Book Review Essay

In search of lost elsewheres: Medievalism today

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Nadia R. Altschul. *Politics of Temporalization: Medievalism and Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century South America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 288 pp., $95.00. ISBN: 9780812252279.

Louise D'Arcens. *World Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern Textual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 224 pp., $26.99. ISBN: 9780198825951.

Jonathan Hsy. *Antiracist Medievalisms: From 'Yellow Peril' to Black Lives Matter*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021. 170 pp., $115. ISBN: 9781641893145.

Catherine Karkov, Anna Kłosowska, and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, eds. *Disturbing Times: Medieval Pasts, Reimagined Futures*. Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2020. 384 pp., $24. ISBN: 9781950192755.

The outlines by which the study of medievalism has developed as a discipline are now reasonably clear. On the one hand, the field has

established its separateness from medieval studies; on the other, it has shaken off the sense that it is necessarily secondary, always only a form of reception study. (A new essay collection, forthcoming at the time of writing, will address this second aspect: *Medievalism and Reception*, edited by Ika Willis and Ellie Crookes.) As a nascent discipline, the field began as one that attracted much critical suspicion, went through a phase of exploration, and now boasts its own long-established journal, dedicated publication series, and annual conferences. The appearance of the recent titles considered here, by distinguished and established scholars, underlines this steady progress towards consolidation.

Respectability, of course, always entails a certain loss. Those moments in which a field can maintain its upstart guerrilla status can be the most exhilarating, offering the sense that an older order is being challenged. The challenge for medievalism now—not an easy one—is to hold on to that sense that a radical revision is going on. The revision in this case is, of course, to medieval studies itself. It has been recognised since at least Kathleen Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism* (1998) that the two fields are locked in an uneasy embrace, medievalism the 'despised "other"' (*mon semblable, ma soeur!*) of the older and more formal study.

The study of medievalism began, nevertheless, highly respectably. Many regard Alice Chandler's 1970 work, *A Dream of Order*, as definitive; it is often cited as bringing the study of medievalist impulses into the mainstream. Chandler did not, herself, overtly set out to establish any new discipline. Her work was avowedly more limited in its aims, offering accounts of major figures in the establishment of what she called, in her subtitle, 'The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature.' There was little sense that her book owed much to medieval studies at all, in fact. The subtitle is an odd one: the proposed focus on literature suggests a study that ought to take in such figures as Walter Scott, the William Morris of the early poetry and late romances, Thomas Hardy, and Alfred Tennyson among others. But *A Dream of Order* is far more a work of political than of literary history. Scott is there, and so is Morris (though more the socialist than the poet). So too are Carlyle, Cobbett, and Ruskin. Overall, it was a book about nineteenth-century social and political history—expert, erudite, but unlikely to upset anyone in the medieval studies establishment.

Nevertheless, the book inaugurated the study of medievalism in its early phase. By the end of the decade what was being called *Mittelalter-Rezeption* was the subject of conferences in Germany. The journal *Studies in Medievalism* had been established by Leslie Workman and Kathleen Verduin in the United States. The annual appearance of this journal in subsequent years under a range of editors was for a long time the core of the study of medievalism, as powerful an influence as any in the developing field.

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Hence a phase can be loosely distinguished as one in which canonical writing—mostly by male authors—was reassessed in light of medieval reception. In this regard Scott was obviously central, but examination could go back to the Romantics, and forward to Morris and Tennyson. But the new domain of study was not confined to the literary for long. In the 1980s, the heyday of cultural studies, medievalism too diversified by turning to the neglected, the non-canonical, the subaltern, the popular. In this, it echoed Birmingham-school cultural studies, which reverberated through literary studies departments at the time. If studies of the nineteenth century were dominated by images of shining armour and the chivalric ethos (whether in poetry, prose, painting, music, architecture, or statuary), then late twentieth-century study went to Hollywood, to comic books, theme parks, Disney—and ultimately to a clunky new form called the video game. In ways that were reasonably familiar from both 1980s cultural studies and the legacy of Marxist literary criticism of various kinds, we saw in this phase analyses of class and gender in medievalisms, with an increasing emphasis, deriving from postcolonialism, on medievalism's effects as an imperial export.

