1 Doing it differently: medieval and contemporary

This book puts into practice a shared idea about the ‘contemporary medieval’. It brings concepts of what is ‘medieval’ and what is ‘contemporary’ together in a dynamic and fluid exchange, and it explores how past and present might be put into practice in an ongoing critical conversation. It reflects on disciplines and practices engaged by our work as medievalists long interested in modern critical theory, and offers some broader context for the contemporary medieval within the fields of medieval studies and creative-critical discourses in the arts and humanities. While we want this chapter to serve as an introduction to the book as a whole, we first offer an explanation and exploration of what we mean by ‘contemporary medieval’, why we think it is important and what it can contribute to our aim of working differently. The chapter concludes with a further reflection on its title, on what ‘doing it differently’ might mean.

First, and very briefly, we introduce ourselves and our way of working. We are both early medieval scholars with a long history of collaboration. Our subject is early medieval Norse and British culture (often termed Anglo-Saxon studies), c. 500–c. 1100, and we have a long-standing interest in and commitment to understanding the literary culture of this period in relation to genders and sexualities, places and locations, eco-criticism and environmental studies. Chapter 2 outlines in more detail the winding path of our collaborative and individual research over some thirty years to reflect on the twists and turns of scholarly practice. Here we note simply that working together is central to our research, and so also to our rationale for the contemporary medieval. But where might we locate the beginning of this idea?
Twelve poets on a bus

It rained steadily that day. Clare was accompanying a group of poets to Lindisfarne in Northumberland as part of her work for *Colm Cille’s Spiral* with the London Arts Agency, Difference Exchange. The project presented a re-imagination of the legacy of the sixth-century Irish monk Colm Cille, St Columba, through six contemporary art and literature commissions and dialogues that unfolded across Ireland and the UK as part of the City of Culture 2013, starting and ending in Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland. One particular ‘knot’ in the collaborative spiral linked Newcastle, Lindisfarne and nearby Bamburgh in an exploration of artistic innovation and the early medieval past. The commission of this ‘knot’, ‘The Word’, directed by Linda Anderson (Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts), celebrated the natural beauty, deep history and artistic legacy of the early medieval kingdom of Northumbria by bringing it into engagement with the region’s well-established reputation for modern and contemporary British poetry. This dual emphasis on place and cultural practice connected Newcastle with the tidal island of Lindisfarne, whose early medieval monastery was founded by St Aidan, and the Lindisfarne Gospels, dedicated to St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, and with Bamburgh, the early Northumbrian royal city where Aidan died. Whence the poetry bus from Newcastle to Lindisfarne.

*Shadow Script: Twelve Poems for Lindisfarne and Bamburgh* by Gillian Allnut, Peter Armstrong, Linda Anderson, Peter Bennet, Colette Bryce, Christy Ducker, Alistair Elliot, Linda France, Cynthia Fuller, Bill Herbert, Pippa Little and Sean O’Brien, edited by Colette Bryce, was published later in 2013. The commission also produced a site-specific sound installation, *Antiphonal*, engineered from the commissioned poems and mixed with recordings of natural sounds and Old English words, by artist Tom Schofield (Culture Lab, University of Newcastle). *Antiphonal* was installed in the two locations of the crypt of St Aidan’s Church, Bamburgh, and the then newly renovated Look-Out Tower on Lindisfarne. Two films by Kate Sweeney were then added to the sound installation, which previewed in Newcastle. In 2013, *Shadow Script* and *Antiphonal* brought together Bamburgh and Lindisfarne for the Festival of the North East and the Lindisfarne Festival (when the Lindisfarne Gospels were displayed at Durham Cathedral). At the end of the year, ‘The Word’ participated in the culminating events of *Colm Cille’s Spiral* in Derry-Londonderry, long associated with St Columba, Colm Cille, in the concluding days of its term as the UK City of Culture.
Clare had not been on a poetry bus before. She wasn’t very familiar with tweeting either, let alone poets tweeting on a poetry bus. She was more comfortable with poets and writers who lived over a thousand years ago than those sitting next to her. And the weather was dreadful. It was hard to walk against the wind, let alone imagine the powerful motivations that had brought Aidan and later Cuthbert to Lindisfarne, ushering a new religion and culture into the region, or to hear the voices of those anonymous others – women, travellers and traders, warriors and farmers among them – who also contributed to this remarkable legacy of new practices and new words. And yet, for all that, it was fun – joyful, thought-inspiring and revitalizing.

