

Religion, race, and sexuality

Melissa E. Sanchez and Abdulhamit Arvas

This graduate seminar examines the entangled histories of religion, race, and sexuality through literature. Rather than treating devotion and desire, faith and embodiment, or theology and politics as separate domains, the seminar examines how their intersections have historically produced categories of identity, difference, and community.

How are spiritual and secular discourses of desire mutually constitutive? Is the experience of religious devotion—with its gender-fluid identifications, erotic raptures, and bodily disciplines—ever anything but queer? To what extent do monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) depend on, and even construct, racialized hierarchies?

Situating these questions within early modern theology as well as modern and contemporary contexts challenges the presumed stability of selfhood, morality, and monogamy that are often taken as normative in definitions of faith. The seminar interrogates how theological discourse not only regulated but also destabilized emergent formations of race, sexuality, and gender.

Bringing together literary texts, theological writings, ethnographies, and critical theory, the course advances a comparative and transhistorical framework. In doing so, the seminar positions religion as a generative archive for rethinking how categories of race and sexuality take shape. It also underscores the methodological stakes of reading devotion and desire together: attending to their entanglement unsettles the boundaries of

periodization, resituates canonical works in broader transnational contexts, and opens the study of literature to comparative religious and queer frameworks.

Presentations

Each class session opens with a student presentation (no longer than 15 minutes). The student responds to the assigned readings, highlights main arguments of texts, develops an argument, and offers at least three open-ended questions to facilitate class discussion. This is an individual contribution to the collective effort of the class to understand and interpret the texts presented. The presentation should set up the discussion of the text(s) for that session, in terms of both clarifying what is at stake in the reading as well as suggesting where the class could go with it.

Reading schedule

Week 1 - Theory and history on religion, race, secularism, and sexuality

- Medovoi, Leerom. "Dogma-Line Racism: Islamophobia and the Second Axis of Race." *Social Text* 30, no. 2 (2012): 43-74.
- Sanchez, Melissa E. "Introduction: No Past? Theology, Race, and Queer Theory's Authorized Genealogies," in *Queer Faith: Reading Promiscuity and Race in the Secular Love Tradition*, 1-22. New York University Press, 2019.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Introduction: The Discourse of Secularism" and "From the Cold War to the Clash of Civilizations," in *Sex and Secularism*, 1-29, 122-55. Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Warner, Michael. "Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood," in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, 123-31. Continuum, 1999.

Week 2 - Samson Agonistes

- Graybill, Rhiannon. "Conquest's Compulsion: Against the Promise of the Promised Land in the Hebrew Bible," in *Lee Edelman and the Queer Study of Religion*, edited by Kent L. Brintnall, Rhiannon Graybill, and Linn Marie Tonstad, 45–64. Routledge, 2024.
- Halpern, Richard. "Samson's Gospel of Sex: Failed Universals in Milton and Freud," in *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies: Gender, Race, and Sexuality*, edited by Ania Loomba and Melissa E. Sanchez, 187–94. Routledge, 2016.
- Hochberg, Gil Z. "Introduction: Israelis, Palestinians, Queers: Points of Departure." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4 (2010): 493–516.
- Hochberg, Gil Z., Haneen Maikey, Rima, and Samira Saraya. "No Pride in Occupation: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4 (2010): 599–610. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2010-006>.
- Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes*. 1671.
- Judges 13–16 (KJV).

Week 3 - The Faerie Queene

- Britton, Dennis. "Introduction: Not Turning the Ethiope White," in *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance*, 1–34. Fordham University Press, 2014.
- DeVun, Leah. "The Monstrous Races: Mapping the Borders of Sex," in *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, 40–69. Columbia University Press, 2021.

- Goldberg, Jonathan. "Spenserian Askesis: The 1590 *Faerie Queene*," in *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations*, 61–121. Fordham University Press, 2009.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Book 1.

Week 4 - Othello

- Africanus, Joannes Leo. *A Geographical Historie of Africa*. 1600.
- Boyarin, Daniel. "Othello's Penis: Or, Islam in the Closet," in *Shakespeareer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon, 254–62. Duke University Press, 2011.
- De Nicolay, Nicholas. *Navigations, Peregrinations, and Voyages Made into Turkey*. 1585.
- Lithgow, William. *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Painefull Peregrinations of Long Nineteene Yeares Travailes*. 1632.
- Sandys, George. *A Relation of a Journey Begun An. Dom. 1610*. 1615.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*.
- Smith, Ian. "The Queer Moor: Bodies, Borders, and Barbary Inns," in *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion*, edited by Jyotsna G. Singh, 190–204. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Traub, Valerie. "Sexuality," in *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance*, edited by Ania Loomba, 147–80. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Van Linschoten, Jan Huygen. *His Discours of Voyages into Ye Easte & West Indies*. 1598.

