Gillian R. Overing / Ulrike Wiethaus (eds.)

American/Medieval Goes North

Earth and Water in Transit

With 9 figures

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Acknowledgments

As ever, our authors have both our gratitude and admiration. Their willingness to think and work with us throughout the many stages of this book, and their creative embrace of the A/M project have been a source of inspiration. We thank Roni Horn for her generous permission to reproduce her work, and for the work itself – another important and inspirational part of our imagining the Northern progression of the American/Medieval.

The Wake Forest University Humanities Institute with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities has supported this second volume as it did our first volume, The American/Medieval: Nature and Mind in Cultural Transfer. We thank the Humanities Institute and the Institute Director Dean Franco. We are also grateful to the Office of the Dean at Wake Forest University for the continuing affirmation of collaborative and interdisciplinary work in the Humanities, as well as providing us with much needed material support.

Our gratitude extends to the participants and audience members of a conference session on chapters in progress of Volume Two. The session was organized by our contributor Gale Sigal for the 57th Annual Conference of the Southeastern Medieval Association, which met at the University of the Bahamas in November, 2018. The conference theme, Diaspora: Identity, Migration, and Return highlighted colonial expansion and its impact, and thus proved to be an important platform for deepening our A/M work on the North. We also owe a debt to the organizers of the IONA conference (Early Medieval Studies on the Islands of the North Atlantic) which met in Vancouver, April 2019, and to its participants. The conference aimed to explore and produce transformative networks, skills, theories, and methods for the future of the field of early medieval studies. Our conversations and interactions with this diverse and committed group of medievalists have already prompted us to think about a third volume of the American/Medieval.

Jeff Nichols has once again worked his magic as the IT specialist of the Department for the Study of Religions. Ann Marie Noell has offered important editorial support in the final stages of preparing the manuscript. We have en-
joyed working with the knowledgeable and efficient editorial team at Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, especially Susanne Köhler, who has shepherded Volume One and parts of the Volume Two process. Thank you all!
Gillian R. Overing and Ulrike Wiethaus

Introduction: American/Medieval Points North

An Emergent Project

“A/M is an emergent project precisely because the A/M complex is alive, breathing, usable, marketable, relevant, and has tremendous power to signify exuberance, fear and grief, and to evoke a sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ as Euro-Americans – for better or worse.”¹ This is the way we described the American/Medieval in our first project, and we believe more than ever in its vitality. It has always been a project about transit, and this second volume is predicated even more deeply on this premise. One element that has not changed, however, is the challenge of definition; we still envisage the American/Medieval as following the eddying currents that flow between two unstable markers: American and Medieval. We still retain the glyph – (/) or the slash- which allows us some un-grammatical leeway as we claim our key themes as both adjectives and nouns. The glyph or slash recognizes and highlights the flux of the relationship between these markers as well as the instability of the markers themselves. The two terms might be apposite, opposite, intersectional, divergent, yet always emergent.

Since the publication of Volume I, our own work and that of our contributors has moved and changed. And as we as scholars are in transit, it becomes ever more urgent to consider that our earth, too, is undergoing even vaster changes. For this reason, the stakes of the American/Medieval and what it might address and reveal are higher than before. Should there be any doubt left, our capitalist settler state project has been stripped of its pretenses in unprecedented fashion under the Trump administration, revealing the devastating ecological impact of neo-liberalism at its worst. New findings about climate change, excruciatingly sped up in the North for human and other than human species alike, are indisputable and increasingly dire. The current ideological rhetoric of “fake news”

begs the question of knowledge production and mythopoetic discourse as different currencies of truth and untruth. The US elections of 2016, straddling the completion of American/Medieval volume I and the first stirrings of our work on American/Medieval volume II, generated a watershed where we perceived that earth and water entered an unpredictable and dangerous transit.

Since November of 2016, human communities find themselves in increasingly dangerous transit too. As modelled by the current US government, global border passages become ever more drenched in cruelty, racism, and xenophobia. Yet at the same time, alongside these hard political facts, we are also witnessing in the work of our volume’s authors the tracing of A/M currents of life-giving beauty: the medieval has never not been a place to find new life and deeper life.

