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The Global Middle Ages

Global Medievalism

An Introduction

Helen Young and
Kavita Mudan Finn

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Elements in the Global Middle Ages

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Abstract: The typical vision of the Middle Ages that Western popular culture represents to its global audience is deeply Eurocentric. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* franchises imagine entire medievalist worlds, but we see only a fraction of them through the stories and travels of the characters. Organised around the theme of mobility, this Element seeks to deconstruct the Eurocentric orientations of Western popular medievalisms, which typically position Europe as either the whole world or the centre of it, by making them visible and offering alternative perspectives. How does popular culture represent medievalist worlds as global – connected by the movement of people and objects? How do imagined mobilities allow us to create counterstories that resist Eurocentric norms? This study represents the start of what will hopefully be a fruitful and inclusive conversation about what the Middle Ages did and should look like.

Keywords: medieval, popular culture, medievalism, fantasy, Vikings

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Introduction

Medievalism, the reimagining and repurposing of the Middle Ages, is a staple of twenty-first-century political and popular culture. Arguably all popular culture medievalisms are political because popular culture both reflects and shapes the ideologies of its production including, although not uniquely, models for identification and in-group/out-group divisions. Like academic medieval studies, popular culture medievalism conventionally ‘desires and reifies a white, predominately cisgender and male, Middle Ages’.¹ The association of medieval Europe and the people who lived there with whiteness, and their position as holders of white heritage, are rooted not in historical evidence, but in a reimagined history that selectively interprets known – and imagined – people and events in the service of modern racist ideologies, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. White Western medievalism tells and retells in new modes and media a story about the past that justifies present oppressive structures as natural, inevitable, and right; as Dorothy Kim warns, ‘medieval studies is intimately entwined with white supremacy and has been so for a long time’.² Counterstories can and must be told to resist the oppression and violence habitually storied into medievalism, not least through its adoption by fascistic white extremists to, as Mary Rambaran-Olm, Bree Leake, and Micah James Goodrich put it, ‘protect each other and the futures that we imagine’.³ We enter this Element in a spirit of radical hope, seeking to deconstruct white Western popular medievalisms and to identify and promote strategies of counterstorytelling. We start, then, with the emerging critical orientation in medieval studies that organises this series: the global Middle Ages.

What Are the Global Middle Ages?

We pose this question in the present tense because ‘the Middle Ages’ were invented after the fact and have in some sense been continually reinvented ever since. The Middle Ages of 2022 are not the Middle Ages of 2002 any more than they were the Middle Ages of 1602. These processes of reinvention – that is, medievalism – have produced multiple, often conflicting, ‘Middle Ages’: sites of barbarism that are also objects of nostalgia – violent, muddy, and bloody but also courtly, chivalric, and romantic.⁴

¹ Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich, ‘Medieval Studies’, 357.

² Kim, ‘Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy’.

³ Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich, ‘Medieval Studies’, 357.

⁴ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 61–85. See also David Matthews’ discussion of grotesque and romantic medievalism in *Medievalism*, 15.

The European Middle Ages were created by fifteenth-century Italian humanists to delineate the millennium or so between their own time and the end of the classical period that they claimed to be reinvigorating in a renaissance. The medieval is first and foremost a temporal construct: a time between times, a kind of limbo, and its existence demands a fundamental division between pre-modern and modern. As Geraldine Heng and Lynn Ramey argue: 'Time in the West sees modernity as a unique and singular arrival that ends the long eras of premodernity, instantiating the origin of new, never-before phenomena: the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the beginnings of colonization, empire, race, et alia.'⁵

According to this story, only the West became modern – with all that modernity entails – at the right time. This reimagined temporality enabled colonialism and imperialism by positioning every non-European people and culture as pre-modern, backward, and uncivilised and therefore in 'need' of European civilisation. Thus too begins the myth of 'progress' with which we grapple to this day in the Global North and West.

