

# The Afterward: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in the Medieval Imaginary

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## Introduction

For this special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*, we offer a coda that shifts from the medieval past to its afterlives in the form of medievalism. We deal more specifically with the lives and work of two transgender activists, the narratives around whom offer much in the way of rethinking medievalism and how we teach it. Focusing on the legacies of two formative activists in American LGBT history, this Afterword/Afterward provides the foundation for a praxis—a way of conceptualizing and engaging with medievalism that centers trans women of color and ultimately offers a way of radically rethinking what we mean by “medievalism” in the first place.

Marsha “Pay It No Mind” Johnson was a black trans woman, born August 24, 1945. Sylvia Rivera was a Puerto Rican trans woman, born July 2, 1951. Both lived in New York City, often on the streets of Greenwich Village. Both participated in the Stonewall Riots and became prominent members of New York City’s street community and gay liberation movement. However, their cultural, historical, and political significance is not easily summarized. During her lifetime, Johnson came to be regarded by many as a living saint (as we describe in detail below). Rivera was a more overtly controversial figure while she was alive, thanks to her relentless commitment to challenging both police violence and transphobia within the white, cisgender gay community.<sup>1</sup> However, after her death, Rivera has been honored and remembered by transgender

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1. Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 239.

people who have asserted her significance to LGBT history. Thus, both Rivera and Johnson have been venerated, sometimes as political leaders, sometimes as saints, and often as both, by segments of the LGBT community. In this way, we are presenting a hagiography of sorts.

So, what have two trans women of color to do with the medieval? Our short answer: Quite a bit, with the caveat that Rivera and Johnson *did* medievalism in a way vastly different than the way, say, Tolkien did medievalism. When first consulting the archive of material that reaches us concerning the lives of Rivera and Johnson, it is clear to us that there is much of the medieval in their lives. Here we will present some accounts of Rivera's and Johnson's lives (as well as the retellings of those lives) and show how they intersect with powerful rhetorics of canonization, sainthood, and martyrdom. Affective devotional practice, liturgy, and experimental religiosity all pervade these narrative accounts, and, in some examples, medieval analogues are clear. For instance, at one point, Johnson dresses herself as the Virgin Mary,<sup>2</sup> while Rivera adapts and rewrites medieval hagiography in the homespun liturgy she created for the STAR community.<sup>3</sup> The greater significance of this medievalism remains more difficult to pinpoint, and this Afterword/Afterward does not argue for any single interpretation. Rather, we hope to show that these hitherto unacknowledged engagements with the medieval past demonstrate how medievalism can be something not just represented but embodied—a powerful form of resistance. The canonical figures of Johnson and Rivera as well as the (medieval) rhetorics surrounding their lives allow us to reflect on modern trans resistance and the lasting impact of these extraordinary activists still felt today. More broadly, this paper is significant for medievalists today as our collective work continues to interrogate and negotiate what narratives about the medieval past and its afterlives we deem worthy of scholarly attention and pedagogy—most of all pedagogy, since it has powerful repercussions for the field, its future directions, and ultimately who finds the medieval past accessible.

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2. Sylvia Rivera, "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones," in *Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*, ed. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, 67–85 (New York: Alyson Books, 2002), 73.

3. Stephan L. Cohen, *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: "An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail"* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

We have organized the following accounts thematically. After a brief discussion of the extant archive of Johnson's and Rivera's lives, we provide an overview of Rivera's and Johnson's background, the circumstances of their meeting, and their political collaboration. We hope to provide an impression of the community in which both lived and worked. We then examine the prevailing narratives around Johnson's devotional practices and eventual canonization within queer and trans communities before moving into Rivera's devotional practices. Our archival accounts then turn to a discussion of attributed miracle work and the rhetoric surrounding Johnson's martyrdom. Finally, we will close with a discussion of the "medieval imaginary" and how the extraordinary lives of Rivera and Johnson can aid us in reformulating what it means to *be medievalist* as well as what it means to be *a medievalist teaching medievalism*.

### Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in the Archive

Outside of the medieval academy, the legacy of Rivera's and Johnson's activism along with their personal lives have been the subject of scholarly and popular attention.<sup>4</sup> As cofounders of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), Rivera and Johnson advocated for New York City's queer and trans community for decades, drawing public attention to critical social issues such as youth homelessness, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and police harassment before, during, and after the events at Stonewall in 1969. Johnson's activist career was tragically cut short by her death, widely believed to be a murder. Throughout their lives the two maintained a close relationship, and their politics were deeply critical of the assimilationist quality of much LGBT activism (an issue no less contentious today). Not only were Rivera and Johnson transgender women, but their activism intersected with the antiracist, anti-imperial

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4. See *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, dir. Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel (New York: 2017); Rivera, "Queens in Exile"; *Pay It No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*, dir. Michael Kasino (Redux Pictures, 2012); Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Duberman, *Stonewall*; Cohen, *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York*; and Robert Sember, "Resurfacing: AIDS, Sexuality, and the Politics of Mourning," *Transforming Anthropology* 8, nos. 1-2 (1999): 54-76.

politics of the Black Freedom Movement—a cause both were active in during their younger years and that continued to inform their politics throughout their lives. A complete discussion of Rivera’s and Johnson’s lives must acknowledge their place as racialized subjects; as Puerto Rican and African American women, respectively, Rivera and Johnson existed at an intersectional juncture of identity, and to understand their transgender identity as well as their racial politics of resistance, these intimately interwoven aspects of their identities must be acknowledged.