As *Shadow Script* bears out, the modern poets also offered new visions, words and practices forged of an intense engagement with the local history of Northumberland and its poetry. Working together across disciplines and practices offered reflections on the creative vitality of the past and different ways to explore and share knowledge. One poem, ‘Lindisfarne: The Roughs’, by Gillian Allnutt, even got to grips with the weather, then and now. Another equally remarkable poem, ‘Asylum’, by Colette Bryce, was to become part of Clare’s chapter, ‘In Three Poems: Medieval and Modern in Seamus Heaney, Maureen Duffy and Colette Bryce’, for a collection of essays edited by Gillian together with Ulrike Wiethaus. That collection, *American/Medieval: Nature and Mind in Cultural Transfer*, offered Gillian a chance to explore the wider dimensions of these tides of connection between the medieval and the contemporary in terms of deep exchanges at the level of history of ideas between the European medieval world and the USA. The focus on cultural and natural traces of this ongoing exchange is expanded in the forthcoming second volume, *American/Medieval Goes North: Earth and Water in Transit*, to explore ecocritical and environmentalist concerns, climate change and indigenous displacement.

*Colm Cille’s Spiral* has offered a number of other legacies. Several postgraduates and early-career scholars who worked on the project elaborated ‘New Ways to Know the Medieval’ in a short reflective article for the *Old English Newsletter*. Some early medievalists, most notably Joshua Davies and Carl Kears, advanced or initiated related research projects of their own, exploring the medieval and the modern. Clare contributed a brief prefatory paragraph to a second poetry pamphlet, *Waves and Bones*, in many ways a companion to *Shadow Script*, which was commissioned by the Newcastle Poetry Festival in 2018. She wasn’t able to make a second bus trip because of the weather (snow!). By then, however, learning
more about contemporary poetry and its relationship with early medieval culture was central to her research. Between 2014 and 2018, while Clare was working and teaching with colleagues and students at King's College London, benefiting from a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust during 2016–18, and collaborating as ever, on and off, with Gillian, the shared idea of the contemporary medieval came into focus. This idea depended from its beginning on working together and exploring new practices in which early medieval British culture and history might resonate differently with various contemporary communities.

The story of Clare and the poetry bus shows how, and why, we have been drawn to those who are themselves drawn to the early medieval world, to the new ways of seeing that they bring to our work and to our ways of working. Working together and collaboratively, we have continued to explore different formats and venues where we might explore the medieval and the contemporary. We have studied and worked with artists, artworks and creative practices in a variety of contexts. In 2014, for example, we collaborated on ‘Deep Water Tales’, a multimedia presentation for Midsummer Water Day (King’s College London), in conjunction with the Museum of Water installation by Amy Sharrocks at Somerset House. In 2015, we explored ‘Sonic Illumination’, a collaborative event at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, for Adventures in the Illuminated Sphere, directed by poet and multimedia artist Caroline Bergvall during her residency at the Gallery. Students and staff at King’s College London participated in both events. And, most recently, we have worked with poet and artist Sharon Morris on ‘Putting the Audience into Practice’, for the first Creative Critical Writing workshop (University College London, 2017). We also share a long-standing interest in the American artist Roni Horn, and a growing one in the Inuuvialuit artist and sculptor Abraham Anghik Ruben. Reflecting on, responding to and exploring the implications of the very different practices of Bergvall, Horn, Morris and Ruben are central to our thinking about the contemporary medieval, as it travels across British, European, Inuit and American domains.

