Introduction

No Past? Theology, Race, and Queer Theory's Authorized Genealogies

Like a Prayer

This book exhumes a dead metaphor—the comparison of secular love to religious faith—in order to examine the unexpectedly queer affordances of its theological vehicle. In the modern West, the description of secular desire through a Christian lexicon of prayer, conversion, salvation, redemption, confession, sacrifice, revelation, and ecstasy is so pervasive that it is scarcely noticeable. We need look no farther than contemporary popular music, ranging from bad to brilliant, in which examples abound: just a few obvious instances are George Michael’s “Faith,” Madonna’s “Like a Prayer,” REM’s “Losing My Religion,” Melissa Etheridge’s “Angels Would Fall,” Beyoncé’s “All Night,” John Legend’s “Made to Love,” Lady Gaga’s “Judas.”¹ These lyrics cite a tradition formalized by Dante and the troubadours, diffused into European discourse by Francesco Petrarch and his Renaissance imitators, and central to such standbys of modern wedding recital as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s vow that “I love thee with a love I seemed to lose / With my lost saints.”² True love, as distinct from lust or infatuation, resembles religious faith in structure but is directed at love objects who are in the world rather than saints or deities beyond it. Taken straight, this tradition would seem to supply ideological grounding for many of the compulsory normativities that queer theory has critiqued: monogamy, singular identity, self-sovereignty, and self-disclosure.

But what if religious discourse instead offers a script for theorizing promiscuity? My central proposal in this book is that if we linger over the secular religion of monogamous love, we can appreciate the deep affinities between queerness and faith across the temporal, national,
and generic borders that both queer theory and early modern studies too often take for granted. Throughout, I build on Carla Freccero’s astute observation that “a critical genealogy of one of heterosexuality’s most powerful discourses, the love song, demonstrates, proleptically, the queerness at the heart of heteronormative culture.” The particular strand of this genealogy that I examine is the Pauline theology of the divided will, which I treat as a neglected resource for queer theorizations of desire and subjectivity. Because Christianity has been so widely invoked to justify discrimination and violence against sexual minorities, that proposition would appear counterintuitive at best. In light of the long history of religious hostility to sodomy, homosexuality, adultery, promiscuity, and gender nonconformity, it makes sense that queer theory would give biblical and theological writing no quarter. Religion has done, and continues to do, untold damage to queer life. Particularly given the alarming and seemingly inexorable ascendency of the religious Right in US politics, shouldn’t queer theorists be calling for increased secularization, rather than inviting theological discourse into our own archives and genealogies?

To the contrary, I argue that when we dismiss the queer potential of religious writing on the grounds that this is not how it is understood by most practicing Christians, we grant that it is off-limits to those who do not believe. We thereby make theology sacred in the dual sense of that term explored by Giorgio Agamben: both consecrated and cursed, barred from human contact insofar as it has been sacrificed to the gods (even if we don’t believe in them). Instead, I suggest that we profane theology, bringing it into contact with the creaturely world through use and play. As numerous queer theologians, religious studies scholars, queer and psychoanalytic theorists, and early modernists have observed, taken on its own terms, a good deal of biblical and theological writing troubles normative views of intimacy and attachment. The result is that, Richard Rambuss demonstrates, “Christianity’s own myths, institutions, and cultural expressions offer too many transit points to the ecstatic, the excessive, the transgressive, the erotic to be allowed to serve tenably in . . . a censorious capacity, to be cast as a force field for the proscription of desire and its ever-wanton vagaries.” I would add that the “(orthodox) perversities” that Rambuss has identified in Christianity are present not only in spontaneous moments of devotional ecstasy. They are also part
of theology, understood as a systematic attempt to theorize belief, and of secular discourses of love. And because theology is itself a human invention, the metaphoric transport between sacred faith and secular love works both ways. It is not only that discourses of secular eroticism adopt religious idioms but also that theological writing deploys human desires and attachments to figure the relation between creature and creator. The sacred and the profane are mutually dependent and mutually disruptive.

I focus in this book on the secular legacy of the Pauline Epistles, whose soteriological elevation of faith over works, feelings over acts, guides the thought of Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Through Augustine, Pauline theology also shapes the lyrics of Francesco Petrarch, whose interminable pining and petulance affords a model for the secular love tradition that I examine in the writing of William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Mary Wroth, John Milton, and John Donne. This long and unruly genealogy, I propose, allows us to examine eroticism in a more complex and capacious sense than oppositions between monogamy and promiscuity, or normativity and transgression, can accommodate. Rather than depict love as eternal, the translation of religious fervor into secular eroticism registers with unusual precision the theological conviction that human desire and subjectivity are fundamentally promiscuous, a word I use not only in its sexual sense, but also in its more expansive designation of all that is errant, disorderly, flexible, and indiscriminate.

