

## Introduction

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# Deadly Virtue

FLORIDA, LAND OF FLOWERS. In the mid-sixteenth century, French Protestants attempted to colonize this lush region and its Indigenous people through an eroticized diplomacy based in their ideals of love, friendship, identity, and power. In 1564, they built a stronghold that they named Fort Caroline, where they attempted to form lasting relationships with the people indigenous to the wide river mouth and the inland mountains of present-day Georgia and Florida. At the outset, these Protestants idealized colonialism as a romantic friendship between French and Indigenous people in which the Christians' god would help them recognize and redeem an elect from among Indigenous people, creating one transcultural empire under the control of "true" Christians. French Calvinists, called "Huguenots," or ghosts, by hostile countrymen and women, envisioned a Protestant empire under an Indigenous king rich and powerful enough to defend against the monarchies of Europe.<sup>1</sup> The failure of this strategy would inform later Protestant colonialism in North America, as well as the construction of American whiteness.

Sixteenth-century Protestant letters, engravings, and travel narratives tell a tale of romantic imaginings in Florida that laid the groundwork for a more violent, separatist form of colonialism. According to the narratives of these would-be colonizers, the Indigenous people of the region welcomed the French with love. As one young Frenchman recalled, the people there greeted their Protestant visitors in 1564, "crying out 'AMY THYPOLA PASSON' which means Brother and Friend like the fingers of one hand."<sup>2</sup> *Mon ami*, "Brother and Friend"—such greetings promised success for the small Protestant enterprise, which would depend on love

and friendship. It was an auspicious start with a seemingly mutual utopian vision. However, this narrative of love was a fiction, one imbued with hierarchy and relations of power buried deep in the heart and soul of Protestant conceptions of identity and faith.

This book is an account of that transcultural love story, and it historicizes the meanings of love and friendship in a colonial context.<sup>3</sup> The Huguenots planned to use love to—as they phrased it—*allure* the Indigenous people into alliances that would support Protestant ambitions for colonizing the region and gaining access to its wealth. They would locate and convert the region’s strongest and richest Indigenous king to Reformed Christianity, appointing him as their leader. However, they never had a chance to carry out this experiment: before they could find a king to lead them to victory and start a Protestant empire, their fledgling colony was crushed. First weakened by betrayals, mutinies, hunger, desperation, violence, and sickness, Fort Caroline was finally eradicated at the hands of the Spanish, who advanced on it under cover of a hurricane that capsized French ships. Thus, the story ended in heartbreak: the few survivors returned to France, chastened. As Fort Caroline’s French commander, René Laudonnière, recalled, it “cut [them] to the heart to leave” and “tortured [their] spirits” to abandon a place that had seemed to be the “culmination of [their] great desires.”<sup>4</sup>

The story, it turns out, was a love triangle, one that had angered a jealous, Christian god, which they conceived of as a single, patriarchal being. Significantly, the survivors of that massacre believed that the Spanish were sent by that god. The Christian god was intent on punishing the French for their love for Indigenous kings. While historians have looked at greed and power in colonialism, this book examines the Protestants’ faith as another historical motivation, one shaped by events at Fort Caroline. The French interpreted the fall of Fort Caroline as a sign of their god’s displeasure; they surmised that he had been angered and came to believe that he had been incited by their vision of unifying under an Indigenous king. They believed that this god communicated his love and displeasure through “afflictions” and that such tragedies and hardships were tests of faith meant to bring them closer to him. Using this providential logic, future Protestant colonial ventures in New England sought to interpret this tragedy and to carry out the Christian god’s will, proving their faith. As a result, future Protestant colonialism would not be transcultural.

While the French Huguenots had hoped to convert and integrate the Indigenous people near Fort Caroline, later colonial projects in New England would be separatist. Protestant leaders would require members of their communities to resist transformative relations of love and friendship with Indigenous people, in order to secure their Christian identities against any such sympathies and so to prevent their god's anger. As one founder of a colony in seventeenth-century New England commanded, "we are not to grow wild."<sup>5</sup> Instead, they would establish a hierarchy privileging the *elect*, who would exert masculine dominance over the rest of humanity and come to think of themselves as *white*. From this separatist identity they would produce a successful Protestant America and establish a white supremacist system to replace the old monarchies and church hierarchies of Europe and the Holy Roman Empire. In addition to explaining the failure of Fort Caroline in providential terms, the survivors employed sixteenth-century understandings of physiology, power, and identity based in humoral science. According to this science, the physiological signs that would later mark racial difference, such as skin color, were mutable, changing with custom and environment. Therefore, though they noticed and remarked on physiological differences, the French believed these phenotypic traits to be neither permanent nor as important as the customs of the body that they believed had caused these traits. They expected that, in addition to these customs, powerful emotional attractions and dependencies on other humans would affect and shape bodies, as well as cultural and spiritual affiliations. Thus, Fort Caroline is also key to understanding the gendered and eroticized relations that would become American white supremacy and biogenetic racism.

On the way to this familiar story of colonial New England, the Protestant attempt on Florida began with a plan for integration that appears transracial. While readers today might expect otherwise, the French described Indigenous people as healthy, moral, and handsome specimens of humanity: therefore, it made sense that they might encounter some of the chosen members of the Christian god's invisible church among these people. This apparent openness to love and friendship with Indigenous people was part of the Calvinists' plan for assimilating Indigenous people into a Protestant empire, which was expressed with an emotionalism that needs to be put into historical context and identified with the violence of colonialism. Throughout his account, Laudonnière expressed open

admiration for the beauty and “good character” of the Indigenous people.<sup>6</sup> Travelers portrayed this sympathy as mutual: when the Spanish attacked Fort Caroline in 1565, eradicating the colony, some Indigenous people reportedly “wept for their French friends whose throats were slit under their eyes.”<sup>7</sup> From today’s vantage point, the Calvinists’ expression of such strong affections indicate an alliance of “red” and “white” Americans that transcended race.<sup>8</sup> As French scholar Frank Lestringant has argued, the French Huguenot “identification was not mere calculation. It was sometimes lived in complete sincerity.”<sup>9</sup> The French Calvinists’ willingness to serve under a Christianized Indigenous king suggests, as historian Edmund S. Morgan put it in 1975, that these Europeans exhibited “no sign of racial prejudice.”<sup>10</sup>

Although scholars point to a longer history of cultural racism, such embodied alliances preceded modern concepts of biological race as permanent and genetic.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that these sixteenth-century Protestants displayed no prejudice: if Indigenous people were to join an empire “like the fingers of one hand,” the French believed that this hand should be a Reformed Christian one.<sup>12</sup> According to their science of the body and identity, such a physiological and spiritual transformation could be rendered with love: a Christian god’s love carried by the handsome representatives of the Reformed faith. Before biogenetic racism became fundamental to the American system of white supremacy, early Protestants created a two-category, gendered, classed, and eroticized Christian hierarchy of those chosen for favor from their god and those damned to hell. In the sixteenth century, we see a division into these two proto-bioracial categories: the elect, or true Christians (who could potentially be Indigenous people), and the rest of *damned* humanity (which included even Europeans who had practiced Christianity their entire lives). The challenge was in determining who was who, but Christians had a long practice of reading bodies for evidence of morality. They also believed that Indigenous people could be fundamentally changed through a process of conversion and colonialism that would impose European customs, including Reformed Christianity, which Calvinists believed was the one true faith. They planned to instill norms of Christian *virtue* in the Indigenous peoples through a seemingly friendly, loving method of colonialism.