Editors' Introduction

Critical confessions now

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On the occasion of *postmedieval*'s tenth anniversary, we have come together to celebrate. But how and why do we celebrate or, more urgently, how do we celebrate *now*? What the present moment makes clear is the extent to which there is no possibility of unbridled celebration — that is, no possibility of celebration taken out of contexts shaped by the vicissitudes of hope and despair. The rituals and rites of celebration bring into relief that the commemorative function of celebration carries with it the sedimentation of historical force and memory; celebration is always already the acknowledgment of the present's conditioning by the past and the past's re-emergence into the present. These pasts, of course, can be both constraining and enabling.

Our decision to focus on confession in this special issue provides an opportunity to perform a collective confession of appreciation for the decade of work made possible by the platform built by *postmedieval*. Thus, we called for a diverse set of contributors to engage in a confessional mode of writing. We tasked the authors to reflect on the ways in which each author's positionality is

constituted by and constitutive of *postmedieval*'s 'present-minded approach' to premodern studies. By calling these authors, these devoted readers and writers, to confess, then, we ask them to take up the first-person singular in order to bring the past and present 'into productive critical relation.' We are guided in part by Amy Hollywood's reminder that 'confession was not only an admission of sins but also an act of praise and a profession of faith' (Hollywood, 1995, 60) as this commemorative issue offers collective praise for and faith in the project of *postmedieval*.

This faith, like this celebration, however, is not unconditional but rather guided by the journal's own call for 'productive critical relation.' In other words, to be most faithful to the spirit of the journal is to embrace even these moments of praise as also opportunities for self-critique — to account for our affective attachment to and investment in premodernity while also recognizing and safeguarding against the inequity, violence, and injustice engendered by medieval and early modern institutions and forms of life. Thus, we imagine with Hollywood's contribution to this issue 'a medieval tradition deeply at odds with itself, a tradition that distrusted itself as much as I did it' — that is, we imagine a counter-tradition internal to premodernity that serves as the very possibility of its undoing, its resistance, its transformation, and, even, its legibility to and resourcefulness for the present. We embrace the theme and mode of confession just as much as we remain suspicious and critical of it.

Our critique of confession stems from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One (1976), in which he describes the epochal shift from sovereign to bio-power marked by an ever-increasing and compulsory 'confession of the flesh' (Foucault, 1978, 19). By this phrase, Foucault asserts that despite the increased refinement and discretion that guided Christian penitential practices into modernity, the end of the eighteenth century witnessed a 'steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex' (Foucault, 1978, 18). That confession remains the central modality of inciting discourse about sex is made plain in the penultimate sentence of the text, when Foucault writes, 'We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow' (Foucault, 1978, 159). This shadow of sex is, as Foucault describes earlier, 'the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures' (Foucault, 1978, 155). This specter of sex, 'this unique signifier and [...] universal signified,' mandates an unending task of confession such that 'each individual has to pass [through sex] in order to have access to their own intelligibility [...] to the whole of their body [...] to their identity' (Foucault, 1978, 155–6). Confession, then, is cast as the central model

for discursive production and subjectivation — both knowing oneself as subject and becoming subject to power — within an epoch organized by bio-power.

But Foucault considers an alternative, the possibility of escaping the ‘ruses of sexuality’ by entering into ‘a different economy of bodies and pleasures.’ Indeed, as he explains, ‘It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim [...] to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance’ (Foucault, 1978, 157). If Foucault gestures towards an escape from the grips of power, the apparatus of sexuality — and we are not entirely sure he does, as his articulation of this possibility is always conditioned by the uncertainty of the ‘one day, perhaps,’ by the ‘if’ — how exactly does he envision this ‘different economy of bodies and pleasures’? This enigmatic phrase has puzzled those looking for any kind of practical application of Foucault, but as David Halperin explains, the phrase does not ‘denote a mere rearrangement of otherwise unchanged and unchanging “bodies and pleasures,” a minor modification in the formal design of the sexual “economy” alone, consisting in a revised organization of its perennial “elements”’ (Halperin, 1998, 94). Instead, bodies and pleasures ‘refer to two entities that modern sexual discourse and practice include but largely ignore, underplay, or pass quickly over, and that accordingly are relatively undercoded, relatively uninvested by the normalizing apparatus of sexuality, especially in comparison to more thoroughly policed and more easily pathologized items such as “sexual desire”’ (Halperin, 1998, 94). As such, they provide the very site of resistance to the apparatus of sexuality, what Foucault also terms *scientia sexualis*.

But if this *scientia sexualis* ‘kept as its nucleus the singular ritual of obligatory and exhaustive confession’ (Foucault, 1978, 68), does our escape from or resistance to it require an outright disavowal of the procedures of confession insofar as it serves as the basis for the discursive production of the subject? Must bodies and pleasures be posed in opposition to discourse? Mark Jordan suggests as much when he proclaims, ‘The only way to reach that other economy is first of all by unsaying, by apophasis. The apophasis begins with the phrase “bodies and pleasures”’ (Jordan, 2015, 118). In other words, Jordan imagines bodies and pleasures as entirely resistant to discourse. However, Foucault’s formulation of discourse is itself inseparable from the disciplining and regulation of the body, and further, the strategy of apophasis, commonly understood as unsaying or denial, requires the articulation of the very thing that is purportedly unsaid or denied. Apophasis can, in fact, be thought of as a way of bringing up a subject through an ironic attempt at denying it, which is to say that the apophasis of bodies and pleasures is never untethered from discourse insofar as even the denial of discourse requires its very recognition.