Week 5 - Religion, sexuality, Black studies

- Armstrong, Amaryah Shaye. "Losing Salvation: Notes toward a Wayward Black Theology." *Critical Times* 6, no. 2 (2023): 324-44.
- Neill, Michael. "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1989): 383-412.
- Smith, Ian. "Racial Blind Spots: Misreading Bodies, Misreading Texts," in *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, 53-79. Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Smith, Ian. "The Racialized Reader," in *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, 31-52. Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Winters, Joseph. "Queer Negativity and Racial Antagonism: Edelman, Afro-Pessimism, and the Limits of Recognition," in *Lee Edelman and the Queer Study of Religion*, edited by Kent L. Brintnall, Rhiannon Graybill, and Linn Marie Tonstad, 144-59. Routledge, 2024.

Week 6 - *The Merchant of Venice*

- Boyarin, Daniel. "Introduction," in *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1-29. University of California Press, 1997.
- DeVun, Leah. "The Hyena's Unclean Sex: Beasts, Bestiaries, and Jewish Communities," in *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, 70-101. Columbia University Press, 2021.
- Little, Arthur L., Jr. "The Rites of Queer Marriage in *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Shakespeareer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon, 216-24. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*.

Week 7 - Turk plays

- Daborne, Robert. *A Christian Turned Turk*, in *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England: Selimus, Emperor of the Turks; A Christian Turned Turk; and The Renegado*, edited by Daniel J. Vitkus, 149–231. Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Loomba, Ania. "'Delicious Traffick': Alterity and Exchange on Early Modern Stages," in *Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells, 203–24. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Parker, Patricia. "Preposterous Conversions: Turning Turk, and Its 'Pauline' Rerighting." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1–34.
- Vitkus, Daniel J. "The English and the Early Modern Mediterranean," in *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630*, 25–44. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Week 8 - Paradise Lost, Books 1-6

If you want to read online, you can use the [Dartmouth Milton Reading Room edition of Paradise Lost](#). For a hard copy, Gordon Teskey's edition (this is the one to be used in class); Merritt Hughes' edition; or Jonathan Goldberg and Stephen Orgel's edition.

- Magarik, Raphael. "Paradise Circumcised: How Milton Became Secular." *Modern Philology* 121, no. 4 (2024): 402–24.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Assigned selections: 1.1–375, 1.522–798; 2.629–897; 3.55–343; 4.1–171, 4.288–538, 4.610–778; 5.561–907; 6.628–912.
- Nyquist, Mary. "Antityranny, Slavery, and Revolution," in *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, 123–61. University of Chicago Press, 2013. Focus: 123–47.

- Wilburn, Reginald A. "Making 'Darkness Visible': Milton and Early African American Literature," in *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriating Milton in Early African American Literature*, 1–56. Duquesne University Press, 2014.

Week 9 - Paradise Lost, Books 7-12

- Crawford, Julie. "Transubstantial Bodies in *Paradise Lost* and *Order and Disorder*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 75–93.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Assigned selections: 7.1–215; 8.64–178, 8.249–653; 9.1–47, 9.192–1189; 10.460–584, 10.845–1104; 12.1–269, 12.606–49.
- Shore, Daniel. "Was Milton White?" *Milton Studies* 62, no. 2 (2020): 252–65.

Optional

- Sanchez, Melissa E. "Milton's Genderqueer Christianity." *Milton Studies* 62, no. 2 (2020): 306–22.

Week 10 - Gender, marriage, imperialism

- Atshan, Sa'ed. "Critique of Empire and the Politics of Academia," in *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, 183–212. Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Atshan, Sa'ed. "Introduction: There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions," in *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, 1–26. Stanford University Press, 2020.
- DeVun, Leah. "The Perfect Sexes of Paradise," in *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, 16–39. Columbia University Press, 2021.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Islamic Head Scarves in French Public Schools." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 23, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2005): 106–27.

- Willey, Angela. "Monogamy's Nature: Global Sexual Science and the Secularization of Christian Marriage," in *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880–1960*, edited by Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes, and Ryan M. Jones, 97–117. University of California Press, 2018.

Week 11 - Sufi poetry

- Arvas, Abdulhamit. "Mapping Boys on the Horizon," in *Boys Abducted: The Homoerotics of Empire and Race in Early Modernity*, 81–108. Duke University Press, 2025.
- El-Rouayheb, Khaled. "Aesthetes," in *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800*, 53–110. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Lewis, Franklin. "Sexual Occidentation: The Politics of Conversion, Christian-Love and Boy-Love in 'Attār." *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2009): 693–723.
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh. "Introduction," in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 1–25. University of California Press, 2005.

Week 12 - Richard Crashaw

- Crashaw, Richard. "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa."
- Crashaw, Richard. "The Flaming Heart."
- Rambuss, Richard. "Christ's Ganymede," in *Closet Devotions*, 11–72. Duke University Press, 1998.
- Rambuss, Richard. "Sacred Eroticisms," in *Closet Devotions*, 1–9. Duke University Press, 1998.

- Tonstad, Linn Marie. "Saying Nothing," in *Lee Edelman and the Queer Study of Religion*, edited by Kent L. Brintnall, Rhiannon Graybill, and Linn Marie Tonstad, 211–20. Routledge, 2024.