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## Who Do You Say That I Am?: Race, Iconography, and Jesus in Twenty-First Century America

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Who Do You Say That I Am?:  
Race, Iconography, and Jesus in Twenty-First Century America

Introduction, Context, and Terminology | “*What’s the buzz? Tell me what’s a-happenin’!*”<sup>1</sup>

“Jesus was a White<sup>2</sup> man... that’s a verifiable fact,” Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly asserted on live television in December 2013.<sup>3</sup> “As is Santa,” Kelly proclaimed, ridiculing a then-recent article by blogger Aisha Harris which suggested that instead of a White Santa Claus, a cartoon-penguin-Santa “could spare millions of nonwhite kids the insecurity and shame” of being inundated with images of a Santa that did not look anything like them.<sup>4</sup> While the issue of Santa’s race must be relegated to a different essay, a look at the evidence about Jesus’ race suggests that he was not, in fact, White.<sup>5</sup> Surveying Jesus imagery over the centuries, though, it becomes clear that Kelly’s claim about Jesus’ race is, however uninformed, backed by a plethora of images of a Jesus who is as White

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*, produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, performed by John Legend, Alice Cooper, Sara Bareilles, and Brandon Victor Dixon (2018; New York, NY: NBC, 2018), web video. Throughout this work, I’ve used quotes from *Jesus Christ Superstar* as subtitles for my section headers, foreshadowing the analysis of the musical at the end of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalize “Black” and “White” throughout this paper when speaking about race; I choose to capitalize Black out of respect for the Black community and to counter the White supremacist tactic of using a lowercase “b” in “black” as a form of disrespect and delegitimization. Thus, I also capitalize “White” in order to maintain consistency. This decision came about through discussion with Professor Dexter Gordon, who writes, “I have always been cautious about the dangers of making a single entity, skin color, essential to the identification of any person. I am however persuaded by the notion that people should be identified by whatever means they choose. Having reread the arguments in these two essays and especially after the reminder of the fact that detractors and racists use the lower-case reference as an intentional racist act of denying the use of the capitalized form I am deciding to go with the capitalized version as my preferred useage going forward” (e-mail communication with the author); Lori L. Tharps, “The Case for Black with a Capital B,” *The New York Times*, last modified November 18, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>; Merrill Perlman, “Black and White: Why Capitalization Matters,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, last modified June 23, 2015, [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php).

<sup>3</sup> Megyn Kelly, “‘Santa is What He Is,’ Which is White,” YouTube video, 2:10, posted by “TPM TV,” December 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XYIJqf4dLI>.

<sup>4</sup> Aisha Harris, “Santa Claus Should Not Be a White Man Anymore,” *Slate*, December 10, 2013, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/12/santa-claus-an-old-white-man-not-anymore-meet-santa-the-penguin-a-new-christmas-symbol.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Princeton biblical scholar James Charlesworth goes so far as to say Jesus was “most likely dark brown and sun-tanned,” according to Christena Cleveland, “Why Jesus’ Skin Color Matters,” *Christianity Today*, last modified March 18, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april/why-jesus-skin-color-matters.html>; Kristin Romey, “What Archaeology is Telling Us About the Real Jesus,” *National Geographic*, last modified December 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/12/jesus-tomb-archaeology/>.

as can be. Why is it that so many representations of Jesus make him look like he was born in Scandinavia?

This research fits largely within the realms of two categories of study: iconography and Christology. Iconography refers to that which deals with images or symbols, especially those related to religious subjects<sup>6</sup>; it is the study of the idea that “the presence of the divine is effected through practices of ‘visual piety.’”<sup>7</sup> Christian iconography depicting religious stories, beliefs, and practices is a complex realm; centuries of tradition can be represented in small symbols, and iconography itself can have a powerful influence on beliefs.<sup>8</sup> One study of the psychological effects of iconography finds that exposure to White Jesus iconography “leads *both* White and Black individuals to express greater racial bias against Blacks.”<sup>9</sup> In explaining visual piety, one lens for understanding and experiencing religious art, David Morgan emphasizes the power of iconography, calling it

“eminently social.” [Religious images] are not [...] rarefied things that individuals dispassionately contemplate. Neither are their meanings strictly private; rather, they are inflected within and constitutive of the social world that binds individuals together. Again and again we have found that religious images assist in fashioning the impression of a coherent, enduring, and uniform world in which the self exists meaningfully. [...] [P]opular religious images need to be understood as historical traces of the worlds they helped to construct.<sup>10</sup>

