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"Secular Conversions and Nineteenth-Century Free Love"

In this paper I read popular discourses of free love – pulp novels, newspaper stories, mass-circulated tracts – from mid-nineteenth-century America in order to examine the way a metadiscourse of secularism was intimately lived and embodied. I am particularly interested in moments of what I call “secular conversion” – moments of conversion from one state to another, from one identity to another, from one belief to another – that we see in these texts. Such moments of conversion often problematize our notions of secularization because conversion is so deeply associated with the religious. But these discussions and representations of embodied secular conversions, I will suggest, offer alternative imaginings of belief for a postsecular world.