
Essay Cluster: Grounds for a Trans-regional
Medieval Studies, Beyond the Global

Are there limits to globalising the medieval?

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Abstract The aim of this article is threefold: firstly, it seeks to critique, from the perspective of Iberian and Latin American studies, the Eurocentrism inherent in the research programme known as the ‘Global Middle Ages’ that has emerged in the last two decades in Humanities faculties primarily in the USA and Europe. Secondly, it argues that the identification of global neomedievalism is particularly indicative of the Eurocentric limits of the global medieval paradigm, which is illustrated with several examples from Hispanophone contexts. Lastly, it proposes some alternative theoretical frames through which to analyse the histories of diverse geographies, which seek to account for multiple global temporalities in different linguistic traditions without reinforcing the medieval/modern construction that is in turn rooted in systemic forms of racism and antiblackness.

Resumen El presente artículo tiene tres objetivos. En primer lugar, y desde la perspectiva de los estudios ibéricos y latinoamericanos, busca posicionarse de manera crítica frente al eurocentrismo inherente al programa de investigación conocido como “Edad Media global”. Esta perspectiva ha aflorado en las dos últimas décadas en las facultades de humanidades (en especial de Europa y los Estados Unidos). En segundo lugar, se considera que la identificación del neomedievalismo como global es indicativa de los límites eurocéntricos del paradigma medieval global. En este sentido, el segundo propósito será ilustrar esta limitación mediante ejemplos de contextos hispanohablantes. Por último, se proponen marcos teóricos alternativos para analizar la historia en geografías diversas. Estos tratan de dar cuenta de múltiples temporalidades globales en diferentes tradiciones lingüísticas sin reforzar la oposición medieval-moderno que, de hecho, está arraigada en formas sistémicas de racismo y anti-negritud.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2024).
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-024-00309-2>

To speak of a global Middle Ages and associated phenomena, such as global neomedievalism, is increasingly common, and no doubt readers of this cluster and *postmedieval* more broadly will be very familiar with medieval globality's origins and rationale. Since the mid-2010s it has gained increasing currency in medieval studies as a way to diminish the field's undeniable Eurocentrism, and as a result has encouraged a variety of literary and historical studies that decentre Europe or focus on its connections and exchanges with extra european polities in the period. The Global Middle Ages (henceforth GMA) research programme was, for many medievalists, a paradigm shift, in that it opened up new discussions on intercultural exchange in the period c. 500–1500 CE, particularly in contexts usually excluded from such analysis. Yet at the time of writing—late 2022—it is also fair to say that the fields of historical, cultural, and literary studies in this period are at an impasse. The notion of a medieval period in all locations of the globe is neither unanimously accepted nor unanimously utilised as a research paradigm by those who have long worked on the very geographies that GMA seeks to include. In language departments, the undeniable Eurocentrism of GMA's origins—that is, its initial theorisation by those working on English and French medieval studies—is also starting to have tangible, institutional effects. GMA's theoretical elaboration was spearheaded in the USA by Geraldine Heng, Susan Noakes, and Lynn Ramey, co-directors of G-MAP (Global Middle Ages Project). Heng and Noakes now edit the Cambridge series *Elements in the Global Middle Ages*. While the parallel effort began by UK historians working on China and the Mediterranean may not emanate from Western Europe disciplinarily, it does so institutionally (see Holmes and Standen (2018)).¹ As of 2022, multiple tenure lines in GMA have been opened up in US English departments which, despite perhaps liberatory intentions, centre those trained in traditional European (or, more precisely, English) medieval studies as the voices of a global analysis. Sierra Lomuto has recently shown how these new positions constitute a strategic equality, diversity, and inclusion initiative that paradoxically reinforces the colonial dominance of the use and study of the English language and has laid bare 'the obvious incompatibility of the global medieval turn within the English department, which creates a fissure that cracks open the colonial logic that still lays claim to both English literature and medieval studies' (2023, 4).

1 GMA has also been developed elsewhere in Western Europe: the University of Vienna hosted the comparative project VISCOM from 2011–2019 with a final conference on 'Adventures in Comparison: The Global Middle Ages,' while the latest issue of the Swiss journal *traverse* interrogates postcolonial premodernity and GMA.



The monolingual GMA that emanates from the English department, despite its diversifying aims, is one of the primary ways in which it fails to achieve full decoloniality and instead arguably perpetuates an epistemological neocolonialism.² A related factor is the uneven availability of GMA in the classroom: the founding, best-in-class example was the programme run at the University of Texas at Austin from 2004 (Heng 2021, 2–4). Other universities with sufficient financial and teaching resources can also draw on a large, interdisciplinary pool of faculty, such as Yale’s Medieval Studies programme and Oxford’s equivalent, although the latter centres the compulsory learning of a European language, while alternatives such as Hebrew and Arabic are not always available. Elsewhere in Western Europe individual courses begin from the lens of GMA, such as one at the Freie Universität Berlin on ‘das globale Frühmittelalter,’ but it was not team-taught.³ These examples, though hardly representative, nevertheless raise the question of who gets to define, teach, and learn about GMA, and what it means for smaller institutions teaching medieval studies but without the necessary expertise to globalise it.

I nevertheless begin this article with a discussion of the undeniable achievements that GMA has brought to historical and literary studies, before going on to address the issues that will remain if it continues to be used as an analytical paradigm in an unchanged manner. I do so by highlighting the paradigm’s limitations from the perspectives of Iberian and, particularly, Latin American studies. I write from the perspective of someone trained in these fields and with research interests in neomedievalism. I also write from the perspective of a mixed person; one side of whose family comes from an Iberian-South Asian colonial background, a background now lost to history and superseded by the overlapping force of British colonialism. I write with a name that has, in the past, compelled me to talk about a past with which I am not sufficiently familiar. I include this information about my own positionality because I want to emphasise that sometimes (intra)imperial connections are discernible from the position of the knowledgeable outsider (read: scholar), but alien to the person inhabiting that identity; this is an issue I see as persisting in the notion of ‘global neomedievalisms’ that is discussed in the subsequent section of this article. Here I demonstrate how, in the case of colonial and postcolonial cultural production, a ‘global Middle Ages’ runs the risk of silencing those for whom ‘medieval’ describes a period, iconography, or a set of traditions that is wholly European and undesirable. In a discussion of specific ‘neomedievalisms’ from Hispanophone contexts, I demonstrate firstly how (post)colonial neomedievalisms can unsettle the foundations of GMA, and, secondly, how the misidentification of extra European ‘neomedievalism’ takes GMA back full circle to the Eurocentrism it sought to quash.