Central to Pauline theology is the view that faithlessness is not only inevitable, but also indispensable to salvation. It is in its failures and struggles that faith escapes becoming just one more work, one more mechanical ritual. Indeed, Paul’s conceptual system is premised on the view that the human will is inherently divided and obscure, and therefore congenitally incapable of fulfilling that first and most merciless of divine commands: Love me. Only me. The value of the crucifixion rests on humanity’s inability to offer eternal, exclusive, and unambivalent devotion and thereby to earn salvation on its own. Faced with frailty and failure, the human creature accepts the need for divine grace. Accordingly, far from assuming the possibility of happy fidelity often trumpeted by the modern evangelical Right, premodern Christian thought is obsessed with humanity’s salutary faithlessness and self-opacity. Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin offer a theory of subjectivity centered on
the recognition that what we know and tell of ourselves is unreliable, opaque, and partial: as I discuss at greater length in chapter 2, Lacan observes that what Pauline theology calls “sin” diagnoses the ambivalence and aggression that psychoanalysis has located at the core of desire. Devotion pulsates with doubt and distraction, the experience of which reminds humanity that grace is amazing because no one deserves it, but everyone can hope for it. In this, it is like secular love.

Intimacy, in this Christian schema, is premised not on an enduring commitment that guarantees a predictable future, but on a recursive temporality of broken vows, shifted attention, and renewed zeal. The resulting ethics of promiscuity, as I discuss in chapters 1, 2, and 5, requires a humbling awareness that the love we receive as well as that which we feel can be only charitable, never merited. We have blind spots that will catch us unaware; we will make compromises that will appear as such only in retrospect; our most deeply felt affections are potentially poisonous, cruel, and self-serving. In short, we are neither innocent nor invulnerable—whatever our hopes and intentions, we will inflict as well as suffer pain and disappointment. Paul, and the theologians and poets who take him seriously, know that Nietzsche is right: resentment saturates morality, and generosity can become its own form of aggression. As I will argue throughout this book, this theological, and especially Protestant, conviction of human depravity surprisingly offers a model of relationality that, premised as it is on a view of love as a matter of (always partial) charity and forgiveness, also offers a striking departure from normative definitions of romance based on self-knowledge, mutual desert, and lifelong fidelity.

Treating theology as a theoretical resource for examining secular desire, intimacy, and subjectivity can expand queer theory’s authorized genealogies and objects of study in several ways. First, amidst ongoing debates about the definition, utility, and purview of queer theory, attending to the queerness of premodern theology and poetry unsettles an acquired, unquestioned habit of mind that sees promiscuity and monogamy, obedience and transgression, as opposites. Ironically, a sexual radicalism that assumes that promiscuity frees us from repressive commitment and dreary vanilla sex may affirm neoliberal ideals of autonomy, privacy, and accumulation (of partners, of experiences, of goods). The profiles and preferences of app-based cruising or the acqui-
stitution of the tools and techniques of BDSM, for instance, illustrate what Kathryn Lofton has said of the “religion” of modern consumerism more generally: they can “forge new kinds of sectarian allegiance and new forms of obedience” to dominant structures of race and class. Although I critique commitment as a potentially discriminatory and damaging ideal, I avoid treating monogamy as the problem and promiscuity as the solution. Instead, I trace the long, intricate, and contradictory genealogies of these secular concepts as they collaborate with gendered, racial, national, and socioeconomic taxonomies.

The second affordance of the theological and poetic tradition I study is its perspective on the presecular and premodern roots of what Sharon Holland has called “the erotic life of racism.” Because religion is so explicitly central to both past conceptions of race and current neoracisms, attending to the theological concepts that shape secular eroticism illuminates a long history in which race and sexuality are mutually constituted. Poetic and theological writing concerned with the vexed relation between body and soul, works and faith, what one does and who one is, allows us to see the relation of acts and identities as inseparable from a genealogy of racialized sexuality and thereby challenges the imagination of a single, universalized queer subject. The secular lyrics I study, written at a time when the cultural dominance of companionate bourgeois marriage was not yet inevitable, often register a racialized sense of the contrast between the sincerity and freedom claimed for Christian (and especially Protestant) believers and the unregenerate hypocrisy and servitude of religious and racial others. This association of freedom (from history, from necessity) with authenticity makes both mainstream morality and queer promiscuity differently accessible for differently racialized bodies and souls. As I discuss at length in chapters 2 and 3, numerous women of color and queer of color scholars have shown how racial hierarchies are sustained by attaching unique respectability and morality to monogamous marriage and treating alternate forms of intimacy and kinship as evidence of a pathological failure of self-regulation. Yet ideals of promiscuity also enact their own taxonomies of segregation, devaluation, and omission. As Holland has argued, “In many ways, mainstream queer theory wants to leave history behind,” because recalling the long history of racial, ethnic, and colonial subjugation and violence that conditions erotic fantasy and preference is
“entirely disruptive to a theoretical project invested in the autonomy of . . . erotic preference.” I extend Holland’s call for locating queer subjectivity in “a transhistorical view of time” to account for the conjoined categories of religion, race, and sexuality before modernity. As I show in chapters 2 and 4, the alternatives to laborious monogamy found in premodern theological and poetic writing frequently depend on the figuration of formal—and therefore hypocritical rather than heartfelt—allegiance through improvised racial categories. At the same time, these lyrics are structured by a theological conviction of the impossibility of the lucid rationality and firm self-possession that classical philosophy had long deemed evidence of fitness for liberty. In stressing the failures of the classical values of self-knowledge and self-determination, Pauline theology and its poetic legacy open on a theoretical level an ethics of relationality suppressed by the material history of slavery and colonialism.