This volume thus retains some of the categories of analysis that we previously employed, Old Trauma, New Archives, and Creatures on the Move, but these too, as we outline below, have undergone revision and expansion in the new work assembled here. We reconfigure the three original themes in tune with this volume’s increased focus on eco-humanities and environmental questions in hemispheric/circumpolar/arctic contexts and environments, and with a particular emphasis on early medieval and Northern signifiers.²

Why the North? The title of this introduction points to the north and from the north, and takes the north as a key coordinate for the terms of passage of the second iteration of A/M. The North signifies, as do all four cardinal directions, simultaneously emotional, environmental, and cultural bodies of knowledge. These include political structures (“the wealthy North”), artistic productions (“Scandinavian” design), and finely-tuned Indigenous economies. “Indigeneity” and colonial “Whiteness” operate as Northern signifiers par excellence and entail the millennium old currents of religious and spiritual practices linking Indigenous peoples and Christian missionaries. Western archeologists and Indigenous oral historians agree that long before Columbus, it was northern seafarers from Scandinavia (“Vikings”) and their enslaved Irish thralls who made first contact with “America” in its northernmost regions. The North thus sig-

nifies the beginning of transatlantic contact and exchange fueled by European slave economies, the beginning of the attempted conquest of Indigenous peoples in the “Americas”, and the beginning of a long history of Indigenous resistance.\(^3\)

The failure of Norse trade-oriented settlements due to an incapacity for adapting and living with rather than against earth and water signal a dead end of the settler project, but also present an opportunity to revisit the North in ever moving historical and geographical transit. In both medieval and contemporary contexts, the North traffics as an unsettling and unsettled signifier, and never more so than in the context of climate change, then and now.\(^4\) The concept of earth in transit is overwhelmingly imaged in terms that are verging on our incomprehension. National Geographic may report that NASA data shows that between 2002 and 2016, Kallaalit Nunaat (Greenland) lost approximately 280 billion tons of ice per year, and offers us a way to process that information: this average annual ice melt is “enough to cover the entire states of Florida and New York hip deep in meltwater, as well as drowning Washington, D.C. and one or two other small states.”\(^5\)

Earth becomes water. Earth and water entangle in transit.

Why earth and water and not fire and air? Writing as European immigrants, we seek to expand the parameters and foundations of how we think and speak through the medieval, of how we experience and enact its manifold mutations in the US. Waterways were the original and most ancient transit between and across the cultural and geographical divides of Europe and the “Americas.” The element of earth has become the signifier for our contemporary state of environmentally destructive behaviors, but is also relevant in terms of the role islands have played in earliest waterways: Iceland, the Orkneys, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland.

We have not restricted our contributors to just the themes of earth and water, however. We have encouraged them to engage with the two themes of transit and the destructiveness of the Anthropocene broadly and creatively, encompassing

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themes of craft and aesthetics, indigeneity, white nationalism and racism, and
the forces of migration/immigration. Many of our previous A/M authors have
chosen to contribute again, and are joined by several new ones. Volume II in-
cludes both early career and senior scholars. The essays represent a rich mix of
disciplines: literature, history, art history, film studies, rhetoric, religious
studies, and cultural studies. As with our first volume, our consistent aim is to
find ways of talking across disciplines and periods differently, and inclusively,
and to continue to clear a distinctive space for the A/M project as different from
the still dominant paradigm of medievalism. To that end, the A/M project creates
opportunities for new modes of writing and collaboration. It comprises a mix of
longer and shorter pieces which include some creative critical writing and
personal narrative.

Overview of Chapters and Sections

There are many routes to and from the north, and just as many ideas of how to get
there and how to leave the north. Part One, titled *Earth and Water in Transit,*
introduces three concepts of passage which combine our focus on environment
(water, the other than human, the volcanic earth) with both meditation on and
analysis of the artistic and ideological reach of A/M northern passages.