Thus, in a way, we are bound to confess, but perhaps each performance of confession — in a different context, with resistance in mind — might serve to resignify this act and destabilize, if only provisionally, the technology of bio-

power that mobilizes confession for its purposes. That is our aim in this special issue of *postmedieval*. As scholars of color, we are all too familiar with the protocols of compulsory confession that require us to justify our attachments to medieval and early modern studies within an academic system that, itself, suffers from deep-rooted racial, class, and gender biases. ‘How does your research in the Middle Ages or the early modern period have anything to do with you?’ ‘What made you specialize in this field in the first place (as opposed, for example, to African American studies, Latinx studies, or postcolonial studies)?’ By posing these questions, ourselves, and by assuming the role of confessor frequently reserved for senior white scholars, we attempt to reverse the dominant arrangement of power and reimagine the act of confession as a generative, maybe even essential, mode of academic inquiry. Thus, we move away from a coercive form of confession that merely reproduces academic hegemonies under the guise of ‘diversity and inclusion.’ Instead, we consider confession as an opportunity to foreground the embodied and material experiences that shape our work, the pleasures, pains, and affects that condition our attachments to premodernity in the present, and the newfound forms of knowledge made possible by attending to our positionalities. This is an opportunity, that is, to imagine with Foucault the potential for resistance generated by bodies, pleasures, and knowledges.

Of course, a mere reversal of roles is insufficient to undo the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between confessor and confessant if the structure itself remains intact. So we would like to join our contributors in offering a series of confessional reflections. Indeed, by taking up the first-person singular ourselves, we are also always already taking up the first-person plural, for the indexical quality of the ‘I’ renders it essentially polysemous, always potentially inhabitable by multiple speakers. Understood in this way, each citation of the ‘I’ functions as, in the words of Amber Musser, a ‘mode of dual embodiment’ (Musser, 2018, 2). Like Lyle Ashton Harris’s photograph *Billie #21*, which, according to Musser’s reading, conjures the image of Billie Holiday while putting Harris on display, the assumption of the indexical ‘I’ ‘illuminates the possibility of reading [the subject] as a plural self both [...] through [their] performance of citation *and* in relation to the otherness of [themselves] that [they] summon’ through an act of self-reference akin, in this case, to Harris’s theatrical citation of Billie Holiday in the form of a self-portrait (Musser, 2018, 2–3). This inherent plurality of the first-person singular also bespeaks the collaborative and dialogic quality of confession that is retained in its etymology (L. *com-*, ‘together’ + *fateri*, ‘to speak’). But the prefix *com-* may also serve as an intensive prefix that renders the root word more emphatically or thoroughly accomplished. In taking up the theme of confession, we embrace the ambiguity of the *com-* and imagine confession both as a collaborative attempt to speak together or with each other *and* as an opportunity to speak thoroughly or, even, to speak out, to speak up.

So, again we ask, ‘How — through collaborative confession — do we celebrate *now*?’ The difficulty of this question rests, in part, in the indexicality, once more, of the ‘now.’ Is this the now of the issue’s publication or the now of our writing or, even, the now reactivated upon each instant of its rereading? Like the ‘I,’ the indexicality of the ‘now’ implies a plurality of time — a now that is always inflected by the past and future — for we must recognize that whatever future may come to emerge will surely be haunted, conditioned, and enabled by the past. But the difficulty of this question is also in the difficulty of imagining celebration at all in this present moment, for, as we write, we face the convergence of a global pandemic and the large-scale degradation of Black life in the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery (1994–2020), Rayshard Brooks (1993–2020), George Floyd (1973–2020), Elijah McClain (1996–2019), Tony McDade (1982–2020), and Breonna Taylor (1993–2020), among countless others. How can we celebrate at a time like this? And a more difficult question: What can we do? Even with the eruption of powerful and moving protests led by Black Lives Matter and the traction gained by the call to defund and abolish the police, the large-scale isolation made necessary by the world’s — in particular the United States’ — inability to deal effectively with COVID-19 has made the decision of how to respond to this urgent call to action all the more fraught.

These conditions have made us question, we confess, why we do what we do at this precise moment because, in addition to marching, to donating, to reading and watching too voraciously the news, and to reaching out persistently to those for whom we care, one of us also almost decadently returned, once again, to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Volume One — not only as a means of reimagining a World Civilizations course sequence, but also because he wondered what, if anything, it might offer as a reflection on the current crises. In a similar move, in his *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, David Halperin asks, ‘What book do we imagine the more reflective members of ACT UP to carry about with them in their leather jackets?’ (Halperin, 1995, 15). The immediate and unanimous response, according to Halperin’s ‘admittedly unsystematic survey in 1990’ (Halperin, 1995, 16), was *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One. Rehearsing a kind of wish fulfillment, Halperin’s surprise and glee reflect his desire to hold on to the political efficacy of intellectual labor even if activists did not actually carry Foucault in their leather jackets. What can Foucault offer us if we decide to carry him in our leather jackets today?