Contemporary scholars, particularly black feminists, highlight the importance of considering gender and sexuality as frames integral, not tangential, to understanding race formation historically. Siobhan B. Somerville, C. Riley Snorton, Ann L. Stoler, María Lugones, and Patricia Hill Collins argue for a more intersectional approach to scholarly treatments of racialized embodiment and experience.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, their approaches emphasize the importance of history to intersectional discussions of race, sexuality, and gender as their findings chart an enduring history of the relationship between these categories that has its roots in colonialism and persists in the “new racism” of the United States today, which seeks to elide racial difference as a strategy for the continuation of oppressive politics and rhetorics.<sup>6</sup> In addition, each author situates the oppression of racially subaltern bodies in an analysis of a constellation of different texts, consulting not only legal history and political epistemology but also the growing experiential archives of poetry and music. The wealth of narrative, historical, and artistic texts available for a study of Rivera’s and Johnson’s medievalism reveals how a

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5. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 15-39; María Lugones, “Heterosexuality and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186-209; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Ann L. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634-60, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/645114>: 634-60; Patricia Hill Collins, “Why Black Sexual Politics?” chap. 1, 25-52 and “Prisons for Our Bodies, Closets for Our Minds: Racism, Heterosexism, and Black Sexuality,” chap. 3, 87-118, in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

6. See Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

rigorous accounting of their lives requires an equally rigorous accounting of diverse sources. By compiling those sources in a coherent manner (in this case, with close attention to their idiosyncratic uses of the medieval past), this continued work on Rivera's and Johnson's medievalism points toward a new, more inclusive archive of sources for the study of medievalism. In particular, we are indebted to the work of Tourmaline, whose decision to share the primary sources she found during her archival research on STAR made our work possible.<sup>7</sup>

To collate these narrative accounts of Rivera's and Johnson's lives is to lay the foundation for an updated archive of medievalism. In his article, "Listening to the Archives: Black Lesbian Literature and Queer Memory," Matt Richardson discusses the complicated and often fraught history of black archival work specifically.<sup>8</sup> He is concerned with claims to history and continued efforts to seize control of that history through the creation of archives of black experience. In those archives of black experience, Richardson sees a lack of queer voices, possibly owing to an unconscious impetus to sanitize or normalize blackness in reclaiming a history that has been subject to countless abridgements and manipulations. His work dwells on the importance of memory as he underscores various examples of a "politics of improvisation" in art and literature that amplifies the queerness of black experience throughout American history.<sup>9</sup> He ultimately confronts the question of who is remembered in the archive and the need for an archive of black experience to be clearer in its representation of nonnormative sexuality. This work on Rivera and Johnson follows Richardson's line of questioning, as it acknowledges their subjectivities as inherently racialized, postcolonial, and transgender. As discussed in greater detail below, Rivera and Johnson both engaged with their tradition of "improvised" medievalisms—experimental in their transcendence of time and historicity—that are queer, transgender, and postcolonial at their core.

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7. More of Tourmaline's work is available on her website, which is published under her former name: <http://www.reinagossett.com>, accessed 12 September 2019.

8. Matt Richardson, "Listening to the Archives: Black Lesbian Literature and Queer Memory," in *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*, 1–20 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

9. Richardson, 16.

To argue simply that Rivera and Johnson should be included in an ever-expanding archive of medievalism may belie the complex engagements with the medieval past that their lives present—engagements which form the crux of this Afterword/Afterward. It is equally important not to subsume their legacies and identities within such an archive in a reductive way. Rather, Rivera's and Johnson's entangled narratives may utilize the medieval but are in no way reducible to a medievalist experiment. These radical lives and their medievalisms offer an avenue into a broader understanding and appreciation of Rivera and Johnson. At the same time, archival work can inform how medievalists conceptualize and teach medievalism more broadly. We can reassess the form and function of a pedagogy of medievalism, calling attention to the ways in which we as scholars and instructors can subvert the prevailing status quo, mainly by challenging notions of what we consider medievalism in the first place.

### The Origins of STAR House

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson met seven years before the Stonewall Riots on an auspicious night: Halloween. Halloween was an important night in the calendar of LGBT life because it was one of the few nights one could appear in gender transgressive clothing without fear of arrest. Wearing clothing that did not conform with one's assigned birth gender was illegal, as an 1845 New York State statute made it a crime to "masquerade."<sup>10</sup> This law effectively put transgender people at risk of arrest at all times and implied that they were pretending to be something they were not.<sup>11</sup> That Halloween night, Rivera was with a group of Latina queens when she spotted Johnson. Rivera wrote, in her characteristic campy inflection, "This one queen named Louisa snatched Marsha's wig. Well, Marsha wasn't going to have it. When she caught up to Louisa up on 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue she beat the living

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10. Ruthann Robson, *Dressing Constitutionally: Hierarchy, Sexuality, and Democracy from Our Hairstyles to Our Shoes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 125.

11. For one such arrest, see *People v. Archibald*, 58 Misc.2d 862 (N.Y. Misc. 1968).

daylights out of her.”<sup>12</sup> Later, Johnson introduced herself to Rivera and took her out to eat.<sup>13</sup> Johnson took Rivera under her tutelage, as she had been living in street communities for longer than the younger queen. Thus, a friendship began that would serve as the basis for Rivera’s and Johnson’s groundbreaking organizing for transgender liberation.

Johnson was credited by her friends in the New York LGBT community with providing the spark that erupted into the Stonewall Riots. In one of the first acts of resistance that night, Johnson threw a shot glass at a police officer and yelled “I got my civil rights.”<sup>14</sup> Johnson’s statement encapsulated the feeling at the Stonewall bar that night: that it was time for LGBT people to fight against police harassment, joining the people’s movements of the late 1960s. Rivera has been credited by some contemporary activists for starting the Stonewall riots, even though she herself did not claim to.<sup>15</sup> For both, the Stonewall Riots were the beginning of more formalized political engagement. Together, Johnson and Rivera founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutions (STAR), one of the first trans organizations in New York City.

STAR’s approach centered on the immediate needs of homeless transgender and queer people of color. Johnson and Rivera articulated a revolutionary approach to activism that was broad-based and structural in its method. Johnson described the politics of STAR to a reporter saying, “STAR is a very revolutionary group. We believe in picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary.” She continued, “We’d like to see our gay brothers and sisters out of jail and on the streets again. There are a lot of gay transvestites who have been in jail for no reason at all, and the reason why they don’t get out is they can’t get a lawyer or any bail.”<sup>16</sup> Johnson and Rivera raised money to bail out their sisters and built a community for homeless transgender youth, which they named STAR House.

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12. Rivera, “Queens in Exile,” 71–72.

13. Rivera, 72.

14. *Pay It No Mind* (2012).

15. Sylvia Rivera, “Our Armies Are Rising and Getting Stronger,” talk given at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York, 2001; available online at *History Is a Weapon* (blog), <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/riverarisingandstronger.html>, accessed 27 May 2018.

16. Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 115.