“‘Her, the Water, and Me’: Three Women Go North” by Clare A. Lees and
Gillian R. Overing offers a multi-disciplinary dialogue about modern and me-
dieval ways of knowing and understanding water as place and process – as source
and resource – and in so doing, explores and unsettles habitual disciplinary
associations of place with specific times, identities and genders. Structured as a
creative critical conversation between the authors, the article brings together
medieval and modern ideas about water, women and the monstrous in art,
popular culture, poetry and learned texts to demonstrate how the subject of
water connects different times, places and media. Beginning in modern Iceland,
the essay moves through Icelandic and early medieval British tales of the watery,
the fishy and the female, while exploring the work of contemporary American
artist, Roni Horn. Horn is the first of the three women to “Go North,” although
Lees and Overing point out all three follow in the footsteps of many other women
who have done so. Horn is a New York-based artist with major exhibits in Europe
(Tate Modern, Kolunga Kunstmuseum) and the US (Guggenheim, Whitney). Her
work both translates and mediates “Old” and “New” world themes, spans almost
four decades and encompasses sculpture, drawing, photography, language (such
as her visual dialogues with Hélène Cixous), and site-specific installations (such
as the Library of Water in Stykkishólmur, Iceland). Horn is known for her work
on place, identity and Iceland, and Lees and Overing use this work in their essay
as both catalyst and focus for their examination of the American/Medieval crisscrossing of temporali ties, cultures and places.

Elly R. Truitt introduces creatureliness to the two-way passage north by delineating the long historical track of the other than human through its intersections with human migration, Indigenous displacement, and the present threat of climate change. Truitt’s essay “‘And of all these things the Polar Bear was the symbol’: Charisma, Wilderness, and Whiteness” examines the figure of the polar bear in medieval and contemporary culture, drawing the links between the great northern bear and Arctic and subarctic peoples, and the importance of the polar bear in symbolizing “northerness” for millennia. Truitt reminds us that Ursa major, or the “Great Bear,” is almost always visible in the northern hemisphere, and acts as a pointer to Polaris, the northern pole star, thus making it “emblematic of the northern sky”. The far north was also known to be the home of other great bears, the polar bears that could fight a walrus, or a human, and win. In the medieval period, these northern bears were “symbols and trophies – of adventure, danger, and inhospitable wilderness”. Later, in the early modern period, they appeared as scientific objects in the natural history collections and the Wunderkammern of the wealthy and scientific elites. Truitt points out that such trophies were often placed alongside artifacts and specimens of those peoples, like the Inuit and the Sámi, who have inhabited the far northern climes for many thousands of years. Later Anglo-American writers and explorers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century “promulgated the notion of the far north as a wilderness unspoiled and untouched by human existence,” a wilderness to be both worshipped and conquered. The military and international mining corporations never lagged far behind.

This history, Truitt argues, constructs an imaginary where it is the polar bear, a solitary creature that ranges over huge swaths of icy terrain, but not the vastly more expansive Indigenous homelands that becomes the charismatic icon most identified with the far north. By the 1990s, when global warming presented a clear threat to many species, the polar bear – its habitat threatened by the fast-rising temperatures of the Arctic – became the symbol of the cost of a warming atmosphere and rising seas. The polar bear imaginary thus displaces a history of colonial-military-corporate conquest of the hundreds of thousands of In-

6 As an example of the colonialist glorification of explorer “heroes,” see Jean Malaurie, The Last Kings of Thule: With the Polar Eskimos, As They Face Their Destiny. Translated from the French by Adrienne Foulke (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Indigenous people whose lives, cultures, homes, and livelihoods are threatened disproportionately as sea ice disappears and the permafrost thaws.  

Mathias Nordvig’s essay “Katla the Volcanic Witch: A Medieval Icelandic Recipe for Survival” returns the reader to Iceland to consider shifts and alignments both literal, in terms of volcanoes, and metaphorical, in terms of a comparative ethnographic perspective on Indigenous perspectives on place. The essay considers the conceptual approach of medieval settlers to their new environment in Iceland, populated by Scandinavians and their enslaved servants in the period 870–930 AD. These new settlers were familiar with a sometimes harsh climate of the Scandinavian peninsula, but experienced it in intensified form in subarctic Iceland, and its new feature, volcanically active underground, which needed to be conceptualized and incorporated in the Icelandic worldview.

Nordvig applies American Indian and Indigenous Studies perspectives on story, oral history, and environment to the Icelandic narratives about volcanic eruptions, specifically focusing on analysis of the folktale about the witch Katla. According to local lore, she is responsible for the so-called Kötulhlaup, glacial bursts that originate from Mýrdalsjökull, the glacier in southern Iceland covering the volcano Katla. He argues that this folktale is an example of Indigenous Icelandic epistemology that can be traced back to the settlement era, and has its roots in similar cognitive processes as those applied by American Indian cultures to think through human-environmental relations. Although the folktale about the witch Katla is recorded late, in the mid-19th century, there is convincing reason to assume that it has a long history in Iceland and, as Nordvig’s essay demonstrates, is shaped by the same complex of settler Icelandic perception of environment, volcanoes in particular, that was formulated in the early medieval period and Viking Age.