Morgan indicates that iconography is not created, nor does it exist, in a vacuum—iconography is influenced by the world that creates it. At the same time, he stresses the power of images to create false impressions or simple depictions of a reality that is, in fact, highly complex. He writes, “Images, songs, and objects evoke the worlds that make them and seductively suggest to those whose world they share a totality and uniformity that is as reassuring as it is tendentious.”<sup>11</sup> This reassurance Morgan refers to suggests that iconography can reinforce existing ideas and practices. This specific assertion about art is echoed by a more general claim from Karl Marx, who wrote in the nineteenth century that “the ideas

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<sup>6</sup> “Iconography | Definition of Iconography by Merriam-Webster,” *Merriam-Webster* online, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate#h2>.

<sup>7</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Mediating Absence—Effecting Spiritual Presence: Pictures and the Christian Imagination,” *Social Research* 78, no. 4 (2011): 1041.

<sup>8</sup> David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Simon Howard, “The Effects of Christian Religious Imagery on Anti-Black Attitudes” (doctoral thesis, Tufts University, 2016), i (italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, 207–208.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, 9.

of the ruling [group] are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”<sup>12</sup> To analyze and question iconography that reflects and reinforces a world ruled in every arena by certain people, then, is to analyze and question that ruling group itself. “[A] world is an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign,” Morgan writes; “To use a literary metaphor, a world is a story that is never just one story, never just one world.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is my intention in this essay to continue in the subversive tradition of questioning the iconographical canon of a White Jesus in order to help bring to the fore the other images—stories—worlds—expressed in non-hegemonic (and to me, more authentic) iconographies of Jesus.

The second term and area of study that is useful in framing this discussion is Christology: the “theological interpretation of the person and work of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> The study of Christology centers around a question that Jesus himself is quoted in the Gospels as asking his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>15</sup> Understanding and interpreting the person and deity of Jesus was a central theme in the Gospels and continues to be important inside and outside of Christian circles today. Despite the decline of mainline Christian churches in the late-twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, Jesus remains the human representation of God, of the divine, for many people around the world. In the United States, where my study is focused, a majority of people identify as Christian.<sup>16</sup> Because Jesus was human, and we are human, the bodily/physical identity of Jesus necessarily plays an important role not only because he is a human representation of the divine, but

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *German Ideology* (1845) (London: Electric Book Company, 2000), accessed December 4, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 92. Marx uses “class” in his original quote in an economic sense; to convey the same meaning in a broader sense, I am using “group.”

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, 9.

<sup>14</sup> “Christology | Definition of Christology by Merriam-Webster,” *Merriam-Webster* online, accessed December 13, 2018, [webster.com/dictionary/Christology](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Christology); At this point, I would like to make a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Jesus and Christ are not synonymous—Jesus is a name of a historical man, while Christ means “messiah” or “anointed one” and is a title. Iconography is a means of helping the human mind understand the transformation from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. Anything that changes the physical attributes of Jesus (this is what White Jesuses have done for a long time) is a Christology, not a historical representation of the person of Jesus. In Christianity, “Jesus” and “Christ” are often used interchangeably; in this essay, I hope to use the terms appropriately, but noting this terminological detail is important; “Christ | Definition of Christ by Merriam-Webster,” *Merriam-Webster* online, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Christ>.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 16:15, for example.

<sup>16</sup> In 2010, the Pew Forum reported that 31.5% of the world’s population identifies as Christian. The same organization’s 2014 United States Religious Landscape Study reported that 70.6% of Americans identified as Christian at that time. “The Global Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified December 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>; “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified September 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

because he is a divine representation of what is human. For the billions of people potentially considering Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?", the accompanying questions "how can the divine be depicted in a human body?" and "which human bodies can be seen as divine?" are implicit but fundamental. Some of the work done in this essay relies on my own Christology, which I describe in further detail below, and most of it is analysis of popular Christology as represented through Jesus iconography in the United States—going beyond discussing the physical attributes of the historical Jesus' body, and discussing who the Christ is for Christians today. White Jesus iconography is a cornerstone of American identity and factors heavily into ideologies such as White supremacy and racism. Non-White, non-hegemonic depictions of Jesus, however, can provide a path towards overturning those destructive forces.