In this story the Middle Ages are bounded not only by time but also by space – they happen only in Europe. The turn towards medievalism as a favoured paradigm of identity formation in Europe was driven by ethnonationalisms; it 'could be imagined as bottom-up and organic, to be found in the blood, the soil, the language, and the material remains of one's own place'.⁶ As Sharon Kinoshita observes, however, 'the nationalist paradigms that have traditionally shaped our understanding of the Middle Ages are frequently ill-suited to the objects they purport to explain' because the borders of people, nation, and language use shifted during both the medieval and modern eras.⁷ Events like the Danish and Norman conquests of England are retrospectively framed as intra-racial amalgamations of Germanic (or Gothic) peoples as early as the sixteenth-century writings of Richard Verstegan and William Camden. This belief in the immobility of populations – in this case, for an entire millennium – is fundamental to the construction of white supremacy. It is imagined as having been long enough that various subgroups within that category of *Homo europaeus* (white man), such as Goths, Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and so forth, distilled their specific racial characteristics and expressed them through divergent cultures and social institutions. This story of a distinct European spatio-temporality that crystalises white identities to the exclusion of all others is critical to European colonialism and imperialism

⁵ Heng and Ramey, 'Early Globalities, Global Literatures', 391.

⁶ D'Arcens and Lynch, 'Introduction', xiii–xiv. On medievalism and the formation of modern European nations, see, for example, Geary, *The Myth of Nations*.

⁷ Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries*, 3.

and is deeply entangled with contemporary popular culture medievalisms. But it is not the only story that can be told. The Middle Ages can – and should – be global.

This Element follows Geraldine Heng's foundational theorisation of a 'global Middle Ages' as one that decentres Europe, disrupts European temporalities, and deconstructs the raced spatio-temporality of 'medieval'.⁸ As Heng and Ramey argue, it does this by producing 'the recognition that *modernity itself* is a repeating transhistorical phenomenon, with a footprint in different vectors of the world moving at different rates of speed'.⁹ Furthermore, the 'pure' white medieval Europe of the contemporary Western imagination is a creation of modernity generated through and by centuries of retellings, and it is rooted in a rhetoric of ethnonationalism and colonialist fantasy. The global Middle Ages should instead be considered a framework for counterstorying the European Middle Ages, one which disrupts structures and reveals omissions and contradictions while offering a more expansive, complex, and ethical narrative of the past. Decolonising the Middle Ages by decentring Europe and disrupting white colonialist spatio-temporal narratives is in no way limited to academia. The Black Museum's *Caravans of Gold: Fragments in Time* exhibition in 2019, for example, explored Saharan trade and its interconnections of West Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. A similar concept informs the work of the J. Paul Getty Museum.¹⁰ We reject the application of a 'global Middle Ages' label as an anodyne 'diversity initiative' of a field that remains steeped in the white heteropatriarchal colonialism that Sierra Lomuto has powerfully critiqued.¹¹ In order to do this, we follow 'Margo Hendricks' intersectional framework of premodern critical race studies, which 'recognizes the capacity of the analytical gaze to define the premodern as a multiethnic system of competing sovereignties'.¹² While the material we analyse often presents a white- or Eurocentric perspective, it is our goal to interrogate that perspective and, where possible, to offer counterstories. When we speak, then, of the global Middle Ages we mean the epistemological, political, and medievalist project that seeks to tell new stories about the medieval past and what we can do with it in the present – including the futures we can imagine through it. We acknowledge our own positions as a white person in the Global South (Helen) and a South Asian woman in the Global North (Kavita),

⁸ See, for example, Heng, 'The Global Middle Ages' and 'Early Globalities, and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods'.

⁹ Heng and Ramey, 'Early Globalities, Global Literatures', 391.

¹⁰ Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*. For the Getty project, see Keene, *Toward a Global Middle Ages*.

¹¹ Lomuto, 'Becoming Postmedieval'.

¹² Hendricks, 'Coloring the Past, Considerations on Our Future', 379.

both with scholarly roots in anglophone literature, and we have made efforts to expand our citational genealogies to better reflect what the global Middle Ages should look like; any errors or omissions are our own.

What Is Global Medievalism?