Finally, in turning to biblical, patristic, and early modern writing and cultural history, I join the many medieval and early modern scholars who have sought to rethink queer theory’s archive to include premodern materials usually understood as outside the temporal and identitarian boundaries of modern queer studies. What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described as the Great Paradigm Shift is also a secularization of both sexuality and race. According to this narrative, the theological category of sin is succeeded by those of crime, illness, and identity; ethnoreligious categories of Christians, Jews, Saracens, Moors, heathens, and pagans are succeeded by racial distinctions based on visual differences of skin color and phenotype. As Jonathan Goldberg has insisted, “The model of supersession and revelation—enlightenment—is always committed to a forgetting or obliteration.” Such a model obscures its own historicity: no less than modern definitions of “race” and “sexuality,” both historical periods and present definitions of the religious and the secular were nineteenth-century inventions. When we read beyond modern and secular boundaries to engage with premodern analyses of faith and subjectivity, we can appreciate that many “traditions” invoked by right-wing politics and opposed by queer scholars are themselves a product of selective memory and citation.

I take Pauline theology as my object of analysis because it is so central to what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call a “fantasized mainstream” in US secular culture. I treat theology, and the erotic poetry it
shaped, as archives that are, to borrow Goldberg’s words, “contributions to queer theory that do not appear under that rubric.” Although this book engages with and at times contextualizes the writings of the past, and although it draws on a number of pathbreaking histories and genealogies of sexuality, its goals are primarily theoretical rather than historical. In reevaluating writing that has been habitually dismissed, queer theory as a field can challenge both the normative culture that theology and love poetry are assumed to undergird and its own orthodoxies as a field. We can start by taking a closer look at the religious foundations of secularism itself.

Have We Ever Been Secular?
As Mark Jordan aptly notes, “Queer theorists have trouble paying enough attention to queer religion—especially if the religion is Christian and the theorists Anglo-American.” From the perspective of intellectual and political history, this exclusion of theology from queer theory is odd. Intellectually, in L. O. Aranye Fradenburg’s succinct description of the relationship between courtly love and psychoanalysis, Christian theology is part of the genealogy of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, and “for this reason it is also part of contemporary theory.” Thinkers who have been central to queer theory’s conceptual frameworks—perhaps most prominently, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida—consistently engage with biblical and theological sources to examine desire and subjectivity. Politically, before the late 1970s, as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini remind us, there is a “rich history of progressive movements for African American civil rights that were grounded in the Black Church, the movements for economic justice grounded in the Catholic worker movements in the United States and Catholic base communities in Central America, the long-standing tradition of Jewish progressive politics, and the Quaker movements on behalf of abolition and against war.” To this list we can add Mormon polygamy, Spiritualist gender nonconformity, and first-wave feminism. Historically, religiosity has prompted radical as well as reactionary responses to the dominant order.

The evacuation of theology from queer theory may have been less an inevitable development than a result of the specific cultural and historical moment in which queer theory consolidated itself as a field.
Queer theory is only one instance of Lawrence Buell’s observation that in late-twentieth-century literary and cultural studies more generally, “religiocentric frames of explanation started to go out of fashion at about the same time evangelical Christianity began to seize control of public culture to a degree unprecedented since colonial times.” The institutionalization of the field that would come to be known as queer theory began in the 1980s, which was also the decade in which religious culture in the United States saw a sea change. Cold War distinctions that deemed the United States the site of individual religious choice and freedom as against the state-mandated atheism and conformity of the Soviet Union had paved the way for a conceptual conjunction of Christianity, capitalism, and democracy that would flourish with the “prosperity gospel” of mass-mediated Christianity in the 1980s. The year of the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, 1979, was also a banner year for white evangelicalism in the United States: Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority as a political action committee and Pat Robertson released an “Action Plan for the 1980s,” the goal of which was to incite “a profound moral revival” by harnessing the “awesome power of the media.” In the 1980s and 1990s, a politically reactionary evangelical Christianity was fostered through megachurches, political action committees, Christian amusement parks and youth groups, and televised broadcasts of religious programming. The spread of white evangelical Christianity abetted the US government’s deadly inaction in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic—we might think of Billy Graham’s malicious claim that HIV was God’s way of punishing America for tolerating homosexuals. At the same time, an ascendant discourse of “family values” put the nail in the coffin of the Equal Rights Amendment and forged a new link between Protestant Christianity and opposition to contraception and abortion. During the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, faith-based charities, businesses, and organizations habitually defended discriminatory policies under the banner of religious freedom. Most recently, the rhetoric and policies of the Trump-Pence administration have accentuated the ease with which claims of sincerely held religious belief provide cover for attacks on women, immigrants, and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

Given that the rise of right-wing evangelicalism was coterminous with that of queer theory, it is unsurprising that the field tends to regard
Christianity with suspicion, if not hostility. Yet in treating secularization as a prerequisite of queer politics, the field of queer theory also risks perpetuating what Jakobsen and Pellegrini describe as “the Enlightenment progress narrative, which forecasts the continuous and inevitable expansion of freedom” that is “often told as the legitimating narrative of American life.”

