

Fighting for the Middle: Medieval Studies Programs and Degrees within Higher Education

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Medieval. Medi. Medium Aevum. The Middle Ages.

A period defined as between the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Renaissance.

Between the classics and the early modern.

To be in the middle, to be in a middle.

To be defined as and by the “middle” is to always be defined by what has passed and what has yet to come. It is to be defined not by what you are made of but by what you are not, by what sits at either periphery or either extreme. To inhabit a space that is defined as a “middle,” inflected by a point of origin and a destination, is to constantly negotiate a space defined by anticipation—anticipation of a prehistory *and* a setting-up-for. Or, on the other hand, it is a narrative of revision, reconstruction, deconstruction, a *having-done-with*. It is at once a space of interconnectedness: the middle is a bridge. It survives in the context of other spaces—and yet it can also be a space of extreme isolation, only ever seen when passed over or passed through, and always in service of a different destination.

Medieval studies is the discipline dedicated to the study of the “Middle Ages,” the period of years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, the classics and the early modern. There is such generosity in the discipline’s temporal scope, a generosity veering toward excess, for how could one thematically organize, much less unify, a period of one thousand years, identified as being in-between? As medievalist Fred Robinson (1984: 750) puts it, the field’s temporal parameters are arbitrary: “Our period extends from the close of the classical period to the beginning of the Renaissance. If classicists and Renaissance scholars do not know when their periods begin and end, then that is their problem.” As members of an institutionalized community, academic medievalists more or less accept the vastness of our discipline’s temporal limits. Though we often focus on and specialize in a specific temporal range (in English studies: Old English, Middle English, late medieval), we recognize that our chosen range is much larger, and that we must be cognizant of setting our selected range into a much broader context of time. And yet, conventionally, medievalists do not apply this framework to other aspects of the discipline’s design. For example, they do not extend the same flexibility that they do to temporal scope to geographic scope. Medieval studies is traditionally a “Western European” discipline. When broad, it will also include the Mediterranean. There are also limits on what questions scholars can ask about the materials from this period. Until recently, for example, the methodologies of critical race studies were considered anachronistic, and discussions of race qualified the term with quotations or reframed it as “alterity” or “otherness.”

Critical race scholars in medieval studies have extensively discussed what is implicit (and explicit), not just in the history of the construction of the discipline of medieval studies but in the ways that scholars within the discipline often protect the discipline’s reach—methodologically and geographically. Adam Miyashiro (2019: 9), for example, has shown how the “field of medieval studies is intertwined with the global colonial project.” He has specifically argued that the field’s conceptualization of “Anglo-Saxon” relies on Indigenous erasure, genocide, Orientalism, and ethnonationalism. Sierra Lomuto (2019) has discussed how the “temporal construct” of the discipline is “inextricably tied to the spatial construct of Western Europe. And just as Western Europe has been constructed through . . . the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, so too does the ‘medieval’ carry this valence of power.” Her work shows how constructing a discipline in response to desires for “Western” political supremacy (however implicit) “furnishes a heritage site for whiteness” (Lomuto 2016, 2019).

Though scholars who are already qualified as medievalists discuss the disciplinarity of medieval studies in conferences, journals, and blogs, it is not only these spaces that set the boundaries and rules of the discipline. Rather, institutions and faculty design and define the discipline as they design and define graduate programs, degrees, certificates, or undergraduate minors (and though rarer, majors) in medieval studies. Though we think of these programs as training grounds for a profession that already exists beyond them, these programs shape the discipline as they welcome new scholars into it. It is within the process of constructing these qualifying programs that governing bodies determine who—and *what*—a medievalist should be. In deciding what a student must learn in order to qualify as a “medievalist,” these governing bodies establish the discipline’s identity.

These requirements often suggest that legitimate medievalists are those who work in the service of understanding Europe, even as they are conditioned to do so in an interdisciplinary program that recognizes the necessity of expertise far beyond Europe. For example, the concurrent PhD degree in medieval studies at my alma mater, the University of California, Berkeley, requires “Advanced Competence in Medieval Latin,” regardless of specific research interests. It also requires “reading proficiency in a medieval vernacular language.”¹ Students can select from any of the following without written permission: courses in Celtic studies, English, French, German, Italian studies, and Scandinavian studies. Arabic, however, requires written permission from the graduate adviser of the degree. Despite the fact that UC Berkeley treats Arabic as a language at the periphery of “medieval studies,” a professor from the Near Eastern Studies Department was invited to serve and now serves on the degree’s advisory committee. This teetering between inclusion and exclusion exemplifies the way medieval studies as a discipline often claims an interdisciplinarity that performs inclusivity even while it maintains a hierarchy of value.