Indeed, did we see the object of study, medievalist cultural forms, proliferating even as the field of study tried to grasp it? This might be a question for future work, but it seems to me possible that medievalist culture at large (in a range of forms from the novel and poetry to cinema and high-concept art) has become newly appealing in recent decades. The aforementioned clunky new genre, video games, notably morphed in our current digital era into sleekly sophisticated computer games, now a vast cultural arena in which a medieval aesthetic remains close to the centre. World cinema has, if anything, renewed its love affair with the Middle Ages, as has television drama. And while it once seemed to me that contemporary literature in the Anglophone tradition shied away from the period and its associations with low forms like historical romance, in fact Anglo-American writing has revelled in the Middle Ages in recent times, from the criminally under-noticed *To Calais, in Ordinary Time* by the British writer James Meek (2020) to an extraordinary proliferation of works by women novelists in Britain, Ireland, and the US: Lauren Groff's *Matrix* (2021), Victoria Mackenzie's *For thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain* (2023), Emma Donoghue's *Haven* (2022). Even Siân Hughes's *Pearl* (2023), a first-person narrative set firmly in recent times, is underlain by the presence of the fourteenth-century alliterative poem of the same title.

To some extent this wave of writing is due to the way in which fantasy writing has come into the mainstream in recent years. Reviewers might have been largely puzzled by Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) with its dreamlike Arthurian setting, but the book signalled the relative

ease with which one of the canonical British novelists shifted into a domain previously thought to be restricted to the world of thick volumes with embossed gold lettering on their covers. Most of the recent titles I mention, however, are not particularly indebted to fantasy at all, instead finding new ways of reconciling the demands of realism with fundamentally non-realist medievalist aesthetics.

Arguably then the past quarter century or so could well be paralleled with the 1840s for its explosion of medievalist art and iconography at large. In the 1840s medievalism was a response both high and low to times of political uncertainty. What we are now seeing may be, similarly, a response to disorder through the medieval imaginary. Even the fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* ended with a kind of congress of nations to decide what to do in place of the fantasy of the return of the queen (itself negated by the prospective queen's assassination before she reached the throne). Historical film, literature, and television drama abound at present and in part involve a search in the archives for ways of doing things in the past, while liberal democracies falter and fail all around us. Good times for the study of medievalism, then? Of course.

And yet... The turn to the popular and subaltern has ultimately posed a serious problem to medievalism. Attention to non-canonical culture, so productive in so many ways, has also entailed prodding medievalism's slumbering balrog. At the same time as the medieval imaginary has extended itself through high-art novels and high-concept computer games, it has been just as active in the iconography and actions of the far right, in Anglophone cultures and far beyond. This is proving to be a huge problem, one which in its turn is reverberating back through medieval studies itself. It is a demonstration, if it were needed, that the older, parent discipline and the newer descendant are still inextricably linked. This is the realm of what Andrew B.R. Elliott, in his astute critique *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (2017), calls 'banal medievalism,' which 'resurrect[s] a specific view of the past in the service of a fervent and exclusive nationalism...' (160). Medievalists of all stripes have looked on, horrified, at the hijacking of medieval iconography in the service of repugnant ideologies. Medievalism in this form is usually anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and conversely in favour of 'authentic' identities, the way things were in the Middle Ages when men were men, women were women, and white people were really, indisputably, white. The cross of St George and the English flag were rarely glimpsed before devolution in the United Kingdom under the Blair Labour government in the late 1990s. They are now ubiquitous, from sporting spectacles to far-right rallies. In France, Marine le Pen of the *Front National* is keen to associate her party with Joan of Arc, which makes a change (though not an improvement) from the

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preoccupation of her father and predecessor as leader, Jean-Marie le Pen, with the Merovingian king Clovis (see further on this D'Arcens's book, pp. 38-41). Italy's far-right prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, turns out to be a major Tolkien fan who as a youth activist dressed as a hobbit. And so it goes on.