The first STAR House was a trailer truck sitting in a parking lot that Rivera and Johnson discovered and claimed as their own. Rivera and Johnson quickly attracted two dozen young transgender sisters. Duberman writes, “The ground rule in the trailer was that nobody *had* to go out and hustle her body [perform sex work], but that when they did, they had to kick back a percentage to help keep ‘STAR House’ going.”<sup>17</sup> Rivera and Johnson performed sex work to earn enough money to bring back breakfast food every day. One morning, Rivera and Johnson found someone driving the truck away. They watched, terrified, as young queens started to jump out of the back. “We’re standing there like two yentas,” Sylvia later recalled. “‘Oh, my God, the kids, the kids! Oh Lord Jesus, please don’t take the children!’ Two crazy women, hysterical. And in full drag.” Most of the youth managed to leap out of the truck safely, but one queen woke up to find herself on the way to California.<sup>18</sup> Rivera and Johnson knew they needed a more permanent home.

Rivera and Johnson raised money to rent a building and expand STAR House. Together, they earned enough money through sex work to pay the rent while the younger members “liberated” food for the house, as well as their neighbors. Rivera described the relationship between STAR and its working-class neighbors saying, “Everyone in the neighborhood loved STAR House. They were impressed because they could leave their kids and we’d baby-sit them. If they were hungry, we fed them . . . it was a revolutionary thing.”<sup>19</sup> By caring for their straight, cisgender neighbors, STAR demonstrated their intersectional understanding of revolution. For them, the liberation of transgender people could not be separated from justice for other impoverished people of color.

### Marsha as Saint

Among queer and trans people living on Christopher Street, sharing resources, information, and survival skills was a widespread practice.

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17. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 239.

18. Duberman, 239.

19. Rivera, “Queens in Exile,” 53.



Rivera reported that her friends regularly shared food and temporary housing.<sup>20</sup> Johnson, however, became well-known for her truly remarkable generosity. Rivera said, “Marsha would give the blouse off her back if you asked for it. She would give you her last dollar. She would take off her shoes. I’ve seen her do all these things.”<sup>21</sup> Johnson’s appearance also contributed to her notoriety. Her look was unconventional: she used flowers and found objects to create elaborate crowns, which she wore alongside dresses and white sneakers. Together, Johnson’s appearance and personality earned her a curious distinction: she became known as the first living saint of the queer and trans community.

According to Agosto Machado, a longtime friend and fellow activist, “She was a bodhisattva, a holy person, a saint on street corners.” Machado compared her to “Jesus with the loaves and fishes,” explaining “Marsha always had something to share.”<sup>22</sup> Many other members of the New York City queer and trans community shared this assessment of Johnson’s significance. Tommy Laigan-Schmidt said, “Marsha had a following around town . . . I’d go to the flower district and they’d have these big tables where they sort lilies and things. And Marsha would be sleeping under them! I saw this more than once. And I would go to the guy there and say, ‘Why is she here?’ and the guy would just say, ‘She’s holy.’”<sup>23</sup> When Andy Warhol silkscreened Johnson’s image in 1975 as a part of his “Ladies and Gentlemen” portrait series, he turned her into a literal icon. However, Johnson’s friends insisted that Warhol did not create Johnson’s success. Instead, he merely recognized the acclaim she had already found.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson had a rich and public spiritual life that demands and deserves to be taken seriously as a devotional practice. Medieval studies, in fact, provides a means to contextualize her idiosyncratic habits within a larger tradition. Johnson described her devotions in this way: “I go pray to Mary. I use Jesus for most of my prayers most of the time. Cause I use the church in Hoboken and you can light a candle or go in and say a

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20. Rivera, 42.

21. Rivera, 45.

22. *Pay It No Mind* (2012).

23. *Pay It No Mind*.

24. *Pay It No Mind*.

prayer. You know, for people dying of AIDS.” Her friend and longtime roommate Randy Whicker said “She was very, very religious. A neighbor came in and told me that at 6 in the morning they had gone to the Catholic church across the street and Marsha was prostrate on the floor in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary.” Another friend reported that he would “find her in the strangest churches. She’d be dressed in velvet and she’d be throwing glitter. And she would never face the altar. When she was praying, she’d lay prostrate facing the door because she thought, you don’t look at the altar.” Other friends said that Johnson would pray at the Greek Orthodox church, the Catholic church, the Baptist church, a Jewish synagogue, to “cover all angles.”<sup>25</sup> According to her friend Bob Kohler, she often went down to the Hudson River to remember her father or pray to Neptune, sometimes throwing her clothes into the water as an offering. After her supplications, Johnson would sometimes walk naked through Christopher Street. Soon someone would call the police, and when they found her exposed, she would be arrested. Kohler said, “They would take her away for about two, three months. And they would put an implant in her spine of thorazine, I think it was, and that would calm her down and then she would come back and she’d be like a zombie for about a month and then she would be the old Marsha, back to Neptune and her father.”<sup>26</sup> By her own account, Marsha was married to Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Speaking back to the many people who described her in ableist, anti-black and transmisogynistic terms like “crazy,” she remarked, “He [Jesus] takes me seriously.”<sup>28</sup> As the above accounts demonstrate, the narratives surrounding Marsha P. Johnson’s life are infused with the medieval rhetoric of sainthood as well as experimental devotion. These narratives relating her experience as an activist and trans woman of color, alongside her philanthropic work, have imbued her with a political as well as a spiritual importance.

To a medievalist, Johnson’s devotional practices may be highly reminiscent of the medieval English mystic Margery Kempe. Credited as one of the earliest specimens of autobiographical writing in the English

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25. *Pay It No Mind*.

26. *Pay It No Mind*.

27. *Pay It No Mind*.

28. *Pay It No Mind*.

language, *The Book of Margery Kempe* follows the devotional life of a married woman turned religious pilgrim in the early fifteenth century.<sup>29</sup> This narrative of Kempe's life details her choice in wearing white clothing, widely met with ridicule and opposition. At the same time, her highly affective devotional practices in a variety of religious spaces—from temples in Jerusalem to various monastic orders throughout Europe—demonstrate the same “equal opportunity” spirituality espoused by Johnson. While Johnson throws glitter in churches and lays prostrate, turned away from the altar, Kempe's story is rife with similarly idiosyncratic expressions of faith, most notably in her use of tears:

Sum of the pepil askyd whedyr sche wer a Cristen woman er a Jewe; sum seyde sche was a good woman, and sum seyde nay. Than the Erchebischop toke hys see, and hys clerkys also, iche of hem in hys degré, meche pepil beyng present. And in the tyme whil the pepil was gaderyng togedyr and the Erchebiscop takyn hys see, the seyde creatur stod al behyndyn, makyn hir preyers for help and socowr ageyn hir enmiis wyth hy devocyon so long that sche meltyd al into teerys.<sup>30</sup>

(Some of the people asked whether she was a Christian woman or a Jew; some said she was a good woman, and some said not. Then the Archbishop took his seat, and his clerks as well, each of them in his degree, many people being present. And in the time while the people were gathering together and the Archbishop took his seat, the said creature [Kempe] stood behind, making her prayers for help and succor against her enemies with her devotion while she melted all into tears.)