In this essay, I explore the problems with White Jesus iconography and then examine what happens when Jesus is portrayed as Black. I propose that non-hegemonic Jesus iconography can potentially serve as a tool to help dismantle the structures of both implicit White privilege and explicit White supremacy that plague American society today. This essay is an attempt to implicate myself and my communities and to shift one small aspect of our thinking and actions to be less harmful and more constructive to all.<sup>17</sup>

Background and History | *"I dreamed I met a Galilean, a most amazing man. He had that look you very rarely find, the haunting, hunted kind. I asked him to say what had happened, how it all began."*<sup>18</sup>

The Creation of a White Christ | *"I've been living to see you. Dying to see you, but it shouldn't be like this."*<sup>19</sup>

There is a wealth of excellent scholarship on the topic of Jesus iconography; sources from a variety of scholarly areas and popular media including cinematic studies, psychology, liberation theology, and art history have provided the background information for this essay. Jesus' race has been discussed for centuries; what is believed to have caused the now-widely-accepted imagery of a White Jesus is a letter purportedly written by a Roman prefect in

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<sup>17</sup> White people have to start doing this work because many of those who suffer under the structures that benefit White people have already been doing the work. At the same time, the work must be done in dialogue, collaboration and community with people of color.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Judea, Publius Lentulus, in the first century CE.<sup>20</sup> The letter, translated from Latin to English in the seventeenth century, describes Jesus as

a man of average size [...] He has hair the color of an unripe hazelnut, smooth almost to his ears, but below the ears curling and rather darker and more shining, hanging over his shoulders, and having a parting in the middle of his head according to the fashion of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and quite serene; his face is without wrinkle or blemish, and a slight ruddiness makes it handsome. No fault can be found with his nose and mouth; he has a full beard of the color of his hair, not long but divided in two at the chin. His facial expression is guileless and mature; his eyes are grayish and clear. [...] In stature he is tall and erect and his hands and arms are fine to behold. [...] he is rightly called by the prophet “Fairer than the sons of men.”<sup>21</sup>

This description of Jesus seems familiar because so much of the Jesus iconography present in the United States is perhaps modeled after it. The letter, supposedly unearthed in fifteenth-century Italy, is now widely understood to be fabricated at that time, but that discovery did not hinder this image of Jesus from becoming popular and even, sometimes, taken to be a realistic depiction of what Jesus actually looked like.<sup>22</sup> The significance of the Publius Lentulus letter itself is debatable, since White Jesus iconography existed before it; more interesting is the history of White Jesus iconography taking hold in the United States and becoming the revered image that it is now.<sup>23</sup>



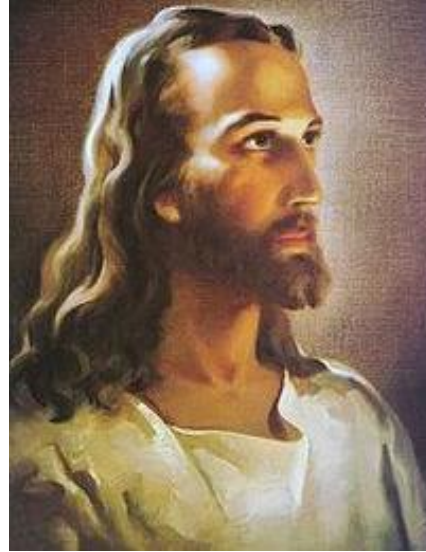
<sup>20</sup> Cora E. Lutz, “The Letter of Lentulus Describing Christ,” *The Yale University Gazette* 50, no. 2 (1975): 91–97.

<sup>21</sup> Lutz, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 208.

<sup>23</sup> At the same time, it is believed that in the Roman Empire in the first century CE, race was conceived of in a very different manner than it is today. This anachronism factors into my discussion, but must be relegated to a different study due to lack of space here. Jessie Washington, “The Race of Jesus: Unknown, Yet Powerful,” *The Times of Israel*, last modified December 24, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-race-of-jesus-unknown-yet-powerful/>.

Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey provide a comprehensive summary of the historical imagery of Jesus and the importance of that imagery in the narratives of Christianity and race in America in their book *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. The wealth of examples and sociological research in the book illuminates a larger picture of the complexity of attitudes towards Jesus iconography in the United States. They discuss the proliferation of White Jesus iconography in particular. In the early nineteenth century, a time of high illiteracy rates in America, Blum and Harvey contend that one factor leading to the ultimate widespread acceptance of a White Jesus in America were “mass-produced visual depictions” of White Jesuses created by Protestant organizations wanting to evangelize to all Americans.<sup>24</sup> The young but rapidly expanding nation was “inundated [...] with ephemera,” largely due to the development of new technologies, and “information and transportation revolutions made cultural power possible.”<sup>25</sup> Mass-produced imagery paired with disregard for or ignorance about the fact that the Publius Lentulus letter was fabricated had lasting impacts on Jesus iconography in America. While some authority figures knew the letter to be forged, they still claimed its description to be true. A Rhode Island preacher in the 1810s even stated that the description “corresponds well with descriptions given of him, by the ancient inspired writers,” citing Solomon’s Songs, the Hebrew prophets, and the Gospels; Blum and Harvey explain, “Of course, [the preacher] never pointed out exactly where the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke or John ever referenced Christ’s hair length or skin color, but he did not have to. Art was providing what the Bible had not.”<sup>26</sup> The many Americans who could not read were able to understand and come to know Jesus through images.<sup>27</sup>



Thus, the image of a White Jesus took hold and could not be reined in. Blum and Harvey assert that this widespread White Jesus iconography had varied effects on Christian belief and practice. Jesus’ Whiteness was often depicted within images that made him look docile or suffering; portraying the savior as a “suffering servant” served as an argument for the slaves to continue serving

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<sup>24</sup> Blum and Harvey, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Blum and Harvey, 80; 79.

<sup>26</sup> Blum and Harvey, 83.

<sup>27</sup> William S. Pendleton, *Letter from Publius Lentulus, to the Senate of Rome Concerning Jesus Christ*, lithograph, 1834; Warner Sallman, *Head of Christ*, painting, 1940.

without complaint (the argument being, if Jesus is happily a suffering servant, then slaves can be too) allowed White slaveowners to justify their violence and oppression towards their slaves (and to justify slavery itself).<sup>28</sup> Douglas explains the Christian apologia for slavery, and for forcing slaves into Christianity, as follows:

Almost from the very beginning of the American slave trade, many slaveholders justified stealing Africans from their homeland—and enslaving them—with claims that they were introducing the “African heathens” to Jesus Christ. They reasoned that they were rescuing Africans from an ignominious life as pagans. These slaveholders rationalized that the benefit that slaves received from Christianization—that is, the assurance of salvation—far outweighed the brutality of slavery.<sup>29</sup>

Slaveholders had fears about introducing Christianity to their slaves, though. They “knew that there was more in the Bible than directives to slaves to obey their masters and they worried about what slaves would do with passages from Exodus, for instance.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, to prevent their slaves from realizing the inherently liberatory message of Christ, they created legal structures in which “slavery overwhelmed faith [and] freedom.”<sup>31</sup> Slaves baptized as Christians were legally “not exempt [...] from bondage;” “local courts rendered sexual relationships with African Americans as dishonoring and shameful for White Christians and then made interracial marriage illegal;” and finally, seemingly indestructible patriarchy was overruled by slavery when “new laws [...] declared that status would follow slavery, not paternity,” meaning that if one parent was a slave, the child would be a slave as well.<sup>32</sup> Going along with this, slavemasters stressed the soteriological message of the White Christ over the practically applicable (and liberatory) message of the non-White Jesus. They preached that if one were to obey one’s earthly master, then one would be rewarded with salvation in the hereafter—as Jesus’ character is admonished in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “All your followers are blind, too much heaven on their minds.”<sup>33</sup>

With the advent of film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came a new technology through which to perpetuate a hegemonic image of Jesus. Throughout cinematographic history, the story of Jesus has been a popular and sometimes profitable one to portray in film. Unsurprisingly, following the model

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<sup>28</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Blum and Harvey, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Blum and Harvey, 50.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Leonard C. McKinnis, “From Christ to Black Jesus – Black Theology’s Christological Move as Operative in the Black Coptic Church,” *Black Theology* 14, no. 3 (2016): 242; Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*.



