In translation

Translation, as both practice and concept, has emerged during the course of this book as one of its key themes. Translation is a form of communication, and it is one way past cultures enter the contemporary. Translating from an old language into a modern one is perhaps the most familiar practice for medievalists, especially those whose work is based in textual culture. Translation is a scholarly skill, then, but it is also a poetic practice, and this book has drawn on the work of contemporary poets such as Caroline Bergvall, Sharon Morris and Pauline Stainer as ways to explore the contemporary medieval. Translation is also transformation. It is a practice that expresses dynamic, transformative relationships between languages and times, as Chapter 4 argued, and between self and the world, as Chapter 5 explored. The ethical and the aesthetic as well as the social and the cultural are all implicated in translation. This concluding chapter focuses on the dynamism that translation as both practice and concept expresses. Translation is a means of travel, of transit. In this final chapter, we test what it might mean to be ‘in’ translation. We turn to contemporary art-making, in contrast with the focus on earlier medieval culture in Chapter 5, to explore some further implications of the contemporary medieval.

This book has considered contexts large and speculative (contemporary art-making and the creative-critical environment), and small and quotidian (the weather, words for water). We offer these as contributions to an ongoing conversation about the contemporary medieval in practice. In Chapter 5 we looked to the early medieval for our study of the environment and the ethics of understanding bodies, identities and histories. In Chapter 4, we found a thread through time that explored not only wonder but also travail and duress, loneliness, exile and displacement, the psyche in extremis. We focused attention on questions of audience, both early medieval and modern, in Chapter 3, and took a long
look at our own scholarship, linked and laced through time, in Chapter 2. Throughout, we have found ourselves in conversation with present and past. Our reflections have offered us practices for understanding the contemporary medieval. We experience these passages between past and present as forms of translation that, in turn, translate us; they enable us to be in transit, and to remain open to the generative possibilities of both the contemporary and the medieval.

We offer these concluding remarks as a meditation on the further questions that our study of the contemporary medieval has raised and might address. Given our emphasis on seafaring and travel in Chapter 4, how might present realities of displacement, migration and exile be illuminated by their intersection with the medieval? How might our interest in the medieval biodegradable self in Chapter 5 intersect with the current threat of climate change – an issue we first raised in Chapter 2? What further light might the contemporary medieval shed on our current psychic and political engagement with the environment? How will the thread of water that we have followed throughout this book reveal the felt dimensions of racial injustice? Following Bergvall’s Drift, how might an anonymous seafarer or wanderer, like those of the Old English poems that are now named for them, speak to the migrant or the refugee of the present moment? What might be the healing, inspiring, creative outcomes and possibilities for our many selves, our forms of communication and writing, our scholarship, our pedagogies of our ongoing conversation about the contemporary medieval?

The dynamic relation between selves and worlds in transit, both medieval and modern, opens up the fluidity of identity in physical and psychic ways. We have explored how contemporary art-making offers passages to, and from, the medieval by using the work of Roni Horn as well as of Caroline Bergvall. Carol Ann Duffy’s Everyman also tackles worlds and selves, taking on religion in its broadest cultural and social contexts. Abraham Anghik Ruben’s work speaks to our current refugee crises by addressing the particular environments, cultures and histories of the Inuit. Artists like Horn (whose work is central to Chapter 4), Katie Paterson and Olafur Eliasson (both of whom we discussed briefly in Chapter 2) speak to the questions and concerns about deep time and the environment we bring to the table as medievalists, but they do not engage directly with the medieval past. So too, in this chapter, artists such as Philip Ob Rey, Edward Burtynsky and M. NourbeSe Philip help us resist an ending. Exploring the work of these contemporary artists and poets advances and expands the dimensions of the contemporary medieval. This work creates different continua and a new set of contours
in and into which the contemporary self is translatable, expanding the reach of our weather-mapping of self and environment (addressed first in *Chapter 2* and more fully in *Chapter 4*). Like Horn, Bergvall and Ruben, Ob Rey, Burtynsky and Philip bring pressing modern political, environmental and ethical issues to the forefront of our conversation with the early medieval past.

In an apposite, and opposing, vision of contemporary biodegradability, the “V” HS’ series for *Humantropy* (2015) by the French, Iceland-based video and multimedia artist Philip Ob Rey offers a photographic installation of giant forms made from discarded and tangled webs of VHS tapes, located in particularly bleak Icelandic landscapes. These giant figures or creatures, formed from the detritus of old media, make a powerful protest against both plastic pollution and contemporary mass media. They also conjure the stuff of a variety of nightmares, both medieval and contemporary. As a commentary on the evolution and devolution of Norse giants and monsters, these giants evoke the Icelandic medieval past as well as a desolate modernity and futurity. These installations also evoke a contemporary nightmare in which the absence of biodegradability becomes a material threat to ourselves. This vision of a psyche severed from the environment and haunted by monstrous forms of its own making offers a stark contrast to the relative fluidity and potential harmony of the early medieval biodegradable self we have proposed. However, Ob Rey’s work also helps us insist that we offer no idealization of any concept of medieval biodegradability. The detritus of the early medieval world and its rubbish dumps are well documented by modern archaeology, and the examples of degradability we discuss in *Chapter 5* are shot through with issues of power (the building of bridges across the fens, for examples) as well as terror (water is a source of distance as much as it is of desire, as our example from *Maxims I* demonstrates). Ob Rey’s Norse-inspired giants express the scale of the contemporary problem.