Part Two, First Peoples, segues from Nordvig’s application of Indigenous methodologies into a study of Indigenous-European contact zones and colonial and post-colonial archives. Pamela Berger and Wayne Newell’s essay, “Through the Eyes of an Irish Slave: An Unconventional Point of Entry into the Medieval World” analyzes three cultural perspectives that ground the feature film, Killian’s Chronicle, directed by Pamela Berger and premiered in 1994. Killian’s Chronicle creatively imagines some of the possible dynamics of first contact between Europeans and First Peoples on the East Coast. Scholars agree that in the tenth century, those called Scotti in the Icelandic Sagas could have originated in any part of the western Celtic world, including Ireland. No new evidence has been found to contradict the possibility that, as the Sagas tell us, the first recorded Europeans to set foot on the shores of North America were two Irish thralls. The

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8 On the impact of colonialist racism in the North, see John Steckley, White Lies about the Inuit. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
second part of Berger and Newell’s essay focuses on the contemporary experience of the Wabenaki (People of the First Light), whose ancestors would have interacted with the Norse and their enslaved entourage. The Pequot and Passamaquoddy elders who ensured the Indigenous cultural authenticity of Killian’s Chronicle have continued their cultural research and educational outreach beyond the film, thus placing it in a larger Indigenous framework of cultural and historical reclamation. Through the efforts of Wayne Newell and other tribal elders, the Passamaquoddy celebrate an extensive cultural, spiritual, and political renaissance. Passamaquoddy language revitalization through a childhood immersion program, a new museum that is host to many cultural events, and the publication of a Passamaquoddy/Maliseet dictionary exemplify a retrieval of traditional knowledge systems for the generations to come. Mashantucket Pequot Elder Barbara Hartwell Poirier, the film’s executive producer, serves her tribal community as a Pre-trial Intervention Commissioner at the Tribal Court, and as Mashantucket Pequot Healthcare Advisory Board Chair. Subsequent to her work on Killian’s Chronicle, Poirier also continued to research Mashantucket Pequot genealogy and tribal history in the aftermath of the devastating Pequot War (1636–1638). As is true for the Passamaquoddy’s language, the Mashantucket Pequot celebrate and foster the re-birth of the Pequot language; the innovative Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center provides a rich resource of archaeological and anthropological information on Eastern Woodland tribal nations. Poirier’s accompanying essay to the Berger and Newell article underscores the long Indigenous struggle against a genocidal colonialism that followed first contact.

In her essay, “Ultima Thule Redux: Screening Spaces of Death, Regeneration, and the Sacred in the Arctic Circle,” Ulrike Wiethaus invites reflection on Indigenous Peoples’ deliberate utilization of cinematographic narration to educate and to affirm Indigenous cultural sovereignty by evoking alter-temporal space and Indigenous concepts of the sacred. The essay’s analysis focuses specifically on the highly regarded Fast Runner trilogy of feature films produced by the Inuit film cooperative Igloolik Isuma Productions. The scripts are almost entirely in Inuktikut. The trilogy maps intricate processes of cultural transformation both pre and post contact with Europeans and charts a reclamation of Indigenous culture, language, and metaphysics.

The essay names as the European point of departure not the Norse expeditions as rendered by Killian’s Chronicle, but their retelling in and impact on Christian missionary efforts during the Middle Ages and beyond. Between 1073 and 1076,

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the German cleric Adam von Bremen composed the first known European ethnography of the North American coast in his multi-faceted magnum opus *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg*). Taking its clues from Adam of Bremen’s methodological reflections and narrative framing, “Ultima Thule” conjoins Indigenous cinematographic aspects of the trilogy with a thousand year old culture of colonial religious change. Alter-temporal Indigenous life-ways and resistance as reflected in spatial sacrality and spatial destruction and resistance in the Arctic Circle reveal Western temporal regimes as contingent and culturally limited and limiting.