The issue is that value is inherited and learned. In deciding what a student must learn to qualify as a medievalist, a governing body will inevitably pull from what their own training taught them about what is valuable to learn and master. This process formalizes disciplinarity, and it can be limiting. If a group of scholars are taught that any qualified scholar of the Middle Ages must have full and complete mastery of the Bible above all scriptural texts circulating in the span of a thousand years, then when they

1. “Concurrent PhD,” Berkeley Medieval Studies (website), <https://medieval.berkeley.edu/concurrent-phd> (accessed June 10, 2022).

are in a position to design a medieval studies degree, they are more likely to require students to commit to mastering biblical knowledge. For a student who enters the program with an interest in studying translations of the Qur'an in England, the program will require them to prioritize mastery of the Bible, not the Qur'an. And so this program has set a student up for a study of the Qur'an that inflects back on the Bible. In fact, Christopher Livanos and Mohammad Salama's (2023: 145) essay in this issue unpacks the stakes of exactly this kind of disciplinary limitation as they show how "a certain strain of European and American Biblicism continues to impose itself on the field of Qur'anic Studies . . . limiting themes and conclusions" one can derive from Qur'anic studies.

This essay at hand considers the politics of disciplinarity in medieval studies by revisiting my own graduate program at University of California, Berkeley. In 2016, along with a graduate student in the art history department, Jess Bailey, I (myself a student in the English department) took on the role of negotiator and advocated on behalf of a community of graduate students for a more flexible and inclusive conceptualization of the discipline.² These efforts were perceived as threatening—and so were we. This essay offers an account of our "diversity work," which I theorize through Sara Ahmed's critical frameworks, in order to share the greatest lesson we learned: aside from the established governing body of the degree program, the fiercest defenders of a conventional, Eurocentric conception of medieval studies were those newest to the discipline—the graduate students.

Though I offer a detailed description of the events that took place before, during, and after our diversity initiative, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a singular experience but one that represents a larger issue within medieval studies and disciplines in general. Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2021) ethnographic research has shown us how often the very people who request and express a commitment to diversity work will reject it. That resistance to diversity and inclusivity is almost inherent to a body once it is institutionalized. Ahmed (2021: 44) further shows us how "institutional racism . . . [is] part of a wider struggle to recognize that all forms of power, inequality, and domination are systemic rather than individual." This essay thus lays bare the events of a single diversity initiative in order to help us understand how medieval studies operates as a discipline.

2. To ensure anonymity as I retell this narrative, I have excluded all names and, as much as possible, identifying markers. (The exception is Jess Bailey, who has given me permission to use her name.)

Middle: The Position of Being among or in the Midst of Something

Five white male professors who each belonged to a different discipline—history, music, German, classics, and art history—founded UC Berkeley’s medieval studies program in the 1960s. With the help of the dean of the graduate division at the time, they formalized their shared intellectual, interdisciplinary interests into a degree-granting program. UC Berkeley is one of the few schools where medieval studies is a degree. This means, according to UC Berkeley, that students enrolled have “both a home department and training in the core disciplines of Medieval Studies.” In other words, medieval studies at UC Berkeley is a formal discipline, one that “equips graduate students in a variety of disciplines with wide-ranging, rigorous training in the materials and methods necessary for advanced research in the history, languages, culture, and art of medieval Europe.”³ Beyond this brief sentence, there is no other definition or description of the degree. Instead, like other graduate programs, it is the requirements that define it. The following are those requirements: a methods proseminar; a course in medieval history; another course from outside the home department, on a solely medieval topic; advanced competence in medieval Latin; reading proficiency in a medieval vernacular language; working knowledge of the material sources of medieval culture; a field statement; a medieval studies component of the oral qualifying examination; regular participation in the medieval studies colloquium, and one presentation of dissertation work in progress to that colloquium. The website also provides a list of courses one can take to meet the requirements for “medieval history,” “a course on a solely medieval topic outside of the home department,” and “reading proficiency in a medieval vernacular language.” The listed courses that follow these requirements are all conventional courses on European history, and almost all focus on texts (rather than material culture). Though the requirements make space for a student to take other courses that fulfill the requirement, the program does not advertise them and requires students to get permission from the committee chair. Interdisciplinarity is encouraged and appreciated, but also very controlled.

I was admitted to UC Berkeley’s English PhD program in 2013, having just finished an MPhil in medieval studies at Oxford University. The

3. “Handbook for the Concurrent PhD in Medieval Studies,” University of California, Berkeley, 2019, p. 1, https://medieval.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/ms_handbook_2019.pdf.

concurrent degree's requirements did not serve my research interest, but I felt compelled to consider the degree because of the additional credential it would grant me when entering a competitive job market. I was invested in studying the racialization of Muslims in medieval England. While my Oxford degree had prepared me in paleography, codicology, and medieval history, I still had no background in critical race theory, postcolonial studies, or medieval Arabic. Given that there were no medievalists or early modernists at UC Berkeley who worked on race, I took coursework in nineteenth- and twentieth-century disciplines. Eventually, I communicated that I wanted to opt out of the medieval studies degree, given that I needed to turn my focus during my two years of coursework to topics outside of the scope of medieval studies as UC Berkeley conceived it. I was told I would not be taken seriously as a medievalist if I did not complete the degree. So, I did.