This scene from the *Book* chronicles the moments leading up to Kempe's testimony before an ecclesiastical council to ascertain her religious orthodoxy, and it reveals a common thread between her and Johnson. Each encounters opposition, either in the form of litigation or general

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29. See Lynn Staley, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1996).

30. Staley, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 125.

misunderstanding, to her devotional practices, and we can see Johnson's church visitation as existing within a broader historical phenomenon of women negotiating orthodoxy with their own spiritual agency. In addition, responses to both Kempe's and Johnson's religious practices were structured by ableism. The historical, scholarly treatment of Kempe's *Book* includes instances in which her significance and spiritual practices were called into question along clearly ableist logics. The common experience of repeated incarceration due to their devotional practices fits into a much broader, pernicious narrative regarding the policing of neuro-divergence.

Margery Kempe also receives pushback for engaging in preaching—a profession forbidden to women throughout the European Middle Ages (and beyond). As noted above, an account from Rivera details how Johnson once dressed as the Virgin Mary, carrying a wooden cross and bible, to profess her religious teaching. Rivera remarks:

Marsha had been on SSI (Social Security Disability) for quite some time because she had several nervous breakdowns. She had been locked up several times in Bellevue and Manhattan State. Her mind started really going. She had a doctor who did not diagnose her syphilis right away. So when they finally caught it, it was in the second stages. Marsha lived in her own realm, and she saw things through different eyes. She liked to stay in that world, so with that and the syphilis infection . . . and then her husband, Cantrell, was shot by an off-duty officer. He was shot to death and she really went over the edge. She managed to come out of that one, and then she lost it again. She came over to my house dressed like the Virgin Mary, in white and blue, and she was carrying a wooden cross and a Bible. She came in and started preaching the Bible to me and we had a few words. Then she took the wooden cross and hit me upside the head with it. If it had been any other queen, I would probably be in jail, 'cause I would have killed her. She drew blood because the nail wasn't completely bent, and she put a gash in my head.<sup>31</sup>

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31. Rivera, "Queens in Exile," 73.

Rivera's account evades simplistic interpretation, but clearly Johnson had a multivalent (even unconstrained) relationship with religious observance. The explosive events detailed by Rivera as well as Johnson's own words regarding her marital relationship to Christ demonstrate a radical engagement with Christian devotion. In her use of the "bride of Christ" motif specifically, Johnson draws on bridal theology, while her Marian preaching shows how she takes Christian iconography and precedent and *refashions* it.

While both Kempe and Johnson were treated as "insane" because of their unconventional religious practices, the ableism that impacted Johnson was also shaped by transmisogynoir. Transmisogynoir describes the specific forms of subjection experienced by black transgender women and black transfeminine nonbinary people.<sup>32</sup> The social construction of transmisogynoir contains within it discourses of ableism, in particular the construct of mental disability. For example, historian David Carter, author of one of the most widely cited accounts of the Stonewall Riots, described Johnson as someone "suffering from psychosis."<sup>33</sup> The descriptor "suffering" implies that Johnson should be pitied, rather than respected. Moreover, while Johnson's experiences of ableist transmisogynoir did harm her, it is less certain that Johnson's disabilities themselves caused her to suffer. In fact, Johnson's friends described her as happy and generous of spirit, even when describing behaviors they thought were "crazy." Carter bases his claim that Johnson was "psychotic" directly on her gender expression. He writes, "Her off-center nature is also shown by the way she used materials found on the street for her wardrobe: costume jewelry became ornaments not for her ears but her hair, sometimes she wore red plastic high heels, and she might deck herself out in flowers."<sup>34</sup> Johnson's outfits could be understood as a beautiful practice of resilience in the midst of poverty, but Carter instead casts them as evidence of "craziness." Carter also blames Johnson's disability for the

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32. "Misogynoir" was coined by Moya Bailey to describe the "specific violence of representational imagery depicting Black women." See Moya Bailey, "New Terms of Resistance: A Response to Zenzle Isoke," *Souls* 15, no. 4 (2013): 341-43.

33. David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 65.

34. Carter, 65.

violence that she experienced: “That energy and craziness were essential characteristics of Marsha’s life is seen in her acknowledgement that by 1979 she had had several attempts made on her life by johns, eight nervous breakdowns, and innumerable arrests.”<sup>35</sup> By claiming that Johnson was attacked and arrested because of her “craziness,” Carter erases the transmisogynoir Johnson experienced. Instead he blames that violence on her disability and black transgender womanhood, casting her as responsible for it. Carter conflates transgender identity and disability, treating transfeminine expression as a mark of insanity. Simultaneously, his portrayal of Johnson reflects pervasive misogynoir imagery of black women as excessive, domineering, dangerous, and not truly feminine.<sup>36</sup> While there are important similarities between Kempe and Johnson, Johnson’s race and transgender womanhood intersected with ableism to form a specific oppression that differed from Kempe’s experiences. Johnson’s example points to the importance of accounting for race in general and transmisogynoir specifically in scholarly analysis.

### Sylvia Rivera, Santería, and Liturgy

The community of STAR House was sustained, in part, by shared devotional practices. Together, the residents of STAR House practiced their own version of Santería, complete with a personalized liturgy. Rivera described spiritual practices at STAR House:

We’d all get together to pray to our saints before we’d go out hustling. A majority of the queens were Latin and we believe in an emotional, spiritualistic religion. We have our own saints: Saint Barbara, the patron saint of homosexuality; St. Michael, the Archangel; La Calidad de Cobre, the Madonna of gold; and Saint Martha, the saint of transformation. St. Martha had once transformed herself into a snake, so to her we’d pray: “Please don’t let them see through the mask. Let us pass as women and save us from harm.”