2 GMA’s Anglocentrism contrasts how other fields have broadened their remit by centring hitherto marginalised voices and languages in Western academia. Iberian and Latin American studies continue to reformulate themselves to encompass regional, indigenous, or historically present languages in these territories in research and pedagogy, such as Galician, Nahuatl, and Arabic.

3 See course websites as follows: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/courses/mst-medieval-studies>; <https://www.fu-berlin.de/vv/de/lv/679404>.

4 Following Hytten and Stemhagen (2023), I capitalize 'Black' but not 'black' as part of an idea or concept (e.g. blackness). See also Dumas' justification: 'I write blackness and antiblackness in lowercase, because they refer not to Black people, *per se*, but to a social construction of racial meaning' (2016, 13).

5 See Vogel and García (2017) and discussion below.

Finally, I build upon work by Lomuto (2020, 2023) on the pitfalls of GMA as a diversity initiative. According to Lomuto, these pitfalls are unavoidable because of GMA's theoretical roots in representation- and accommodation-driven decoloniality, which means that even as it shifts the foci of Western institutions it fails to challenge antiblackness and neocolonialism at a systemic level.⁴ To go beyond the idea of inclusion, I suggest that more radical methods to decolonise historical-cultural pedagogy and research can be sought within recent work in language teaching and, crucially, critical Black studies. Those working in the former field have developed the notion of 'translanguaging' to value the ways in which multilingual speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire in interpretive scenarios. I suggest this offers a way through which to rethink any reliance upon a shared, Anglocentric vocabulary and instead advocates for a multiplicity of dehierarchised conceptualisations of the past.⁵ Scholars of critical Black studies, meanwhile, call for a disruptive, revolutionary approach to decoloniality that identifies the root of systemic antiblackness in the West in the invention of modernity/coloniality (and, consequently, of medievality), as well as the construction of the human: 'Afropessimist, Black feminist and other strands of work within critical Black studies seek not to reconstruct the concept of the human in more inclusive ways but to problematise and to disrupt this process' (Chipato and Chandler 2022, 1793). The interdependence of the modern, the medieval, and processes of colonization has also been laid bare in the decolonial research programme led by Latin American thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano and brought into medieval(ism) studies by José Rabasa and Nadia Altschul, which will be expanded upon below. This call for a more radical decoloniality could entail a rejection of the medieval, the adoption of 'the nonmodern,' or even an asynchronous study of the past that rejects linear temporal schemes in favour of the multiple and the asynchronous possibilities afforded by non-western cosmologies.

The title of this article is a question, which in part represents my position as a junior scholar intervening in a conversation that is important to me and is unresolved. Yet it also acknowledges that this is a debate that has vital real-life stakes in antiracism and decolonial studies (Miyashiro 2019; Rambaran Olm et al. 2020, 360; Hsy 2021, 3). Thus, to dismiss an initiative like GMA out of the gate based upon terminology alone, and without acknowledging its contribution, does far more harm than good. Instead, I seek to build on the initial impetus of GMA to decentre Europe in order to propose a way forward that destabilises traditional western temporalities and goes beyond the varied methodologies of GMA, whether those that rely on interconnectedness or mere comparison. While I do not propose a single solution to the problem at hand, this article seeks to offer



fruitful avenues for interdisciplinary theoretical engagement that allow for multiple historical epistemologies to be operative as equally valid.

Gains and losses

The gains achieved by the GMA paradigm in the shape of the diversification of historical and historical literary studies to encompass areas beyond Europe are undeniable and are evident in academia and, to a more limited extent, in the public sphere. For example, news of a turn to GMA in academic medieval studies—particularly as a result of major conferences adopting it as a theme—made its way into the mainstream media and no doubt influenced public perception (Gabriele 2018). On one occasion the *New York Times* reported on the way in which academic medievalists were mobilising a ‘global turn’ at the annual ICMS in Kalamazoo in response to the white supremacist rally at Charlottesville in 2017 (Schuessler 2019). Exhibitions and talks have taken place over the last decade at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, although the audience they have reached is limited to those with the socioeconomic resources and incentive to be museum-goers.

The GMA research programme has provided more tangible benefits at the level of the diversification of curricula and scholarship by encouraging Anglophone students and scholars, at least in the US and UK contexts, to broaden their focus beyond Europe in an attempt to de-hierarchise the study of the past and thus, to an extent, to challenge the theoretical basis of popular white supremacy. For example, GMA has emboldened new, field-shifting comparative work across geographies: Heng’s contributions on GMA include a persuasive case study on the Abbasid Empire’s trade in China and southeast Asia (2019) as well as general theorisations of GMA (2014, 2021), while Jonathan Hsy builds upon Heng by adopting GMA to explore antiracist neomedievalisms produced by western minority groups and in contexts beyond Europe to ‘signal the interconnectedness of peoples, ideas, and cultures across Afro-Eurasia throughout the time period broadly recognized as coinciding with a European Middle Ages’ and thereby counter ‘racist deployments of the “medieval” (in the pejorative sense of backwardness or barbarity)’ (2021, 19).

