

**BRANDI ESTEY-BURTT**

**BA (Honors: English), St. Thomas University, 2009**

**MA (English Literature) McMaster University, 2010**

**MA (Theology and Religious Studies), Atlantic School of Theology, 2014**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**TITLE OF THESIS:** WHEN THE MESSIAH COMES:  
THE POSTSECULAR MESSIANIC IN  
CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

**TIME/DATE:** 1:30 pm, Tuesday, August 13, 2019

**PLACE:** Room 3107, The Mona Campbell Building, 1459  
LeMarchant Street

**EXAMINING COMMITTEE:**

Dr. Lori Branch, Department of English, University of Iowa (External Examiner)

Dr. Kathy Cawsey, Department of English, Dalhousie University (Reader)

Dr. Dorota Glowacka, Contemporary Studies, University of King's College (Reader)

Dr. Alyda Faber, Systematic Theology & Ethics, Atlantic School of Theology (Reader)

Dr. Alice Brittan, Department of English, Dalhousie University (Supervisor)

**DEPARTMENTAL REPRESENTATIVE:** Dr. Jason Haslam, Department of English,  
Dalhousie University

**CHAIR:** Dr. Kazue Semba, PhD Defence Panel, Faculty  
of Graduate Studies

**ABSTRACT**

Despite proclamations about the death of God and the decline of religious institutions throughout the twentieth century, questions of secularism and religion are currently being re-thought through the lens of postsecularism. The concept of the postsecular does not imply that religion has been temporally or intellectually superseded as the secularization thesis posited, but instead indicates the necessity of new approaches to thinking about spiritual life in the early twenty-first century. In this dissertation, I consider how literary postsecularism constructs an alternate space – which I frame as the messianic – which challenges the binary erected between secularism and religion. Though literary postsecularism has become a lively and growing field of late, the messianic remains an under-theorized aspect of this field. I examine how authors such as Marilynne Robinson, J.M. Coetzee, Marjorie Liu, Gene Luen Yang, Colum McCann, and Mohsin Hamid re-evaluate the role of religion in literary discussion post-9/11. Following Manav Ratti's model in thinking of the postsecular as a negotiated term, I argue that these authors respond to urgent contemporary matters such as neoliberalism, colonialism, and migration by reconceiving the messianic as an ethical practice with critical aesthetic dimensions.

In the first chapter, I draw on Walter Benjamin's and Jacques Derrida's work on weak messianism to argue that the postsecular situates the messianic as a collective instantiation of responsibility, intimacy, and possibility. In later chapters, I explore the hopeful possibilities that postsecular readings of Robinson, Coetzee, McCann, and Hamid produce, while also highlighting the often-Eurocentric tensions and problems that arise in conceptualizing the postsecular in Yang's and Liu's comics. Motivating my readings is a consideration of how each author invokes a sacramental poetics of the everyday that offers a pluralistic and imaginative vision for living well with others in the twenty-first century.