Even while my research focused on Europe, in understanding how English texts in England racialized Muslims, the approved list of courses did not list the ones I needed. So, multiple times, I requested special permission to count courses toward requirements. Having to show advanced competency in Latin meant that I could not strengthen my Arabic with the intensity I needed to in order to consult Arabic texts for my dissertation research. At the same time, in the three years I attended colloquia or lectures by invited scholars, I did not hear from a student or scholar whose work was invested in questions of postcoloniality or race. For a while, I made sense of this by recognizing that the degree's governing body had to make choices that served the bulk of the community. After all, I was a minority, not just racially but in terms of my intellectual interests. I assumed that the committee had to negotiate the needs of a much larger collective community, to which I belonged.

But after witnessing the way the advisory committee managed diversity and equity concerns, I began to wonder whether the committee was disregarding collective community needs rather than negotiating them. For example, I came across a report that the degree's governing body had written to UC Berkeley administration. In it, there was a section that described the degree's diversity and equity efforts. Under this section they celebrated their inclusion of Arabic as an optional language to fulfill requirements. But then they referred to it as an "exotic language." They celebrated that they had recently invited a disabled speaker. But then they did not offer any critical discussion of the degree's diversity health. They did not mention any plans to invite women of color as speakers, nor did they describe any efforts to diversify the program's overwhelmingly white student body. I was

serving as the graduate student coordinator at the time and was organizing monthly colloquia. Given how visible I was as a leader in the community who had repeatedly had to request permission to apply outside courses to my requirements, I began to wonder whether the committee understood the ways marginality impacted my work and mental health, much less whether they had a plan to address it. All along, I imagined that the degree's governing body recognized and accepted the responsibility of making this community welcoming to everyone, and that they were weighing the social and intellectual needs of every member against their limited resources. But it started to become apparent to me that there was never any critical inquiry to begin with, that my membership in this community was one-sided: I was welcome to benefit from it, and not the other way around. The report started to circulate among graduate students, and others felt the same. We were all frustrated. And we started to notice other trends that reaffirmed that the advisory committee was not investing in diversity, inclusivity, or equity. For example, we tracked that the committee had given the degree's annual essay prize to men for five years in a row even though nearly half of the graduate students were women.

The new chair of the medieval studies concurrent degree recognized our frustration. In May 2016 she wrote to us that "a good step in sorting issues is having a clear view of what they are" and suggested asking the Graduate Division of Diversity to conduct a survey (pers. comm.). That following fall, graduate students decided to hold a town hall to discuss issues we were whispering about among ourselves in small groups. I chose not to attend. My tenure as graduate student coordinator had just finished, and I had started my exam year. I wanted to pull away from medieval studies for a year and focus on research in postcolonial and critical race theory. The most senior graduate student summarized the concerns that students raised in the town hall into a letter addressed to the advisory committee. Before sending it to the committee, he circulated it for feedback.

When I read the letter, I was overcome with respect for my peers and colleagues. In their criticism of the program and suggestions for change, I recognized a genuine commitment to community and inclusivity. They described how the degree's requirements were "Eurocentric" and "text-based." They put into words the discomfort I felt every time I had to ask for an exception to a course requirement: "One can substitute requirements, but that occurs on an ad hoc and sometimes idiosyncratic basis" (pers. comm., September 24, 2016). Their suggestions for changes to the degree made me realize that we shared a vision for an inclusive, dynamic, and

exciting medieval studies discipline, one that made room for the world, even as it invested in a study of Europe. For example, the letter suggested that the committee could consider broadening its scope to include buy-in from Byzantinists or students working on medieval China and Japan who had expressed an interest in the program. Including these students could “have the salutary effect of widening the scope of medieval studies out from its Western European focus.” The letter suggested that the degree “ask faculty from non-Western fields to present at one of the colloquia and invite someone who works on a non-Western field to give a talk with some regularity.” To address diversity, “adding the phrase ‘people of color and women are especially encouraged to apply’ to calls for committee positions or the Kalamazoo prize is a simple but important reminder.” I could tell from these suggestions that I was seen by my peers (as were the other few women of color in the program) *even though* I was not present in the town hall.

Less than a month later, on October 12, 2016, the advisory committee of the degree responded to the graduate students. They did not respond to any of the specific suggestions. In fact, they dismissed them all for the following reason:

The Medieval Studies faculty have discussed several times in recent years what understanding of the Middle Ages should guide its program, where its chronological, geographical, and linguistic concentration should lie, and each time have firmly concluded that our current, broadly European and circum-Mediterranean definition is the one that best serves its students and best maintains the conditions of its intellectual vitality. At the same time, we welcome interdisciplinary exchange with our colleagues across the university, particularly if students wish to study areas outside the ordinary remit of Medieval Studies. Recent discussions of the Global Middle Ages have not only emerged from, but have depended on, the disciplinary and institutional formations medieval studies has durably assumed; in the same way, insofar as it is true that “medieval” might denote “a set of intellectual skills,” it does so only because those skills are established on the material base of a certain historical particularity. These same formations, of course, define the expectations younger scholars face when entering the field; offering training within them therefore ranks high among the responsibilities we owe our students. It might be worth remarking that the Medieval Studies degree program is, on all sides, optional. Students do not need to pursue it to receive

their PhD, so that those whose needs are not met by its scholarly focus lose nothing by putting their effort elsewhere. Faculty undertake this addition to their required teaching and administrative duties as a service to students; they do not gain either institutional or professional rewards for their labors. In the present period, when the Medieval Studies degree program has been threatened with extinction, its success in attracting interested faculty and students and its reputation for rigorous training have been the sources of its strength. (pers. comm.)