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35. Carter, 65.

36. For a discussion of the controlling images of black women, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 83–84.

And to the other three we'd kneel before our altar of candles and pray: "St. Barbara, St. Michael, La Calidad de Cobre: We know we are doing wrong, but we got to live and we got to survive, so please help us, bring us money tonight, protect us, and keep evil away." We kept the sword of St. Barbara at the front door and the sword of St. Michael at the back door to ward off evil. We were watched over.<sup>37</sup>

Rivera outlines a complex liturgy of her own making, tailored to the needs of transgender women of color who engaged in sex work to survive. This free and experimental use of both biblical and apocryphal material harkens back to a medieval period in which saints' lives and other religious tales circulated widely and were frequently altered and adapted to serve practical ends. For example, St. Barbara's popularity in the Middle Ages is evident from her inclusion in the prolific *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend) manuscript tradition, which forms the foundation for many saints' narratives. However, the Barbara at work in Rivera's liturgy bears little resemblance to the "canonical" saint known mostly for her refusal to marry and the performance of various miracles associated with lightning and the healing of wounds. To label her "the patron saint of homosexuality" is a radical act that rewrites the historical narrative of St. Barbara stretching back to the thirteenth century. Perhaps this interpretation is based on Barbara's refusal to marry or maybe Rivera invokes her for protection because she is frequently associated with artillerymen and the construction of weapons. Either way, this devotional reformulation of canonization narratives exhibits a malleable use of religious history with its origins in the medieval past. Additionally, Rivera's invocation of St. Martha as a shapeshifter of sorts is clearly juxtaposed with the group's need to "pass," in Rivera's terms, as cisgender women in order to protect themselves from violence.

It is important to situate this liturgical narrative within a broader history of Santería. Rivera and Johnson both claim Santería as their primary

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37. Cohen, *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York*, 134, quoting Steven Watson, "Sylvia Rivera, Founder of S.T.A.R."

spiritual framework in their Christian devotion.<sup>38</sup> As a “transnational” faith system, Santería has its roots in the colonial Caribbean; “Yoruba-inspired” and “African-imagined,” Santería is diasporic and continues to attract adherents today.<sup>39</sup> The late nineteenth into the twentieth centuries witnessed the formation of a distinctly postcolonial Santería, a “Yoruba-spiritist-Catholic amalgam” that manifested itself in different ways across a wide, diverse geography.<sup>40</sup> In George Brandon’s historical survey of Santería, Rivera’s spiritual practice represents a distinct branch of the faith system’s history, which “began to appear in New York in the middle 1960s as a variant of Puerto Rican Espiritismo.”<sup>41</sup> Steven Gregory’s *Santería in New York City: A Study in Cultural Resistance* examines the social significance of Santería practice in modern New York City, citing its durability as a religious and iconographic system for shoring up ethnic identity while providing a “framework” with which to “construct . . . sociohistorical identities.”<sup>42</sup> As a medium for performing resistance by coopting colonial Christian rite, doctrine, and liturgy, Santería represents a powerful postcolonial tool that not only exerts agency over colonial Christianity but also the medieval narratives that form its foundation. Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi explains the “syncretic” relationship between Santería and Roman Catholicism (with its attending medieval tradition):

Santería continues to have a syncretistic and symbiotic relationship with Roman Catholicism. Given the nature of the religion and the persecution of the Roman Catholic Church, the leaders of Santería used the iconography of the Catholic saints to preserve the identity and devotion of the spirits, of the *Orishas*. Consequently, Saint Anthony is Elleguá, Saint Barbara is Chango, Our

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38. *Pay It No Mind* (2012) and Cohen, *Gay Liberation Youth Movement*, 15.

39. Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

40. George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5.

41. Brandon, 6.

42. Steven Gregory, *Santería in New York City: A Study in Cultural Resistance* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), xi.



Lady of Mercy is Obatalá, Our Lady of Regla is Yemayá, and so on. The reader should not be confused; the religion of the *Orishas* is a wonderful example of religious syncretism but continues to be predominantly an Afro-Caribbean religion in continuous interaction and exchange with the cultural and religious vitality of its context.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Rivera's liturgy exists at a nexus of religious and postcolonial thought in its syncretic reformulation of sainthood—a reformulation that we can see clearly in the narratives surrounding Rivera and Johnson themselves. Rivera's practice of Santería and development of the liturgy above carries with it a deep, historical significance that intersects with her Puerto Rican identity and the communities of color she advocated for. It remains that this liturgy also represents a refashioning of medieval cults of sainthood to suit a trans woman of color striving for survival in New York.

### Bodies, Miraculous and Martyred

STAR House was ultimately a short-lived project, but after it closed Rivera and Johnson continued to participate in gay rights organizing efforts. However, neither of them were welcomed by the mainstream gay rights movement. While many LGBT people who frequented Christopher Street venerated Johnson as a saint, few took her seriously as a political thinker. Likewise, Rivera was vilified by her compatriots. Gay liberation activist Arthur Bell said, "The general membership is frightened of Sylvia and thinks that she is a troublemaker. They're frightened by street people."<sup>44</sup> Bell's description illustrates fissures within the gay liberation movement, highlighting the way that middle class gay activists were uncomfortable with homeless LGBT youth, even though those young people were the primary participants in the Stonewall Riots.

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43. Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, "Vodou, Spiritism, and Santería: Hybridity and Identity in Caribbean Religions," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, vol. 1, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, 732-38 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 736.

44. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 239.

Middle class and white gay activists found Sylvia Rivera threatening for many reasons. Historian Martin Duberman writes:

Sylvia was from the wrong ethnic group, from the wrong side of the tracks, wearing the wrong clothes—managing single-handedly and simultaneously to embody several frightening, overlapping, categories of Otherness. . . . If someone was not shunning her darker skin or sniggering at her passionate, fractured English, they were deploring her rude anarchism as inimical to order or denouncing her sashaying ways as offensive to womanhood.<sup>45</sup>

Duberman's description highlights Rivera's experiences of racism and classism within gay liberationist circles. He also describes the impact of emerging transmisogyny within lesbian feminist communities. As lesbian activists began to organize separately out of frustration with the sexism of gay men, some also sought to exclude transgender women from women's spaces. According to Rivera, a typical conversation with a lesbian activist went something like this:

WOMAN: Why do you like to wear women's clothing?