Mary Kate Hurley examines an altogether different archival source of Indigeneity and colonialism in her essay, “Choosing a Past: Fictions of Indigeneity in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.” Hurley considers the construction of the American/Medieval’s capacity to represent anterior Western European cultures as simultaneously maternal, monstrous, and irretrievably lost to time and conquest in the popular video game *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* to establish a basic understanding of how American fantasists deploy a narrative of dis/placed Western European indigeneity. She pays special attention to the Northern dimension of these works and asks, how do fictions of the North operate as a site of nostalgic yet ambivalent longing, a cipher for a pseudo-homogeneous mythic European past that never really existed? Hurley further argues that the *Elder Scroll* creators utilize fictitious portrayals of indigeneity as a tool of transatlantic world-building. In this sense, game fantasists follow in the footsteps of medieval texts like Wace’s *Brut*, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and even *Beowulf*, all of which use monstrous portrayals of anterior cultures to imply an irredeemable heroic past superseded by a triumphant European Christianity.\(^\text{10}\)

Part Three, *Men of the North*, continues the theme of parahistory introduced by Hurley with a focus on Euro-American constructions of archived masculinities that still affect the present, whether in the political realm (Thomas Jefferson’s evocation of Saxon genealogies) or in religious sub-cultures (literary exhumations of a cult of Odin on one hand, a spiritual continuance of medieval geomancy on the other). In his essay, “Hengist and Horsa at Monticello: Human and Nonhuman Migration, Parahistory and American Anglo-Saxonism,” Joshua Davies takes as his point of departure Thomas Jefferson’s 1776 suggestion that the seal of the United States feature an image of Hengist and Horsa, “the Saxon chiefs from whom we claim the honor of being descended.” The suggestion is

\(^\text{10}\) On the role of white slavery as the foundation for European “civilized” culture and the recycling of white slave stereotypes to describe the distance between “civilized culture” in the US by labeling Indigenous peoples ‘monstrous’ etc., see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010).
often cited as a revealing moment of American medievalism, but Davies first examines some familiar Old English texts such as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicles*, the Old English Bede and Æthelweard’s *Chronicle*, de-familiarizing these and at the same time creating a basis for connecting a parahistorical bridge to the US. He argues that “the stories of Hengist and Horsa do tell us something about the formation of the country that would be called England and the ways in which the history and rights of the indigenous populations of Britain were overwritten and subjugated. But they tell us different things, in different ways, according to the precise circumstances of the retelling.”

His readings establish an anterior parahistory before moving more deeply into the vital efficacy of the American/Medieval complex. Davies registers the racial and ecological aspects of the myth of Hengist and Horsa in the Middle Ages and pursues its impact on eighteenth-century America in the context of the broader history of American racial laws. Davies asks, what did such Saxon brotherhood mean in the European Middle Ages and on American plantations such as Jefferson’s Monticello? What does it mean to claim Anglo-Saxon medieval kinship in modern America?

Tina Boyer turns toward equally mythical and equally potent racist uses of the medieval past in her essay, “Losing Your Religion in *American Gods*.” *American Gods* refers to both a novel by the contemporary English author Neil Gaiman and the award-winning US fantasy-drama television series for the cable network Starz that is currently in its second season. The novel and TV series engage with themes such as immigration, religion, and colonialism by investigating the idea of what happens to African and European gods and other spiritual beings when their believers move to the United States. Gaiman imagines that these previously much worshipped entities, having lost the faith and devotional homage of their human followers, now must lead a pitifully meager and lonely existence in the United States. To add insult to such injury, they are forced to fight against the new gods of social networking, the internet, and media. In the middle of such Götterdämmerung is a US citizen by the name of Shadow, who will decide the fate of the gods.

Boyer proposes a two pronged interpretative focus for *American Gods*. Colonialism and racism: this first analytic prong pertains to the choice of using the Norse god of war and wisdom Odin, the leader of the old gods, but also to the marginalization of the gods after they have arrived in the US. Not entirely unsurprising, the themes of colonialism, racism, and immigration appear to be more pronounced in the American TV show than in the British novel. Secondly, there is the threat of new technology and spirituality: the novel paints an almost nostalgic picture of the turn away from older faiths as gods mutate into demons and marginalized people. The overwhelming threat of technology seems to offer
a new kind of colonialism. Framing this unusual engagement with colonialism, racism, technology, and spirituality are a plethora of oppressively gendered relationships. Boyer critically foregrounds the infusion of this mélange of old and new gods with a steady drip of unexamined toxic misogyny.