This response presented medieval studies as a discipline that needed protecting. Its language suggested that the discipline had survived as long as it had because of active and careful preservation. Its geographic restrictions—Europe and the circum-Mediterranean—“maintain[ed]” its “intellectual vitality.” The repeated emphasis of its “formations,” both “disciplinary” and “institutional,” suggested that it had retained its strength as a discipline because of foundations built in the past. Despite this preservation, the response suggested it was still a vulnerable discipline, “threatened with extinction.” It implied that the letter to the committee invited harm to the field: any relationship toward the field that was not invested in protecting and guarding it firmly was a relationship that could cause it harm. The response poised the field’s “rigorous training” in opposition to suggestions that would widen the scope of the field and make it more inclusive, not just for those with other intellectual interests, but also for people of color.

Despite the fact that the committee had “discussed several times in recent years what understanding of the Middle Ages should guide its program . . . chronological, geographical, and linguistic,” they did not mention anything about their discussions around chronology or temporal limitations. There was no need to protect, define, or limit this boundary despite how ambiguous and vexed the beginnings of an “early modern” period or the ends of a “classic” one may be. The only mention of temporal limits was one that claimed the discipline maintained “historical particularity,” which explicitly contradicts the vast historical range we collectively agree the discipline to have.

Instead, the committee seemed to have directed its efforts toward defining the geographic and linguistic boundaries of the discipline: “broadly Europe” and the “circum-Mediterranean.” This is the boundary that, if flexible, could welcome a host of “other” intellectual interests and methodologies. Setting aside the fact that it was, in fact, the students of the degree

themselves who had proposed suggestions that would make the degree better serve their intellectual needs, the concern for “intellectual vitality” seemed entangled with what shortly followed this part of the letter, the gesture toward the global Middle Ages: “Recent discussions of the Global Middle Ages have not only emerged from, but have depended on, the disciplinary and institutional formations medieval studies has durably assumed.” The committee reminded us that there is a newly formed discipline where the kinds of suggestions we were making belonged. That discipline was not medieval studies but the global Middle Ages. Rather than using the existence of the discipline of the global Middle Ages as a way of making flexible or broadening the intellectual pursuits, methodology, and geographic and linguistic work that can be done in the discipline of medieval studies, the response suggested that the presence of the global Middle Ages relies on a narrow construction of the discipline. The global Middle Ages “depend[s]” on the disciplinary limitations of medieval studies, which the committee was committed to fiercely protecting.

But I did not register all of these insights right then. Instead, as an immigrant whose family has been repeatedly told they were welcome to “leave if they don’t like it here” by racist students at school, people standing in line at the supermarket, or USCIS employees, the performatively generous statement that students “whose needs are not met by [the degree’s] scholarly focus lose nothing by putting their effort elsewhere” was deeply offensive. The advisory committee’s response to the town hall letter would ensure that the program would not serve someone like me, with intellectual interests like mine, as much as it served a white man with intellectual interests solely rooted in Europe. I wondered whether this rhetoric was suggesting that the degree would be stronger without a diverse range of interests that pulled resources in different directions. Over conversations with fellow colleagues and peers in the lounge while drinking microwave coffee and eating leftover department hors d’oeuvres, I realized other students were also bewildered and enraged. Most students felt dismissed and invalidated, regardless of their intellectual interests or racial identities. I had not participated in the town hall or in drafting the letter, and yet my peers had still fought for a program with my interests in mind. And now in our communal rage, I understood that we shared the same values. It was empowering, and I was energized to resist how comfortable the advisory committee was with asking the very students who made up my community to leave it. That night, I began a letter in response to the committee’s letter.

Just as my colleagues and peers thought of my needs in the town

hall, I wanted this letter to reflect theirs. I imagined this letter would build on the one we had all already agreed to send, but this time it would include signatures, and we would send it on behalf of all of us. But, as I would later realize, something changed for the students after the committee's dismissive response, and they became uncomfortable writing, signing, and sending a community letter.