That Foucault treats in this text ‘a policing of sex’ is well understood, but what is less often acknowledged is the way that this policing of sex gives rise to modern forms of biological racism and racism enacted through state violence (Foucault, 1978, 25).¹ The final chapter of *The History of Sexuality* proposes a technology of power comprised simultaneously of the disciplining of the human body (anatomy-politics) and the regulation of population (bio-politics). This is what Foucault calls bio-power — ‘a power whose highest function was perhaps

1 Ann Laura Stoler provides an important corrective to this lacuna in analyses of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Volume One (Stoler 1995, 19–54).

no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through' (Foucault, 1978, 139). While Foucault resists a progressive narrative that moves from technologies of sex to the emergence of bio-power to the production of modern racism — not only is his account more complicated than this, his thinking on race is also rudimentary at this point — what is clear is that these terms are for him inextricably tied. Sexuality, he explains, is 'one of the most important' concrete arrangements constitutive of bio-power in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1978, 140). Furthermore, one of the major consequences of bio-power is the development of a normalizing society, itself grounded in the disciplinary and regulatory practices of anatomo- and bio-politics, in which racialization takes place as the installment of social hierarchy. Thus, Foucault asserts that 'racism took shape [in the nineteenth century] (racism in its modern, "biologizing," statist form) [when] a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race' (Foucault, 1978, 149).

Just as crucial to an articulation of the relationship between sexuality, bio-power, and racism, however, is the rise of capitalism. Foucault is explicit here: 'This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (Foucault, 1978, 140–1). And he goes on to explain that, at the same time that state institutions 'ensured the maintenance of production relations,' anatomo- and bio-politics not only 'operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. They also acted as factors of segregation and social hierarchization' (Foucault, 1978, 141). Racism as social hierarchization is tied directly to the development of capitalism, which, in fact, haunts the concluding chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, which is peppered throughout with the language of production, property, value, utility, and, of course, economy. Thus, the deployment of bio-power colludes with a commodification of life: 'It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor' (Foucault, 1978, 144). The move from sovereign to bio-power is not only the shifting focus from death to life, it is also the restructuring of life as capital — a form of life whose value, hierarchically calculated, is inseparable from a process of racialization.

How, though, does the unending murder of Black people challenge Foucault's characterization of bio-power? What this violence makes clear is that the development of bio-power is not the abolition of 'murderous splendor' altogether — that attempts to sustain sovereignty through the specters of totalitarianism and fascism can persist even after and in tandem with the

emergence of bio-political regulation — for the form of life made legible to bio-power is coextensive with and as mortality, a zombified or alienated life subject to commodification. Therefore, the sounding cry that Black lives matter is a reclamation of life that is not subject to the appraisal, devaluation, and regulation of bio-power. To claim that Black lives matter cannot be reduced to the claim that Black lives simply have value because such an interpretation would sustain the capitalist structure that serves to corroborate state violence and institutional racism. Instead, the embracing of Black lives, Black bodies, Black pleasures is just as much a challenge to capitalism as it is to racism. It is no surprise, then, that the destruction of property is not only one necessary manifestation of protest but also a tactic so vilified by the hegemony of capitalist ideology. For it is only through a critique of capitalism that we might attempt to forge that ‘different economy of bodies and pleasures’ to which Foucault alludes at the conclusion of *The History of Sexuality*. What, then, can academic labor, couched itself within an increasingly corporatized academic system, do in the face of such violence, in the midst of such crisis?

I confess, I don’t know what to do. I reread Foucault, in part, because the echoes of the AIDS crisis conditioning Halperin’s own reading have haunted my thinking over the past few months,² and although I make no pretense of finding tangible answers to pressing political questions in his text, I do acutely recognize the way that my reading, this time around, is shaped by the seemingly interminable deaths, especially of people of color, caused by COVID-19 — or, perhaps more accurately, the convergence of COVID-19 and a failed healthcare system — and a militarized police force.

I also reread texts from the Christian monastic and mystical traditions. Could they offer any insights into alternative forms of action, work, and labor? While the Benedictine motto *ora et labora* [‘prayer and work’] appears to map onto an opposition between the contemplative and active lives, the Christian monastic formulation of the prayerful life suggests a much more complex relationship between *contemplatio* and *actio*, *theoria* and *praxis*. John Cassian (c. 360–435), for example, whose *Institutes* and *Conferences* are mandated reading for those living according to the Rule of Benedict, offers an important allegorical interpretation of Mary and Martha from the gospel of Luke and ultimately, through the character Abba Moses, places Mary’s contemplation over Martha’s action. However, Abba Moses not only upholds the value of Martha’s practical ministry by making clear that Martha ‘was calling [Mary] not to a disreputable task [*non ad uile opus*]’ (Cassian, 1997, 1.8.2). He also renders contemplation a kind of action itself. When, according to Abba Moses’s account, Jesus calls out, ‘Martha, Martha, you are concerned and troubled about many things, but few things are necessary, or even one [*paucis vero opus est aut etiam uno*]’ (1.8.2), the multiple *opera* performed by Martha are

- 2 Despite their shared status as viral pandemic, however, AIDS and COVID-19 are importantly different as well. This is not to say that the AIDS pandemic cannot teach us anything about our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the need for a more robust healthcare system, but it is to recognize the limitations of this comparison especially on account of HIV’s and Coronavirus’s different modalities of transmission, the disparate communities predominantly affected by each virus, and the distinct configurations of shame, blame, and responsibility associated with each pandemic.