of the White Jesus depicted in a multitude of ways in pre-film America, American Jesus films have almost always portrayed Jesus as White (and they tend to stick close to the Publius Lentulus description of Jesus). A variety of articles have critiqued Jesus films and several focus specifically on Jesus' race within those films. In "The Caucasianization of Jesus: Hollywood Transforming Christianity into a Racially Hierarchical Discourse," a 2015 article, Catherine Jones and Atsushi Tajima explore Jesus imagery in film and especially tear apart the significance of the difficulty of depicting Jesus as he (probably) really was, digging into issues of Islamophobia, privilege, and the dangerous association of a very specific<sup>34</sup> Whiteness with godliness in Hollywood. Much of the theoretical analysis in this text helps me critically analyze two contemporary depictions of Black Jesuses in this study, and provides explanations of what ideology contemporary depictions of Black Jesuses are working to eliminate.<sup>35</sup>



Rebekah Eklund's 2017 article "Hot Jesus, Black Messiah, Suffering Son of God: How Jesus Films Shape Our Moral Imaginations" explores a wide variety of Jesus films, and explores the significance of how Jesus is depicted, drawing distinctions between those films claiming to be accurately representing first-century Palestine and those claiming to be modern interpretations of Jesus' life.<sup>36</sup> Eklund reflects on the symbolic value of certain depictions of Jesus and engages

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<sup>34</sup> Rebekah Eklund, "Hot Jesus, Black Messiah, Suffering Son of God: How Jesus Films Shape Our Moral Imaginations," *Journal of Religion & Film* 21, no. 1 (2017): 1–36. Eklund explains that most White Jesuses in film fit into very specific standards of beauty, unattainable by many, further diminishing who can personally identify with the human representation of the divine ("Jesus actors are not only white, they often represent an idealized form of whiteness." (4))

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Jones and Atsushi Tajima, "The Caucasianization of Jesus: Hollywood Transforming Christianity into a Racially Hierarchical Discourse," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (2015): 202–219.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Powell in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), Eklund (5); Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings* (1961), Eklund (5).

in close visual analysis of the imagery, focusing particularly on the lack of diversity within actors playing Jesus in most American-made Jesus films.<sup>37</sup>

A White Jesus continues to have benefits for White Christians today. White Jesus iconography tends strongly toward a weakening and pacifying of Jesus—it creates a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” who looks like White Christians and also allows them (us) to maintain their privilege, comfort and entitlement. Making Jesus a white-washed milquetoast makes Jesus exclusively for White Christians, and makes Jesus completely non-threatening and unchallenging—allowing White Christians to circumvent Jesus’ command to “deny [yourself,] take up [your] cross, and follow me.”<sup>38</sup>

Reclaiming a Jesus of Color | “*I think you’ve made your point now. You’ve even gone a bit too far to get your message home. Before it gets too frightening, we ought to call a vote, so could we start again please?*”<sup>39</sup>

While the creation of White Jesus films—such as Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings* (1961), Norman Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and Cyrus Nowrasteh’s *The Young Messiah* (2016)—continues today, a new movement in the racial iconography of Jesus developed slowly throughout the nineteenth century and really took off during the Civil Rights Movement. As Christianity became less of a White American tradition with slaves, former slaves, and Native Americans (often forcibly) adopting the religion, there also came shifts in the racial identity of Jesus iconography.<sup>40</sup> Literature that traces these shifts comes mainly from the tradition of liberation theologians who helped proliferate a theology, iconography, and history of a non-White Jesus during the Civil Rights Movement. In November 1968, the Congregational Church minister Rev. Albert Cleage published a book of sermons, *The Black Messiah*, explicating his theology of a Black Christ. A friend of the late Malcolm X, he writes in the introduction to his book,

For nearly 500 years the illusion that Jesus was white dominated the world only because white Europeans dominated the world. Now, with the emergence of the nationalist movements of the world’s colored majority, the historic truth is finally beginning to

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<sup>37</sup> Eklund also touches on the anti-Semitism proliferated and perpetuated through many White Jesus films, generally by portraying Jesus as not Jewish and by portraying those who killed him as very Jewish. This topic, while fascinating, must unfortunately be relegated to another study, although I will touch on it briefly later in this study.

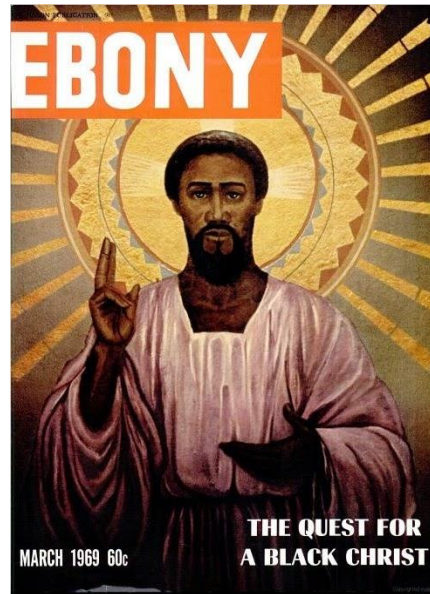
<sup>38</sup> See Matthew 16:24.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*.