After I wrote an initial draft and circulated it among graduate students suggesting making it a community letter, a graduate student from the History of Art Department, Jess Bailey, whom I had not yet met, responded immediately and expressed how offended she was at the response to the town hall letter. It had given her even more reason to fight for a more equitable and inclusive conceptualization of medieval studies. We began to work via email and Google Docs. We set the letter generated from the town hall as the base and framed it by discussing the ways in which the committee's response was dismissive and problematic. And then we revised and expanded the list of suggestions. We suggested that the committee invite graduate students to make a list of speakers they would like to see invited to UC Berkeley, so that when the committee invites its two speakers every year, they could pull one from the graduate students' list and another from the faculty's. We suggested that faculty work *with* the graduate students enrolled in the methods proseminar to produce a syllabus. This way students can spend time studying the methods that are pertinent to their research interests, such as postcoloniality. Given the limited focus of the faculty associated with the degree, the methods proseminar could include guest lecturers from fields well beyond Europe. Though we may not be studying the same material, we could learn new methodological approaches from them. Recognizing that those whose research interests fall outside the scope of medievalist faculty will be far less prepared to write a dissertation by their fourth year than those whose research interests fall inside that scope, we also asked that the program leave some of the coursework requirements flexible so that students could choose courses they found useful to their particular dissertation questions.

Jess and I finally met for the first time in a small, windowless office space she had reserved in Dwinelle Hall, with hard copies of the letter draft in hand. She was a petite white woman with an edgy pixie cut. We hugged, somehow already close friends even though we had never met. We were meeting the first group of graduate students regarding the letter. This group was made up of predominantly white women whom I had shared rage with just a week before. I expected our conversation to be about how we were

going to develop the letter and was surprised that, instead, the conversation focused on whether we should even write the letter. It began with peers expressing concern over jeopardizing recommendation letters they would have to ask for in the future on the job market. Jess and I both had members from our dissertation committee on the advisory committee as well, and we empathized. We stressed that if we wrote it collectively, faculty could not blame an individual. That led them to express concerns over whether other members would sign it. “Well, will you?” We asked. Over the course of an hour, no one confirmed they would sign. We proposed that we would not send the letter unless at least half of the graduate students signed it, to protect backlash against a handful. But still they did not commit. We proposed adding an option for an “anonymous signature.” But they still did not commit. Finally, they said that if white men from the program signed, they would consider signing as well. But they were not comfortable speaking to white men themselves, since they were not yet committed to the letter. So Jess and I then had to meet with a group of white men.

The only students who agreed to sign, even when they had suggestions to the letter, were the students who already felt marginalized and underserved by a program that had promised interdisciplinary training—the art historians, comparative literature students, the few women of color. When it came to the remaining graduate students, Jess and I were in a negotiating middle ground, a space that held us between every subgroup of the field’s student body: white women who needed confirmation from white men; text-based studies students who needed art history students to be more specific about the ways they were marginalized. We scheduled meetings with students whenever we were available, in between classes, when we should have been reading for exams, and late in the evening. We spoke to students by phone.

Every student who would not sign nonetheless had feedback for us. However, writing or sharing their criticism of shortcomings of the letter with us was the extent of the labor they were willing to put into its construction. Most of the students’ criticism of the letter fell into two broad categories. First, they felt that we were not giving credit to the committee’s expressed commitment to diversity. As examples, they provided the fact that the new chair met with graduate students previously in the spring and had written an email to us acknowledging there were issues of equity and diversity, that she was looking into getting the graduate division to conduct a “climate report,” and that recently, the committee had worked with several other schools in the University of California system to secure a UC-wide

global Middle Ages grant: Middle Ages in the Wider World. One student even wrote to us that though the essay prize had been awarded to men for years in a row, she herself had been encouraged to apply, but had not done so. She suggested that this is reason enough that there is not gender bias and that the letter dismissed the efforts faculty *had* made. The second set of criticisms repeatedly centered around the fact that the letter discussed both diversity in body and diversity in discipline, a logical connection that at least one-third of the students, all in the history and English departments, thought was confusing. This criticism was always in response to the following paragraphs in the letter:

The letter we received repeatedly sets the academic quality of the degree against our call for more inclusivity, diversity, and equity. It describes the degree as it is as having a “scholarly focus,” “intellectual vitality,” “rigorous training,” and suggests that the changes we propose would jeopardize these valuable qualities. However, we believe that a more inclusive and diverse program would only strengthen the scholarly focus, intellectual vitality, and training of the concurrent degree.

We think it is important that all involved in Medieval Studies affirm that diversity is not just the presence of female, queer, or POC bodies in the room, in the program, on committees, etc. It is the active fostering of an environment that allows everyone to feel valued and respected. It is not enough to simply concede seats at the table so that a minority will be represented. Nor is it enough to acknowledge that there are people who “study areas outside the ordinary remit” and that they are allowed to ask for “exceptions.” In fact, it is worth mentioning that marginalization is itself the process of making students feel like exceptions, and this process only reinforces the problem.

Students took issue with this part of the letter. They argued that we cannot critique the makeup of the students in the programs and the intellectual fields of study in the same section. They found it vague to refer to the two as if they are entangled. I will return to the question of diversity disciplinary below but want to note here that while the criticisms offered were valid, often the suggestions that followed were not. They asked that we find specific anecdotes and offer specific examples of how students felt marginalized. “Specific is better,” one student wrote. While these students were explicit that their suggestions, pages and pages in length, were “not a sig-

nature” and that we should “check back in” once we had addressed their suggestions, they insisted that we do the work of making explicit the particulars of the ways the program excluded and marginalized students, individually. While they were not comfortable putting forward their names even as anonymous signatures, they were comfortable in asking that students make details regarding their exclusion—emotional and logistic—explicit in the very body of the letter.