Secularization is usually understood as an accumulation of what Charles Taylor calls “subtraction stories,” the gradual liberation from erroneous belief and practice that has accompanied the arrival of modern secularity. In Linell Cady’s evaluation, the “story of secularization narrates the triumph of empiricism over superstition, reason over faith, and the emancipation of all spheres—science, knowledge, the market, the state—from the oppressive and authoritarian ‘yoke of religion.’”

Trust in secularization as the path to a “disenchanted” state of rationality and freedom is based on a definition of “religion” as individual belief that must be kept separate from the public, political, and economic life of modern democracy. Yet this particular distinction between religiosity and secularity is itself a Christian one. It was initiated by the Pauline denial of the soteriological significance of ceremony, circumcision, and dietary laws; taken up by the Latin Church to proclaim the unique sincerity of Christian devotion as against Judaic, Muslim, and pagan ritual and custom; and significantly expanded by the Protestant Reformers’ denunciation of Catholic sacraments as mere superstitions.

Christian norms continue to haunt secular culture in part because, as Tracy Fessenden puts it, “a Protestant conception of religion” determines the “meanings of both the religious and the secular.” While it is empirically true that organized religion’s formal role in the state has been restricted in modern Western societies, from French laïcité to the US separation of church and state, it is also true that Christian perspectives and practices still inform everyday life and state politics in a myriad of norms so taken for granted that their credal basis has been rendered all but invisible. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the privatization of belief has allowed modern secular states and national cultures to be structured according to Christian norms. The free exercise of Christian belief receives staunch legal protection, even when it involves overt discrimination against sexual and racial minorities, while non-Christian religious identities and practices are treated as
mere pretext for illegal, dangerous, or culturally marginal activities and ways of being. Christianity’s productive invisibility itself depends on a suppression of the historicity of the concepts of the religious and the secular. The adjective “secular” originally designated those clergy who lived, preached, and ministered in the present, temporary, visible world designated by the Latin saeculum (age, lifetime, or generation). By contrast, “religious” clergy retreated into monasteries to worship an eternal and invisible deity. The Protestant Reformation was the beginning of secularization in the sense that it argued for the transfer of political, legal, economic, and cultural institutions from religious to secular basis and jurisdiction. This change sought not to exclude religious experience from everyday life but to integrate them. Protestant reformers rejected monastic seclusion as hypocritical and superstitious—a misguided substitution of works for faith, external conformity for internal sincerity. As against secularity as an epistemic category, “secularism” as an ideology names the nineteenth-century doctrine of the separation of religion and politics, a separation made possible by the Protestant definition of religion as private belief that, unlike embodied ritual or custom, could be sustained without public display or enactment.

Accordingly, postsecular scholars maintain that, in Talal Asad’s laconic formulation, “the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not essentially fixed categories.” Within literary and cultural studies, Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman have argued that by “naming and provincializing the animating master narrative of the secular”—seeing it as a product of the Western university’s particular geographical and historical location—we can reconsider an equation of secularization with freedom and progress that can be complicit with doctrines of Western superiority and American exceptionalism. I would add that this postsecular perspective might have affinities with a presecular one. Rather than situating our present moment as “after” secularism in the sense that religion has returned to Western culture, politics, or academia, postsecularism reckons with the possibility that we have never been as secular as we thought we were. Presecular writing can attune us to modes of thought that do not assume the possibility of progress, disenchantment, or liberation (this allies them with posthuman and new materialist theory, as I demonstrate in chapter 5). Premodern theology and poetry abjure humanist ideals of autonomous choice or prudential commitment in favor
of a Pauline and Protestant mindset that, in Alan Sinfield’s apt assessment, “thrived on irrationality.” Recognizing that mainstream secular discourses of desire are in fact Christian in structure if not in content allows us to notice the perversity and abjection that infuse “our” ostensibly modern world. This also allows us to rethink the association of theology with normative morality, on the one hand, and of queerness with modernity and liberation, on the other.