Medievalism is a process of storytelling even when it lacks a conventional narrative element. Neo-Gothic cathedrals in settler colonial states like Australia, Canada, or the United States, for example, tell a story about white European possession of the land. Like culture as a whole, medievalism is ‘concerned with meanings, pleasures and identities’.¹³ We may think of it, then, as an ongoing process of storytelling that manages what meanings are attached to ‘the Middle Ages’ and therefore also manages who can take pleasure in and construct identities through that imagined past. In its present form it has principally told a story of the bounded European Middle Ages that centres Europe and whiteness (in its multiple formations) to the degree that they have been made synonymous. This is not to say that only white people can enjoy or do identity work through medievalism; black and anti-racist medievalisms have existed for centuries, as scholarship from Matthew X. Vernon, Jonathan Hsy, and others increasingly shows.¹⁴ Nonetheless white people have privileged access to medievalist stories, and most Western popular culture reiterates centuries of medievalisms that have contributed to, justified, and upheld white power and ideologies.

Medievalism is deeply linked to European imperial and colonial projects and to the white racial formations that underlie them. An originally Eurocentric concept, ‘the Middle Ages’ were taken to other parts of the world, where they served imperialist ideologies to colonisers and colonised alike.¹⁵ It had always already positioned the ‘rest’ of the world as backward, deficient, and not just open to but in need of European domination. Candace Barrington argues that global medievalism is a colonialist process that asserts and reasserts white heteropatriarchal power and possession in that it ‘uses the European medieval past as prism for interpreting, shaping, and binding cultures outside the Western European nation-states’.¹⁶ While we contest Barrington’s exact terminology here – preferring the critical conceptualisation of ‘global’ explained earlier in

¹³ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 1.

¹⁴ Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms*; Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages*; Davis and Altschul, *Medievalisms and the Postcolonial World*.

¹⁵ For example, Altschul, *Geographies of Philological Knowledge*; D’Arcens, Lynch, and Trigg, ‘Medievalism, Nationalism, Colonialism’; D’Arcens, *Old Songs in the Timeless Land*; Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*; Warren, *Creole Medievalism*.

¹⁶ Barrington, ‘Global Medievalism and Translation’, 183. On white colonial possession-taking, see Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*.

this Element – she nonetheless offers a typology of medievalisms – spatial, temporal, and linguistic – that is useful for understanding white Western medievalism and highlighting the potential for post- and decolonial medievalisms that resist those norms.¹⁷

Temporal medievalism takes place when non-Western peoples and cultures (colonised or not) are positioned as ‘medieval’ and therefore uncivilised by modern European cultures.¹⁸ Predicated on a strict divide between medieval and modern, temporal medievalism is used in European nations and settler colonies to marginalise and belittle peoples and their cultures who are positioned as ‘non-white’ in any particular context. Spatial medievalism sees settler colonies like Australia and the USA invest in the Middle Ages as part of their national heritage and enables people outside Europe to engage in temporal medievalism.¹⁹ As Adam Miyashiro argues, in white ‘heritage politics’ of nations like the USA and Australia, ‘the settler colonial project is not critiqued but lauded as an extension of medieval Europe’.²⁰ Linguistic medievalism, however, is a resistant, ‘counter’, or postcolonial mode that sees colonised cultures ‘appropriate colonial medieval texts for their own purposes’.²¹ Tracy Banivanua-Mar argues that one type of decolonisation is ‘a dialogue that Indigenous peoples maintained with colonial powers, and in which they asserted their right to choose the best and reject the worst of colonisation’.²² Taking our cues from this insight, we propose that global medievalism chooses what suits its purpose from the colonialist ‘medieval’ and rejects what does not – either by refusing to engage with it or by reconfiguring it. It thus produces a new, resistant counterstory that disrupts white colonial and imperialist logics of hegemonic medievalisms.

Global medievalism is the process of telling the stories of a global Middle Ages, a form of critical race counterstorytelling that is committed to undoing the storying of the ‘European Middle Ages’ and to generating new stories about the past and, through them, the present and future. Medievalism is always about the present and points towards the future even as it reimagines the past. Stories about the past imply a future even when they do not represent it. Global medievalism, then, imagines a past that could lead to a more equitable, just,

¹⁷ For example, Davis and Altschul, *Medievalisms and the Postcolonial World*; Altschul, ‘Medievalism and the Contemporaneity of the Medieval in Postcolonial Brazil’; Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, 108–50; Karkov, Kłosowska, and Oei, *Disturbing Times*; Ellard, ‘Historical Hauntings’.

¹⁸ Barrington, ‘Global Medievalism and Translation’, 183.

¹⁹ Barrington, ‘Global Medievalism and Translation’, 187–9.