We thought, then, that students were expressing genuine concerns about the letter. We thought they were being critical because, in being overly cautious, we might be able to condition the committee to be receptive to the letter’s critiques. We never assumed that students might be using feedback as a distraction, as a way of preventing things from moving forward. So, every day, Jess and I met with students, and every night we stayed up revising the letter to include what students said they needed in order to sign. In the middle of the night, we would redistribute the letter, and then come morning, we would check in with students to see if they had further suggestions, if they felt comfortable signing anonymously or by name. In every email, we added the following lines:

I hope you agree that our requests and suggestions are reasonable, respectful, and direct. We seek, above all, to hold our mentors and ourselves to a greater standard of awareness for the diversity of our program. If you would like to sign the letter, please give me written and documented permission (in writing) to add your name. We will not send the letter unless we have at least half of the concurrent degree students, since it is crucial that we do not alienate or isolate a handful of students.

But every day, we would receive a new set of suggestions or criticisms. And one by one, Jess and I chipped away at the list of suggestions. We removed the suggestion for graduate students to propose speakers because one student felt that it was unhelpful given that the majority of students will cater their interests to western Europe anyway. We removed the suggestion for faculty to develop the methods proseminar syllabus with graduate students because one student felt that this was dismissive of the labor faculty put into developing this course. We removed the suggestion that a number of courses remain flexible. Students, mainly in the English and history departments, argued that the requirements were flexible enough since they allowed you to petition for permission. They even wrote that if Jess and I were claiming that the study of the Middle Ages should include courses

beyond Europe, this was too provocative and that it might cause the committee to invalidate the letter as a whole.

It is obvious now, only years later, that this barrage of feedback was not designed to strengthen the letter we were going to put forward but to post obstacles big enough to halt it. Although Jess and I thought we were responding to student needs, we were in fact working through a new set of obstacles. Though we were emotionally overwhelmed, we were committed to taking the suggestions seriously, not only because we thought that these were conditions for them to sign but also because we had shared such deep disappointment with these students after reading the committee's letter. More importantly, we were committed to community and believed, at the time, that other students were too.

So, to ameliorate students' concerns that we were not recognizing the work the committee had already done, we opened the letter with an effusive declaration of appreciation. To mitigate the risks students felt as they signed the letter, we informed the faculty that the students who had signed (anonymously or by name) were taking this risk because they were committed to the degree. And only after this scaffolding did we start to discuss our concerns with the language in the committee's letter, which reminded students that "the degree was optional and that students are welcome to leave if they do not find it useful." "In every way," we stated, "this sentiment places a burden on those students who are marginalized as opposed to the cultures and structural priorities that marginalize them. Students have chosen this degree because they find it valuable. . . . By asking students to revisit a decision they've already made, this statement suggests that the marginalization a student may be experiencing is the result of the student's poor decision making. It is worth noting that this is the only solution the committee has provided us in this letter."

Finally, broken up into two sections—"Intellectual Diversity" and "Increasing Diversity"—we offered a list of suggestions in the letter and provided explanations and justifications for each. Given that prizes were awarded to white men in the program for years, we asked that all calls for applications include the phrase, "People of color and women are especially encouraged to apply." While this was a simple remedy, the next set of suggestions required more substantial action, such as a revision to the program requirements. For example, we asked for a more substantial inclusion of language requirements by suggesting that "each student could be expected to fulfill one core language of their choice and two other medieval languages." Given that the program had repeatedly expressed a com-

mitment to interdisciplinarity, we asked that specific course numbers be removed from the list of requirements. If that was not possible, we proposed instead that the list be expanded to include all courses taught by faculty affiliated with the degree. We suggested something similar for the Material Culture requirement. As it stood, the list that describes material culture privileged text-based studies (paleography, diplomatics, codicology). We suggested that the language in this requirement could be more inclusive either by removing the specific examples of material culture or by adding more, such as art history, architectural studies, and archaeology.

Middle: To Be Equally Distant from the Extremes

The letter was finished. Our deadline to submit had arrived. The night we were wrapping up the letter and sending it off, a small group of graduate students ran into each other at an event on campus. They decided collectively that they were not comfortable signing their names to the letter. And that night, one by one they texted or called us. First, they asked whether we would hold off sending the letter for two weeks. They wanted more time to consider signing it. We said no. We were tired. We had done our best to respond to every student's concern. They were welcome not to sign. Half of them removed their names. The other half changed their signature from named to anonymous. On October 25, 2016, at 12:15 a.m., we sent the letter to the degree's committee.

The next day the committee chair sent the only response we would ever receive:

Dear Shokoofeh,

My thanks to you and your fellow students for sharing your views as we work together to continue to improve the Program.