The Freedom of a Christian versus Babylonian Captivity

From the early days of the Protestant Reformation, the conceptual nexus of faith, freedom, and authenticity was framed in overlapping geographic and racialized terms. The titles of two of Luther’s influential 1520 tracts, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” and “The Freedom of a Christian,” sum up the goal of reform as a rejection of Catholic sacramental works, the rote fulfilment of which encourages resentment and hypocrisy, in favor of trust in God’s grace, which inspires love and gratitude. And even as Luther deemed the “black devil” of visible, carnal sin less dangerous than the “white devil” of secret, spiritual sin, this metaphor depended on a long history of depicting the devil as black, on the one hand, and dark-skinned persons as excessively libidinous, on the other. Indeed, one early justification of chattel slavery, inherited from Aristotle and fused with Christianity, was that it was merely an outer confirmation of an inner condition, a collapse of figurative and actual enslavement that naturalized the institution itself. Both the forced labor of Indigenous Americans and the African slave trade were justified on religious as well as racial grounds, and through the middle of the eighteenth century the religious differentiation of “Christians” and “Strangers” determined the lawfulness of enslavement. Legal distinctions between Christians and strangers were themselves understood in hereditary terms, as is evident in the decrees of colonial legislatures that “conversion did not alter the status of those descended from pagan lands.” Insofar as Christianity became a grounds for claiming citizenship, what we can see as a Protestant American version of Spain’s pure blood laws served to shore up a longstanding association of “true religion with enlightenment, with whiteness” against the leveling threats of Christian conversion and fellowship. New World emphasis on
skin color did not so much replace as supplement Old World religious groupings. By attending to the religious dimension of racial differentiation, we can appreciate the extent to which Protestant notions of faith and authenticity continue to inform ostensibly secular understandings of both normativity and queerness as racialized constructs. Too often, the term “race” has been deemed anachronistic by scholars who maintain that before the eighteenth century it meant something more like what we now call “ethnicity”: a cultural or religious attribution that was unstable and acquired rather than biologically fixed. Because, this argument goes, race was understood in fluid terms and lacked a coherent pseudoscientific rationale, premodern discourses of race, color, blood, or blackness are distinct from the rigid and discriminatory logic of modern, genetic views of race. Charges of anachronism enable an omission that Kim F. Hall critiqued over two decades ago: “Dismissing the term ‘race’ altogether or imposing absolute historical boundaries between early modern and contemporary constructions may allow us not to think about race either in Renaissance texts or in our classrooms. More specifically, it serves to perpetuate white privilege in Renaissance studies, the luxury of not thinking about race—hence duplicating racism in writing and professional relations.” I would add that the view that race is a modern concept is limiting to scholars of modernity as well, for it obscures a longer history of race that precedes the era of large-scale European colonization and American slavery. Confining the definition of racism to systematic color-based differentiation occludes more diffuse forms of racism built on class, religious, linguistic, and stylistic stereotypes, and thereby allows bias to be excused as observation of cultural differences rather than racist discrimination—in the present as well as the past.

This anxiety about anachronism, as Hall, writing with Peter Erickson, has more recently argued, disavows the archival discoveries and theoretical sophistication achieved by scholars examining early modern race and racism. For decades, scholars of medieval and early modern worlds have contested the view that race is a modern invention, the product of colonialism, Atlantic slavery, and pseudoscientific taxonomies. This body of work has established that (1) a recognizably modern racial discrimination is fully evident by the thirteenth century; (2) the European trade in African slaves began in the fifteenth century; (3) the
English knew of this trade from the beginning and participated in it from at least the mid-sixteenth century; (4) the early modern English population included far more nonwhite and non-Christian persons than has previously been estimated; (5) differences in skin color were accounted for in terms of climatic, humoral, and imprintation theory that at that time had the same pseudobiological status as eighteenth-and nineteenth-century eugenics, phrenology, physiognomy, and forensic anthropometry, all of which once were deemed legitimate modern science but have since been wholly discredited. Race, before the eighteenth century as after it, was viewed as somatic as well as cultural, and racialist thought was instrumental in shaping the modern political and economic abuses often thought to have produced it.

Drawing on the work of Ania Loomba, Ayanna Thompson, and Geraldine Heng, I argue that when we encourage the study of race in the early modern period on the grounds that it had many of the somatic and pseudoscientific meanings usually understood in its modern usage, we endow modern racialization and racism with a precision, intelligibility, and stability that they do not in reality have. Examining race’s volatile cultural and religious constructedness also is critical to contesting modern racism. The work of early modern scholars illuminates the longer history of the critical race theory argument that race is a dynamic and shifting social and cultural construct, not a meaningful physical or genetic characteristic. Then as now, physical attributes acquire valuation and meaning with regard to fantasies about religion, language, national origin, class and economic status, domestic arrangements, and sexual disposition and practice. This historical perspective is necessary to challenging a modern neoracism that thrives by denying that it is “racism,” properly speaking, at all. Étienne Balibar has observed of discrimination based on nonassimilation to dominant religious and cultural identities that “culture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.” Contrasting cultural and biological justifications for racism, Balibar insists, does nothing to change its discriminatory structure and effects, and may in fact rationalize them.