3 Foucault also reads Cassian famously in his work on Christian asceticism and monasticism in order to suggest that the exercise of confession manifests as an authorizing exteriorization of the persistent and internal hermeneutics of the subject. See especially Foucault ([1982] 1999).

superseded by the exemplary *opus* of Mary's contemplation. Monastic labor, then, is not simply manual labor, but also the inner labor of prayer. As a result, Cassian famously draws a comparison between a millstone and the monk's endless stream of thoughts that, on account of their constant flow, 'are utterly incapable of stopping their work' ['nullatenus quidem cessare possunt ab opere suo'] such that labor is both internalized and interminable (1.18.1). And, following Cassian's valorizing of the Psalms, Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547) exclaims, 'Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God [*operi Dei*]' (Benedict of Nursia, 1982, 43.3) — the *Opus Dei* or recitation of the Psalms that grounds the contemplative, aesthetic, and affective labor of the monastic life.³

While the isolation and solitude made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic has recalled, for me, the monastic life, I am also acutely aware of the limitations of this analogy. It might be tempting, for example, to turn *theoria* into *actio*, especially for those of us whose profession centers around the work of contemplation, theory, and critique, but these terms are still importantly distinct for Cassian even if *theoria* is figured as a kind of *actio*. Furthermore, Cassian's championing of *theoria* is only possible because he believes so fervently that prayer to God and the contemplation of God will effect real and just change. But, I don't believe in theory as much as Cassian believes in God. Change and justice, for Cassian, are reserved for those in the kingdom of God, the goal of the monastic life. I want change and justice now. Indeed, in the face of the murder of Black people, theory seems entirely insufficient. I am reminded by Ashon Crawley that

the announcement, 'I can't breathe,' is not merely raw material for theorizing, for producing a theological and philosophical analysis. 'I can't breathe' charges us to do something, to perform, to produce otherwise than what we have. We are charged to end, to produce abolition against, the episteme that produced for us current iterations of categorical designations of racial hierarchies, class stratifications, gender binaries, mind-body splits. (Crawley, 2017, 1)

Racist violence calls for action. It makes an ethical demand to respond and to refuse to reduce the murder of a Black person to an object of reflection or theorizing. Does this mean a disavowal of theory altogether? I think here of José Esteban Muñoz's term 'disidentification,' which 'is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship' (Muñoz, 1999, 4). So, we might disidentify with the act of theorizing in order to survive. But, in this moment, I don't know if survival — even survival rethought as, itself, a form of protest — is enough, for as Muñoz concedes, 'At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct' (Muñoz, 1999, 5), especially at a moment when the survival of institutions, of property, of capitalism is violently misconstrued as and equated with the survival of people.

Again, I don't know exactly what to do. I feel as though I have done nothing over the past few months, but intellectual paralysis is not at all the same as the insistent refusal to work, the resistance to structures that perpetuate racial inequities; neither is theory in and of itself a form of labor resistance. I feel torn between, on the one hand, holding on to the work of theory and, on the other, recognizing that to theorize now is to participate in a form of philosophical idealism. I continue to read and write despite the seeming futility of these actions. I also recognize the importance of speaking up in order to forge solidarity across communities of color — between Blacks and Latinxs — and to share the burden foisted especially onto Black scholars today. What Crawley identifies as 'the violence of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy' (Crawley, 2017, 2) may only be undone through collective labor — collaboration.

In the spirit of collaborative thought, then, I want to quote in full and in more powerful prose than I could offer, Eleanor Craig's important reminder:

While reading and writing are a big part of what we do, and those are indeed already embodied and relational, we do a lot of other things by virtue of existing in these roles. We teach and mentor, which involves both multidimensional relationality and a fair amount of gatekeeping. Pedagogical practices are embodied and involve choices about whether to acknowledge students' embodiment or not. Curricular decisions draw in conscious and unconscious ways on our personal realities, experiences, idiosyncrasies in ways that have bodily charge.

We're often bystanders to institutional decisions or actions by our colleagues where we intervene or don't, and take calculated risks or don't. Sometimes our own embodied experience is overwhelming and we take uncalculated risks and have to live with the results [...]. A lot of this involves our assessments of our own position and power, how our bodies are read, and having to deal with others' affective responses to things we do (or are imagined to have done). Oooh, and hiring practices!!...

We also still exist in the 'outside world' beyond our vocations and have to deal with similar issues in plenty of other contexts, even in quarantine — whether to (ever) call the cops (don't), microaggressions while grocery shopping, even social media debates that we choose to engage or not engage. (Craig, 2020)⁴

This point may be obvious, but it bears repeating: we are not our jobs, nor is what we are capable of doing ever limited to what we do at work. I may not know what to do with theory, but in the meantime, there are so many other things to do — so many other forms of affective, embodied, and communal labor and care often left unrecognized or obscured.

4 My reflections around these issues would not be possible without the conversations with, challenges by, care of, and late-night chats with both Eleanor Craig and Amy Hollywood, which makes me think that this is the only way that I, at least, can do theory today.