Yours sincerely,
XXXXXXXX

Though two faculty members wrote to us individually and acknowledged our labor and our commitment to improving the program, they neither rejected the suggestions nor accepted them.

Instead, the following semester, we received notice that the advisory committee had asked the graduate diversity director to conduct a climate report. Here we were, once again, being asked to communicate what we thought were the strengths and weaknesses with the program's diversity,

equity, and inclusivity culture. It was not enough that we had conducted our own town hall, that we had summarized our thoughts in a letter, that we had worked as a community to write and submit another letter that made the shortcomings of the degree explicit. “A good step in sorting issues,” the chair of the concurrent degree had said in May, was “having a clear view of what they are.” Nearly half a year later, hundreds of words later, hours of discussion later, and the advisory committee was still trying to understand what the issues were. They claimed an interest in hearing from us, even after they had dismissed and then ignored the thoughts we had, with painstaking care, delivered to them. They wanted to conduct a survey, to collect data, and to decide whether a majority were in the margins: Is there statistically enough marginalization in the program for the committee to consider it significant?

So, we all filled out a survey titled “MedSt Anonymous Survey about Program’s Climate for Diversity.” It took most students ten minutes to complete the survey. It took me days. It was too difficult to revisit the events of the past year. Five months later, we all sat in the room where medieval studies colloquia are held and received a summary of the report: 70 percent felt that the program was actively committed to diversity and sensed that it was improving over the previous year. Seventy-eight percent felt comfortable discussing equity and diversity issues with advisers. The facilitator continued to report on statistics that contradicted a year’s worth of the conversations I had had with students. Then the report moved away from numbers to a summary of the qualitative responses. In the excerpted quotations that they read to us from long-form reflections, students consistently raised issues with “implicit biases” and “macroaggressions.” They said explicitly that faculty knew harassment was happening and yet did not do anything about it. They wrote of toxic gender dynamics among peers. The long-form responses belied the statistics. The summary of the report ended with these micronarratives, and the energy in the room was uneasy. Did it matter that three-quarters of the student body felt that the program was committed to diversity if there were faculty who were explicitly aware of harassment but disregarded it? Can percentages and graphs justify these stories?

We transitioned into an open discussion, moderated by the graduate diversity director. Faculty spoke, both those on the advisory committee and those affiliated with the program. They repeatedly stressed that if harassment—sexual or otherwise—was occurring, we needed to let them know. They reminded us that they were committed to diversity and that they wanted us to experience graduate school in an environment different

from the hostile, sexist environments where they themselves had earned degrees. So, we need to speak up, they urged us. All the while, not a single graduate student or faculty from the advisory committee mentioned the letter that included half of the graduate students' signatures. In fact, aside from that single-sentence email response I had received over seven months prior, the committee had not yet addressed the letter. They did not even use the diversity initiatives of the past year as a frame for the graduate diversity survey. But particularly, in this discussion, the repeated insistence that graduate students must speak without any reference to the letter was bewildering. Revisiting its erasure during this town hall while writing this essay years later still sends a chill down my spine.

At some point, Jess and I, who were sitting side by side in the town hall circle, looked at one another. I raised my hand and said, "Faculty keep asking us why there is a culture of silence. But there is not. We spoke up months ago when we sent you a letter. They know what we are upset about. They know what we would like to see happen. But they never responded. We are not the ones who are silent. I am just wondering how they think students can come to them when they cannot even draft a response or engage with what has already been said?" The chair of the medieval studies program immediately jumped in. She said to the diversity director that she wanted to make a brief comment, that the committee received the letter but learned from fellow students that the organizers of the letter (she did not refer to us by name) had pressured students into signing the letter, that there were complaints that students had even felt "bullied" (she used this exact word). Given that there were concerns over this, they had decided not to respond.

I was stunned. There was silence. Nearly all the graduate students were there. And yet they sat in silence. I said, this time as my voice shook and my lips started to quiver, "How could you dismiss every part of that letter for the reasons you have just laid out? If there were concerns over bullying how could you not reach out to us and ask us about our process? You never even asked to have a discussion." There was more silence. Then a different faculty member from the committee said that in listening to this conversation he was realizing that they should have replied. He apologized. The chair did not respond.

Jess and I walked to the bus stop together after the town hall. At first, we were enraged. We yelled—the very fact that the director received reports of bullying and then decided to do absolutely nothing. Is this not evidence of the very culture the letter is criticizing? And then we wanted so

badly to know which students had told the chair that we had bullied them and what evidence had they provided. Did the chair even ask for evidence? Was it her? Or was it him? No, it could not be him, because he ended up not even signing, so why would he report it? Maybe it was a group of them? It was a futile conversation. It did not matter. I realize now we were coping with the shock of realizing that now (and for a long while before) we were no longer part of a student community. How wrong we were to think that this was a community letter, that we were coming together as students to discuss and shape the discipline we were working toward entering for the remainder of our intellectual lives. We were, in fact, set in opposition to faculty and students, neither here nor there. We were not of the discipline but positioned against it.