In extra european locations ‘medieval’ has, nevertheless, been a relatively common periodisation in English language scholarship for some time, even before GMA became common currency. For example, studies of exchange and interconnection in ‘medieval’ Chinese and Indian history have been embracing ‘a multi-directional, dynamic perspective in understanding pre-modern cultural interactions’ (J. Kim 2022, 188), but such

- 6 On India, see Mukhia (1998), D. Ali (2014) and Maurya (2022). On China, see Cunrui Xiong (1994), Barrett (1998), Brook (1998) and Knapp (2007).
- 7 See, for example, Grunebaum (1946) and numerous later studies.
- 8 See Watt (1972), Ousterhout and Ruggles (2004), and, more recently, Gomez (2018). Much of this research overlaps with Mediterranean, Jewish, and Iberian studies, as I discuss below.
- 9 The ‘middle period’ is still used interchangeably with ‘medieval’ in Islamic Studies scholarship (see Fromherz (2020)), although others have continued to critique the relevance of ‘medieval’ for Islamdom after Hodgson (see Al-Azmeh (1998), Varisco (2007)).

studies do not always engage with the shifts in theory proposed by the GMA programme (see, e.g., Sen 2017 and Aciri 2018, cited in Kim 2022). ‘Medieval’ is, however, not universally accepted terminology in studies of Indian and Chinese history and culture in this period and its usage has been debated since at least the 1990s.⁶ For their part, scholars in Islamic Studies have long referred to a ‘medieval’ period⁷ and studied Islamicate societies’ exchanges with others in the same time frame.⁸ The debate around periodisation has an equally long history: while arguing for the term ‘Islamdom,’ Marshall Hodgson concluded that the periodisation of ‘Ancient,’ ‘Medieval,’ and ‘Modern’ ‘is still more distortive of the world scene than of the European’ (1974, 48) and proposed a new tripartite categorisation for Islamicate societies consisting of formative period, middle period, and the period of ‘gunpowder empires and modern times’ (Burke and Mankin 2018, 19).⁹ More recently, Rabia Umar Ali discussed the problematic interdependence of the historical framing of the European Middle Ages as the ‘Dark Ages’ and the fact that it coincided with a period of relative prosperity in the Islamicate world (2012).

The contested reception of GMA within the fields of study noted above demonstrate that although ‘Middle Ages’ has indeed been globalised, it is not uniformly seen as an effective periodisation through which to analyse extra european history. Furthermore, many of these examples predate or run alongside the USA- and UK-based GMA research programme of the last two decades. GMA’s adoption is therefore uneven globally and its pursuit is, importantly, conditioned by the material resources available to individual researchers at a given institution, as well as the (in)accessibility of its theorisations, which are largely in English. These limitations ultimately raise the question of what sort of distinct research it can facilitate as an analytical paradigm. While there is an urgent need to teach global history and decolonise curricula to fight white supremacy and the far-right appropriation of the European past in the West, it is equally vital to take stock of what might be lost in the process of globalising a temporality and to do so by taking cues from scholars of extra european history and, particularly, at extra european institutions. The primary argument against the existence of a Middle Ages beyond Europe is the periodisation’s European origins and ongoing Eurocentric, even neocolonial, connotations as a Western framework of knowledge when it is exported to the rest of the world, as is evident in neomedievalist practices. This is an issue that I now turn to below as I outline objections and alternative frameworks from Latin American and Iberian studies, after which I seek solutions in new currents in decolonial studies.



Latin American studies, Iberian studies, and the Middle Ages

As a global analytical frame, GMA's utility depends upon the establishment of a consensus across multiple fields and geographies. Alongside the aforementioned diverging opinions in Islamic, Chinese, and South Asian studies of periodisation, similar conversations have happened and continue to take place in Latin American and Iberian studies. One of the principal objectives and methods of GMA, as articulated by the largest Anglophone research projects on the topic, is the study of global interconnections, networks, and exchanges in the period c. 500–1500 CE.¹⁰ For her part, Heng contrasts the notion of a globally orientated study of medieval literature and history that 'foregrounds interconnectivity' to that of world literature/history which 'involves learning about a wide collection of places with individual cultures, histories, and societies, some of which may or may not be introduced in relation to the others' (2021, 16). Interconnected histories continue to dominate discussions of GMA. Despite this emphasis, a more broadly comparative approach to GMA also persists in publications. For example, the series *Elements in the Global Middle Ages*, edited by Heng, features separate titles on distinct geographies, while edited collections like *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages* (Hermans 2020) adopt a similar structure with geographically distinct chapters.

The emphasis on interconnected histories in studies of globality were critiqued as early as 1997 in the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, for whom a global frame can obscure local specificity. According to Subrahmanyam, global historical issues have to be considered first and foremost in their local manifestations: 'we cannot attempt a "macro-history" of the problem without muddying our boots in the bogs of "micro-history" ' (1997, 750). More recently, Alex West has voiced opposition to the interconnectivity-model of GMA precisely due to its exclusion of large swathes of the globe; West instead proposes a 'hemispheric Middle Ages' (2021). Timothy Reuter had also earlier critiqued 'medieval' as a global category for comparison without evidenced interconnection, because 'it may provide a preliminary filing system to determine what is appropriate for comparison, but it does not offer conceptual protocols which will enable us to carry out comparison' (1998, 45). A recent article in the French journal *Annales* likewise critiques the tendency in works proposing a global Middle Ages that 'often contain high-quality contributions that focus on particular regions of the world, but the interconnections between them tend to remain relatively subliminal' (Ertl and Oschema 2022, 9).

10 As elaborated, for instance, on these websites: <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/defining-global-middle-ages>, <http://globalmiddleages.org/about>.

- 11 The weaknesses of the interconnection and exchange justification for GMA were also recently highlighted by Nora Berend (2023), whose article came out after the present study was written and revised but nevertheless complements many of the points raised here.
- 12 The same hesitation is evident in Heather McKillop's chapter on Mesoamerica in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, which employs periodisations used in precolonial Latin American studies, such as the Late and Terminal Classic periods (spanning 600–900 CE) (2020, 393–421). See also Mendoza (2006).
- 13 Although earlier iterations of GMA did not engage with decolonisation or its theorisations explicitly, more recently Heng has made suggestions for 'Decolonizing the Premodern Curriculum by Teaching the World' (2023, 362).
- 14 See Lanning (1967) on Peru, Duverger (2007) on Mesoamerica, Swenson and Roddick (2018) on indigenous Andean temporalities, and Zerubavel (1998) on the usage of 'pre-Columbian.' I am grateful to my colleague Sabine Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz for shaping my thoughts on the incompatibility of a 'Middle Ages' with the precolonial Americas.