Margaret Zulick returns to an emphasis on earth and water in her essay, “American Compass: Natural Magic and the Transit of Earth and Water in the Early Mormon Imaginary.” She argues that nothing speaks of the medieval relationship with earth and water as succinctly as the divinatory practice of dowsing – that is, using a willow wand or other tool to point through the earth to the presence of water. In an American context, the striking analogy between the golden plates “discovered” by Joseph Smith, purporting to record the Book of Mormon, and the family business of gold dowsing has already been noted. Euro-American settlers in new territory frequently used medieval divination techniques to find water; and if water can be found by asking the earth, Zulick proposes, so can gold be found, and so can story. Importantly for the A/M project, Zulick addresses the impulse to “anoint” the American landscape with a new sacred mythology and a new sacred compass rooted in European medieval practices. And indeed, this well-practiced impulse fueled nothing less than the Second Great Awakening.

Dowsing is enmeshed in early Christian religious tradition, and continued to be relevant in European medieval practices of both mysticism and witchcraft. The Mormon story of a “discovery” of new sacred texts in the American earth thus illuminates the meaning-making transit of these ideas and practices as a compelling instance of the American/Medieval world-making endeavor. Joseph Smith’s creative act, part scam part prophecy, thus provokes us to contemplate the human need for sacred roots; and thus to invent roots where they do not yet exist or where they have been ripped out of the landscape materially and figuratively by the onslaughts of colonialism and modernity. Zulick argues that treasure hidden in the earth; the treasure of earth’s gifts and the treasure of a European medieval past, both historically and mythically conceived, enables those who descend from European peoples to re-invent “America” as “European.”

In Part Four, Northern Cræft, we reaffirm our conviction that the medieval has never not been a place to find new life and deeper life, and our final section calls particular attention to those currents of life-giving beauty always to be discovered in the A/M. The Old English concept of “cræft” inspires both essays, and extends far beyond our modern definition. The University of Toronto’s ongoing Dictionary of Old English project, currently up to the letter ‘I,’ comes to no one conclusion:
The most frequent Latin equivalent for cræft is ars, yet neither ‘craft’ nor ‘art’ adequately conveys the wide range of meanings of cræft. ‘Skill’ may be the single most useful translation for cræft, but the senses of the word reach out to ‘strength’, ‘resources’, ‘virtue’ and other meanings in such a way that it is often not possible to assign an occurrence to one sense in ModE without arbitrariness and the attendant loss of semantic richness.11

Cræft is thus both physical and intellectual, it can be applied to all forms of artistry, artisanship and ingenuity, to military and medicinal skills, to the capacity to create in many dimensions. The two essays in this section celebrate these dimensions and exemplify “cræft” from different perspectives.

“Writing With Birds: Enigma 59, Riddle 51, and Process-Based Poetics” by Donna Beth Ellard with Bailey Pittenger, is a creative collaborative meditation on the process of creating an early medieval poem, from the cutting of the quill to the play of words and meanings. The two authors, a medievalist and a poet, explore non-cognitive relationships between birds and humans that arise from the practice of making, maintaining, and writing with quill pens. Building from a discussion of scribal practices and statements concerning the use of quills, Latin and Old English riddles solved as “penna” (“quill”) and “feper ond fingras,” (“feathers and fingers”), and glossary entries on bird names, they argue that quills generate flight paths between bird and scribe. In other words, quills move from functioning as external prostheses and become tools that are fully imbricated with bodies. The authors then test the limits of this argument by discussing their own extended project of collecting feathers, making quills, and writing with them, in the contexts of solitary scribal transcription from early medieval manuscripts and community-based contemporary poetry workshops.

Far from an attempt at medieval reenactment, the essay aims to understand what happens when humans change patterns of engagement with birds, with their organic materials, and with the pace of writing in Denver, Colorado, where both authors live. They conclude by briefly considering a thousand years of writing with quills and ask us to consider what unthought relationships have been engendered between species by way of this long technological history? How has this technology entangled the written word with notions of avian sound and flight? How are the human and other than human connections differently understood and articulated?

