Fixeurs au Moyen Âge. Histoire et littérature connectées* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2021), 42-44.

[2] David Nirenberg, “Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of ‘Jewish’ Blood in Late Medieval Spain,” in David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 232-264; David Nirenberg, “Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jews and Christians in Fifteenth-Century Spain,” *Past & Present* 174 (2002): 3-41.

[3] Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 40-41.

[4] Zrinka Stahuljak, *Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[5] <https://cmrs.ucla.edu/archives/program-overview/>

[6] <https://cmrs.ucla.edu/students/graduate-certificate-in-global-medieval-studies/>

[7] <https://cmrs.ucla.edu/research/axes/>

Zrinka Stahuljak
UCLA
zs@humnet.ucla.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum

Volume 16, Issue 4, #5