SYLVIA: Because I feel very comfortable. Do you like wearing pants?

WOMAN: Yeah.

SYLVIA: Well, I like wearing a skirt. What can I tell you? I like to feel flowing. You like to be confined. That's your problem.<sup>46</sup>

Rivera's response indicates both her refusal to be demeaned and her savvy understanding of emerging lesbian feminist ideology. Rivera was undeterred by the constant questioning she faced in gay activist circles. She was determined to take part in gay liberation, whether her participation was welcomed or not.

In 1973, after four years of enduring hostility in gay communities, Rivera was formally excluded from the Christopher Street Liberation Day rally, an event that commemorated the very Stonewall riots that Johnson had helped to start. Not one to go away willingly, she fought her

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45. Duberman, 239.

46. Duberman, 214.

way to the stage, grabbed the microphone and spoke about transgender people suffering in prisons:

I've been trying to get up here all day, for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail. They write me every mother-fucking week, and ask for your help, and you all don't do a god-damned thing for them. . . .

They've been beaten up and raped. And they have had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and to try to get their sex change.

The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women's Liberation. . . .

But do you do anything for them? No! . . .

The people [STAR] that are trying to do something for all of us and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class club. And that's what you all belong to.<sup>47</sup>

The crowd booed Rivera. Was it her transgender identity, her womanhood, or her statements about jail that displeased them? If the way gay activists spoke to her during organizing meetings is an indication, it was all three. Her willingness to curse openly and to describe the violence transgender people experienced in uncensored language was likely upsetting to many gay people. She was a sex worker, a drug user, a transgender woman with no interest in getting a sex change, a survivor of sexual violence, and a champion of the people that mainstream gay organizations wanted to ignore.<sup>48</sup> Many gay people must have wondered what gave this Puerto Rican queen the right to criticize them. Likewise, many saw her as a threat to the civil rights they were just beginning to gain.

Following Rivera's speech, lesbian activist Jean O'Leary spoke. O'Leary was among a new generation of radical lesbian feminists who wanted to exclude transgender women from the women's liberation movement. She denounced Rivera, calling her a man and accusing her of oppressing women through her "impersonation" of them. She described

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47. Cohen, *Gay Liberation Youth Movement*, 158-59.

48. Rivera, "Queens in Exile," 73

herself and her lesbian organization as reasonable women, unlike Rivera.<sup>49</sup> According to Rivera, “She [O’Leary] told [emcee and prominent gay activist] Vito Russo to kick my ass onstage . . . but I still got up and spoke my piece. I don’t let too many people keep me down. Especially my own.”<sup>50</sup> Rivera was tenacious, but the aftermath of the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day proved that she was also deeply impacted by the violence, injustice, and rejection she experienced. The morning after Christopher Street Liberation Day 1973, in despair over being attacked by the people she felt should have been her comrades, she attempted suicide.<sup>51</sup> Uncannily (miraculously?), Johnson returned home in time to save her life.<sup>52</sup>

Nineteen years after Johnson prevented Rivera’s suicide, Johnson died tragically. On July 6, 1992, her body was found in the Hudson River. Without investigating, the police ruled it a suicide. In the hours after her body was found, many of Johnson’s friends accepted the police report. Some cited her mental disability, saying that she might have been depressed or that she could have thought she saw her father in the river and decided to go in after him. Rivera, however, was adamant that the police were wrong. She insisted that Johnson would not have committed suicide because she had promised Rivera that they would “cross the river Jordan together.” They made that pact after Rivera had attempted suicide herself and Johnson had saved her life.<sup>53</sup> Soon, Johnson’s community rallied together to question the assumption that

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49. “Jean O’Leary of Lesbian Feminist Liberation speaks at 1973 NYC Pride,” *Wikimedia Commons*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean\\_O%27Leary\\_of\\_Lesbian\\_Feminist\\_Liberation\\_speaks\\_at\\_1973\\_NYC\\_Pride.webm](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_O%27Leary_of_Lesbian_Feminist_Liberation_speaks_at_1973_NYC_Pride.webm), accessed 27 May 2018.

50. Susan M. Glisson, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 61.

51. Rivera, “Queens in Exile,” 80.

52. According to Duberman, O’Leary came to regret the way that she treated Rivera, claiming that she has since learned about transgender identities. It is difficult to know, however, if O’Leary truly came to terms with the fact that her words caused a woman to attempt suicide.

53. Tourmaline, “Every time I look at that damn river . . .,” blog post, 27 February 2012, <http://www.reinagossett.com/every-time-i-look-at-that-damn-river-i-actually/>.

Johnson had killed herself. Randy Wicker, Johnson's friend who put her up in his home for more than ten years, wrote to the police saying that the assumption that Johnson's death was a suicide was an "insulting, untrue, stereotypically-bigoted labeling of her death (all homosexuals, especially famous ones like Marsha are miserable creatures prone to suicide)."<sup>54</sup> Johnson's friends began to ask questions and discovered that witnesses had seen four men attacking Johnson by the pier earlier that day.<sup>55</sup> Her friends began to agree that Johnson's death was all too similar to the murders of so many black transgender women. Soon the police changed their finding to "cause unknown," but Johnson's friends wanted the police to reopen their investigation. Johnson's death was marked by a spontaneous procession to the Hudson River, when a crowd so large showed up to her funeral that police were forced to allow them to march.<sup>56</sup> Demands to investigate her cause of death went unmet until 2012, when transgender women of color finally successfully pressured the police to reopen the case.<sup>57</sup>

Johnson's death was devastating for Rivera. Rivera became homeless and lived on the pier where Johnson died. Then in 1993, she became a member of Transy House, a home run by transgender women, patterned after the example of STAR House. In fact, Chelsea Goodwin, one of the women running the house, was one of the "children" Rivera supported at STAR. With the support of these community members, she regained her health and sobriety.<sup>58</sup> She fell in love with resident Julia Murray, with whom she remained partners until her death. Rivera found a job at the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, working in their food pantry, a position that suited her talent for connecting with homeless New Yorkers. She became the director of the food service program and was active in the church's LGBT senior organization. In 2000, she and

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54. Sember, "Resurfacing," 69.

55. Sember, 69.

56. *Pay It No Mind* (2012).