²⁰ Miyashiro, ‘Our Deeper Past’, 4.

²¹ Barrington, ‘Global Medievalism and Translation’, 190.

²² Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 4.

and inclusive future where present oppressive power structures (capitalist colonialist white heteropatriarchy) can be dismantled or, in fantasy worlds, were never allowed to exist. The received medieval past is powerful but can be resisted through counterstorytelling. This can involve, for example, telling medievalist stories from subaltern perspectives, deconstructing myths of the European Middle Ages, centring people and cultures from parts of the world that are not Europe, and emphasising global connections. Global medievalism dovetails with Louise D'Arcens' helpful formulation of 'world medievalism' in that both are transhistorical, transnational, and transcultural.²³ We prefer the term 'global' for its connections with the critical 'global Middle Ages' discussed earlier in this Element, and because our interest here is specifically in medievalisms that resist colonialist capitalism associated with modern globality. In this Element we argue that global medievalism manifests in twenty-first-century popular culture through an exploration of stories and counterstories in that domain. Counterstories to white Western medievalisms have a centuries-old history; we ask how they manifest in contemporary popular culture and look forward to many more to come.

Popular Culture and Global Medievalism

There is no simple and generally agreed-on definition of popular culture. Imre Szeman and Susie O'Brien offer a useful outline: 'entertainment produced through and by commercial media (television, film, the music industry, etc.) that have the economic and technological capacity to reach large, demographically diverse, and geographically dispersed audiences'.²⁴ This provides an ideal focus here for two reasons: it encompasses the transnational nature of much of contemporary popular culture, and commercial entertainment media is one of the key sites of medievalism in the twenty-first century (and earlier).²⁵ The features of popular culture as defined here emerge variously in the texts we explore in later sections. These range from vast multimedia franchises such as that built around J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, to fantasy and historical fiction novels from multinational publishing houses and small presses.

²³ D'Arcens prefers 'world' to 'global', arguing that, as a term, it is 'a more amenable concept for a cultural phenomenon such as medievalism: it exceeds the global in its temporal depth and horizon, accommodating an idea of transcultural ecumene that reaches back beyond the period when 'globe' became synonymous with global capitalism'. *World Medievalism*, 16.

²⁴ Szeman and O'Brien, *Popular Culture*, 24.

²⁵ In scholarship of popular culture, 'global' is typically used in a colloquial sense meaning multi- or transnational, or in relation to modern globalisation (e.g. Crother, *Globalization and American Popular Culture*).

Early studies of popular medievalisms often focussed on film,²⁶ but interest has grown exponentially in the past decade or so, resulting in a vastly expanded scope of reference and substantial theorisation.²⁷ Some scholars in medievalism studies have dismissed popular culture medievalism because of a perceived lack of interest in the historical Middle Ages.²⁸ Others have appropriated Umberto Eco's derogatory term 'neomedievalism' in theorisations of how popular (especially electronic) medievalisms function, often by seeking differences from other kinds of medievalism.²⁹ High, public history, and popular medievalisms have all substantially contributed to the construction of a European rather than a global Middle Ages.³⁰ Recent scholarship on Anglo-Saxonism demonstrates this further.³¹ Popular culture medievalisms use their own logics and values when it comes to balancing commercial, recreational, and educational priorities. They may have different formal features, strategies, and plots to other medievalisms, but they habitually tell the same story of the European Middle Ages. We therefore prefer the expansive 'medievalism' over variations such as 'neo-medieval'.

Popular culture shapes what we 'know' about the Middle Ages³² and is part of the mass media ecosystem that circulates political medievalisms attached to contemporary ideologies.³³ The dominant mode of twenty-first-century popular medievalism is the 'gritty' or 'grimdark' approach associated with the *Game of Thrones* and *Witcher* franchises, which reinscribes white racial medievalisms even as it asserts its own difference from Tolkien and Disney films.³⁴ Genre and subgenre are important considerations because they shape both production and reception, ultimately impacting what is understood to be the historically authentic representation of the medieval past.³⁵ It would be easy to dismiss popular culture medievalisms as merely subject to hegemonic power. As bell hooks

²⁶ For example, Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages*; Driver and Ray, *The Medieval Hero on Screen*.