<sup>40</sup> Blum and Harvey, 49–50.

emerge—that Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation, Rome. [...] Jesus was a revolutionary black leader, a Zealot, seeking to lead a Black Nation to freedom.<sup>41</sup>

Cleage’s words about domination call to mind the Marxist idea mentioned earlier, that “the ideas of the ruling [group] are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”<sup>42</sup> He calls for his congregants and all Black people wishing to overturn the White supremacist structures that oppressed them to take to heart the truth of a Black Jesus; only then, he argues, can “the tasks of building a Black Nation” begin.<sup>43</sup> A few months following the publishing of Cleage’s sermon collection, a March 1969 article in *Ebony Magazine* entitled “The Quest for a Black Christ: Radical Clerics Reject ‘Honky Christ’ Created by American Culture-Religion” by Alex Poinsett featured an



interview with Cleage.<sup>44</sup> Popular sources assert that this article and the image of a Black Christ from a Detroit Church that graced the cover of the issue almost got the magazine shut down.<sup>45</sup>

Shortly after Cleage’s book and the *Ebony Magazine* article were published, Black theologian James Cone published *A Black Theology of Liberation*; it is the leading authoritative text on Black liberation theology. This book provides valuable history and grounding for many of the arguments made by more recent authors, and serves as a foundational text for my research due to its simple but groundbreaking ideas on why Jesus can and should be conceived of as Black. Cone writes,

It is my contention that Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation. The function of theology is that of analyzing the meaning of that liberation for the oppressed community so they can know that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any message

<sup>41</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Marx, *German Ideology* (1845) (London: Electric Book Company, 2000), accessed October 18, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Cleage, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Poinsett, “The Quest for a Black Christ,” *Ebony Magazine*, March 1969.

<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Bakhunin, “Black Jesus Almost Put *Ebony Magazine* Out of Business,” *Lipstick Alley*, last modified August 16, 2012, <https://www.lipstickalley.com/threads/black-jesus-almost-put-ebony-magazine-out-of-business.987805/>.

that is not related to the liberation of the poor in the society is not Christ's message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology.<sup>46</sup>

Cone then argues that, especially in the context of the Civil Rights Movement during which he wrote—and I argue today as well—race is tremendously relevant to the topic of religion and Christianity in particular. Cone published a second book on the topic in 1997, *God of the Oppressed*, further expanding on the liberatory principles of Jesus' teaching. This text provides more historical grounding for my analysis of contemporary depictions of Jesus and for understanding opposition to imagery of a non-White Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

Around the same time as *God of the Oppressed* was published, Episcopal priest Kelly Brown Douglas wrote *The Black Christ*, a critical analysis of various past conceptions of Black Jesuses. Douglas summarizes three theologians' influential Black Christs (Cleage's, Cone's, and J. Deotis Roberts'): "In all three versions, to call Christ Black indicated that Christ was for Black freedom and against White oppression. Any representation of Christ that suggested otherwise was a distortion of the gospel witness to Christ."<sup>48</sup> However, Douglas criticizes both Cleage's and Cone's Black Jesuses, because they respectively "strongly supported violence" and "allowed for violence."<sup>49</sup> She praises Roberts' conception of a Black Christ of liberation and reconciliation; she quotes him as saying, "the nonviolent revolution offers reconciliation beyond confrontation and liberation of the oppressed."<sup>50</sup> She goes on to indicate the strengths of each of the three philosophies: "Cleage's Black Christ is the only one that challenges Christians to accept Jesus as an African"; "Cone's version challenges those who are not on the side of the oppressed"; and "Robert's version of the Black Christ [...] emphasizes reconciliation [in order] not to alienate the White community."<sup>51</sup>

Several case studies also marginally influenced my research in the area of Black Christology: Reggie Williams' *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, and Leonard McKinnis' article "From Christ to Black Jesus – Black Theology's Christological Move as Operative in the Black Coptic Church." Williams' book is significant to my research because it frames the work I am doing as a White Christian scholar, attempting to understand and deconstruct White supremacist structures that are still reinforced and perpetuated in many arenas of my faith. Bonhoeffer's studies and ensuing theological teaching are inspiring to me and help me understand the

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<sup>46</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 11.