The series of essays by Maureen Kelly, Margaret Boyle, Jeffrey Stoyanoff, Erica Weaver, Noel Blanco Mourelle, and Amy Hollywood attend to these affective, embodied, and communal aspects of life and share an investment in the critical and self-critical potential of the Christian tradition. In 2007, the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley hosted a symposium titled ‘Is Critique Secular?’ as an inaugural event for the then-new Program in Critical Theory. In the volume produced from this event, Wendy Brown asserts that the 2005 Danish publication of and response to cartoons satirizing the Prophet Muhammad posed an opportunity to challenge the notion that ‘the Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique’ (Brown, 2009, 8). ‘Insofar,’ she writes, ‘as this affair raised a nest of (often unasked) questions about conventional ordinances of secularity, religion, insult, injury, blasphemy, free speech, dissent, and criticism, it provided an extraordinary platform for rethinking the putatively secular foundations and premises of critique’ (Brown, 2009, 7).

Kelly’s essay extends this analysis through a deft reading of Foucault’s work on confession and critique in *The History of Sexuality*, his 1977–1978 lectures on *Security, Territory, Population*, and his 1978 essay ‘What is Critique?’ Through an analysis of confession as ritual, Kelly locates in the life of Ursule, a young girl from Brabant who in 1288 entered a cloistered and ascetic life on the counsel of a beguine, the possible resistance to the matrices of power installed by the act of confession. By identifying in the story of Ursule’s very struggle with confession an example of counter-conduct, Kelly suggests that, even amidst the process of normalizing confession as a technique of power, alternative modes of conduct enable the disruption of regulatory power, and that this mode of confession offers an important progenitor of critique. Narrative and story-telling also preoccupy Boyle’s account of her mother’s diabetes and her own relationship to disability after emergency brain surgery. In her contribution, Boyle aligns herself with the sixteenth-century Carmelite mystic Teresa of Àvila and in so doing both reformulates and performs confession as the production of meaning out of narrative. Teresa’s religious life, Boyle suggests, resists reduction to the medicalized appraisals of diagnosis, prognosis, and cure. And even as Boyle resists belief, she holds on to a faith in story-telling’s power to combat the exclusion of people and of meanings enacted by academic ableism. Heteropatriarchy stands as the object of critique in Stoyanoff’s essay, which offers a beautifully queer reading of the Middle English mystery play *The Second Shepherd’s Play*. At the heart of Stoyanoff’s analysis is the moment when the shepherds uncover the ruse whereby husband and wife Mak and Gill attempt to pass off as their own child the sheep that Mak has just stolen. By positing this sheep as a proxy for the Christ Child, this scene in the play’s invented account of the events leading to the Biblical Annunciation of the Shepherds serves to foretell the coming of what Stoyanoff characterizes as another queer child in the form of Jesus Christ. By framing the coming of Christ with the working-class and queer

conditions of the shepherds' lives, Stoyanoff argues, the play offers a salvific figure made for those excluded from hegemonic and elitist structures of kinship, sexuality, and class.

Weaver, Blanco Mourelle, and Hollywood explore, in particular, the critical capacity of Christian exemplars by theorizing their power to challenge, destabilize, and undo. Weaver, for example, turns to the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* and situates it within the penitential textual tradition. Her skillful reading articulates the paradox whereby the act of confession, like censorship, serves to further circulate the very vices it seeks to stamp out. It also offers a challenge to Foucault's formulation of subjectivation through confession by illustrating the ways in which confession, in both the *Life* and an instructional note for a confessor, risks the undoing of the self, which is especially charged and dangerous in the context of current American immigration policies that require the verification and sanctioning of individual claims for asylum. Blanco Mourelle's essay theorizes in the prayer of the *emparedada* ['walled-in woman'] what he calls a confession of enclosure — that is, an impersonal form of prayer whose very power rests in its evacuation of biographical detail. Performed in a state of utter enclosure, Blanco Mourelle argues, the absolution offered by this prayer upsets the social order by foregoing the Church's sanction and suggests that the censoring of this text found hidden in the walls of an old house in Barcarrota, Spain, bespeaks its radical potential for institutional opposition. Finally, Amy Hollywood asks how the 'noble unfaith' posited by thirteenth-century beguine Hadewijch of Brabant might undergird a counter-tradition internal to Christianity. What Hollywood traces is a Christianity at odds with itself, a version of Christianity that fiercely opposes white nationalism's violent fantasy that a monolithic medieval Christianity can serve as the authorizing foundation of whiteness. Thus, only by unlearning 'much — maybe all — of what we think we know about Christianity,' Hollywood claims, can we recognize the 'value of life. Not life elsewhere, purified and denuded of all those things that make us the creatures of flesh and blood and bone that we are, but life here and now.'

I confess, I wish I had said nothing. Many of the essays in this issue discuss the inherent dynamics in confession, eye it with suspicion, or see it as liberating. As a medievalist of color, I share the experience with other medievalists who did not fit traditional ideas about what a medievalist looks like or what a medievalist studies. We were and are compulsively asked by colleagues, potential employers, friends, and family why we study the Middle Ages. My response was often my rehearsed, if academic, confession inextricably linked with my autobiography. In these interactions power was exerted, resisted, or subverted, but it was always tense, a micro-confrontation. I share with several of the contributors of these essays a resistance to confess and to explaining my out-

of-bounds actions which for many years have focused on studying Jean de Joinville's thirteenth-century *Life of Saint Louis*.