Gale Sigal’s essay, “‘Like a Breath of Northwest Wind’: William Morris’s Medievalism Beyond England’s Shores,” focuses on the British Victorian designer, poet, and socialist, William Morris and his obsession with the medieval north,

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Icelandic sagas and medieval technology. Sigal emphasizes throughout the essay that his knowledge was not merely expertly historical; it was also practical in that he applied it to his design work; medieval motifs appear in his floral designs for wallpapers, rugs and fabrics, his stylish but utilitarian furniture, his firm’s dyes derived from medieval recipes, and the ink, paper and fonts for his Kelmscott Press. Morris’s life and work exemplify the diversity and dynamism of early medieval craft in multiple dimensions.

Sigal demonstrates Morris’s influence as an artist, historian, medievalist and mythmaker not only in his native land, but across the seas. He designed American home decor, including stained glass windows for Vinland, Catherine Wolfe’s estate in Newport, RI in the 1880s; along with fellow artists, he influenced the arts and crafts movement in North America, and with the foundation of his Kelmscott Press, he influenced American book design. In making the past part of the present, Morris’s work serves as a model of interdisciplinarity and intercultural exchange, and a unique instance of the life-giving beauty of the American/Medieval. Sigal argues that the complexity, diversity and sheer volume of his contributions to artistic and intellectual culture on both sides of the Atlantic invite a reassessment of how the medieval world can resource both, as well as a provocation to consider the afterlife of his influence in tandem and contrast with some other contemporary, more partial, and less life-giving uses of the medieval.

Conclusion

In her stirring collection of essays on the Anthropocene, historian of consciousness Donna J. Haraway admonishes us to “stay with the trouble” rather than to avert our eyes, close our ears, numb our hearts, and deaden our minds. To “stay with the trouble” in order to stop the rapacious capitalist and colonialist destruction of “Terra,” our blue planet and to stop the widespread stance of “sublime despair” and a “politics of sublime indifference.” At this troublesome moment, to become present to each other counteracts despair as we embrace our “bumptious diversity and category-breaking...knottings.” This kind of being in presence also demands an outspoken confrontation with the ongoing harm of white racism. Once again draped in medieval symbolism, as a recent front page article in the New York Times pointed out, our scholarly confrontation with the re-emergence of white racism must be at the center of Medieval Studies.

13 Haraway, 97.
It is our hope that as this new collection of A/M essays has gathered stories of birds, of polar bears, of gods and golden tablets, of terrifying trauma and courageous re-imagination, the strengthening of a “we” is encouraged without apology. This emergent and yet ancient “we,” “without guarantees or the expectation of harmony with those who are not oneself,” is, as the editors and contributors envision, defined by a re-grounding in earth, and a going to the water that is both ancient and future.  

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15 Haraway, 98.


Part One: Earth and Water in Transit
Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing

“Her, the Water, and Me”:\(^1\) Three Women Go North

The far north is an unearthly earth, where much of what those of us in temperate zones were told is universal is not true. Everyone walks on water, which is a solid.

Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*\(^2\)

Our collaborative essay offers a multi-disciplinary dialogue about modern and medieval ways of knowing and understanding water – as place and process, as source and resource – and in so doing we explore and unsettle habitual disciplinary associations of place with specific times, identities and genders.\(^3\) We bring together medieval and modern ideas about water, women and the monstrous in art, popular culture, poetry and learned texts to demonstrate how the subject of water connects different times, places and media. And while this might seem an already overly ambitious purview, we also want to consider how our mix of elements speaks to the overarching themes of this volume, how the American/Medieval is threaded through with water, and how the North catalyzes and inspires our whole enterprise.

American/Medieval as we will construe it is a nexus of connections, oppositions, associations, a mix of the random and the deeply co-incidental, a tide of ideas that we will follow through medieval and modern contexts. Water is the thread that gives us passage, and allows us some freedom to cross over boundaries: it belongs to no discipline. Throughout our long collaboration, we have often faced questions about academic identity, whether we are literary scholars, historians, medievalists or feminists. In this essay we continue to aim to speak through and across these categories, and encouraged by recent research in the field of creative critical writing, we have also sought new ways of developing transdisciplinary and transhistorical conversations by weaving creative critical fiction into literary analysis. Our title proposes a tripartite structure of sorts, but in the analyses, hypotheses and stories that comprise the three sections that follow, there will be much overlap and resonance, and eddying. Like water.

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\(^3\) This essay is a revised version of our earlier article, “Women and Water: Icelandic Tales and Anglo-Saxon Moorings,” *GeoHumanities* 4.1 (2018): 97–111. We thank the Taylor and Francis Group for permission to reprint portions of it here.