Hence if the past twenty-five years have been golden for the study of medievalist phenomena, they have also been leaden. Just as medievalism studies started to define itself and become more respectable, at the same time and within a generation, medieval studies was coming under various pressures. Those pressures make themselves felt in medievalism—which in many of its forms actually expresses the worst possible side of medieval studies, via nationalism, racism, and intolerance. The Middle Ages, in our cultures at large, becomes a haven for supremacists and racists in a way that, in the popular view at least, classical Rome or Greece or the Renaissance or the eighteenth century or even the Neolithic do not. In their different ways these periods can, depending on the context, be used as bywords for civilisation and its advancement by leaps and bounds. The Middle Ages, by contrast, never shakes off its tag as a dark age.

After half a century of formal study of medievalism, are we back where we were, then? The culture warriors have infiltrated medievalism, particularly in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and all that has flowed from it. Early moves here were the subject of strikingly forensic analysis by Bruce Holsinger in his *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (2007). There will still be, I hope, room in the future for analysis of, for example, such phenomena as the neomedievalist wave in the novel in recent times (and a related preoccupation in poetry). But in consequence of what I am describing, recent titles, such as those under review here, have a different job to do. They are all aware in their different ways that a major question hanging over the study of medievalism today is that of our role as academics faced with intolerance. Do we police the field, or not? Is it our role to chase down and call out racist medievalisms? We are not all, for example, media analysts with Andrew Elliott's sophistication. What is the role of the humanities scholar more generally here?

One approach is, quite naturally, revisionist, via an attempt to get the truth about the Middle Ages out there. We all know, in the field, about the mischaracterisations of our period. Many of us have tried to correct them. We want to say, when accusations of torture and witch-burnings are flung around, *Please, look to the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and keep the Middle Ages out of it*—though we all know just how little traction such responses seem to get. One approach to the present dilemma, then, is to try to put in circulation views of medieval culture that claim greater accuracy than those mobilised by the far right. Who has not felt the hopelessness

accompanying that moment of taking a breath, pausing a moment, before saying, *Well actually, it wasn't quite like that...*

The corrective approach suffers from one obvious weakness. While we keep learning unexpected things about the Middle Ages, about instances of peaceful co-existence, say, or of hitherto unimagined gender equality, the period can never really serve as the poster child for the kind of equality and tolerance we value today. It was striking, for instance, that when fresh examination of legal records appeared definitively to clear Geoffrey Chaucer of the crime of rape that had hung over him for 150 years, some scholars responded with relief: Chaucer walks free. But the scholars who framed the discussion (see *Chaucer Review* 57.4 [2022], guest edited by Sebastian Sobecki and Euan Roger) made it clear that there was no general absolution here: rape culture remained a serious issue in the late fourteenth-century world in which Chaucer was embedded. The larger problem is—as Jonathan Hsy says in his new book—that there was indeed plenty that was pernicious going on the Middle Ages, and it is impossible and self-defeating to try to reclaim the period as the visionary enlightened time it was not.

R.D. Perry is one thinker who has approached this problem in his essay, 'Hannah Arendt's Middle Ages for the Left' (a contribution to a volume he co-edited, *Thinking of the Medieval: Midcentury Intellectuals and the Middle Ages* [2022]). Perry goes back to what could be taken as the *ur*-scene of medievalist appropriation, among the Nazis. He examines the medieval philosophy lying behind Hannah Arendt's reaction to Nazism. Throughout her career she turns to the Middle Ages to find a better idea of political potential, resisting Nazism's turn to the period to justify rule, instead trying 'to solve those aspects of modernity which gave us Nazism...' (109). Hence for example, when the picture in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* seems bleak and irremediably Hobbesian, Arendt turns to Augustine as a foil to the author of *Leviathan*. 'If Hobbes is one of the founders of modern liberalism and neoliberalism,' Perry writes, 'a system that generates supposedly universal rights from individual interests, then Augustine provides a different model of universalism, one that takes a community of individuals, replete with a variety of differences, as its starting point' (111).