Attention to historical moments when race, always a promiscuous construct, was explicitly intertwined with religion can be instrumental in
allowing us to recognize past and present racisms that cannot be pinned to prejudice against particular phenotypes. In Geraldine Heng’s words, “A political hermeneutics of religion—so much in play again today—enabled the positing of fundamental human differences in biopolitical and culturalist ways to create strategic essentialisms demarcating human kinds and populations.” Leerom Medovoi offers a helpful conceptualization of premodern and modern racism as operating along two axes, those of color and faith. Dogma-line racialization, for Medovoi, supplements and interacts with a more familiar color-line racialization based on descent or phenotype. Dogma-line racism is a “racism of the soul” that can be traced back to the consolidation of Christian European identity through the Crusades and that “maps populations along the other side of Cartesian modernity’s mind/body split, in primary reference to mind rather than body, ideology rather than corporality, according to theologies, creeds, beliefs, faiths, and ideas, rather than their color, face, hair, blood, and origin.” Medovoi’s most prominent examples are modern Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, but he argues that dogma-line racism is itself a secularized theology in which “Jews and Muslims become prototypes for the abnormality of analogized secular religiosities that over time came to include dogmas ranging from socialism to anarchism to black power to feminism.” Medovoi’s work on twenty-first-century dogma-line racism, like Balibar’s writings on contemporary neoracism, helps to crystallize the political urgency of understanding race as more than a simple binary in which the past is divided from the present, religious from secular culture, and racism is reduced to prejudice against those who are visibly “not white.” What Roland Greene has said about European responses to Indigenous Americans in early modern colonial writing also describes modern racial distinctions based on the “one-drop rule,” Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and past and present hysteria about East Asian and Latin American immigration: “racial ‘color’ . . . exists as much in the minds of observers as in physical fact.” For Medovoi, the difficulty of defining just which combination of skin tone, eye color, hair texture, facial features, body type, dress, and comportment allows someone to “look” white brings dogma- and color-line racism together. The two axes of racism converge to “retroactively read the telltale signs on the racial body for what should have been noticed in the first place,” even as the search for somatic evidence of hidden danger is “animated
Questions of sexual excess and repression have long been central to the formation of racial distinctions, and this book examines how theological concepts of faith and grace complicate conjoined racial and sexual categories. As I discuss in chapters 2, 3, and 4, tracing the Pauline logics that still shape Western secular views of love and commitment can provide us a surprising challenge to the innocence of the respectable, monogamous, procreative marriage associated with Christian thought. At the same time, the assumptions of authenticity and emancipation that have shaped queer endorsements of promiscuity may themselves derive from a Pauline distinction between hypocritical conformity and sincere desire. Several queer and feminist studies of the collaboration between narratives of secularization, modernization, and sexual liberation have demonstrated that when queer and feminist theorists assume that secularization is necessary to gender equality and sexual freedom, they unwittingly accept what Jasbir Puar describes as Western “sexual exceptionalism” that perpetuates distinctions between archaic and repressive religiosity and modern and liberatory secularity. As Puar contends, in this queer paradigm “‘Freedom from norms’ resonates with liberal humanism’s authorization of the fully self-possessed speaking subject” and “relies on a normative notion of deviance, always defined in relation to normativity, often universalizing.”

Given that sexual exceptionalism incorporates a secularist ideal that itself derives from Christian tradition, I propose that one response is to look more closely at the theological discourses from which Christian family values rhetoric claims authority and which queer anti-identitarian rhetorics purport to reject. Analyzed on its own terms, Christian faith refuses the reassuring distinctions between transgression and normativity, emancipation and repression, that have shaped queer as well as normative associations of erotic choice with modernity, secularization, and whiteness.

This Book

The following five chapters examine how premodern theology and poetry strikingly contest modern assumptions—both in their explicit
proclamation by believers and in their secular iterations—about what Christian writing has to say about desire, sex, commitment, selfhood, and ethics. Considering the topics of faith, monogamy, procreative marriage, adultery, and erotic accountability, each chapter treats lyric poetry as a hinge articulating theological convictions of humanity’s innate promiscuity with psychoanalytic and queer assessments of opaque and fragmented subjectivity. This poetry makes visible an ethos of promiscuity that—distinct from a libertine ethos of individual entitlement—practices a humbling awareness of our own propensity to guile, aggression, and self-deceit. This ethos does not enjoin a cynical dismissal of intellectual consistency or social justice, but suggests a consciousness of how easily and often we fall short of these goals. In relinquishing a belief in our own wholeness or harmlessness, we might become more open to unbidden encounters with similarly imperfect others. We might also come to practice the ongoing efforts of ethical self-formation that Foucault called *askesis*.

This book builds on much that has gone before in studies of the relations among theology, early modern literature, gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism. Along with the accounts of secularism, race, and religion discussed in the sections above, two fields from which this project has drawn considerable inspiration are political theology and queer theology. The first of these, political theology, resists strict periodization and contextualization, and, as Julia Lupton writes, treats the “religious turn” in early modern studies as “the chance for a return to theory.” As Lupton and Graham Hammill summarize it, this body of scholarship has sought to “identify the exchanges, pacts, and contests that obtain between religious and political life, especially the use of sacred narratives, motifs, and liturgical forms to establish, legitimate, and reflect upon the sovereignty of monarchs, corporations, and parliaments.” The second field I engage, queer theology, contests the tendency among both the Christian Right and queer theorists to focus on those biblical “texts of terror” condemning homosexuality, adultery, masturbation, promiscuity, and gender deviance. Queer theology instead brings together philological, historical, and theoretical methods of reading to illuminate the complexity of biblical and theological representations of gender, sexuality, and kinship. At its most optimistic, queer theology has proclaimed, in Andy Buechal’s words, that “all good theology has always been queer,
even if this way of describing it is new. Christian practice and belief have always been somewhat bizarre.”65 Other queer theologians have stressed the imperfect fit between queer and Christian identity, however, and urged extensive disciplinary self-critique for a field that, as Susannah Cornwall observes, “always stands in a difficult relationship to the ecclesiastical and academic mainstream.”66