Placing emphasis on historically verifiable instances of interconnection and exchange ultimately privileges more mobile societies and consequently excludes central and south America, at least in their relation to Europe.¹¹ The incompatibility of Latin America with GMA is made evident even in a foundational special issue of *Past & Present*, on 'The Global Middle Ages,' edited by Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen: the contribution on the pre-Columbian Americas calls it just that, hesitantly using 'medieval' only 'occasionally [...]—with reservations—for chronological comparability, not to suggest a particular mindset, ideology or developmental stage' (Pennock and Power 2018, 89).¹² Heng sidesteps the issue of the lack of contact the Americas had with other continents in this period, in comparison to Eurasia and Africa, by citing scarce DNA evidence of intercontinental travel, which, to be sure, could be expanded upon in the future, but leaves very little with which to work today (2021, 17). Comparative history and global interconnections are valid conceptions, however when the explicit political intention of such projects is to decolonise curricula and decentre the West, yet they nevertheless privilege some geographies over other, then the enterprise only perpetuates the same exclusion it seeks to combat.¹³ A related issue is the uneven availability of sources across different geographies, something that particularly affects the Americas due to the colonial destruction of precolonial cultural objects (Jansen et al. 2018). In conducting a study of the kinds of interconnections sought by GMA, it is therefore down to the individual researcher to make an ethical decision on what to study, which runs the risk of substantial biases emerging in scholarship. Holmes and Standen acknowledge the real risk of a narrative emerging that, before 1500, 'Africa and the Americas fell behind Europe and Asia in terms of political development and technological and commercial exchange, creating a context against which Asian prosperity followed by European maritime expansion and eventual global dominance then appears inevitable' (2018, 14). While Heng has urged that 'there is no single region of supreme historical significance and priority above all others' when looking globally, this is not a material reality that can be engendered by GMA because some regions will always be easier to study than others owing to the availability of sources and/or the evidence that survives of their interconnections with other locations in the period (2021, 12).

Independent of the GMA research programme, the precolonial or pre-Columbian Americas continue to be examined through long-standing local periodisations specific to their history, including indigenous concepts of time. 'Medieval' has not emerged as an operative term in scholarship, outside the limited scope of GMA.¹⁴ There is moreover an established critical tradition of dissecting the colonial baggage of the 'Middle Ages' in Latin America. On this account, the 'medieval' participates in a model of



oppressive temporalisation that renders it undesirable as a local time frame. For example, Nadia Altschul and Kathleen Davis succinctly summarise how European powers ‘established their superiority in temporal terms by mapping colonial lands and peoples as backward in time and, in many cases, as still living in the Middle Ages’ (2009, 2), and the work of Altschul (2014, 2020) and others has amply shown how ‘medieval’ and ‘Middle Ages’ have been used historically as by-words for the society and customs imposed on the Americas by Iberians and as a way for later generations to pejoratively characterise rural and indigenous communities. For instance, Clínio Amaral and Maria Eugenia Bertarelli trace the historiographic notion of a medievalised feudal system, rooted in Jacques le Goff’s ideas, being transplanted to the Americas, and conclude that ‘the reference to the Middle Ages leads us to a colonialist interpretation of the history of territories in the New World centered on a Eurocentric perspective’ (2020, 110). Elsewhere Amaral, together with Berriel and Lima Almeida, suggest that the theory of medieval continuation is a colonialist obliteration of the estrangement felt by the indigenous population of the Americas (2014, 10–11). This point was also made by Lomuto: ‘in naming the past through the lens of a racial colonial project, the ‘Middle Ages’ developed as a concept that denigrated people of color as barbaric and uncivilized while simultaneously cementing a fantasy of European white purity’ (2020, 504). Christina Brauner has also recently studied the interdependence of GMA and our current globalised, (post)-colonial world: ‘Its worldwide dissemination and its multiplication into ‘Middle Ages’ cannot be explained without the export of ‘Western’ science, its institutions, structures and concepts with universalist pretensions and particular genealogies. Its ‘globalised’ mode of existence bears witness to the epistemic and institutional consequences of colonialism’ (*Seine weltweite Verbreitung und seine Vervielfältigung zu «Mittelaltern» ist ohne den Export «westlicher» Wissenschaft, ihrer Institutionen, Strukturen und Konzepte mit universalistischem Anspruch und partikularer Genealogie nicht zu erklären. Seine dergestalt «globalisierte» Existenzweise zeugt von epistemischen wie institutionellen Konsequenzen des Kolonialismus*) (2022, 42; my translation from the German). The tendency to pejoratively medievalise the Americas can be traced back to the early centuries of colonisation which was framed as a natural continuation of the colonisation of al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia) in early modern discourse. This is evident in the work of the Mexican art historian Ida Rodríguez Prampolini who studied the conquest of the Americas as a neomedievalist, chivalresque enterprise (1977), and as Byron Ellsworth Hamann points out, ‘pre-Hispanic “temples for idols” in both Mesoamerica and the Andes were often referred to as “mosques” (*mezquitas*) in the accounts of the conquistadors’ (2008, 817), thus

equating the traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas to those of the Muslim inhabitants of al-Andalus.

In parallel to medievalists, Latin American decolonial theorists have also established the centrality of temporalisation to the modern/colonial world system, or how ‘history as “time” entered into the picture to place societies in an imaginary chronological line going from nature to culture, from barbarism to civilization following a progressive destination toward some point of arrival’ (Mignolo 2011, 151; also see Davis 2008 and Altschul 2020, 3–10). The modernity/coloniality research programme locates modernity’s—and therefore medievality’s—origin in 1492, with Iberian colonisation, and as an alternative to this periodisation promotes temporalities rooted in local histories (Escobar 2007, 183–184). An example of this in practice is José Rabasa’s proposal of the ‘nonmodern’ as a way to abandon the Western colonial construction of the medieval-modern divide when studying Mesoamerican cultures, which also avoids ‘the built-in teleology of the *pre-*in the premodern’ and ‘suggests a way to think of Mesoamerica and the Middle Ages as *elsewheres* with their specific habitus or backgrounds’ (2009, 31, 32).¹⁵ Rabasa’s nonmodern, as I will go on to argue below, is a viable solution to the western biases of GMA as it is applied worldwide.

15 See also Hulme (2005) which discusses the Eurocentric nature of western periodisation and describes a long tradition of ‘geohistorical unthinking’ stemming from Latin American thought.