Another modern artist, whose work is entirely non-medieval, addresses similar questions of scale that also recall Horn’s art-practice, and pull us back to our pervasive themes of water and the environment. Edward Burtynsky’s monumental compendium of aerial photographs, *Burtynsky: Water*, often realizes water in terms of its profound absence, and the insistent presence of that absence in the landscape. The images shift perspective entirely, upending our visual and affective assumptions. His photographs of the Colorado River Delta in Baja, Mexico, for example, look like massive sprawling tree shapes at first sight, spanning out to branches, twigs and leaves in remarkable detail. The trunk of this delta only has a sliver of blue or green. The browns and greys of the rest of the
‘tree’ detail the absence of water. The delta becoming desert. The tree that is becoming petrified, a petroglyph. The tree that was a river. The uncanny beauty and haunting disjunctions of these images of absence are a memorial to water and a refusal to forget the harsh realities of climate change. Aesthetics is a way to negotiate ethics.

‘Water is the reason we can say its name’ is the opening dedication, or epitaph, to Burtynsky’s collection. The statement offers us the chance to reflect once more on the importance of naming and speaking water, as well as the connection of the very existence of water to our speaking its disappearance. We recall here Roni Horn’s *Library of Water*, which we explored first in Chapter 2 and to which we returned in Chapter 4 and 5. Rebecca Solnit’s assessment of its testimony to transience, ‘[t]he pillars of water from all over Iceland made the room Iceland in miniature and a memorial for what was not yet gone’, complement Pauline Stainer’s vision of the *Library* as ‘memory without mark / written on water’. In *Wonderwater*, Roni Horn offered the phrase ‘dictionary of water’ as a prompt for her interlocutors, Louise Bourgeois, Hélène Cixous, Anne Carson and John Waters, thereby posing the question of how water is collected, stored and remembered. Prompted in turn by Solnit, Stainer and Horn, we pose the related question, ‘How do you remember the future?’

The *Library of Water* is a profound link to a disappeared past and a disappearing future. At the same time, it offers a way to formulate an environmental consciousness that moves beyond nostalgia and regret to forge deep cultural and psychic connections to water.

The passage of water, the connectivity it forms with historical selves, and the importance of remembering that which cannot be expressed (How do you say water?, as Horn puts it) is differently realized in the poetry of Canadian and Caribbean writer, M. NourbeSe Philip. NourbeSe Philip is another contemporary artist who does not directly engage with the medieval. Her epic poem *Zong!* evokes the terror of exile, abandonment and shipwreck, and the complete watery dissolution and effacement of enslaved African bodies. The poem offers a poetic re-versioning of the partial – both fragmentary and biased – historical documents that record the fate of the slave ship *Zong*. In November 1781, the captain of this ship, Collingwood, ordered its cargo of 150 slaves to be cast overboard and left to drown, an act that enabled the ship’s owners to claim money from insurance. NourbeSe Philip’s work is based on the only extant public document related to this massacre; it reworks its sparse and formulaic legal language into English-language poetry while remembering the multiple languages that might have been spoken on that ship. NourbeSe Philip describes her intention to use the legal language of the case brought to court as a ‘word store’ by
which she was able to lock herself into the work of poetry, a form of limitation that creates a space in which to recall the unspoken, the silent words of the slaves locked in the ship’s hold. Such arrangement and rearrangement based on a finite source might remind us of the Old English poet’s use of a ‘wordhoard’, a set of oral-formulaic building blocks, by means of which the text or performance will be reinvented, or redesigned, with each telling. But NourbeSe Philip takes this principle and wrenches it into another dimension of both reading and listening:

I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem … and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.

Words here are murdered, in poetic acts that recall the murder of all those slaves. We are also drawn to this poem not only because it expands the parameters and possibilities of our medieval modes of ‘interlace’ and association, but because it recalls similar themes and engages a similar practice of ‘forensic listening’ to that demanded by Bergvall’s Drift (discussed in Chapter 4). The question of what it means to be ‘at sea’ drifts uncannily across the centuries when we consider the Old English exile, those enslaved on the eighteenth-century ship Zong, or those trapped on the twenty-first-century ‘left-to-die boat’. Both Bergvall and NourbeSe Philip invite us to reflect further on anonymity, past and present, and to find spaces where silence in the historical record might occasion a practice of remembrance. For Bergvall, songs offer ways to speak the dispersed and distributed anonymous self, as we have seen. NourbeSe Philip notes how close are ‘song’ and ‘Zong’, itself an overwriting of the original Dutch name of the ship, ‘Zorg’. In Drift and in Zong! the past finds its voice by participating in broken song, in the wrenched and displaced poetry of the present. Zong! goes further to acknowledge ancestral co-authorship: the poem is credited to the poet ‘as told by Setaey Adamu Boateng”; the work is presented as a collaboration between past and present.