Early medievalists rarely work with experts in the contemporary arts, although there is a growing awareness of the importance of modern medieval literature, creative-critical writing and public arts practices for engaging with contemporary audiences. The next section considers how and why we might bring together research-led fields such as ours with those fields committed to practice-based research or, more simply, practice research in the contemporary arts. Here, however, we use the story of the poetry bus to give a sense of what creative practices in the present might restore to our thinking about the past: a refreshed emphasis on
the creativity of early medieval work, a renewed interest in the dynamic interactions between places and peoples, medieval and modern, a deepened commitment to exploring the different pathways between the present and the past, and an ongoing insistence on the value of shared work, collaborative thinking and participatory practice. The story of the poetry bus furnishes us with some of our key themes for this book: the weather (that rain) and the environment (those various relations between peoples and places), travel (the pathways between the present and the past) and the importance of reflection (creative and critical).

Reflections on disciplines and practices

Poetry, sculpture, photography, film and multimedia performance are some of the arts practices that we have brought to this book’s interest in the contemporary medieval. In this regard ‘contemporary’ means produced now or in the very recent past. We work with living arts practitioners, and we explore live contemporary concerns and debates shared by many who work in the arts and humanities. We use our training as early medievalists to highlight the powerful but sometimes unacknowledged legacies of the early medieval past in these present, cultural, artistic and environmental issues. Our emphasis on practice, and on practice research, offers us a set of contemporary methodologies with which we might put the contemporary and the medieval into the same discursive space. This is also a space taken up by creative-critical work that similarly aims to explore the dynamic possibilities practice-led research offers theoretical reflection.  

*The Contemporary Medieval in Practice*, therefore, is informed by the three disciplines of medieval studies, in particular early medieval studies (as already noted), the contemporary arts and creative-critical work. It addresses the opportunity for the reformulation of trans-temporal, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking offered when these three disciplines are brought into relation. We conceive this relation as offering an emerging *environment* for interdisciplinary work within the creative humanities. We use this key term of ‘environment’ in different ways throughout the book to address the cultural, academic and ethical implications of working in the arts and humanities now: the physical environment, as used by cultural geography and the environmental humanities, and the discursive environment of areas and fields, the subjects and concepts of practices and ideas of academic disciplines more generally. Our second key term, *reflection*, also used in both literal and
metaphorical senses, is threaded through the book, and informs in particular our choice of water as a subject central to Chapters 3 and 4.

Reflecting on collaboration and on multidisciplinarity more generally, however, we face questions about academic identities and about audience. Are we literary scholars, historians, medievalists, feminists, cultural theorists?, we are often asked. How can we speak through and across these categories or environments? And, to whom are we speaking? As our own field(s) and the humanities in general undergo sea changes, as the arts and humanities move in the direction of transdisciplinarity, indeed post-disciplinarity, these are shared issues. Challenged and inspired by recent research in the field of creative-critical writing and by the ethical direction of much contemporary arts theory, this book introduces new ways of developing transdisciplinary and transhistorical conversations. Chapter 2, ‘Slow scholarship: the art of collaboration’, aims to clear new spaces where we can talk to one another and to others in the humanities differently by reflecting on our past work and the deep history of the early medieval past which it engages. The chapter is informed by the structure of an interlace, a description of the early medieval artistic practice of linking and lacing that is found in visual, material and textual contexts. Famously, there is no beginning or end to the densely patterned interlaces of, for example, the early medieval illuminations of the Lindisfarne Gospels – a point we find helpful in describing the various ways our collaborative work has slowly circled around a set of ideas about gender, identity and the environment over the past thirty years or so. We have found contemporary, modern criticism about slow practices to be a useful analogue for the almost incomprehensible span of time involved in studying the early medieval past, in tracing its links and laces. The pressing urgency of reformulating time to understand the deep history of the environment and what contributions we can make to the study of the environmental humanities as contemporary medieval scholars is also central to this chapter, setting up a discussion we continue in Chapters 4 and 5.

Our reflecting on our own work in Chapter 2 is also an invitation to think about the various chronological periods in which the arts and the humanities are invested, those we study and those in which we participate as writers and teachers. We take this invitation in a different direction in Chapter 3, ‘Audience: a prompt and three responses on falling’. To put the contemporary medieval into practice means thinking about how to access audiences for trans-chronological work. Our work over the last several years leaves us in no doubt that there is a significant contemporary audience for early medieval culture beyond our own academic environment of early medieval studies, which is rarely subject to analysis.
Accordingly, *Chapter 3* explores how we might put the audience itself into practice. Using our experience of working with different audiences, the chapter offers three studies on ideas of audience, medieval and modern, prefaced by a prompt or call for response. We use these studies to inform the question of how might we be an audience for one another, and so fall into conversation.