Middle: An Extremely Remote and Isolated Place—i.e., Middle of Nowhere

In her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed (2012) repeatedly likens the institutional rejection of diversity work to hitting a brick wall. She develops this metaphor because so many of the diversity practitioners she interviews describe the experience of diversity work in the institution as “a banging-your-head-on-a-brick-wall-job.” “The feeling of doing diversity work,” Ahmed (2012: 26) interprets, “is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible.” She writes that it is this process of coming up against this wall, however, that makes the wall explicit: “Perhaps the habits of the institutions are not revealed unless you come up against them.”

What came of all of our diversity work? The medieval studies advisory committee appointed a faculty member as equity adviser. In a colloquium, they introduced her and encouraged us to make an appointment if we would like to raise any issues or make any suggestions. “A good step in sorting issues is having a clear view of what they are.”

Over the years, as I’ve tried to process this experience, I’ve returned to the same set of questions: Why didn’t the very students who were willing to attend a town hall in order to express their concerns, who had also agreed to have their criticisms of the program forwarded to the governing body, sign *this* letter that Jess and I so painstakingly composed as a communal document? Why did I invest so much into this, even after I removed the suggestions I personally cared about the most? Students’ fears, cowardice, white fragility, my own deep sense of impostor syndrome all had a

role to play. However, by retelling the narrative of this diversity initiative in the context of medieval studies' disciplinarity, I have come away with a new understanding of these events.

When the chair wrote to the graduate students and described medieval studies as "threatened with extinction," she was invoking not just the crisis in humanities but also the crisis of public higher education. At this point at UC Berkeley, graduate students had already all participated in a union strike both for graduate student negotiations and for workers' rights. We had also witnessed and protested the increasing privatization of the school.⁴ The language that medieval studies could only survive by finding "success in attracting interested faculty and students" is itself the language of privatization and the commodification of education that is threatening public education nationally. This was exceptionally strategic even as it was manipulative, because it automatically instilled in graduate students a heightened sense of urgency. The question that the students who constantly critiqued the letter grappled with was no longer about how we can improve the degree but about whether the degree was worth saving. And the answer for half of the graduate students was yes. Those students also happened to be the students safest in the discipline as it is conceived: students in text-based disciplines, particularly those in the English and history departments.

And this is where disciplinarity matters. As scholars Ellen Messer-Davidow, David R. Shumway, and David Sylvan (1993: vii) elucidate, "Socially and conceptually, we are disciplined by our disciplines." Disciplines discipline. There is considerable power in disciplinarity, as it takes a group's shared values and interests and institutionalizes them into a set of practices, through which a group can resist or fortify established intellectual power. In other words, disciplinarity is determined by *who*, not *what*.

Medieval studies at UC Berkeley was established because five professors wanted to formalize talking about the intellectual interests they shared. There are reasons why, in the 1960s, these professors were who they were: five white men from history, music, German, classics, and art history. Title IX was not passed in the United States until 1972, and it was not

4. In 2014, the UC Student Workers and United Auto Workers Local 2865 held a strike to protest unfair labor conditions, class sizes, and wages. In 2015, there were UC-wide protests opposing the regents' proposed tuition hikes. In December 2015, UC Berkeley students protested the wages and working conditions of custodial and parking attendant staff on campus.

until 1980 that women and men were enrolled in American colleges in equal numbers for the first time. It was not until 1919 that the first cohort of Black women was even admitted to UC Berkeley. Barbara Christian, who was the first Black woman granted tenure at UC Berkeley, did not get tenure until 1978. In the words of scholars Bryan J. McCann, Ashley Noel Mack, and Rico Self (2020: 244), “Disciplinary histories are unavoidably entrenched in national histories, they cannot help but enact the nation’s racial logics.” This degree at UC Berkeley was founded based on the interests and passions of five specific scholars: medieval studies at UC Berkeley as a discipline was shaped by the embodied composition of its founders, which was in turn made possible by a history of racist and sexist exclusionary practices.

When students themselves repeatedly took issue with the fact that the letter spoke of inclusivity of discipline and body in one stroke, they misunderstood the way disciplines create spaces of belonging for some over others. When the advisory committee responded to the town hall letter to say that they had “discussed . . . what understanding of the Middle Ages should guide its program . . . and each time have firmly concluded” that its current version “best serves its students and best maintains the conditions of its intellectual vitality,” it became evident that they, too, were overlooking the exclusionary practices that made this particular characterization of the discipline possible.

It is in graduate programs where this disciplining begins. Graduate programs define the field as they train people to defend it. It is there where power hierarchies are unmistakable, where there are gatekeepers, where the culture of the field is set. It is in that *middle* space, where students are not yet professionals but also no longer strictly students, where the disciplining of the “middle” is determined. And yet, it is also here where those who are not yet qualified as medievalists are willing to interrogate and resist these boundaries, not having yet fully conformed to them. Often, they are dismissed. Always, they are unknown.

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