<sup>47</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Douglas, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas, 77.

significance of this work both for this scholarly paper as well as for my life outside of academia.<sup>52</sup> McKinnis' article focuses on Black Jesus in the context of the Black Coptic Church, but provides excellent theory and background information for my own study, particularly about the oppositional symbols of White and Black Jesus images, and why discussions of Jesus' race in Christological study matter. Drawing on the rich traditions of the Black liberation theologians Cone and Douglas, McKinnis illustrates some of the powerful theological messages provided by a Black Jesus that a White Jesus cannot symbolize.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Jeffrey Siker's 2007 article "Historicizing a Racialized Jesus: Case Studies in the 'Black Christ,' the 'Mestizo Christ,' and White Critique" draws on Black liberation theology, exploring White critique of non-White Jesus imagery, which is useful to help explain White resistance to letting go of White Jesus imagery.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, popular sources, especially those rooted in progressive Christian traditions, have begun to question Jesus' race. A Sojourners magazine article and a blog post explain the importance of rethinking the dominant image of a White Jesus that is still too often portrayed as the true Jesus, and they stress that this is a call to action, especially for White Christians.<sup>55</sup> These articles, written in the last two years, reveal how intractable the (ahistorical) iconography of a White Jesus is—they are making the same arguments Cleage, Cone, and their contemporaries made forty to fifty years ago.

Blum and Harvey also do an excellent job of analyzing the significance of the proliferation of images of non-White Jesuses especially in the last century; one story they highlight is that of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, where four young Black girls were killed in a racially-motivated bombing in 1963. In the tragic hate-crime carried out by White domestic terrorists, the face of the White stained-glass Jesus who had been with the Black congregation for decades "shattered into a thousand shards of glass."<sup>56</sup> The significance of the destruction of the face of this White Jesus was discussed by many. According to Blum and Harvey, novelist and essayist James Baldwin wrote, in the wake of the bombing,

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<sup>52</sup> Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> McKinnis.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey S. Siker, "Historicizing a Racialized Jesus: Case Studies in the 'Black Christ,' the 'Mestizo Christ,' and White Critique," *Biblical Interpretation* 15, no. 1 (2007): 26–53.

<sup>55</sup> Reggie L. Williams, "How the Construct of Race Deforms Our Understanding of Christ," *Sojourners*, last modified June 16, 2016, <https://sojo.net/articles/faith-action/how-construct-race-deforms-our-understanding-christ>; Hans Zatzka, "Jesus Wasn't White: He Was A Brown-Skinned, Middle Eastern Jew. Here's Why That Matters," *The Conversation*, last modified March 28, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/jesus-wasnt-white-he-was-a-brown-skinned-middle-eastern-jew-heres-why-that-matters-91230>.

<sup>56</sup> Blum and Harvey, 1.

“The absence of the face is something of an achievement [...] since we have been victimized so long by an alabaster Christ.” Where others saw meaninglessness, Baldwin found possibility. It was another chance to make life where death had reigned. “If Christ has no face,” then we must give “him a new face. Give him a new consciousness. As far as I can tell, that has never really been a reality in the two thousand years since his assassination.”<sup>57</sup>

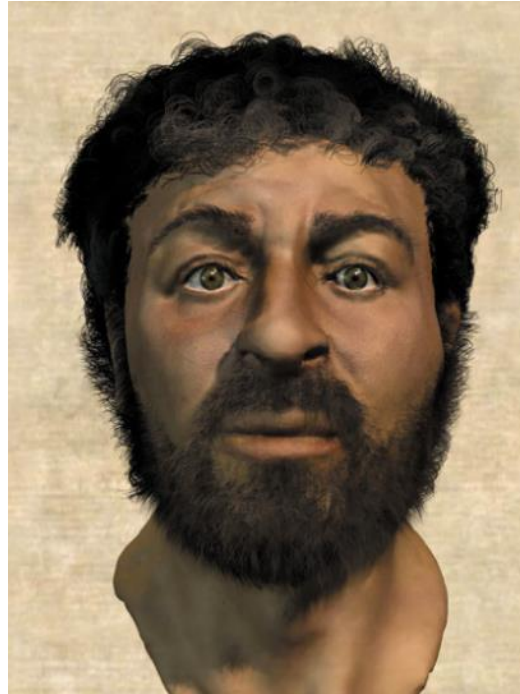
As if following Baldwin’s command, the creation of a new stained-glass Jesus (dedicated in 1965) was funded through a “penny campaign” led by Welsh children: “*The Wales Window for Alabama* has Jesus with short black hair and a dark face. His arms are outstretched as if on a cross. His right hand is extended upward to show strength. [...] His other hand, though, is open wide to offer acceptance and love.”<sup>58</sup> The destruction and replacement of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church stained-glass Jesus echoed and foreshadowed the larger theological and societal changes occurring in Jesus iconography at the time of the Civil Rights Movement as well as before and after it.