My readings of secular love lyrics bring together political theology’s attention to, in Lupton and Hammill’s words, “the status of theology as an operative fiction” with queer theology’s insight that, as Cornwall writes, “the ambiguity of the Christian tradition means that . . . it is neither queer nor anti-queer: or rather, it is both.”67 This is hardly news, of course, to scholars whose work has illuminated the strangeness of early modern religious verse, which is more likely to describe promiscuous attachments and agonized apostasy than serene devotion.68 My contribution to this body of thought is to consider how the fundamentally anxious theology of Paul, Augustine, and their Protestant heirs shapes the obsessive self-inventories of lovers of worldly as well as divine objects. Both formally and thematically, Renaissance sonnet sequences and poetic collections manifest the oscillations of love through cycles of resentment, aggression, appetite, appeal, gratitude, humiliation, and forgiveness. This maelstrom of desires emerges from the “Protestant paradox” diagnosed by Constance Furey: even as the Reformation elevated individual faith over communal ritual, the very turn from works to grace constructed the self as vulnerable and dependent on God and community, and therefore a matter of interactive poiesis, “the crafted fragment of thought” that is not sui generis but responsive and, to that degree, relational.69 Poetic disjunctions between sound and sense, metrical and grammatical units, semiotic and syntactic events, as well as the interruptions, silences, juxtapositions, and opacities that exist between one poem and another, all register the fragmentary, incoherent nature of desire and subjectivity—the propensity to confuse and delude self no less than other, the difficulty of collating event with intensity of reaction. And as the lyric “I,” like its theological counterpart, aspires to the inclusiveness of the “we,” it also reveals the divisions and incoherencies of this relational and communal construct.

Moreover, as Roland Greene has shown, before “lyric largely disappears from the spheres of society and politics and into the dead end of a
discrete literary culture,” it is a key medium for the socialization of gendered, racial, and colonial relations that hinge on the ethical dilemmas of desire and unrequitedness. \(^\text{70}\) While early modern love poetry has not been a continuous object of analysis for contemporary queer, feminist, or critical race theory, it has appeared in some of the seminal work in these fields: we might think of Eve Sedgwick’s theory of the homosocial triangulation of desire in Shakespeare’s sonnets; Barbara Johnson’s excavation of the Petrarchan legacy of “muteness envy” in modern cinema and politics; Fred Moten’s analysis of Amiri Baraka’s “Dark Lady of the Sonnets” in light of the technological apparatus within which Shakespeare sexualizes racial difference; or José Esteban Muñoz’s discussion of male vulnerability in Shakespeare’s sonnets and modern art. \(^\text{71}\) I return throughout this book to the formal manifestations of secular love poetry’s resistance to optimistic ideals of the permanence or perfectibility of desire. I thereby practice what Elizabeth Freeman describes as “close readings of the past for the odd detail, the unintelligible or resistant moment” in order to “treat these texts and their formal work as theories of their own, interventions upon both critical theory and historiography.” \(^\text{72}\) To restate the beginning of this chapter, close reading revivifies dead metaphors and permits them to disrupt and derange the routines of modern life.

In chapter 1, “The Queerness of Christian Faith,” I analyze the theological roots of secular understandings of erotic temporality and fidelity. I begin with the Pauline Epistles, in which the radical humiliation that manifests divine love is necessarily beyond human capacity. I then turn to Saint Augustine’s conviction that the divided human will renders confession incomplete and conversion provisional. Based on the premise that as a human creature he can always change, Augustine’s depiction of faith as a result of miraculous passion is cause for optimism as well as anxiety about who he will be in the future. Salvation for Augustine inheres in the consequent realization that professions of faith are in fact ambivalent prayers for it. Finally, I trace the centrality of Pauline and Augustinian theology to the structure of fidelity in Petrarch’s secular lyrics, which limn in excruciating detail the “mille rivolte”—the thousand turns, revolts, and returns—of his competing attachments to Laura, God, and his own worldly ambition. These poems confront a fragmented self incapable of the conviction and fidelity to which it desperately aspires but does not entirely want.
In chapter 2, “The Color of Monogamy,” I examine how an ideal of monogamy helps sustain intersecting gendered and racial hierarchies. Women of color feminism has long censured the association of female sexual respectability with whiteness and social privilege, but this work generally dates the advent of that association to the establishment of modern slavery and colonialism. Shakespeare’s sonnets, however, register the development of a fiction of somatic, heritable whiteness as a correlate of respectable sexuality, one disseminated in classical discourses celebrating male friendship and in imperial allegories of sexual conquest. Yet in their depiction of a three-way affair between the poet, a “fair” young man, and a “black” mistress, the sonnets conspicuously fail to cordon off rational and mutual “fair” male friendship from the humiliating enslavement of “black” female appetite. Instead, drawing on the Pauline theory of sin and grace that influenced thinkers from Luther to Lacan, the sonnets dissolve the oppositions ostensibly embodied by the poet’s “two loves”—agency and passivity, mastery and submission, fidelity and promiscuity, purity and pollution—to imagine intimacies beyond the couple.