57. Shayna Jacobs, "DA Reopens Unsolved 1992 Case Involving the 'Saint of Gay Life,'" *NY Daily News*, 16 December 2012, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/da-reopens-unsolved-1992-case-involving-saint-gay-life-article-1.1221742>.

58. Randolfé Wicker, "Sylvia Rivera Trans Movement Founder," YouTube Video, 25:09, 27 July 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybnHoHBolqc>.

other transgender activists reestablished STAR and she became involved in a wide variety of local organizing efforts once again.<sup>59</sup>

Later the same year, Rivera fell ill with liver cancer. Just hours before her death, she met with a delegation from the Empire State Pride Agenda in her room at St. Vincent's Hospital. Her goal was to negotiate the inclusion of transgender rights within the proposed New York State Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act (SONDA).<sup>60</sup> In her obituary, members of Metropolitan Community Church described the scene: "Restricted to bed, attached to tubes and monitors, in severe pain, she was determined not to let the mainstream gays get their rights at the expense of the trans community one more time."<sup>61</sup> Rivera's willingness to fight for her community even when she was at her weakest and most exposed made her a compelling advocate. However, despite Rivera's dying plea, SONDA passed in 2002 without protections for transgender people; it was not until January 15, 2019 that New York State passed transgender-inclusive protections in the form of the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA).<sup>62</sup>

### Violent Polarities: Reassessing the "Medieval Imaginary"

As we persist in our efforts to repackage the Middle Ages—its texts, historical narratives, cultural nuances—in the contemporary classroom, we must simultaneously confront the slippery specter of medievalism. At the heart of this fissure between the empirical study of the Middle Ages and its violent applications lies a concurrent need to teach not only a "true" medieval past but also an honest and complete assessment of

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59. "Sylvia Rivera's Obituary," *Sylvia's Place*, Metropolitan Community Church, 19 February 2002, [http://web.archive.org/web/20060619122836/http://www.sylvias-place.org/sylvia\\_obituary.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20060619122836/http://www.sylvias-place.org/sylvia_obituary.htm).

60. "N.Y. Gay Rights Bill Passes," *The New York Times*, 17 December 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/17/nyregion/ny-gay-rights-bill-passes.html>.

61. "Sylvia Rivera's Obituary."

62. "New York Passes Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA) and Legislation Banning 'Conversion Therapy,'" *Lambda Legal*, 15 January 2019, [https://www.lambdalegal.org/blog/20190115\\_ny-passes-legislation-protecting-transgender-people-and-banning-conversion-therapy](https://www.lambdalegal.org/blog/20190115_ny-passes-legislation-protecting-transgender-people-and-banning-conversion-therapy).

its reimaginings. The teaching of medieval history and texts often runs alongside the pedagogy of medievalism—a significant counterbalance useful for interrogating both the common assumptions regarding the Middle Ages and its mobilization in modern political discourse. Discussing the significance of medievalism in the classroom is a productive heuristic for understanding our relationship to the medieval past, not only as scholars but also as modern subjects.

The commentary on the above narratives of Rivera's and Johnson's lives and their engagement with medievalism has been intentionally brief; indeed, much more can be said about the medieval antecedents and iconography that inform a medievalist reading of Rivera's and Johnson's archival lives. Instead, our goal has been to give an impression of the interpretive currency of these narratives, which have much to teach us not only about transgender American history but also where we locate medievalism. We turn now to a brief discussion of the significance of reframing medievalism in light of the above narratives. Rivera and Johnson raise questions about the nature of the "medieval imaginary" as well as how scholars attempt to teach the Middle Ages and its afterlives in politics and popular culture.

This special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* could not arrive at a more opportune moment as the matter of medievalism and its pedagogy requires reappraisal in the context of broader conversations in the field of medieval studies. The "Unite the Right" rally in August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, featured a violent conglomeration of "alt-right" political detachments. Dozens were injured and activist Heather Hayer killed when James Alex Fields, Jr. drove into a group of counterprotesters. The rallies provided a stark example of how white supremacists and white nationalists have utilized medieval symbols.<sup>63</sup> An increasingly vocal

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63. See Helen Young, "White Supremacists Love the Middle Ages," *In the Middle* (blog), 16 August 2017, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/white-supremacists-love-middle-ages.html>; Andrew B. R. Elliott, "A Vile Love Affair: Right Wing Nationalism and the Middle Ages," *The Public Medievalist*, 14 February 2017, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/vile-love-affair/>; and Bryan William van Norden, "What's with Nazis and Knights?" *The Huffington Post*, 19 September 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whats-with-nazis-and-knights\\_us\\_59c0b469e4b082fd4205b98d?ncid=engmodushpmg00000003](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whats-with-nazis-and-knights_us_59c0b469e4b082fd4205b98d?ncid=engmodushpmg00000003).

contingent of KKK members and Neo-Nazis, along with other bigots and supremacists, plastered news media with images of semi-automatic weapons and swastikas sitting comfortably beside medieval iconography emblazoned on shields, helmets, and flags. This appropriation of the medieval past in white nationalist and racist discourses is not a new phenomenon. Rather it has a long and firmly established history of its own that has shown no sign of abating. The self-described “vigil” organized by people of regressive, reactionary, and uncomplicatedly racist ideology (as well as misogynistic, antisemitic, transphobic, homophobic, and ableist prejudice) at Charlottesville rocked not only the global political stage but our own corner of academia.

Activists and educators within the field of medieval studies have actively opposed these dangerous rhetorics, underscoring the proximity between the medieval past and modern ideologies that promote racialized violence and oppressive gender roles. Their work acknowledges that classrooms are inherently political with the added caveat that the medieval studies classroom runs the risk of inadvertently legitimating white nationalist and racist discourses. To combat this, Dr. Kisha Tracy’s open-source wiki, *Crossing the Pond: British Literature I*, even includes a lesson plan devoted to issues of appropriation centered on the digital activism and writing of several medievalists.<sup>64</sup> Sarah E. Bond has also produced a digital bibliography for scholars with an interest in confronting white supremacist appropriations of the historical past, either in their own work or in the classroom.<sup>65</sup> Dorothy Kim’s post, “Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy,” struck a chord with many in the field, especially her observations about the need to address the complicity of scholars who treat medieval studies as an apolitical topic:

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64. Kisha Tracy, “Appropriation of the Middle Ages,” *Crossing the Pond: British Literature I* (blog), <http://crossingthepondfall2017.wikispaces.com/Appropriation+of+the+Middle+Ages>, accessed 12 December 2017.