It is however in Arendt's final unfinished work, *The Life of the Mind*, that she is most engaged with the Middle Ages, Perry proposes. There she turns to Augustine but even more crucially, John Duns Scotus, whom Perry sees as the source of Arendt's ideas about the Will as the capacity to start something new, and human freedom as expression of that capacity. Unsurprisingly, in his exploration Perry comes ultimately to contemporary far-right appropriations of the medieval. To label what we see around us in the breakdown of liberal democracy as 'fascist' or 'Nazi' can be a

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misdirection—at worst, it is obscurely (and falsely) comforting to think that such challenges might be seen off, as we already know them to have been in the past. Perry notes that the recent response to such appropriations 'meets the claim head on, corrects the misunderstanding, and explains the Middle Ages as something more in line with a progressive vision of modernity' (127). Often this approach works with the assumption that the Middle Ages was a time like our own. Arendt, by contrast, takes an approach showing that the Middle Ages 'can serve as a storehouse of alternatives to the problems of modernity, and so we do well to recognize that the medieval world is not our own, and we might even find hope in that fact' (127).

In this larger context Arc Humanities Press, sitting outside the mainstream scholarly publishers in the UK, has been building itself a reputation in the field of medievalism in the past few years. Many of its books, in attractively colourful covers, are short and correspondingly punchy. Some, like Jonathan Hsy's *Antiracist Medievalisms*, are available freely online.

Hsy's starting point in this book is a further problem in addition to what I have outlined above, namely, the 'pervasive feeling of racial exile' experienced by scholars of colour in the field of medieval studies. It is not enough, Hsy goes on, simply to denounce contemporary abuses of the medieval past for political purposes; 'the overwhelming whiteness of our own institutions and professional structures,' remains in place, he notes, 'quietly continu[ing] to exclude, alienate, and harm people of colour' (7). Denouncing extremists who mobilise the Middle Ages in support of their own ideology is insufficient and 'can create a falsely reassuring sense of progressive collective identity that leaves longstanding racial power structures unchanged' (7).

So what to do? Hsy's polemical purpose is 'not merely to make medieval studies more "inclusive" by incorporating more people of color into existing frameworks of study but rather to ask how the whole field transforms once people of color drive the conversations' (18). He outlines three key ideas, suggesting first that 'academic medievalists who oppose racism must move beyond merely critiquing the most spectacularly violent forms of white medievalism and avoid casting the European Middle Ages themselves as somehow in need of defending' (17). In turn, 'academics must value rich forms of medievalism practiced by and for people of color' (17). Thirdly, 'medievalism by and for communities of color helps to tell a fuller story of multiracial solidarity and social justice activism from the late nineteenth century to today' (18).

In practice what this entails in Hsy's book is an archaeology of medievalisms, chiefly American, across chapters neatly lined up according to six categories: Progress, Plague, Place, Passing, Play, and Pilgrimage. In

the first of these, 'Progress: Racial Belonging, Medieval Masculinities, and the Ethnic Minority *Bildungsroman*,' Hsy looks at repurposings of the masculine *Bildungsroman* in the work of the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the Chinese American journalist and public speaker Wong Chin Foo (1847-1898), and Arab American author Ameen Rihani (1876-1940). In the second, 'Plague: Toxic Chivalry, Chinatown Crusades, and Chinese/Jewish Solidarities,' the book turns to the 'Yellow Peril,' the specifically anti-Chinese racism which broke out in the US after instances of bubonic plague in the early twentieth century. Wong Chin Foo, who critiqued it, is again discussed but the chapter explores more fully the extraordinary career of Sui Sin Far (1865-1914). This author was born Edith Maude Eaton in Macclesfield, Cheshire, to a white English father and a Chinese mother, and subsequently lived in Montreal, then Kingston, Jamaica and various cities in the US before resettling in Montreal. At different times she wrote as a Chinese man, Wing Sing, before becoming best known as Sui Sin Far, author of short stories set in Chinatown which 'use medievalizing imagery and narrative structures to respond to classed and gendered norms constructing Chinese as unfit for citizenship' (56).

Chapter 3, 'Place: Indefinite Detention and Forms of Resistance in Angel Island Poetry,' unearths an archive of a very different kind in the hundreds of lyrics carved into walls of Angel Island Immigration station in San Francisco Bay. Here, Chinese migrants were detained; many carved poems on the walls, using medieval lyric forms (as Hsy explains) made conventional in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). The story of how the poems were preserved is on its own fascinating (and well supported by the author's own photos, also seen elsewhere in the book). Hsy's specific interest is in how these medieval lyric forms 'suggest just one localized collective strategy of resistance to racist exclusion and repeating systems of incarceration' (78).