Latin Americans’ complex engagement with the ‘medieval’ as an imposed European time frame is even evident outside of academia, in the growing phenomenon of medieval re-enactment across the region, driven by complex, contradictory impulses of both a racist return to origins, which denies indigenous history, and a rejection of neoliberalism and late capitalism by returning to nonmodern forms of socioeconomic organisation and paganism (De Souza 2023). In my view, critiquing and interrogating these examples as a return to *European* history is a more effective way of identifying how and why the reenactors choose to disengage from indigenous histories, rather than simply subsuming the latter under ‘medieval.’ As I contend below, drawing on a further example from the Philippines, to conceive of the Middle Ages as a globally applicable time frame overlooks the fact that post- and decolonial thinkers and creators of popular culture have conceptualised the Middle Ages as something purely European, precolonial, and often undesirable, and continue to do so. In Latin America, therefore, ‘the globalization of “the medieval” is not an example of full coevalness but is making the world conform to a Eurocentric perspective’ (Altschul 2020, 13).

Distinct doubts and debates around periodisation have arisen in Iberian studies. For Clara Pascual-Argente, the Peninsula’s history has served ‘as a model, whether tacit or openly acknowledged, in what we may call the global turn in medieval studies’ (2019, 484). This influence can be gleaned from the sheer number of studies of cultural interconnectivity and comparison by those working on the Islamicate, Christianate, and Jewish



cultures of Iberia and the Mediterranean pre-1492. For example, alongside the work of historians such as Olivia Remie Constable, Thomas F. Glick, Maribel Fierro, and Eduardo Manzano Moreno, literary and music scholars like María Rosa Menocal (2002), Rina Drory (1993), David Wacks (2007), Ross Brann (2002), S.J. Pearce (2017) and Dwight Reynolds (2021) have analysed racial and religious interconnections in Iberia.¹⁶ As noted above, those working in Islamic Studies do not uniformly adopt the Middle Ages as a viable periodisation, and if their objections are to be taken seriously it is also vital to consider the unsuitability of the ‘medieval’ for Iberia and its cultures pre-1492. Iberianists have already taken cues from the Latin American decolonial school to dissect the relevance of the ‘medieval’ for their purposes. For instance, Jean Dangler took up Rabasa’s ‘nonmodern,’ World Systems Analysis, and Network Theory to highlight Iberia’s interconnections within and beyond the Mediterranean and to discuss how scholarly communities can enact changes to norms of periodisation (2017). In a review of Dangler, Pearce suggested that ‘nonmodern Iberia’ is both ideal yet also ‘a bit cumbersome and encodes too much debate within terms unfamiliar to outsiders to carry useful meaning as a heading or rubric’ (2019, 463). I believe now is the time, given the rise of GMA, that ‘nonmodern,’ with its encoded subversion of the modernity/coloniality world system, might be tried again as a viable alternative to the globalisation of ‘the medieval’ that negates western periodisation, at least in areas colonised by Europe in the early modern period and subject to neocolonialism and ongoing narratives of (under)development. In Rabasa’s usage, nonmodern is a way of dislocating Mesoamerican cultures from an inferior ‘premodernity’ that was followed by a modernity brought on by colonisation. I believe the value of nonmodern lies in how it calls attention to the European construction of modernity and its artificial application elsewhere. To avoid global generalisation, it could be supplemented with other locally developed temporalisations.

It is also worth pointing out that in her recent introductory volume on GMA, Heng also uses ‘nonmodern’ alongside ‘medieval,’ ‘premodern’ and ‘early globalities’ (2021). I would argue, however, that these terms are fundamentally distinct and cannot be used interchangeably: while ‘non-modern’ rejects modernity and medievality, the suffix ‘pre’ latently accepts modernity and the colonial world system it entails as reality. Building on Hodgson’s reflection that although scholars often prefer to adopt common terminology for ease of communication, ‘the responsibility remains for selecting minimally misleading terms and for defining them precisely’ (1974, 45). In the case of GMA, it is its terminological imprecision and Eurocentrism that renders it an incomplete decolonial effort. Nowhere is this clearer than in studies of ‘global neomedievalisms.’

16 Examples of work on exchange and interconnections in Mediterranean Studies include Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Karla Mallette (2013), Brian Catlos (2014) and David Wacks (2019). Post-1492, Barbara Fuchs’ *Mimesis and Empire* (2001) looked globally at the racial legacies of Iberia in the Americas.

The imposition of global neomedievalism

The notion of the modern recreation of the Middle Ages has also recently been extended to the cultural production of extraeuropean societies and termed *global* medievalism or *global* neomedievalism. I would now like to discuss some concrete examples from my own research on Hispanophone neomedievalism, which complicate GMA and, indeed, sit outside existing conceptions of global medievalism/neomedievalism. The distinction between these two terms is political: although many Anglophone scholars use ‘medievalism’ to refer to creative post-medieval recreations of medieval history and culture, here I follow Altschul in preferring neomedievalism as a catch-all term, since ‘the theoretical foundations [of medievalism] are ones with which we may no longer want to abide: Anglocentrism instead of geographical openness, insistence on survival versus revival leading to dual medieval- versus- modern societies, definitions of the medieval based on geopolitical and religious exclusions, and a focus on the Middle Ages as identity’ as well as the confusing conflation between ‘medievalism’ and ‘medieval studies’ (2023, 5; 9). Neomedievalism is a useful barometer for the utility of GMA, because its extra european manifestations can furnish scholars with an idea of how these areas conceive of the Middle Ages, and in many cases, this is as something wholly European and undesirable, as noted above in the example of Latin American re-enactment.

One of the first scholars to discuss extra european or ‘global medievalism,’ Candace Barrington restricted its usage to ‘the reception of [the] European Middle Ages’ (2016, 184). The recent introduction by Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn to global medievalism diverges from Barrington’s approach to the ‘medieval’ as a local, European time span and prefers to map it worldwide, though focusing on western popular culture (2022). This is a pathbreaking work on a particular type of resistant (neo)medievalism, also studied by Hsy (2021), but it overlooks a possible danger in using the term ‘global (neo)medievalism’: the medievalisation of modern cultural production from the seat of empire. This is a concern voiced by Louise D’Arcens in her most recent book which takes neomedievalism beyond Europe and sees how it fares as a concept. D’Arcens questions ‘whether including pre-colonial-contact Aboriginal culture within the scope of world medievalism is itself an inescapably colonizing gesture that can only reinscribe Eurocentric epistemologies, or whether this problem can be ameliorated by bringing perceptions of the global medieval into dialogue with Aboriginal perceptions of time and history’ (2021, 145). I would observe that the former possibility, of inescapably reinscribing Eurocentric epistemologies, has been shown to be



the case on more than one occasion in Hispanophone literary studies: mapping neomedievalism across the globe to (post)colonial locations can quickly degenerate into a neocolonial form of scholarship that only categorises and considers postcolonial cultural production according to its relevance to existing literary models produced at the metropole. Barrington calls this ‘temporal global medievalism,’ which ‘divides the world by time, with the West (as variously defined) part of a European continuum and the East (another restless category) relegated to a temporal realm always developmentally behind the West’ (2016, 185).