Chapter 3, “The Shame of Conjugal Sex,” traces the effects of Pauline and Augustinian soteriology on Protestant views of marriage. The Protestant Reformation is conventionally understood as elevating conjugal love above the lifelong celibacy idealized by the Catholic Church. But this redemptive vision of companionate marriage overlooks a key argument of leading reformers like Luther and Calvin: both deemed marriage superior to celibacy not because marriage sanctifies shameful creaturely desires, but because it publicly acknowledges them. This view of marriage as humbling confession of impurity runs counter to the modern ideals assumed by the US Supreme Court in Obergefell v. Hodges, which affirmed the constitutional right to marriage for all couples. In Obergefell, the majority claims that marriage is a unique expression of love, while the dissent insists that it is a sanctuary for the family values threatened by promiscuous queers and welfare queens. Both arguments work to excise the irrational lust whose administration Protestant writers, following Paul, deemed the institution’s chief aim. Anxiety that nuptial sex shares the excess and indignity of fornication structures the gendered, sexual, and racial fantasies of Shakespeare’s sonnets and Spenser’s Amoretti and Epithalamion. When Shakespeare’s procreation
sonnets cast poetry as a reproductive technology free of the contamination of lust, they valorize not only same-sex desire but also the preservation of specifically “fair”—white—life and culture. Spenser, by contrast, reveals that the ideal of chaste romance generates sadomasochistic fantasies that naturalize white male rapacity and racialize female innocence.

Chapter 4, “The Optimism of Infidelity: Divorce and Adultery,” argues that whereas in modern thought secularism appears the only route to challenging lifelong monogamous marriage, the early modern writers John Milton, Philip Sidney, and Mary Wroth base their endorsement of divorce and adultery on the Pauline distinction between duty and love, letter and spirit, that infuses faith itself with a salutary faithlessness. Milton’s divorce pamphlets and Sidney’s and Wroth’s adulterous sonnet sequences assume that any given commitment may turn out to be a mistake, so intimacy is inevitably provisional. In their emphasis on interiority, these writers participate in a cultural project of privatizing love, which scholars have rightly seen as an ideological foundation of heteronormativity, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Yet by taking this privatization to its logical extreme, they provide grounds for removing intimacy from institutional regulation and reward altogether. These writings are useful to modern queer thought not just as positive models, but also because they alert us to the exclusions upon which freedom may be premised. Sidney, Wroth, and Milton are part of the longer history that precedes and conditions present queer associations of secularism with Western reason and modernity, religion with superstitious and oppressive non-Western cultures. The ideal of sexual liberation, no less than those of monogamy and marriage, has its own racialized genealogy.

Chapter 5, “On Erotic Accountability,” focuses on lyrics written from the point of view of the unfaithful lover. I argue that the theological concepts of charity, forgiveness, and confession can inform secular discussions of erotic accountability: What do we owe those whom we love and those who love us, particularly when those categories do not converge? Understanding accountability in the dual senses of responsibility and narration illuminated by Judith Butler, I consider how aesthetic creation—the struggle to tell a coherent story of the self and its desires—constitutes an unattainable ethical obligation. I focus on the devotional and libertine lyrics of John Donne, who, like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin before him, represents confession not as a Foucauldian act of
truth, but as an imaginative, aestheticized acknowledgment of guilt in *potentia*. Donne’s attention to the entanglement of matter and spirit resists the ideals of romance and rationality that have often been deemed the signal characteristics of “human” sexuality; instead, he writes from the perspective of a being coopted by foreign forces within and without. Counterintuitively, Donne is at his most religious when he defends promiscuous, impermanent, and impure intimacies. For the indiscriminate desire that Donne’s speakers pursue is not only the contrary of singular devotion but also a secular approximation of divine forgiveness and *caritas*, the arbitrary yet generous love for imperfect creatures regardless of merit.

I conclude with a coda in which I examine some implications of Pauline theology for recent debates about periodization, affect, and reading. Here, I observe that the figure of the scholar whose work is spurred by love rather than professional aspiration, submission to texts rather than mastery over them, reparative rather than paranoid approaches, offers a paradigm for scholarly commitments that are not defined in terms of traditional periodization. Yet I recognize that an endorsement of amateurism and attachment might be a secular version of the Pauline hierarchy of faith and love over works and rewards—and therefore itself quite consonant with a longstanding view of literary study as a “secular vocation.” Rather than treat this theological resonance as a reason to dismiss the possibility that different orientations to reading can reinvent institutional norms, I explore what the persistence of this Pauline structure can tell us about our ways of inhabiting academia. By pursing this framework to its logical conclusion, I propose that a revaluation of promiscuity—with all of its implications of infidelity and instrumentality, distraction and play—may encourage scholarship that resists ideals of scholarly mastery and commitment that tend to reinforce the institutionalization of queer theory’s archive as modern and secular.

I close this introduction with a reflection on the value of scholarly dialogue from Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant’s *Sex, or the Unbearable*. At the end of this book, Edelman comments that “except as a rhetorical gesture . . . we can’t renounce persuasion. But that doesn’t make agreement the point toward which we ought to tend . . . . The shaping of our claims in terms of various rhetorics of persuasion . . . solicits, in this context, resistance, counterargument, and the teasing out of thought that
allows us . . . to rework our ideas as they pass through the filter of the other.” This offers a useful summary of the interchange that I endeavor to stage in following chapters between conceptual systems and scholarly conversations often considered incongruent, if not mutually incompatible. By passing these writings “through the filter[s] of the other,” I try to reassess many of the academic boundaries—of method, historical period, and institutional organization—that currently shape field formations and interpretive protocols. My reading of these materials tends to be opportunistic rather than systematic, evocative rather than exhaustive. In committing to such promiscuous reading, I hope to find new pasts in the present—and new futures in the past.