

# The Intricate World and the Mundane University

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Our century is not free from it; each time that ethnocentrism is precipitately and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular effects to consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit. – Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

In medieval Muslim contexts, people had specific language through which they moved from the local to the trans- or interregional; individuals readily distinguished the space of their own neighborhoods, homelands, political realms, and the religio-cultural tissue of Muslim-ruled polities everywhere.<sup>2</sup> But at the same time, single terms connotatively flexed relationally—much as they do now—to accommodate dynamics of formality and informality or breadth and intimacy that also imply geo-spatial scalability.

The word *ṣuḥba*, or companionship, is a useful example. Because Islamic legal and spiritual authorities elaborated holistic ethical frameworks by which to live, jurists' and Sufis' writings sometimes clarified *ādāb al-ṣuḥba*, or etiquettes of friendship and discipleship. They gathered *ḥadīths* such as “a meeting of two brothers is like a meeting of hands—one washes the other—and God makes it so that one believer can only ever benefit another in meeting,” or “the most favored form of charity (*ṣadaqa*) is that which reconciles people to one another,” or “any man who finds a fault (*ʿawra*) in his brother and veils it (*yasturuḥu*) shall obtain heaven.”<sup>3</sup> Correct association is thus refining in ways that mutually enrich those with equal status, balance out power dynamics, or burnish one who helps another save face. Studies of the Cairo Geniza show that, among Jews and Muslims, *ṣuḥba* became jargon in

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 80.

2. Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Medieval Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. The concept of reconciliation being a superior form of charity is derived from Q 49:9. Tāj al-Dīn b. al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿiyya al-kubrā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw and Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭināḥī (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1964), 6:315–16.

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mercantile contexts: it connoted a contractual right to “designate the associate an agent through written instructions” to do specified tasks with the designator’s merchandise.<sup>4</sup> These relationships were largely homosocial, and the correspondences enacting them were by professional men, albeit that they sometimes passed into women’s custodianship.<sup>5</sup> *Ṣuḥba* also took on “covenantal” overtones as a byword for political alliance.<sup>6</sup> This carried into nonelite writings. In the folk-epic *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, a legendary Byzantine queen is said to put out a call in Constantinople stating that “anyone who wishes to invade Muslim territory must establish *ṣuḥba*” with her, prior to “commanding that the canopies and tents be readied” for the march.<sup>7</sup>

This plurality and plasticity is surely edifying for how to close-read each usage, but it would be overreaching to use any one of these instances to read the others in revisionist fashion: the fact of Geniza merchants’ homosocial, masculine *ṣuḥba* doesn’t automatically queer a fictional queen’s invocation of the concept. The ethical or contractual formalism of mentors or rulers doesn’t mean that when friends and lovers casually refer to their relationships as bonds of *ṣuḥba*, they are citing learned tradition. The existence of networks of *ṣuḥba* that crisscrossed the Indian Ocean does not imply that every expression of *ṣuḥba* is a subtle, local link in a great, global chain. The possibility of latent intricacies does not, in other words, replace an eloquent mundanity—people in premodernity, too, created myriad bonds that they treated, with varying degrees of metaphor and euphemism, as friendships.

The tension between the allure of that which might reveal intricacy to “us” and the recognition of its mundanity to our subjects is, I argue, at the core of much recent work on a Global Middle Ages (GMA). Moreover, potential intricacy is often moralized by authors, with material underpinnings and implications about how and why we should allocate resources to study the global and the medieval. Medieval studies’ traditional homes in English and European history gain support for producing synthetic scholarship and thought that culls erratically from other disciplines. The results are then valorized for how they prompt “us” to question our status in the world at present by dismantling the specious prefiguration of European civilizational coherence, uniqueness, or insularity present mainly in prior historiography of Latin Christendom. I thus place “us” in quotations because it is through assumptions about who participates in GMA conversations and with what stakes that these moral and material gradients emerge.

A recent essay by Geraldine Heng, who coined the term “Global Middle Ages,” helps orient the terrain of external novelty and internal ordinariness when contemplating

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4. Jessica L. Goldberg, “Choosing and Enforcing Business Relationships in the Eleventh-Century Mediterranean: Reassessing the ‘Maghribī Traders,’” *Past & Present* 216, no. 1 (2012): 3–40, at 16.

5. Elizabeth Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 242.

6. For a discussion of pre-Islamic Near Eastern ideas of covenantal friendship, see Shelomo D. Goitein, “Formal Friendship in the Medieval Near East,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115, no. 6 (1971): 484–489, at 484.