‘Temporal global medievalism’ typified the cultural (neo)imperialism of those working from the modern Spanish nation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereby (post)colonial cultural production was used to proffer the antiquity of purportedly autochthonous Iberian cultural forms in order to bolster Spanish national identity. A well-known example of this is the ballad tradition of the Sephardim, descendants of Iberian Jews forced into exile from 1492, many of whom settled in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean before later generations emigrated to the USA. Throughout the twentieth century scholars worked to collect and collate Sephardic oral traditions worldwide, largely from female singers, with differing goals in mind. Many early collectors from Spain did so out of a nationalistic impetus. Michelle M. Hamilton has discussed how famous Spanish medievalist Ramón Menéndez Pidal was chiefly concerned with how the Sephardic or ‘Judeo-Spanish Romancero served as witness to the fullness of a lost “Spanish” ballad tradition and corpus’ (2009, 182). More recently, musicologist Edwin Seroussi articulated the complex, overlapping motives for this medievalisation of Sephardic cultural production, or ‘how, by whom and why such a modern repertoire of songs came to be anointed with this halo of archaism’ (*cómo, por quién y por qué un repertorio tan moderno llegó a ser ungido con este halo de ancianidad*), ranging from the idealisation of the Sephardim by Ashkenazi Jews, modern Spanish nationalism, and cultural imperialism to the modern Sephardic sense of nation (2019, 28; my translation from the Spanish). Yet, as I have recently argued, if one returns to the audio archives of ballads recorded in the USA in the twentieth century, it is clear that these ballads reflect contemporary concerns of assimilating into American metropolises as an upwardly mobile minority overshadowed by an Ashkenazi majority, and their singers are not cognisant of, and do not place importance upon, possible medieval sources identified by scholars (De Souza 2024). Despite this fact, studies that medievalise and trace the textual genealogies of these songs still dominate in scholarship on the Sephardic *romansas*, which arguably constitutes a type of epistemic violence towards the value and valence that they held for their communities of reception. By considering the songs as descendants of a peninsular

Spanish tradition and part of a wider, neoimperialist pan-Hispanic network of literary influence, these studies obscure the renovation of earlier models in light of the diaspora's experiences in the Mediterranean, the USA and elsewhere post-1492.

A second example of such external medievalisation is the case of the Mexican *corrido*, another genre whose origins academics have sought in Iberian poetic antecedents. The *corrido* emerged in nineteenth-century Mexico as a newsbearing musical genre during the War of Independence against Spain. It is no coincidence that, despite the genre's roots in Mexican independence, it has come to be re-rooted in Iberian history. In the 1960s Merle E. Simmons and Américo Paredes engaged in a debate on the genre's purported Iberian ancestry, with Paredes arguing against Simmons's charge of a lack of originality by attending to the *corrido*'s local specificities: 'it is an expression of Mexican nationalism' and 'includes the Mexican spirit of bravado' (1963, 233). For Paredes, Simmons's accusations served to undermine the literary-cultural creativity of Mexican cultural production post-independence. They also contributed to the medievalisation of the tradition back to Iberian antecedents, following the methods of Menéndez Pidal and subsequent scholars of the Sephardic ballad.

Left unchecked, a study of global neomedievalisms can therefore quickly descend into to a neocolonial excavation of literary genealogies, as evidenced by postcolonial and diasporic Hispanophone cultural production from at least the nineteenth century. Current theorisations of global neomedievalisms do not sufficiently distinguish between neomedievalism that actively engages with the European Middle Ages and cultural production that contains medieval traces only intelligible to the scholar. Once again Altschul's analysis is instructive in this regard: neomedievalist 'practices, traits, or objects are not defined by their first moment of existence—their origin—but instead by their presence in whatever chronological times they have existed' (2020, 9). To avoid the neocolonial temporalisation of extra european cultural production as medievalist, scholars therefore have an ethical imperative to understand the perspectives of the producers and consumers of these works rather than overemphasise a theoretical historical origin or influence.

A second issue with mapping global neomedievalism that I have already touched upon is the way in which (post)colonial and diasporic cultural productions have historically reconfigured a specifically *European* Middle Ages in an example of 'creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries' (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 7). These interventions function against the backdrop of the modern/colonial matrix of power. If the term 'global neomedievalism' is used to connote *both* modern recreations of a formerly colonised country's



precolonial past *and* recreations of the European Middle Ages in this same context, it conflates two phenomena that are spurred on by distinct impetuses. In some Hispanophone contexts, the latter form of cultural production is distinct in so far as its function has been to construct the Middle Ages as something particularly *European* and backward as an anticolonial gesture. I have studied this in the case of the Philippines, where the European Middle Ages have been invoked and reenacted in order to deride the social formation and culture imposed on the archipelago by the Spanish colonisers. The late-colonial anonymous metrical romance *Historia famosa ni Bernardo Carpio: sa reinong Espana na anac ni D. Sancho Diaz at ni Doña Jimena* (*The Famous Story of Bernardo Carpio in the Kingdom of Spain, Son of Sancho Diaz and Doña Jimena*) (1860), appropriates a legend of medieval Iberia to articulate future strategies of renewal and creolisation and dissuades its audience from a fruitless search for origins through its *mestizo* hero, while simultaneously critiquing an indolent, medievalised Spanish monarchy (De Souza 2024). *Bernardo Carpio* is therefore an example of what Barrington had earlier called ‘linguistic global medievalism’ which is when ‘non-Western cultures appropriate medieval texts for their own purposes’ (2016, 190). While GMA may aim for the ‘medieval’ to shed its Eurocentric associations, in the late-colonial Philippines it retained Europeanness as a form of resistance. Like the antiracist neomedievalisms studied by Hsy, *Bernardo Carpio* also constituted a survival strategy in the late colonial state by taking a colonial literary form and subverting its logics from within, but it is distinct insofar as it does not disprove the notion that the Iberian Middle Ages are white property (2021, 4 and 7-8) but rather reinforces this as a symptom of colonial decadence.