²⁷ D'Arcens and Lynch, *International Medievalism and Popular Culture*; Marshall, *Mass Market Medieval*; Young (ed.), *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms*; Young (ed.), *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture*.

²⁸ Alexander, *Medievalism*; Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

²⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism*; Marshall, 'Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalism'; Utz, 'A Moveable Feast'. The journal *Studies in Medievalism* has hosted much of the theoretical discussion, especially in themed volumes XIX and XX in 2010 and 2011.

³⁰ Young, 'Place and Time'; Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 15–87; Mitchell-Smith, 'The United Princesses of America'; Fimi, *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History*; Cecire, 'Medievalism, Popular Culture and National Identity in Children's Fantasy Literature'; Rambaran-Olm, 'Sounds about White'.

³¹ Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures*; Miyashiro, 'Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies'; Miyashiro, "'Our Deeper Past'"; Rambaran-Olm, 'Anglo-Saxon Studies, Academia and White Supremacy'; Wilton, 'What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon?'

³² Sturtevant, 'Based on a True History?' ³³ Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media*.

³⁴ Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 63–87.

³⁵ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 215–16.

argues, however, ‘when we desire to decolonize minds and imaginations . . . popular culture can be and is a powerful site for intervention, challenge, and change’.³⁶ Building on this idea is the work of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, who argues that ‘restorying’ can transform even multinational franchises into sites of emancipatory resistance to the hegemonies that medievalism conventionally upholds.³⁷

Barrington’s typology of white colonial and resistant medievalisms, outlined earlier in this Element, is a useful starting point to explore different ways popular culture medievalisms work and how they might be global. Temporal medievalism – the positioning of others as medieval and therefore backward and uncivilised compared to the modern white Western self – takes a slightly different form in popular culture. When the narrative present is coded as European medieval, temporal medievalism positions others as not yet or not even medieval; we see this Orientalist framework on full display in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) and the BBC’s *The Last Kingdom* (2015–20).³⁸ Audiences in settler colonies like Australia and the USA engage in spatial medievalism when they understand the medievalist narrative present of these programmes as being connected to their heritage. J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* offers an illustrative example of how temporal and spatial medievalism contribute to the story of a ‘European Middle Ages’ through popular culture.

While the phrase never appears in his published writings, Tolkien is often said to have created a mythology for England.³⁹ His was not a purely nationalist medievalism, however; while he spent most of his life in England, he was actually born in the colony of South Africa. His medievalism was profoundly white, racial, and Eurocentric⁴⁰ with substantial Germanic and Anglo-Saxonist elements; he praised the ‘noble Northern spirit’ that he believed characterised white Germanic people, including the English, and those English who participated in the colonial project.⁴¹ His own devotion to medieval English language and literature illustrates this. *The Lord of the Rings*, moreover, models spatial

³⁶ hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 5. ³⁷ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, 159–64.

³⁸ See Downes and Young, ‘The Maiden Fair’; Hardy, ‘The East Is Least’. We discuss *Game of Thrones* later in this Element.

³⁹ For a discussion of Tolkien’s ethnonationalism, see Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*.

⁴⁰ Fimi, *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History*; Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 15–39; Lavezzo, ‘Whiteness, Medievalism, Immigration’; Young, ‘Diversity and Difference’. The *Rings of Power* television series has not yet aired at the time of this writing, but advance publicity has indicated a more racially diverse approach to casting than prior Tolkien adaptations.

⁴¹ Balfé, ‘Incredible Geographies?’; Fircchow, ‘The Politics of Fantasy’; Obertino, ‘Barbarians and Imperialism in Tacitus and *The Lord of the Rings*’; Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, 152. For Anglo-Saxonism, see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

medievalism through the relationship of the colonial kingdom of Gondor to the fallen realm of Numenor. The people of Gondor are ‘the race of Numenor’ while, when Aragorn is crowned, he repeats the words of his Numenorean colonising ancestor: ‘Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world.’⁴² Spatial medievalism is also significantly at play in the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in settler colonies; indeed, a significant tourist industry has emerged following the filming of Peter Jackson’s two Tolkien trilogies in Aotearoa (New Zealand) that conflates real-world locations with parts of Middle-earth.⁴³