7. *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*, ed. al-Maqānibī et al. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maṭba‘a al-Ḥusayniyya), 6: 66–67.

“medieval globalism.”<sup>8</sup> Heng meditates on the “transhumanities” import of a ninth-century wreck of a dhow carrying tens of thousands of Chinese ceramics, as well as tens of finer gold and silverworks possibly intended as diplomatic gifts, off the coast of Belitung in Indonesia. She designates the ship “ordinary” but also calls its cargo “extraordinary.”<sup>9</sup> At first, it seems that the latter is a device to defamiliarize our present; against the idea that there was only one, Western “industrial revolution,” the mass-produced Tang wares present us with vast prospects for multiple modernities, including one that affected quotidian maritime trade along the “arterial trceries” of the GMA.<sup>10</sup> At times, though, the line of our dazzled gaze and that of our subjects merge. Skeptical of other scholars’ speculations that those aboard may all have survived because human remains have not been found on or around the wreck, Heng writes, “if there had been survivors, *given the extraordinary cargo*, is it likely that no stories were told of *this treasure* for 1,200 years, and none had sought it, until its accidental discovery in 1998?”<sup>11</sup> Yet is that which is untold treasure to us not an “ordinary,” albeit painful, aspect of medieval commercial risk? If Tang mass-production was typical of the period, was so much of this cargo extraordinary to its porters? How common was shipwreck? How common was survival? Would the Arabophone or Persophone managers of the dhow, the ship-hands, or the Southeast Asian port workers have preserved memories of rescue? If so, where—in their bookkeeping, letters, or oral histories?

In her study of Geniza documents concerning the port of Aden’s role in Indian Ocean trade, Roxani Margariti writes that because shipping strove to hug the coast, “salvage was routine” and wrecks were often visible from the shoreline as they were occurring or shortly after.<sup>12</sup> In addition to their own lifeboats (*qāribs*, whose use is attested in ninth-century travel writing), teams who sighted them might relieve struggling crew.<sup>13</sup> Divers, quickly dispatched, could rescue some of the goods—thieves could likewise dive for them. However, because the merchandise had not reached its destination, sellers (for merchants, runners, and sailors were different people and those links of *ṣuḥba* meant that one need not travel with one’s own goods) would then have to legally reclaim it, for which they needed to have contributed prior to myriad systems of information storage and exchange. Debris of ships from which nothing else remained might wend its way back to the city of origin, but then

8. On background to this coinage, see Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4.

9. Geraldine Heng, “An Ordinary Ship and Its Stories of Early Globalism: World Travel, Mass Production, and Art in the Global Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2019): 11–54.

10. Others have made similar arguments for multiple modernities and related modes of historical consciousness. Huda Fakhreddine, “Defining Metapoesis in the ‘Abbāsīd Age,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42 (2011): 205–35; Stephennie Mulder, “From Renaissance to Renaissances: Toward a New Paradigm in Art History” (presentation for the webinar “Whose Renaissance? Re-Imagining the Early Modern World in the Age of White Supremacy,” University of Nebraska, October 29, 2020).

11. Emphasis mine. Heng, “Ordinary Ship,” 53.

12. Roxani Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 173.

13. George Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 119.

it would need to be somehow identifying—new lumber, in one case, provided a clue for a lost vessel.<sup>14</sup> Margariti notes that merchants corresponding about lost or found goods did not necessarily discuss human casualties; those who kept watch from port cities to dispatch rescues might write of those they failed to save when bodies washed ashore, but by then the sites of their accidents were often untraceable.<sup>15</sup>

Interests in material specifics were likewise contingent on a subject's orientation. Elizabeth Lambourn and Philip Ackerman-Lieberman state that mention of caches of Chinese ceramic wares (*ṣīnī*) recurs in medieval Arabic records, but among Jewish merchants at least, physical features such as translucency and glazing only arise when they raise questions for kosher home-use.<sup>16</sup> Writing of the Old Sundanese narrative poem from western Java about the travels of a Hindu ascetic, *Bujangga Manik*, Alexander West remarks on the oddity of near-ubiquitous (by then Ming-era) Chinese ceramics going almost unmentioned, though there, a gilt Chinese box receives special attention in a scene in a noblewoman's quarters, perhaps for its relative rarity and expense.<sup>17</sup> As Heng notes, archaeology meanwhile fills in further gaps. She calls our attention to the exceptionality of the “only intact” extant blue-and-white Tang wares (described as “prototypes” for later Ming analogues) having been found on the Belitung wreck, as well as the prospect that their Chinese potters were imitating Basran potters' own attempts at recreating Chinese techniques. We might further situate this history, though, using the 1969–70 discovery of a blue-and-white Tang potsherd at the site of a mosque central to a market at the port of Sirāf. The sherd's decoration used a different and, per one group's recent findings, possibly earlier technique of applying the cobalt pigment to dry but unfired clear-glazed ware, rather than using it as an underglaze like the Belitung pieces that came to more closely resemble their Iraqi counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Looking at the Belitung wreck as a unique-yet-worldly microcosm, our wonderment compounds, but we perhaps lose a sense of other analogues and traces, as well as fundamental human dynamics of silence, speech, and information loss. Instead, the fathomless connectivity of people of “many races, religions, and cultures” lost at sea is made meaningful through the “global” frame.<sup>19</sup>