In that text, about halfway through the crusade memoir he chronicled, the author recalls how his ship was boarded and how he and several others were captured and threatened with death. Through a crusader who knew Arabic, it was quickly understood that at any moment they would be executed. Several people rushed to confess to a monk who was in their company, but Joinville says, 'For my part, I didn't remember any sin I had committed' ['Mais endroit de moy, ne me souvint onques de pechié que j'eusse fait'] (Jean de Joinville, 1995, §354). He just couldn't recall anything he had done wrong, so — astoundingly at the hour of his death — he doesn't seek a last confession. Nietzsche, in his discussion of forgetfulness, describes it as the 'temporary shutting of the doors and windows of consciousness' (Nietzsche, 1918, 40) and suggests that this shuttering of the consciousness is essential for a person to flourish: forgetting is generative and oblivion the substrate on which 'anything healthy and great, anything truly human, can grow' (Nietzsche, 1997, 63). Applied to the author, this modern interpretation of the benefits of forgetting gives him crucial control over the content of his narrative, a means to push away a coerced remembering. I've always imagined Joinville's memory lapse as a kind of resistance, as a signal that in his work he writes his own story in his own way.

In hindsight, when called to explain my interest in the Middle Ages I might have said — taking a page from Joinville's text — 'You know, I don't remember,' and refused to be part of someone else's design and go on writing my own story. I study him because, although he is very dead and white and male and elitist, I believe he has something to teach me about strategies of resistance and self-expression.

I appreciate Joinville's attitude and his strategies. However, I also believe that to critically examine why we do what we do with the past should be recognized as part of academic rigor, as well as crucial to ethically sound work. Why have I been studying the *Life of Saint Louis* for the better part of three decades? How much of the text's truth have I revealed and how much about myself? Even if I can't fully answer these questions, the move to self-examination gives my engagement with the text more legitimacy and more crucial thought. Omitting, repressing, or refusing to acknowledge the motivations that fuel our passion for our studies seems an unhealthy road that has led to dangerous fallacies. Scholars have been thinking hard about the unexamined motivation for studying the past, and revealing the extent to which the past was and is weaponized to engage the present.

Our solicitation of alternative models of academic writing reveals the power of the confessional mode and produces several cautionary essays about the uses of confession. This seems a good way forward to think about self-examination in 2020. My cluster of essays focus on, but are not limited to, literary confessions. So, for example, the contributions of both Caitlin Watt and Jea

Yung Park discuss the ineffectiveness of confession in two medieval texts and how the lessons learned in the Middle Ages turn a mirror on our modern selves. Through the narrative of the rape of Lucrece in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Watt's essay discusses the inadequacies of confession alone in the #metoo era to address and end sexual violence. Through an examination of Lucrece's ineffectual confession of her rape and the effective false confession of her rapist, the essay shifts critical responsibility from the confessant to the listener. Park explores how Margery Kempe's willing and motivated use of confession as a tool of self-expression has led to reader embarrassment for her 'oversharing.' Her outpouring of words called into question the authenticity of her discourse, even for those who championed her work. Park links the dynamics of who gets to share without being accused of using questionable practices of self-revelation to pressures medievalists from nontraditional backgrounds face. She argues that they must struggle to prove their relevance to the field, yet any self-presentations to such ends are rendered suspect.

The following three essays by Larisa Grollemond and Bryan C. Keene, Vincent van Gerven Oei, and Ariel Zinder grow more and more personal. They use confession as a springboard to discuss their scholarly practices and to call for reform and progress in medieval studies. Grollemond and Keene, curators at the Getty Museum, consider the difficulties and potential of using popular medievalism — as seen in the 'Games of Thrones' — to teach the public about the Middle Ages. Postings and responses under #GettyofThrones revealed an audience hungry for a nuanced and informed platform about the Middle Ages. They call for a medievalism that balances the pleasure of playing with the past with a call to decolonize medievalism so as not to re-inscribe the ills of the contemporary world onto the past. Van Gerven Oei, focusing on Old Nubian, explains how his early encounters with languages and philology have led to an understanding of their important abilities to deconstruct and destabilize the study of philosophy and medieval studies overall. He calls for a more central role for neglected languages of the academy. Ariel Zinder is also drawn to deconstruction, particularly to the instability of poetry. His essay cum confessional prose-poem about the *Piyyut* tradition of Hebrew poetry investigates the temporality of this poetic tradition and imagines, among other things, the reversal of the search for origins in philology. He seeks research that explores not originary signposts but human intention, chance, time.

I confess I am bad at confessions. In fact, it is quite stressful for me to confess anything personal in public or private. I remember how uncomfortable I felt when I was asked as part of a campus visit to give a job talk about my personal journey; and writing this talk about myself was one of the hardest projects I had undertaken. I was not trained to narrativize a personal portrait of my young self as a scholar. My messy relation with confessional modes is most probably

rooted in my upbringing in an Islamicate culture wherein the *sufi* maxim of ‘hiding your sins’ underwrites one’s relation to the society and God. One of the names of Allah after all is *Es-Siteer* or *Settârü’l-uyûb* — the one who conceals sins. If you conceal your own sins, God will cover yours. For a religion with no institutionalized forms of confession, one that bestows on the individual repentance without the necessity of articulating their sins, confession is considered as degenerating a society by engendering and promoting potentially harmful desires, discourses, and practices for others. Sins can be learned from others; sins are infectious. This is probably what underlies the homophobic narratives against coming-out LGBTQ individuals in Turkey — ‘Why does everyone need to know of their sins? Why can’t they just keep it in private?’ Yet, as in coming out, confessing what others consider as sin can function as a powerfully transformative means to normalize what is deemed abnormal.