In Chapter 4, 'Passing: Crossing Color Lines in the Short Fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Sui Sin Far,' Dunbar-Nelson comes into view, 'the first woman of color to publish short stories' (80). Her works were set chiefly in New Orleans and dealt with the indeterminate and fluid category of the Creole. Hsy picks out three of these in order to explore, via their medieval imagery and particularly their depictions of the Virgin Mary, the ways in which her fiction 'implicates institutionalized religion as a social and legal mechanism of control that is complicit in victimizing mixed-race women...' But, he concludes, 'some of these texts invert Marian tropes by means of happy outcomes' (85). He goes on to explore Dunbar-Nelson's use of Joan of Arc who (long before Marine le Pen's egregious co-optation) becomes a positive, resistive figure of the new woman. The remainder of the chapter, returning to Sui Sin Far, looks at

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the biracial author's fiction set in Jamaica, and elaborates Hsy's key idea (borrowed from Jose Esteban Muñoz) of disidentification, by which 'the author creates literary and theatrical space for new kinds of interracial 'yellow' solidarity between women' (88). Hsy considers Sui Sin Far's 'yellow medievalism' as 'recuperative,' and 'a social corrective to the era's stigmatizing anti-Asian discourses of "Yellow Peril"...' (89).

In two closing chapters Hsy turns to material that will be more familiar to those schooled in medieval English literature, first exploring translations of medieval poetry by which they are transposed into multiracial literary traditions, beginning with the work of the late Carter Revard, a Native American poet and writer who was also a medievalist. Those who follow Hsy's work with Candace Barrington on the extraordinary dissemination of Chaucer globally (see https://globalchaucers.com/) will recognise the subject of the final chapter, in which Nigerian-British poet Patience Agbabi and her celebrated *Telling Tales* is only the best known of some of the work that is going on in transforming the *Canterbury Tales* for modernity.

The study of medievalism, born out of critique, has usually been far from celebratory. It is difficult to take much joy from such aristocratic goings-on as the nineteenth-century Eglinton Tournament, while the prescriptions for a better life by such figures as Kenelm Henry Digby (c. 1797–1880), who devoted his life to medieval romance and chivalry as a code of conduct for modern men and women, today seem merely mad. Yet if we dig a little for the neglected, the subaltern—as Jonathan Hsy does—it is indeed possible to find what I have elsewhere called 'liberatory medievalisms' (Matthews 2015, 113) and which Hsy calls the strategy of disidentification 'with a medieval past [which] can work to transform existing norms in order to create new worlds...' (4). I do wonder if there is a related risk, nevertheless, in steering away from the pernicious and banal medievalisms. The world of medievalism, no more than the medieval world, is not free of either; Hsy's generally celebratory approach could perhaps have been strengthened by wider acknowledgement of this.

Dealing with related problems but somewhat sterner in their approach are the essays in the co-edited volume *Disturbing Times: Medieval Pasts, Reimagined Futures*. This book emerged out of a Leeds panel session and like Hsy's volume eschews traditional publishing; it can be found freely online via Punctum Books. The introduction by the editors Catherine E. Karkov, Anna Kłosowska and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei opens with the problem of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' and goes on to explain that the initial impetus for the collection came out of a panel at the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2015 and the furore over a racist joke used to introduce a speaker there. It is uncompromising, focusing on some

of the less palatable aspects of our discipline before proposing that the collection 'is a disturbance.' They continue:

> It participates in the current movement whose aim is to break up the tranquillity, the settled condition that has been accepted as Medieval Studies for far too long—the settled condition that led to so many of our colleagues tolerating a racist joke or feeling that the appropriation of medieval symbols and the violence instigated by supremacists in Charlottesville or Ayodhya are not their concerns. (20, 21)

The collection of essays that then follows is distant from the usual fare. To begin with, it is by no means solely focused on the western European Middle Ages which constitutes the centre of gravity of, for example, the Leeds congress. The opening essay goes into problems in the field of Nubiology. Another essay, 'Twenty-Five Years of "Anglo-Saxon Studies": Looking Back, Looking Forward,' is collectively authored by Catherine A. M. Clarke with Adam Miyashiro, Megan Cavell, Daniel Thomas, Stewart Brookes, Diane Watt, and Jennifer Neville, this time reflecting a Leeds panel in 2018 which looked back over the quarter century of the Congress to discern trends in early medieval studies (covering among other things digital humanities, the animal turn, and fascist appropriation of early medieval symbols). The essay is a retrospective, then, but strangely prophetic also. Clarke prefaces it with an account of a fast-moving scene as, barely a year after the original panel was held, the International Society for Anglo-Saxonists voted to change its name and is now the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England. This transition looms large, indeed, over the collection; for the editors in their introduction, it is completely clear that 'Anglo-Saxon' must go.