65. Sarah E. Bond, “Hold My Mead: A Bibliography for Historians Hitting Back at White Supremacy,” *History from Below* (blog), 10 September 2017, <https://sarahemilybond.com/2017/09/10/hold-my-mead-a-bibliography-for-historians-hitting-back-at-white-supremacy>.



If the medieval past (globally) is being weaponized for the aims of extreme, violent supremacist groups, what are you doing, medievalists, in your classrooms? Because you are the authorities teaching medieval subjects in the classroom, you are, in fact, ideological arms dealers. So, are you going to be apathetic weapons dealers not caring how your material and tools will be used? Do you care who your buyers are in the classroom? Choose a side.<sup>66</sup>

Her work has received significant backlash, including hate mail and threats against her safety emanating from online spaces such as Twitter, further underscoring the ideological fault line on which the field is set. Yet, her message is relevant not only to the way medievalists teach the Middle Ages but also to the way medievalists teach *medievalism*.

Lately, medievalism pedagogy focuses more on these issues of appropriation and violence. To a greater degree, popular fantasy works, such as the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien or HBO's *Game of Thrones*, dominate the teaching of medievalism.<sup>67</sup> These approaches represent a polarity in the teaching of medievalism, however. If examples of medievalism oscillate between popular, violent entertainment and similarly violent ideology, the question remains what narratives, experiences, and voices are lost in between. In *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages*, Nickolas Haydock elaborates on the modern usage of the term "medieval" to situate medievalism within the broader social context of timeless, inexpressible violence:

The term "medieval" in popular culture often refers to that which is abjectly or shockingly outside the legal and customary constraints of post-Enlightenment civilization. As an expression of contempt or condemnation the term exiles the abject to the distant, other country of the past. [. . .] In the celebrated phrase of

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66. Dorothy Kim, "Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy," *In the Middle* (blog), 28 August 2017, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/teaching-medieval-studies-in-time-of.html>.

67. See Olivia B. Waxman, "*Game of Thrones* Is Even Changing How Scholars Study the Real Middle Ages," *Time*, 14 July 2017, <http://time.com/4837351/game-of-thrones-real-medieval-history/>.

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, one "gets medieval" on someone else's hind quarters. The threat neatly combines racial and homophobic slurs . . . while locating the medieval as an extreme beyond modern limits and perhaps even beyond the limits of language itself. This "medieval" represents a species of violence that even in a hyper-violent film cannot be shown or even clearly described. To "get medieval" then is to step outside the Symbolic order into an Imaginary that collapses directly into an unspeakable, even unimaginable Real.<sup>68</sup>

In this way, the medieval imaginary may very well encompass much of what the modern subject deems unimaginable—a catchall for the sociopolitically deplorable and "backward"—which, paradoxically coupled with notions of a "pure," uncomplicated past, may account for its durability among hate groups. This view of the medieval imaginary captures the entanglement of the medieval past and violence in the modern mind. It also demonstrates medievalism's close relationship to alterity, as "getting medieval" seems to entail the marginalization of nonwhite, queer bodies.<sup>69</sup>

However, these discussions may elide a crucial element in this equation: the capacity of the medieval to be a tool of resistance and empowerment in the wake of these violent, oppressive political forces. As instructors, medievalists essentially dictate what is and is not taught under the umbrella of medievalism, which ultimately affects what narratives and concepts make their way into the medieval imaginary. The current approaches clearly capture the alterity of fantasy worlds or the rhetoric of violence that targets subaltern bodies, but where are the subaltern voices in this pedagogy? The medievalisms of *resistance* exhibited by Rivera and Johnson offer a valuable counterbalance to both scholarly and classroom

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68. Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 8-9.

69. For a more thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see Carolyn Dinshaw, "Coda: Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Foucault, and the Use of the Past," in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, 183-206 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 183-91.

discussions of medievalism that center white-supremacist, cisgender heteropatriarchal ableist ideology and fantasy.

Perhaps a radical shift is in order, specifically in interrogating where we find examples of medievalism in the first place. Firstly, the focus on medievalism solely as a form of artistic representation presents issues, since, as we hope to have shown through the lives of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, medievalism is something that can be *embodied* and *lived*. In other words, in our continued discussions of medieval representation in fiction, we can begin to think about medievalism as a lived experience; (un)imaginably real bodies exist alongside celluloid bodies in performances of the medieval. In addition, this disembodiment of medievalism exists in the polarity of the representations frequently consulted: popular television and political ideology. In the latter case, the nebulous specter of the medieval—along with mobilizations of the historical past and historical rhetoric—is associated with a similarly nebulous and violent ideology. So, within this polarity between entertainment and fascism, we can begin to think about radical lives and experiences that engage with the medieval. Lastly, Richard Utz has called attention to the way that scholars of medievalism have generally been reticent to confront matters of religion and spirituality.<sup>70</sup> He cites the academy's uncritical adoption of temporally linear, historicist methodology in the treatment of religion as the reason for this elision; religious medievalisms, in the forms of ritual or faith, break down the very boundary between past and present that we have been trained to uphold.<sup>71</sup> The archive of narratives presented above gestures toward the value in studying the beliefs and devotional practices of queer and trans activists. There exists a wealth of queer and trans theology, worthy of recognition and scholarly attention.

As we cast the net of medievalism wider, we can begin to include bodies marginalized historically and culturally, all while working toward an archive of people of color as well as trans people who engage with

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70. Richard Utz, "Can We Talk About Religion, Please? Medievalism's Eschewal of Religion and Why It Matters," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 28 (2013).

71. Richard Utz, "Medievalism Studies and the Subject of Religion," *Studies in Medievalism* 24 (2015): 11-19.

the medieval in unique and productive ways. This archive is pedagogically valuable, as it would provide a necessary tool for contextualizing the problems of representation in media and violence in politics by offering recusant medievalisms—medievalisms of embodied alterity and resistance. Above all, this accounting of Rivera and Johnson’s legacies stands as a contribution to a greater awareness of their experiences and impact on the world, providing a hitherto unexplored facet of their lives. It is just as much a pedagogical contribution as it is a testament to these extraordinary, queer, trans lives on their own terms.

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