Falling, however, may also entail failing. We are acutely aware of the incommensurability of our knowledge about early medieval culture on the one hand, and the contemporary on the other. Moving across times, disciplines and practices is a risky business, as *Chapter 3* also explores, but with that risk come also possibilities of new ways of thinking and different directions. *Chapter 4*, ‘Water: seven propositions for the contemporary medieval’, takes up some of these possibilities. It is in this chapter that the different environments of the contemporary and the medieval are brought into direct relation. We reflect on the work of Horn, Ruben and Bergvall to open up further the kinds of critical and creative conversations we might have about the contemporary medieval, its places, environments and ambitions. The chapter focuses in particular on work by Roni Horn, who has no express interest in medieval culture, to challenge the apparent boundaries between the medieval, the medievalist and the modern. Medievalism, as a sub-discipline of medieval studies, draws on a set of wide-ranging disciplinary practices but tends to focus on work that is identified as ‘medieval’ in the post-medieval period. In *Chapter 4*, Horn’s work, by contrast, occupies the fluid space between the creative and the critical, inspiring our reflections on both the medieval and the contemporary. Water, as Horn points out, is a ‘master verb’, and it also informs our analysis of the pathways between the early medieval past and the contemporary present more readily apparent in the arts practices of Ruben and the experimental poetry of Bergvall.

*Chapter 5* continues to focus on environment, weather and water, but raises the stakes to ask some of the pressing questions about our contemporary relation to the environment that we also address in our final chapter. We explore the connections between early medieval and modern concepts of selfhood and look at how bodies and selves, historic and contemporary, are imbricated in environments and worlds. This chapter proposes a (be)coming together of self as matter and the material environment that we envision as a ‘biodegradable self’. We explore this idea in some cultural contexts in early medieval Britain and Ireland, in the work of contemporary poets and artists who engage with the connection of identity and physical environment, and in the specific forms of Old English poetic language which allow the modern reader a new
perspective on how the self is understood in deep symbiotic relation to the environment. Chapter 6 offers some final reflections on the contemporary medieval and our themes of self, environment, passage and translation, as we introduce the visions of some contemporary artists new to this project, Edward Burtynsky and M. NourbeSe Philip in particular. These are also artists with no direct connection to the medieval, but their work helps engage us in our conversation with the past; they speak to us both ethically and aesthetically across the divides of time, period and discipline, and urge us to put our valuing and understanding of the contemporary medieval into practice ourselves.

The trans-chronological, multidisciplinary focus of the contemporary medieval, therefore, requires moving beyond discipline-specific approaches to studying the medieval to address practice-based and creative-critical research: methodologies central to contemporary art and culture. Contemporary arts, both practice and methods, offer medievalists innovative ways to examine, explore and reframe the past. Medievalists offer practitioners of contemporary studies insights into cultural works of the past that have been made or re-worked in the present. Creative-critical writing invites the adaptation of scholarly style using forms such as the dialogue, the short essay and the poem. Similarly, each chapter of this book adapts a different form whose own history gives some indication of how current and medieval practices are co-implicated. We draw freely on interlace in Chapter 2, on call and response in Chapter 3 and on the propositional tract in Chapter 4, before settling back into more familiar academic prose to negotiate the discursive challenges of Chapter 5.

We had wondered about other forms such as the dialogue, but realized that this book is informed instead by the idea of dialogue, or collaborative conversation, throughout. To return to the premise with which we began, the contemporary medieval is very much a shared idea.