A disruptive decoloniality, not diversification

Studies of ‘global neomedievalism’ are therefore doubly useful in unpicking the issues surrounding GMA: on the one hand, those studies that impose a neomedievality that is not adducible to the producers and creators of certain works have fallen foul of the same Eurocentric assumptions and epistemic violence inherent in a global application of the Middle Ages, as the examples of the Sephardic ballad and *corrido* demonstrate. Other texts that are clearly neomedieval for their producers and audiences, like the Filipino metrical romance, conversely serve to expose an extra-European perception of the Middle Ages as something solely European; in turn undermining the notion of a GMA.

GMA began as an effort to diversify, and has more recently transformed into an effort to decolonise, university curricula and

research programmes treating the medieval period, which grew out of individual European states' nationalisms in the nineteenth century, leading to epistemic violence and exclusion or denigration of non-European cultures in scholarship and the university classroom. GMA purports to do so by including and promoting the study of extra european areas and their connections with Europe and with each other in the span of years defined as the 'Middle Ages.' As noted above, scholars from many disciplines have levied accusations of Eurocentrism at the globalisation of this temporality, not least because its invention was intrinsic to the colonial world system that paradoxically oppressed some of the very societies GMA seeks to include, and this is something acknowledged early on by the research programme's foremost theorists (Heng 2014, 236). I repeat the word *include* here because GMA promotes *inclusion* and *accommodation* into a colonial episteme and has achieved quick gains as a result, but I contend that this theoretical compromise is too big and serves the marketisation of the neoliberal university. That is because the politics of inclusion and accommodation, while perhaps aiming towards decoloniality, cannot go beyond the level of diversification. This argument builds on Lomuto's recent work. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included*, Lomuto observes that in recent years GMA has shifted away from postcolonial theory to becoming 'a diversity initiative in service of rebranding the field' (2020, 507). In other words, it is a theoretical evolution rather than revolution, and if revolution is to be achieved, then I believe it will not come from within European medieval studies but rather by taking cues from other disciplines, such as sociolinguistics and critical Black studies.

The central argument mitigating against GMA's Eurocentrism is the importance, above all, of a shared vocabulary to speak across disciplines (Heng 2021, 24). Yet what is being lost by promoting imperfect nomenclature from the neocolonial context of Anglophone academia for ease of comparison and contrast? Proposing a 'shared vocabulary' is not unrelated to the current, material reality of English as an academic lingua franca, a shared language, which has been critiqued from locations all over the globe as a form of linguistic domination and epistemicide (Mocikat 2008; Bennett 2013; Suzina 2021; Navarro et al. 2022).¹⁷ Thomas Ertl and Klaus Oschema have already warned that as GMA requires cross-disciplinary expertise and collaboration, English will likely dominate, which could lead to myriad inequalities between native and non-native speakers, and as a result, GMA 'should not become another project co-opted by elites educated at Western universities to put a friendly face on globalization and celebrate materially well-off cosmopolitans' (2022, 13).¹⁸ In pursuing its task of identifying global interconnections and

17 It is not lost on me that this article is in English and addresses multiple disciplines. It also appears in *postmedieval*, an Anglophone, globally-orientated journal that nevertheless promotes work by non-native speakers. Julie Orlemanski (2023) has recently reflected on issues of terminology and discipline in relation to the journal.

18 See also Fryxell et al. who contend that GMA 'merely serves to reify existing divisions in a Eurocentric periodization that, in the 'era' of global history, reveals the tenacity of Western time models in historical periodization' (2022, 13).



comparison, it is therefore vital that GMA avoids the Eurocentrism to which comparative literature succumbed.¹⁹

As a first step, GMA could be modulated and reformulated by drawing on decolonial solutions to the hegemony of English, such as ‘translingualism,’ which posit that language is always in process and continually remade through performance (Horner et al. 2011). A related concept, translanguaging seeks to engage bi- and multilingual speakers’ ‘existing, multiple, and dynamic meaning-making systems, knowledge, and subjectivities, thus destabilizing the hegemonic power relation between the so-called monolingual native speakers and the othered users of othered languages,’ and it ‘urges all of us to resist neocolonialism through the soft power of English’ (Wei 2022, 178; 179). Translanguaging respects the unique linguistic skills and repertoire that bi- and multilingual people draw on to communicate. The implications of this approach for globally comparative history in the period c. 500–1500 CE could simply be a recognition of multiple operative temporalities rather than a continuous insistence on a ‘Middle Age’. In written scholarship, cross-cultural comparisons and interconnections can still take place while invoking multiple temporalities and approaches to the past and while avoiding postulating one method as hegemonic on the dubious grounds of ease of communication.

A practical example of ‘translanguaging’ in the study of the global past and abandoning a homogenous GMA is given by Carolyn Dinshaw, whose approach to temporality has been levied by some scholars in both Latin American medieval studies and premodern critical race studies as a possible route out of Eurocentric periodisation.²⁰ In her work *How Soon is Now* (2012), Dinshaw fosters temporalities ‘other than the narrowly sequential’ and promotes ‘*asynchrony*: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of *now*’ in our study of the past (2012, 4; 5). To my knowledge, no studies from the lens of GMA have explored the possibility of an asynchronous perspective that embraces what Dinshaw—perhaps taking cues from Rabasa—calls ‘nonmodern—okay, call them queer—temporal possibilities’ (2012, 12). In the context of a globally comparative study, this could involve a comparison of indigenous cosmologies in South America with the mapping of time and the history of the clock in Europe, which does not privilege a single moment of temporal convergence or physical interconnection (during a ‘Middle Age’) but rather identifies ways in which both approaches to temporality could help us understand each other today.

This possible solution goes some way towards addressing the fundamental issue noted by Rabasa, Lomuto, and others: to respect the medieval/modern divide uncritically—and I too have been guilty of this—is also to accept capitalist modernity with its temporal scheme of linear

19 As Kim Jae-yong observes, ‘though the new way that the Euro-American literary establishment regards world literature has expanded its sources and subjects, it is still unable to escape the Euro-American-centric nature of its own perspective’ (2016, 65).