Other contributions in *Disturbing Times* read less like reports from the controversial borders of medieval studies. But even what might look like more conventional forms of critique in the mode of medievalism as we have come to understand it speak to the state-of-the-times character of the book. Josh Davies, for example, forensically traces the trauma of the American Civil War as it persists in what he calls, via the title of his essay, 'Confederate Gothic.' He opens with analysis of the Lee Chapel (dedicated to the memory of Robert E. Lee) on the campus of Washington and Lee University and concludes that 'Medievalist aesthetics was a means of generating an imprecise sense of historicity. A diversion tactic. Confederate Gothic was a means of not thinking about history' (269).

Overall, the essays of *Disturbing Times* bear the mark of their moment —those years when in-person conferences disappeared for a while, never to be quite the same again. Disturbing times, indeed. The editors and contributors want to harness some of the energy that came out of online

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discussions in that period and, as it were, take some positives from the time of plague.

Louise D'Arcens, author of *Comic Medievalism* (2014) and editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (2016) now broadens her focus in *World Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern Textual Culture*. This volume could be seen as situated in more conventional publishing terms, as a volume in the Oxford Textual Perspectives series. But like the editors of *Disturbing Times* D'Arcens is fully aware of the 'remarkable ongoing transformation in the related fields of medieval studies and medievalism studies of recent times, with accelerated self-examination by medievalists of the racist, colonialist, and ethnocentric legacies we have inherited...' (ix). Her book certainly emerges from a set of concerns shared with others under review here and is aware of the rise of the far-right instrumentalization of the Middle Ages. We could see this as an 'aberrant' use of the period, but D'Arcens is not about to let medieval studies off the hook: there is a 'longer tradition of institutional practices' in the study of the period which we need to acknowledge. She is very clear on the question of whether to police or not. We do not need to 'take responsibility for every rogue uptake of the period for malignant ends,' she says, 'but we have a collective duty to acknowledge the legacy we have inherited from our discipline's historical relationship to ideologies that have underpinned forms of social exclusions' (ix).

This is very crisply put—and all of it on the first page of the preface. From there, in her introduction, D'Arcens works her way into her topic in deceptively simple style, via the appearance of a land far in the south, on the edge of a map in one of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* books. This offers her a way in, via fantasy, to the globalist turn in current medieval studies, which she regards as inseparable from current medievalism. A little like Hsy (whose *Antiracist Medievalisms* is mentioned in *World Medievalism*), D'Arcens believes that 'medievalism's historical implication within nationalist, racist, and colonialist projects' must be kept in mind (14), but that its innately malleable character means that this legacy can be challenged and displaced, in order to analyse 'the fullness of [medievalism's] complexity' (15). The book concentrates on a handful of medievalist instances from the past twenty years which themselves reflect the global turn or—to use the term D'Arcens prefers—world medievalism. The book itself is therefore tightly focused, through four chapters which begin with literature and head towards historical understanding more broadly before arriving, in the last chapter, at the Australian film *Ten Canoes*.

Apart from the fact that they draw on entirely different archives, where D'Arcens's approach differs from Hsy's in that she works both banks of the river, attending to both reactionary and liberatory medievalisms. The

first chapter, on recent French novels, begins therefore with the ultra-conservative Éric Zemmour, who when not spreading hate on the airwaves or running unsuccessfully for president, writes novels including *Mélancolie française* (2010) and *Le Suicide français* (2014). These works extend the fascination of the French far right with the medieval past and use the period as an explanation for the melancholy state of present-day, post-imperial France. By way of corrective, the Prix-Goncourt-winning novel *Sermon on the Fall of Rome* by Jérôme Ferrari interweaves the story of a modern Corsican family with the sermons given by Augustine in the wake of the fall of Rome. Ferrari's analysis of the modern French malaise replaces Zemmour's diagnosis of *mélancolie française* with what D'Arcens calls *traumatisme français*, which in this case is concerned less with the trauma of victims (the classic subject matter of trauma studies) than with the trauma of the perpetrators of violence.