**Doing it differently**

This book ‘does’ medieval studies differently by bringing it into relation with the field of contemporary arts and by making ‘practice’, in the sense used in the contemporary arts and creative-critical writing, central to it. Intersecting with a number of urgent critical discourses and cultural practices, such as the study of the environment and the ethics of understanding bodies, identities and histories, our study offers medievalists a distinctive voice in multidisciplinary, trans-chronological, collaborative conversations in the creative humanities. The scope of this book traverses
the traditional and conservative field of Anglo-Saxon studies as it is still often understood by those within and without the field itself, and more radical and emergent contemporary forms of art-making and cultural practice. We aim to open up and define a creative-critical space where the medieval and the contemporary, fields often held apart, are brought into conversation with contemporary artists and their work in poetry and in the visual and material arts. We want to demonstrate that the study of cultural productions of the medieval in the contemporary opens up pathways of connection between the contemporary and the medieval different from those of, for example, medievalism, art history or literary and cultural history. We want to develop new audiences among scholars, students and artists interested in working beyond disciplines and with creative-critical practices, and to challenge current modes of interdisciplinary thinking with conceptual categories that undo the boundaries underpinning disciplinary and interdisciplinary divisions. We also want to discover and encourage an audience within our own field, and to introduce medievalists to some expressions of contemporary art-making, including poetry, that they might not yet have encountered. We stress that we do this by way of exemplification, fully aware that there are many other ways to work across the contemporary and the medieval.

We recognize the importance of attending ethically to work in the past as well as the present: in the face of the troubling co-option of the medieval by the alt-Right in particular, however, we find that *The Contemporary Medieval* offers more creative, and optimistic, practices. We want to find a new language, or languages, in which to conduct our conversation with the past, in the hope that it inspires others to find their own languages, conversations and practices. Doing it *Together*, a work by Caroline Bergvall with which Chapter 4 concludes, prompts us to do it differently as well (see Figure 4.8).

### A note on the past: Old English poetry

Some of our readers may have a passing familiarity with Old English poetry, others more detailed knowledge. The poems drawn on most often in this book are those best known to modern readers and scholars alike: *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and the Old English riddles from the Exeter Book compilation of Old English poetry. We use the most accessible editions and translations throughout, and offer relevant, concise critical bibliography in the Notes. Like all early medievalists interested in the language of Old English, we work closely with the two major dictionaries
of our field: the older Anglo-Saxon Dictionary edited by Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Northcote Toller, familiarly known as Bosworth and Toller and now available online, and the more recent, fully informed University of Toronto Dictionary of Old English, of which the letters A–I are, at the time of writing, available online. Both resources have been invaluable.

While the study of Old English poetic metrics is almost a field in itself, we explain here briefly how we tackle formatting and translation. Old English poems are generally composed in half-line segments, and in each line the first half-line is aurally connected to the second by means of alliteration and syllabic patterns of stress, semi- or secondary stress and no stress. We follow editorial conventions by indicating the caesura between the two halves of a line with a space. A slash (/) in our translations into Modern English indicates the ending of the whole line, making the point that we are translating as literally, if inelegantly, as possible while still aiming for clarity. We use diacritics (e.g. macrons) where they are present in the specific editions we are quoting from, and elsewhere we have simplified, editing for sense and retaining the use of the variant letters æÆ (‘ash’), þÞ (‘thorn’) and ðÐ (‘eth’).

Notes

1. In our individual and collaborative work, we have engaged with different branches and schools of contemporary critical theory. We have conceived our project here somewhat differently. While no single approach underlies this book, we continue to find ethical bases and inspiration for our thinking primarily in feminist and gender theory, as we outline in some detail in Chapter 2, as well as in ecocriticism and in place-based and cultural studies. In this book, however, we borrow more heavily from the ethical impulses underlying these theoretical categories than from any specific or overt meta-critical frame of reference.

10. *Waves and Bones* (Newcastle: Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts, Newcastle University); part of ‘Crossings: Newcastle Poetry Festival’, 2018).

11. The MA module The Contemporary Medieval was first offered at King’s College London by Lees and Sarah Salih in 2016 and covered both early and late medieval works and their modern, contemporary iterations. ‘The Contemporary Arts and Early Medieval Culture in Britain and Ireland’ was awarded a Major Research Fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust, 2016–18.


13. Particularly noteworthy were the contributions of Joshua Davies to these events. For our work with Caroline Bergvall at the Whitechapel Gallery, see https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/events/adventures-in-the-illuminated-sphere/. Accessed 7 January 2019.


15. There is a growing literature about creative-critical writing; see, for example, *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice*, ed. Katja Hilevaara and Emily Orley (London: Routledge, 2018).