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14. Margariti, *Aden*, 170–71.

15. *Ibid.*, 174–75. For shipwrecked sailors who survived, by the twelfth century the Song state created welfare mechanisms to support them with stipends and rations until they could take other ships home; Tang records show that the court was petitioned to aid in ensuring safe passage from Indonesia via the Vietnam coast, where both reefs and pirates were known issues. Jung-Pang Lo, *China as a Sea Power 1127-1368*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 199; Kenneth R. Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100-1500* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 63.

16. Elizabeth Lambourn and Philip Ackerman-Lieberman, “Chinese Porcelain and the Material Taxonomies of Medieval Rabbinic Law: Encounters with Disruptive Substances in Twelfth-Century Yemen,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, no. 2 (2016): 199–238, at 203–8.

17. Alexander West, “*Bujangga Manik*, or, Java in the Fifteenth Century” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2021), 115, 250–51.

18. M. Spataro et al., “Pottery Technology in the Tang Dynasty (Ninth Century AD): Archaeometric Analysis of a Gongyi Sherd Found at Siraf, Iran,” *Archaeometry* 61, no. 3 (2019): 584–86.

19. Heng, “Ordinary Ship,” 53.

The lingering question of *for whom* this global frame has utility is clarified by the publication in which Heng's article appears, the short-lived *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, which was inaugurated with an essay by Byzantinist Peter Frankopan.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, the journal's intended audience is not a monolith, and this is attested in how Frankopan describes its necessity. Where Global Medieval Studies in the United States—from whence many of the journal's contributors hail—is often presented as a solution for a beleaguered and even moribund field, Frankopan describes the situation in Britain as one in which medieval studies is wildly popular and structurally supported because of its relationship to the island's own sense of historical context and consequence. However, the field is therefore crowded with people trying to say new things about old canons, while the world meanwhile does not “begin and end with Europe.”

Referencing the “linguistic challenges” of tasking scholars trained in the European Middle Ages with “re-centering the Middle Ages away from the narrowness of Europe,” Frankopan recognizes that pragmatically this is best achieved not by creating omnispecialized hyperpolyglot-philologist-archaeologist-humanists, but through collaboration. Drawing a contrast with the journal *Speculum*, with its stated focus on Europe but lateral interest in scholarship on “Arabic, Byzantine, Hebrew, and Slavic studies,” the *Journal of Medieval Worlds* promises multi-nodalism and anti-Eurocentrism. Yet its audience's own center is clear. The journal will enable readers to access “poorly studied or even ignored” topics using “Old Church Slavonic, Semitic [...], Turkic, Iranian, Indic, and Sino-Tibetan” sources, while also being able to appreciate the particularly “innovative, pioneering, and extremely exciting” approaches Euromedievalists have taken to more “popular” areas.<sup>21</sup> Euromedievalists who have sharpened their theoretical knowledge to distinguish themselves in a well-resourced if swamped field now might apply themselves to worlds of materials whose own fields of specialization (“outside the mainstream”) will be elevated by subsumption in the global (Euro)medievalist frame. This characterization of each area's contributions seems to unintentionally recapitulate the colonial models critiqued elsewhere. Philologists of non-western languages (whose work does require “determination” and a “strong constitution”) mine obscure, exotic gems for the western Europeanists to appraise, cut, set, and sell at a markup or proudly wear.<sup>22</sup>

Various Euromedievalists guard against accusations of the GMA framework being dilettantish or extractivist by highlighting their diverse network of collaborators and interlocutors or gesturing to the fact that the global turn in modern historical studies likewise has not displaced studies of the local, but rather resituated them. After all, one can arrive at the global from the local by “look[ing] out” rather than “starting from the more usual ‘globalization’ narrative and only then looking in.”<sup>23</sup> More compelling, to my

20. Peter Frankopan, “Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2019): 5–10. According to its site, publication of the journal was suspended as of 2021.

21. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

22. *Ibid.*, 10.

23. Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, “Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages,” *Past & Present* 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 1–44, at 23.

eye, is Erik Hermans' depiction of the GMA not as the suppressed external reality which local specialists discover through the application of a widening lens, but rather as the historiographic praxis of consciously assembling and thinking with macro-historical "panoramas" of scholarship about the period.<sup>24</sup> I appreciate his idea of building towards a global picture rather than building from the presumption of globality. I likewise appreciate Sierra Lomuto's call—drawing on Sara Ahmed—to use engagement with the GMA not as a means to sort the good medievalists and medievalisms from the bad, but to interrogate how even "good" aims like curricular diversification and the inclusion of new-to-"us" materials and voices in our research are mobilized to fortify institutional visions of medieval studies proper against accusations of their being racist or irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> This is a particularly salient caveat because of the pairing of the global frame with another, in my view far more salutary turn in medieval studies towards contemplating dynamics of race and racialization in the deeper past. Exemplary of this coupling, a recent special issue of *Speculum* bears the title "Race, Race-Thinking, and Identity in the Global Middle Ages."<sup>26</sup>

We might therefore consider how GMA studies could expand not just who our subjects are, but what subjectivity can be beyond confirming or subverting our own expectations. Just as we should be wary of regarding the world as always already global, we should be wary of reading all "global" encounters as inherently and conclusively racialized, rather than as testing grounds for concepts of knowledge, the cosmos, and the human, as well as for local politics of differentially distributing access to community, kinship, power, and opportunity to others.

One instance that anticipates more recent trends of reading medieval intercultural encounters by turns as omens and foils for our racial present occurs in a 2016 essay in *postmedieval* on the "liminality" of Britain for Muslim geographer al-Idrīsī, based at the Norman court of Sicily.<sup>27</sup> The author writes that al-Idrīsī divides the globe into spaces known to and inhabited by humans and those beyond their edges. Britain, being in the far northwest, shares its clime (which is cast as having "decentering power" through its entanglement with the "non-human") with places that are sparsely populated with "savage" and strange peoples, traces of whose existence he gleans from wonders literature. So binarized and extreme is al-Idrīsī's boundary between "*oikumene* and barbarism" that al-Idrīsī is said to praise the "Lord of both worlds [‘ālimayn’]," where he has instead used the description of God as "Lord of the worlds (‘ālamīn)" found in the second verse of the Qur’ān's opening chapter. Likewise, al-Idrīsī's usage of the plural *al-araḍīn* for his survey of inhabited and uninhabited lands, a lexeme that appears frequently in reference to the "seven earths" that God made as counterpart to seven heavens, instead is read as *arḍayn*,

24. Erik Hermans, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020), 1–3.

25. Sierra Lomuto, "Becoming Postmedieval: The Stakes of the Global Middle Ages," *postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (2020): 503–12, at 505–6.

26. Cord J. Whitaker, Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, and François-Xavier Fauvelle, "Speculum Themed Issue: 'Race, Race-Thinking, and Identity in the Global Middle Ages,'" *Speculum* 99, no. 2 (2024): 321–30.

27. Christine Chism, "Britain and the Sea of Darkness: Islandology in al-Idrīsī's *Nuzhat al-Mushtaḳ*," *postmedieval* 7, no. 4 (2016): 497–510.

two worlds.<sup>28</sup> Reading these nouns as dual rather than plural isn't so much grammatically as culturally implausible (referencing the Qur<sup>2</sup>ān and *ḥadīth* for al-Idrīsī would come as easily as referencing the Bible might for his Norman counterparts). It speaks to an aim not to understand an Arabic-speaking Muslim's perspective as such but to use him as an expedient anti-Eurocentric device. What for al-Idrīsī is indeed a racialized globe, albeit on an uneven and shifting continuum of civilization and uncivilization in whose volatile clefts he lived and worked, ironically collapses into polarity under the weight of wanting his subaltern speech to help "complicate" the "colonialist" project of mapping the Norman conquests.<sup>29</sup>

Here is where moral exigency (already somewhat fraught, as I have tried to show) meets the material outlook: if the GMA are meant to achieve the admirable goal of transcending specialization, they definitionally cannot themselves be a specialty. If they are meant to give shape to conversations, one cannot talk to oneself. And yet, job ads would tell us otherwise. Over the past few years, departments of history and English—and in two cases known to me, art history<sup>30</sup>—at several US schools have sought singular professors of the "Medieval World" or "Global Middle Ages," or with research interests therein. One position pairs an interest in the "global" with the Mediterranean, another with that which "[emerges] from [...] English literature"; one asks simply that its applicants care about European cultural production "in the world [...] as a *highly desirable additional area* of investigation"; one seeks a scholar of either "gender and sexuality" or "the global Middle Ages," as if different types of difference are fungible; one does not specify the borders of the "medieval world," but does ask that candidates also teach surveys of "the" Renaissance (I believe they mean the European one).<sup>31</sup> Does this not already sketch the ultimate purpose for the GMA: to conserve the interests of the disciplines that birthed it—in the name of and while giving the appearance of change—in the very ways against which Lomuto warns?