The western obsession with self-knowledge — rooted in the Delphic oracle *gnothi seauton* [‘know thyself’] — or the modern westerner’s continuous effort to create a seamless, stable self-identity can be both imprisoning and liberating. Foucault noted how confessions operate in creating discourses (i.e. sexuality) and mapped the evolution of the ritualistic confession into other forms with the rise of Protestantism, the Counter Reformation, eighteenth-century pedagogy, nineteenth-century medicine, and its dissemination in various layers of relations such as those between children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists (Foucault, 1978, 63). The current issue investigates confessions in academic work, academic writing as confession, or scholar-author as confessing subject. But who confesses? When do they confess? What is being confessed? Which sins?

Expanding the boundaries of confession beyond theological frames requires a reconceptualization of sin. If academic writing and articulation of positionality is a form of confession, which laws do we break? Which ‘sins’ are being confessed and to whom? We are ‘sinful’ being queer, Black, indigenous, people of color, gender-non confirming, disabled. We are ‘sinners’ who are expected to confess what upsets traditional academic laws — our different embodiments, different desires, different beliefs, different cultural upbringings — so as to legitimize our sinful subjects for others. Confessing our sins, our messy relations with the past, can nevertheless be quite empowering, as many articles in this issue show, to make the unaccepted acceptable: the sin of doing race or queer work, the sin of not identifying with those literary characters who look like us, the sin of not liking the literary giant that is Shakespeare, the sin of not accepting the requirement to self-narrativize at all times, the sin of looking for not Shakespeare but black Othello boys in archives, the sin of transgressing conventional scholarly writing and methods, the sin of thinking the early moderns with critical race theory, queer theory, or Indian casteism. Confessing such sins as confessant-cum-teacher then powerfully offers models for using

marginalized backgrounds in producing knowledge. *This is a project of infecting young minds with our sins.*

It is these sins that make some of us invisible or hypervisible, while still developing strategies to reshape medieval and early modern studies, as many essays included in our issue show. In her essay, Kim F. Hall powerfully recounts how she almost burst into tears in an archive where violent histories skillfully hide: ‘I know without a doubt that there’s nothing in the rules to say there’s no crying in the reading room. Nonetheless, when I see *A Negro Boy, named Barbadoes* two pages in, I know I can’t let my tears fall on this beautiful, meticulously detailed list of valuable things.’ Concluding her meditation on archival blackness with ‘I’m here for Othello,’ Hall offers a model for confessional academic writing that reveals inextricable connections between personal experiences, commitments, and scholarly explorations.

Many critical scholarly projects — be they critical race, queer, feminist, or trans studies — have been marked as political or ideological *vis-à-vis* more traditional investigations. As early as 1979, Edward Said countered the distinction between pure and political knowledge as he confessed his ‘contemporary reality’ in his introduction to *Orientalism* (Said, 1979, 9). Said argues that every form of knowledge production is political, and the demarcation of true knowledge as nonpolitical obscures the structural and political circumstances in which knowledge is produced. Ambreen Dadabhoy’s essay in this issue illustrates how her approach to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has been marked as political by her students. Dadabhoy confesses her pedagogical experience with her students to point at ‘the unmarked and unremarkable’ nature of Shakespeare’s whiteness as well as the whiteness of the gaze — both scholars’ and her students’ — that has been directed at the Shakespearean canon. Likewise, evoking critiques of the universal whiteness of Shakespeare, Carla Della Gatta probes common humanity attributed to Shakespeare by reminding us of the misogyny, anti-Semitism, racism, and bigotry that constitute an indelible mark on some of Shakespeare’s most revered plays. Noting the missing conception of the Latino in Shakespeare, Della Gatta asserts, ‘To see myself in the text, I am not Othered. I simply am not there.’ She proposes Shakespeare’s bilingual and bicultural readers must creatively and critically negotiate their experiences, memories, and identities with those that are presented to us as universal.

In a similar vein, Jyotsna Singh asks, ‘Do these demarcations imply that we can *only* enjoy and identify with literature and culture that reflects our specific identity?’ Starting with a confession of her past negotiations with early modern literature, specifically metaphysical poetry, as an Indian graduate student in the US, Singh questions ‘well-intended liberal politics of narrow inclusion’ which generates certain bodies to be bracketed in certain studies. Instead, she suggests returning to literature for its liberatory potential. Colby Gordon also resists hegemonic, coerced confessions, and embraces literary imagination as a means

to envision new and subversive modes of confession. He argues that transgender embodiment and experience is inseparable from repeated and coerced self-narrativizing: ‘Maybe you wonder what it feels like to be transgender. I will tell you. It is not so much about inhabiting a particular kind of body as it is about living under the constant expectation that you will say to anyone who asks (and everyone asks eventually), “This is what I knew and when. This is how I feel about my hands.”’ He returns to the early modern metaphysical poetics of John Donne’s ‘The Funerall’ to offer an alternative model of trans confession that is not amenable to social control, taxonomy, and surveillance.