20 See Bertarelli and Amaral (2020) and Chakravarty and Thompson (2021).

progress and development, and its dependence upon systemic antiblackness, as the inevitable path of history rather than a project instated by European colonial powers. If those producing academic work continue to consider the period before c. 1500 CE as medieval, they therefore take for granted the existence of modernity and its racialised logics. While Heng has observed ‘the asynchrony of global temporalities upturns old tyrannies of periodization in the West’ (2014, 237)—the notion of multiple, alternative modernities can still be understood as still Eurocentric. As Altschul writes, it ‘may seem to provide equality in difference— or full contemporaneity in access to modernity instead of not-yet-fully-modern presents marked by denial of coevalness—but this equality is only available after the world has been subsumed to capitalism’ (2020, 11). This is not to say that race did not exist before coloniality—Heng has proven this beyond doubt (2018)—but the European invention of ‘modernity’ depended upon specific, new forms of racialisation and antiblackness that were systemic, broad in their geographical spread and fundamental to the establishment of the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2021, 106).

In answer to Lomuto’s question of whether GMA can be anti-colonial or will ‘merely adapt the Middle Ages for a 21st-century context of ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (2020, 509), the latter outcome threatens. As early as 2016, Davis identified the danger in GMA legitimising globalisation by providing it with a past (Davis and Puett 2016), and as I noted at the start of this article, GMA is attracting funding and new academic positions. In this context it is important to ask the uncomfortable questions: is this because it fits with the goals of neoliberal academia and global capitalism? Can it also be described as a way to ‘rebrand medieval studies in a way that obscures, redirects, and offers a more palatable marketability’ (Rambaran-Olm et al. 2020, 359)? It is not difficult to imagine a worst-case scenario in which institutions justify a diminishing of geographically broad expertise in literary and historical studies if Europeanists are rebranded global experts and deemed able to work comparatively.

Expanding on Lomuto’s argument, I contend that the critique of GMA can serve to identify the type of inclusive and even liberatory work it undertakes and why it is limited and, secondly, to outline some possible solutions.²¹ Scholars in international relations and geography have recently proposed a decolonial approach distinct from the kind of accommodationist diversification pursued by projects like GMA. Building on the work of Mignolo and Escobar, Farai Chipato and David Chandler critique current dominant approaches in decolonial studies that either take ‘on board epistemologies of the Global South’ (2022, 1784) or highlight structural racism. The former includes these epistemologies alongside

21 In a similar vein, Orlemanski recently pointed out that ‘interrogating terms like global, the Middle Ages, and theory can be catalysts to confront the Eurocentrism, transnational flows of capital, dominance of English, and politics of time that make those words significant for us’ (2023, 79).



dominant western ones, while the latter approach simply identifies and does not change the theoretical basis of structural racism. Neither actively challenge the antiblack world we live in, which is characterised by ‘a libidinal desire to know, to order, and to regulate a world whose reality (where there are no binary divides of human/subjects and nature/things/objects) must continually be violently negated’ (2022, 3). GMA typifies the latter approach, in its inclusion of extra european geographies into a European epistemology. This critique can be traced back to the work of Frantz Fanon who articulated the temporal violence of colonialism:

in Fanon’s speculative narrative of pre- and non-colonial situations [...] there are no obvious ‘precolonial’ values or communities; what is violently disrupted by colonialism is precisely the fundamental ability of cultures and communities to change continuously and self-critically. It is this feature that colonial modernity freezes into suspension; to then valorize the ‘premodern’ or the ‘precolonial’ would be, ironically, to endorse the worse effects of colonization and the kind of modernity it seeks to impose. (Gopal 2004, 160-161)²²

Chipato and Chandler encourage, in contrast, new ‘plural posthuman imaginaries, rich and varied more-than-human ontologies and epistemologies, all manner of repositioned and repurposed subject, in ever-expanding relations of care and nurturing’ (2022, 1794). The caring and careful possibilities of posthumanism, or the critical exposure of the Enlightenment construction of the human that also instated an antiblack world, complement Dinshaw’s asynchronous approach to study the past through multiple temporalities. Taking a posthuman stance could potentially involve eradication of the ‘medieval’ and the ‘Middle Ages,’ just as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ has in large part been expediently disposed of. While this would critically disavow the colonial and racial violence inherent in reifying the medieval/modern binary, erasing this construction entirely without critiquing it likewise silences its history of violence.²³ For posthumanists Manuela Rossini and Mike Toggweiler, disposing entirely with the ‘medieval’ or other elements of Humanist temporalisation is indeed an impossible fantasy in our current reality:

The seemingly liberating dream of hopping off the modernist machine, bringing it to a standstill or smashing it into pieces in order to step into new horizons is caught within an onto-teleological forgetfulness and is thus itself highly contaminated by a delusive accelerationist discourse, coupled to a measured, linear and enclosed understanding of time-space. (2018, 6)

Instead, Rossini and Toggweiler call on those who employ temporalisation to embrace ‘the multiple, relational, ambivalent, incompatible,

22 Also see Mbembe (2001), Walcott (2021, 56), Fúnez-Flores (2022, 12–13), and Chapter 12 of the *Critical Black Studies Reader* (Rochelle Brock et al. 2017), which critiques the discourse of ‘diversity and inclusion,’ to which GMA, in my view, belongs.

23 Another material risk in taking this path is the readiness of universities to destroy departments that are ill-defined, as Ertl and Oschema point out (2021, 798–799).

fragmented, ephemeral, discontinuous, and dissonant in order to see, hear and feel differently’ (2018, 6). For scholars of the period c. 500–1500 CE, this call to perceive differently could be uncomfortable: it involves situating the ‘medieval’ in the violent context of its emergence in the colonial world-system while also pursuing an asynchronous study of the past that does not conform to normative, linear models of connection and comparison, drawing on the materiality and affects engendered by sources as they exist within and across time and resisting the urge to order them geographically or chronologically. The same procedure of critically situating the ‘medieval’ as a concept can, ultimately, be carried out when invoking the ‘Global Medieval,’ which should also continue to be contextualised in whichever political, economic, and institutional settings it has been and will be deemed useful.

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