My concerns about the creation of these types of position—indeed, the prospect that an individual scholar might one day identify themselves as a "Global Medievalist"—are not merely "post-colonialist anxieties" about "linking such an apparently Eurocentric term as 'Middle Ages' to anything called 'global.'"<sup>32</sup> The notional arrogation of "global" expertise in a given period to the *individual* is not a scholarly proposition, but a financial one. In 2023, the American Historical Association reported that tenure-track positions in history seek modernists rather than premodernists (defined as those working prior to 1500) at a ratio of roughly 10:1. Their findings align with those of the Medieval Academy of America

28. Ibid., 509; cf. al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi ikhtirāq al-āfāq* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2002), 1:963.

29. Chism, "Britain," 500.

30. "Visiting Assistant Professor in Global Medieval Art History," *Global Middle Ages*, accessed 13 June 2024.

31. Hannah Cohen, "History of Medieval Mediterranean/Global Middle Age, Rhodes College, History," *H-Net*, 3 September 2019; "Assistant Professor in Global Middle Ages (Tenure-Track), NYU," *MEMOs*, 19 August 2022; emphasis my own in, "Brown University, History of Art and Architecture: Assistant Professor in Medieval European Art and Architectural History in the World," accessed 13 August 2024; "Saint Louis University announces a tenure-track job search!," *Global Chaucers*, accessed 13 June 2024; "Washington and Lee University, History Department: Visiting Assistant Professor in the History of the Medieval World," *H-Net*, accessed 18 June 2024.

32. Holmes and Standen, "Towards," 1.

(MAA), which further notes that demand for medievalists as such halved over the course of the pandemic, already from very little. Fields such as religious studies, Islamic studies, and Italian studies tend to be open on period of specialization in searches, with medievalists therefore competing with modernists. Interestingly, the MAA report raises concerns about the state of hiring in English programs, even though “the English job market remains the most robust of the Medieval Studies jobs,” because of the added criterion of a “global requirement in many job ads” that now “tend to include all literature before 1800 (or even 1900) around the world.”<sup>33</sup> This, of course, overextends the individual professor. Meanwhile, students receive *English* credits and provide *English* enrollments to learn about topics better covered elsewhere, while those other areas remain marginal to the creation and filling of these positions despite their so-called “global” scope. At the institutional level, the global turn does not expand medieval studies; it justifies logics of resourcing that are already entrenched at most universities. It promises much while appearing to take less but cannot reasonably deliver.

Perhaps it is better to have medievalists on campus on these terms than not at all. However, for those of us working on the medieval period in disciplines more moderately bounded by area, religion, and/or language, GMA’s contours form a transactional terrain that raises serious questions: do we keep helping to grow the global turn discursively in the hopes of this spreading the wealth rather than contributing to clear trends toward austerity across academia? After all, why hire three medievalists working on three already broad domains when you could have one “global” scholar?<sup>34</sup> Faced with that threat of redundancy, do we combat Eurocentrism by contributing (and hence, inevitably, domesticating) our work to fields whose very existence is secured against the gutting of higher education by being able to fall back on their Eurocentric fundamentals? Can GMA be used to strengthen multiple fields on the terms of their own integrity and rigor despite these overdetermined moral and material circumstances? And if not, then do we need the Global Medieval as much as the Global Medieval needs us?

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33. Leland Renato Grigoli, “[The 2023 Academic Jobs Report](#),” American Historical Association, 13 September 2023. “[Executive Summary of Medieval Studies Academic-Positions Update](#),” accessed via “Job-Market Data for Medieval Studies,” The Medieval Academy Blog, 30 May 2023.

34. Rebecca De Souza recently raised a similar point but proposed sustained critique of GMA’s institutional contexts as a solution. Withdrawing critical labor entirely (for critique, in its best form, is “a practice of care” about a collective future) and investing it elsewhere is the possibility I wish to highlight here. Rebecca De Souza, “Are There Limits to Globalising the Medieval?” *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 257–83, at 274–76; Mayanthi Fernando, “Critique as Care,” *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 13–22, at 14.