Urvashi Chakravarty turns to queer methods in her examination of overlapping discourses of race and class in questioning the use of love in representations of master/servant relations in the popular genre of ‘servant literature’ on screen such as *Downton Abbey* and in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. She argues that the rhetorics of family with the presumption of affective intimacy are obfuscatory and insidious and are weaponized in the cause of white supremacy and its futures. Challenging the racist projects of returning to the past to (re)create the future, to ‘take *back* control’ of the United Kingdom or to ‘make America great *again*,’ Chakravarty suggests ‘both to re-member the “horizon” of queerness not in an impossibly utopian dream but rather in a methodological refusal to think straight — chronologically, disciplinarily, *or* racially — and to recall the future of the past in, and as, a repudiation of the genealogies of whiteness.’

Amrita Dhar and Tripti Pillai call for transtemporal and transcultural approaches to better address such present urgencies in our explorations of the past. Dhar notes the ‘Project of Unseeing,’ ‘whereby caste-based discrimination is so normalized as to be invisible and therefore unremarkable.’ Dhar probes the class and confessions dynamics by visiting the caste- and gender-based confessions in Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Omkara*, a filmic adaptation of *Othello*. Reading an early modern English play with a contemporary Indian film, Dhar writes, ‘as scholars of the premodern, and scholars committed to using scholarship for pragmatic use in the world, we must place our texts at the service of present urgencies.’ Pillai brings together Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Kalpana Lajmi’s *Rudaali*. Such transcontinental and transhistorical connections reveal an affective solidarity, or a *masala* ethics, amongst mourning/confessing women in seemingly unrelated and far texts and histories. Pillai offers *masala* as a critical means to empower students and scholars — particularly those located within geopolitically and economically marginalized environments worldwide — to participate fully as non-liminal citizens in the community of Shakespeareans by harnessing the archives of their positionality as resources worthy of their and our scholarly attention. Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s confession exemplifies an attention to her positionality; she revisits a moment of shame that arises from being wrong, which she describes as both a source of pain and a generous gift. Akbari contends, ‘If the purpose of a confession is to be exemplary, to offer a story that can be of use to others, the value of this story lies

in the embrace of being wrong. If you are wrong, accept it, sit with it, and try to do better.’ Her contemplation of ‘the gift of shame’ reveals racist structures deeply built within academia. As one of many ways to destabilize and re-imagine such structures, Akbari calls for a humble orientation to collaborative workshops on indigenous pedagogy and storytelling.

All these contributors add their voices to the flourishing community of critical race scholars of medieval and early modern periods who have recently challenged what Ayanna Thompson and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen call in their essay ‘the Country Club’ nature of these fields. This exclusionary structure, Thompson notes in her confession, requires scholars of color ‘to be twice as good to get half as much — premodern race scholars have had to learn at least twice as many disciplines to garner only half the scholarly attention.’ Cohen describes how premodern critical race studies scholars including the Medievalists of Color and early modern #Shakerace scholars created an alternative route by coming together around the RaceB4Race project housed in the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Arizona State University. This, Cohen announces, ‘is the future of the humanities, forged through a renewal and a reclamation of its past.’

The 21 essays we selected to commemorate the tenth anniversary of *postmedieval* contribute to such new ways of reclaiming the past by addressing critical and urgent issues in the present. We have organized the essays above in a series of thematic clusters — in a way that brings them into dialogue with our individual confessions and acknowledges the division of labor in a collaborative project. Here, we map the table of contents in order to offer yet another set of possible dialogues between the essays: The issue starts with Hall, Hollywood, Boyle, and Gordon, whose narrative voices take up the confessional mode in giving accounts of blackness, religious (un)belonging, disability, and transgender experience. Then, articles by Chakravarty, Dhar, and Stoyanoff explore intersections of queerness, race, and class in medieval and early modern imaginations and their current appropriations. Dadabhoy, Della Gatta, and Pillai trace Shakespeare’s white legacies and challenges to it while the subsequent set of essays by Park, Blanco Mourelle, and Watt turn to medieval texts as a resource for exploring contemporary gender dynamics and violence. Weaver, Zinder, and van Gerven Oei assess poetics and language as means for widening our horizon in reshaping medieval studies. Kelly and Akbari offer differing perspectives on the utility of confessions in rethinking our fields. Grollemond and Keene’s essay highlights crude reappropriations of medievalism in popular productions, while Thompson and Cohen track the increasing impact of scholars of color on medieval and early modern studies. Finally, Singh narrates her journey as a Shakespearean, from India to the Anglo-American

academy, and calls for an exploration of race by taking seriously the potential of literature.

The essays we received in response to our call for contributions on confessions exhibit great diversity. They take up different disciplinary approaches by scholars who stand at various stages of their careers. They address not only different time periods but also various linguistic and cultural contexts. Contributors deploy a wide array of methods, critical approaches, and narrative voices, and contributors, ourselves included, assumed the confessional voice with a whole host of affective responses — from enthusiasm to cautious hesitation to outright discomfort. We also recognize that our call to respond to the present moment and to reflect on how our personal investments shape our scholarship was especially challenging because the status of the ‘now’ kept rapidly changing. The rise of authoritarianism around the world, the #metoo movement, the immigration and refugee crisis, a global pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests are just a few of the developments that transpired over the course of preparing this issue. Despite — or maybe precisely because of — all of these challenges, this collection of essays insists that medieval and early modern studies can and should be unexpectedly transformed by the affective, embodied, and communal conditions of the lives we lead now.

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