Analogous to NourbeSe Philip’s decentring of Western conventions of authorship is the immersive installation of Typhoon Coming On (2018) by black American artist Sondra Perry. The work digitally manipulates J. M. W. Turner’s painting Slave Ship, first exhibited in 1840 as Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On, which was
itself inspired by accounts of the Zong. Perry’s ocean is created digitally, using open-source software for visual and sonic immersion. In *Typhoon Coming On*, new technologies are the means for the entanglement of identity and experience: black histories shape and undo work made about them by British artists in the past. In this most recent iteration of the story of the Zong, as in *Zong!* and *Drift*, water remains the consistent catalyst and medium for these themes of exile, displacement and annihilation. Water remains central to understanding our passages to and from the medieval.11

Like Abraham Anghik Ruben’s sculptures that tell a cultural story of two Northern peoples, the medieval Norse and the indigenous Inuvialuit, Caroline Bergvall’s *Drift* and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* span centuries and take on terror, strangeness and compelling human journeys. They do indeed speak the past, and to the past, in epic terms. But there are more quotidian places to pursue this epic conversation, with our students and with each other, and therefore we include here a brief anecdote from one of Gillian’s experiences of undergraduate teaching at Wake Forest University, North Carolina. The scene is an interdisciplinary first-year seminar, called ‘Making Light of the Dark Ages’, where few students got the intended pun, primarily because half of them were non-native speakers, from China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. This had been an unusually reserved group, perhaps because of the language barrier, perhaps because of cultural conventions which did not encourage speaking out in class, and also because the material can be both alien and challenging, even disconcerting. The course texts were a mix of medieval and modern, literary and historical, and ranged from R. I. Moore’s work on persecution in the early medieval period to the obligatory *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* showings, all in the service of making light of the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, having some creative-critical fun with the modern understandings of the medieval and learning some history at the same time.12

Four students chose to do a final team presentation on *The Wanderer*, focusing on different passages from the poem and on the general theme of emotion. They asked, What does it feel like to be lonely, homesick, on a journey, yearning, adrift? What could they learn from this most sober of Old English poems about feeling, about being in the world, in this present world? Each student had glossed passages from *The Wanderer* that they identified with a particular emotional state such as isolation, depression, confusion, regret or nostalgia. Certainly, they detected no joy in this experience of being ‘at sea’. They had carefully looked at the nuances of different translations of the Old English, and then recalled a contemporary song lyric and an experience in their own lives in which they
identified with the wanderer. These four of the most reserved students in the class described with incisive clarity their own instances of pain and loss, their own experiences of being in exile in the USA and in some cases in their homelands, understanding them through the lens of this poem which they claimed enabled them to give voice to their own experience. While this proved to be a moving and meaningful teaching experience and indeed far from depressing, it was also one which raised the question of just what was being taught. Does the medieval poem disappear as the students make it their own? Or does it come into its own? What kind of transaction is taking place? Do the students translate the poem, or are they translated by it? We would argue both, and that these students contribute to and participate in the epic conversation developed by many of the artists we have discussed. They found one expression of the language in which they could conduct that conversation, and, as Clare’s account of the poetry bus in Chapter 1 also demonstrated, it is finding a language to express the contemporary medieval that is key.

Teaching the contemporary medieval is one further way to develop a conversation with the past that challenges and enriches our present. It is another place where we can continue to explore how we might speak the early medieval world, and to explore the problem and challenge of audience to identify how we can include non-medievalists of all stripes, and indeed the many types of medievalists, in this conversation. The stakes, we believe, are high in that the profound human dilemmas we now experience, whether these be political, racial or environmental, are brought into sharp relief and are given a new affective and potentially activist dimension. We of course would argue as humanist scholars that any study of the humanities will make us more fully human, but we have found, in our own experience of both studying and working with many different artists, new forms of creative engagement, and an explosive new frontier of artistic energy and innovation that is inspired by the early medieval world. The energy and beauty of the contemporary medieval has inspired us in turn, and this is what we want to pass on; this is a conversation we would like to continue.

Notes

3. Some of these images are currently available online: https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/water/. Accessed 18 December 2018.


8. Zong!, 193–4. See, for example, 32 and 34 for ways in which the poem represents visual and semantic ‘breakdown’ of water graphically.

9. We are not the first to link these two poems. See, for example, Adalaide Morris, ‘Forensic Listening: NourbeSe Philip’s “Zong!”, Caroline Bergvall’s “Drift”, and the Contemporary Long Poem’, Dibur Literary Journal 4 (Spring 2017): 77–87.