Better known to anglophone readers will be another writer analysed in this chapter, Michel Houellebecq—who rarely appears without the adjective 'controversial' prefixed. His 2015 novel *Soumission* looks back to the Catholic Middle Ages but takes place in a near-future France where Islam is in the ascendant; despite its 'sometimes infuriatingly ambiguous satire' D'Arcens finds the novel to be 'more elusive in its allegiances' than Zemmour's work. Houellebecq has been lumped with far-right writers by some, but she finds him more ambiguous, his main character and narrator 'a satiric literalization' rather than a straight rendering of far-right clichés. This chapter ends up with perhaps the most cerebral French novelist at work today, Mathias Enard, and his novel *Compass*, a challenging but beguiling meditation on French connections with the Middle East through the figure of an ailing neurotic narrator looking back over his career in orientalism, thinking through such past events as the Crusades and coming to a kind of hope rather than the nostalgia beloved of far-right adventures in the medieval past.

If Enard's novel offers the kind of liberatory medievalism that Hsy is interested in, D'Arcens still has a major role for critique and the sceptical analysis of reactionary culture. She is unafraid to call out the more pernicious medievalisms (of such a writer as Zemmour) but brings subtlety to the case of the more ambiguous Houellebecq. Her understanding of literary sources is then extended further in the second chapter, on the Islam Quintet of Tariq Ali, a set of novels by a figure probably better known in the UK as a political activist, commenter on Israel and Palestine, and author of *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* (2002).

World Medievalism then takes a turn towards its author's own location as a scholar in Australia: in the Asia-Pacific region but economically part of the Global North. Many will remember the discovery, on the Indonesian island of Flores in 2003, of the diminutive hominin now

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known as *Homo floresiensis* but from the beginning dubbed 'the hobbit' (just as the Peter Jackson film trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, was being completed). How did this scientific discovery become intricated with medievalist fantasy? What is at stake? Here D'Arcens thoughtfully explores Tolkien's original books as involving multispecies occupation of the same territory while tracing the trajectories of what could have been—but was not—a debate over human origins restricted to narrow scientific circles. Ultimately the typical presentation of the medieval past as white, male, and European overwrote the setting of this discovery in the Asia-Pacific region, while visual depictions of the 'hobbit' tend to forget that the original exemplar of *Homo floresiensis* found in 2003 was in fact female.

Remaining in Australia for the final chapter, D'Arcens explores one of the boldest Australian films of recent times, the coproduction by the non-Aboriginal director Rolf de Heer with Peter Djigirr and the Yolŋu people of North Queensland. While the film with its dual time scheme introduces a pre-colonial past 'a thousand years ago,' it does not thereby, D'Arcens argues, fall into a standard medievalisation of Aboriginal time—which might then be yet another colonisation. Rather, the film's narrative displaces 'European and non-European ideas of time and the distant past' (33).

These are four chapters, then, which range extremely widely even within the self-imposed limits of the past twenty years. Staying for the most part well away from the kind of popular culture which has tended to dominate recent discussion, D'Arcens persuasively traces medievalism where we would not necessarily look for it. The nature of Hsy's book is to pursue what he calls 'disidentification' and the creation of new worlds. D'Arcens sets herself a slightly different task. As with the contributors to *Disturbing Times*, for D'Arcens critique and the calling out of the more exploitative corners of medievalism remain a paramount task. Yet there are also, as in *Antiracist Medievalisms*, more hopeful forms of medievalism. Both *Ten Canoes*—a 'remarkable cross-cultural achievement' (169) —and *Compass* can be held up as models of the kind of deployment of medievalism which, if not entirely unproblematic, points us to a better place.