Temporal medievalism in a colonialist mode is clear in the encounter of the Riders of Rohan with the ‘Wild-Men’ of the Druadan Forest. Their leader, Ghan-buri-Ghan, is introduced as part of nature rather than human: ‘a strange squat shape of a man, gnarled as an old stone . . . clad only with grass around his waist’.⁴⁴ The hobbit Merry sees a resemblance to ancient statues in Rohan: ‘here was one of those old images, brought to life, or maybe a creature descended in true line through the endless years from the models used by the forgotten craftsmen long ago’.⁴⁵ In exchange for passage through the forest, they ask the Rohirrim to ‘drive away bad dark with bright iron’ so that ‘Wild Men can go back to sleep in the wild woods’.⁴⁶ Afterwards they vanish, ‘never to be seen by any Rider of Rohan again’.⁴⁷ Ghan-buri-Ghan and his people are first constructed as existing out of time, backwards, and uncivilised compared to the ‘medieval’ Rohirrim and Gondorians and so unable and unwilling to change that they disappear from the narrative and the implied future of Middle-earth. Thus even texts with a medieval narrative present utilise modes of exclusion to position people outside the temporality that leads to implied modernity.

Colonialist spatial and temporal medievalisms have marginalised Indigenous peoples through discourses that are, as the aforementioned example demonstrates, significant in popular culture. As we worked on this Element, Helen described the project to Professor Daniel Heath Justice, a Cherokee man, Indigenous studies scholar, and author of speculative fictions. He nodded along enthusiastically until the word ‘medievalism’ was mentioned. The colonialist entanglements of medievalism have specifically functioned to exclude Indigenous peoples for so long – and are themselves so profound – that this is not surprising. Global medievalism raises the prospect, but the hegemonic power of multinational popular culture, often aligned with neocolonialism, weighs against its realisation. Justice recommended to us the only global

⁴² Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 1268.

⁴³ For fan tourism, see Williams, ‘Fan Tourism and Pilgrimage’.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 1088. ⁴⁵ Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 1088.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 1089. ⁴⁷ Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 1092.

medievalist popular culture work by Indigenous creators that we have been able to identify: the young adult historical novel *Skraelings: Clashes in the Old Arctic* (2014) by Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley, who are of Inuit heritage.⁴⁸ We discuss it in detail in the [next section](#). Nonetheless global medievalism is part of contemporary popular culture, and we explore its various manifestations in the subsequent three sections.

Mobilities and Global Medievalism

Mobilities are our central concept for ‘grasping the global’ in popular culture medievalism in this Element.⁴⁹ Contemporary studies of mobility, which are grounded in the social sciences, focus on the movement of objects, people, money, and ideas, individually and en masse, on local, national, and international scales.⁵⁰ We draw on Heng’s usage as one of three foundational trajectories of global Middle Ages approaches. ‘[O]ne is focused on mobilities: how people, ideas, material objects, technologies, and cultures crisscrossed the planet. Another is centered on points of anchoring or mooring: the cities and states, trading blocs and ports at which the world met and transacted, and where human relations bloomed.’⁵¹ The third trajectory is ‘fixed on time: continuity and change, the interanimation of past and present’, and thus on the movements of people, objects, and concepts through time.⁵² This suggests to us not only the interplay of temporalities that a global view produces, but also the temporal movement inherent in popular medievalisms that re-present the medieval in modernity for us to watch, read, and play. In this Element we add ‘temporal’ to the dimensions of mobilities.

Attention to mobilities in all their forms reveals social and cultural systems, structures, and power relations: ‘[M]obility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship.’⁵³ Mobility can be an indication of power or the lack thereof in cases of invasion and forced displacement, two modes integral to colonialism. The modes and manifestations of mobilities, then, can reveal not only the power structures of fictional worlds, but the medievalisms that underpin those worlds, global or not. Who and what travels, and why? Where from

⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that there are no Indigenous medievalisms; rather, we are observing here a specific site of exclusion within popular culture. On Indigenous studies and medieval studies in academic medievalism, see Andrews, ‘Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts’. See also Yim, ‘Reading Hawaiian Shakespeare’.

⁴⁹ Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*, 121.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Sheller and Urry, ‘The New Mobilities Paradigm’; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry, *Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings*.

⁵¹ Heng, ‘Romancing the Portal’, 44. ⁵² Heng, ‘Romancing the Portal’, 44.

⁵³ Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, 49.