As D'Arcens's final two chapters remind us, we are used to pursuing the medievalism of places that did not have a Middle Ages in anything like a conventional (i.e. Eurocentric) sense. This means that we deal with the importation of a sense of the Middle Ages to distant parts of the globe through British colonialism, which complicates such attempts as that in *Ten Canoes* to reclaim indigenous understandings through a medievalist framework. While this problem is increasingly well charted in scholarship (not least through the work of Louise D'Arcens herself), the *ur*-scene of such colonial imposition lies elsewhere, in Ibero-America. The central

scholarly figure in these discussions over several years has been Nadia Altschul, who has deeply influenced our sense of the politics of periodisation (sometimes with an influential co-author and co-editor, Kathleen Davis).

Altschul's most recent book, *Politics of Temporalization: Medievalism and Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century South America*, begins with the contention of some historians that Spain's conquest of Ibero-America was essentially a medieval endeavour, as Spain had not yet emerged from its Middle Ages when colonialism began. A 'living Spanish Middle Ages,' therefore, is seen as having 'found its last expression in the colonies' (2). Altschul develops a sophisticated response to this position in her introduction, through consideration of (in particular) Johannes Fabian's ideas about the denial of coevalness (in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* [1983]) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). The perception of the medieval character of a culture is not a verifiable fact of periodisation, but a weapon: 'any supposedly medieval practices are medieval only through our temporalizing of these elements as belonging to the medieval past' (8). This brings Altschul, inevitably, to similar kinds of problems raised by the other books discussed here (and invoking Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* [2018]): the way in which the political right in the West selectively decrees the contemporaneity of the medieval and the accompanying fashion in which 'western fundamentalism buttresses a pure and white Middle Ages in much of the industrialized world' (12). It has been a consistent theme of Altschul's for some time—here expressed particularly incisively—that 'The Middle Ages is not a global historical time but a local European time span.' This clearly implies that 'The globalization of "the medieval" is not an example of full coevalness but is making the world conform to a Eurocentric perspective' (13). As she goes on to say, this extension of the Middle Ages to everywhere else 'unwitting giv[es] weight to Europe as a connecting core' (13).

The only thing I would add to this analysis is that in many cases, it is not in fact unwitting at all. When the West sees its mission as the rollout of its culture to the rest, it is often the case that its past comes as part of the package. Altschul objects to this 'all-engulfing global modernity that precludes the possibility of real alternatives, of lost *elsewheres* and further outsides to capitalist globality' (14). The book that follows is substantial: eight chapters looking at figurations of the medieval and oriental (via 'Moorishness') across Chilean, Argentinian, and Brazilian culture, chiefly in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts.

In a short coda to this book, Altschul cogently summarises in a few paragraphs the general trajectory of medievalism studies since the

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foundational early work of the journal *Studies in Medievalism* and looks at the school of thought that suggests that neoliberalism's destination is in a neofeudal, new Middle Ages. When the Global North looks at the Global South it is seeing not its past, but its future, the place where 'the ravages of unbridled neoliberalism' are taking us (180). I recommend the coda as salutary reading for (among others) anyone coming to the study of medievalism for the first time. I dwell on the framing devices of this book rather than its argumentative substance because of my own insufficiencies in dealing with most of the Hispanic and Lusophone primary material. Altschul is of course right in this book to point to the dominance of Anglophone culture and scholars in the study of medievalism. (In its early phases such scholars were rivalled by German counterparts, but that strand seems to have waned in recent years.) *Politics of Temporalization* is a major corrective to this trend, not simply in that it takes us elsewhere, but in that it brings us to one of the vital test-cases in the imposition of medievalness via Iberian colonisation.

Are medieval studies and its descendant, medievalism studies, more culpable than other fields, then, when it comes to racism and colonialism? The implication of Jonathan Hsy's study is that contemporary medieval studies still has much to do. On the evidence of the works surveyed here, the medieval period clearly does throw up problems that other periods do not. When the far-right looks for iconography from the past it routinely goes to the Middle Ages and not, say, the eighteenth century or the Victorians. The Middle Ages seems to be a one-stop shop for right-wing nostalgics, whether it's Zemmour's Middle Ages as the source of cultural melancholy or the Le Pens' appeal to medieval martial superiority. In turn, medieval studies as we know it is chiefly a European creation, and Europe is chiefly a creation of the Middle Ages. How medievalists fight back remains open to question, but these books go a long way towards some of the possible answers.

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