<sup>57</sup> Blum and Harvey, 4; Image from Gary Younge, “American Civil Rights: The Welsh Connection,” *The Guardian*, last modified March 6, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/06/racist-attack-alabama-1963-gary-younge>.

<sup>58</sup> Blum and Harvey, 23.

Beyond theologically-based Christology, some British forensic scientists and Israeli archaeologists have attempted to recreate what the historical Jesus may have looked like as a Middle-Eastern Jew in the first century CE. Dark-skinned and muscular, with short dark hair, a beard, and dark eyes, the computer-generated image looks nothing like the multitude of White Jesuses taken to be authentic by so many.<sup>59</sup> Of course, it is impossible to know exactly what the historical Jesus looked like. However, most scholars agree that Jesus certainly was not the fair-skinned, blue-eyed man many today believe (or wish) him to be.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the image on the cover of *Ebony Magazine's* March 1969 issue and many other Black Jesuses that have been ridiculed or dismissed over the years bear much closer resemblance to this forensic approximation of the historical Jesus' appearance than the myriad of White Jesuses revered by so many for so long.<sup>61</sup> This varied collection of scholarship on Jesus' identity and iconography establishes a base on which I now construct my own analysis and argument. Using the excellent work of liberation



<sup>59</sup> Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics*, last modified January 22, 2015, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/#>.

<sup>60</sup> Image from Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics*, last modified January 22, 2015, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/#>.

<sup>61</sup> Some scholars have attempted to understand why Americans are so quick to reject Jesus' Middle Eastern-ness. Jones and Tajima stress that certain terrorist attacks in recent decades "have encouraged some Americans to build an automatic mental connection between terrorism and Middle Easterners [...] Consequently, recasting Jesus—the savior of humanity—as Middle Eastern would challenge Americans' viewpoints. In avoiding this internal discomfort, Americans have allowed current events to outweigh historical reality in the cinematic presentation of Jesus" (210). Of course, this argument simply reveals unspoken racism and xenophobia, as studies show that far more Americans are killed by gun violence and right-wing domestic terrorists every year than by Middle Eastern terrorists; David Neiwert, Dareen Ankrom, Esther Kaplan, and Scott Pham, "Homegrown Terror," *Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting*, last modified June 22, 2017, <https://apps.revealnews.org/homegrown-terror/>; Jennifer Williams, "White American men are a bigger domestic terrorist threat than Muslim foreigners," *Vox*, last modified October 2, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/10/2/16396612/las-vegas-mass-shooting-terrorism-islam>; Eve Bower, "American deaths in terrorism vs. gun violence in one graph," *CNN*, last modified October 3, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/03/us/terrorism-gun-violence/index.html>.

theologians, film critics, sociologists and religious leaders, my scholarship focuses on two contemporary depictions of Black Jesuses, reactions to them, and possible developments that they help bring about.

Analysis | “*Jesus, you must realize the serious charges facing you. You say you're the Son of God in all your handouts. Well, is it true?*”<sup>62</sup>

The wealth of scholarship on Jesus iconography in America, which I have only had the opportunity to touch on here, leads back to the question at the center of Christology: “who do you say that I am?”<sup>63</sup> Considering the powerful effect religious iconography holds over American worldviews, Christology must refine its scope. If we are reproducing and disseminating images of the human embodiment of the divine, we must also ask “Who can Jesus be?” “How can Jesus be represented?” “Who can be represented in the images of Jesus we create?” and “Who was Jesus and what did he stand for?” These questions cannot be answered once and for all; for me, however, the answers are clear. As expressed by Siker, drawing on Cone’s liberation theology,

the historically reliable portrait of Jesus in the Gospels is a Jesus who in every way aligns himself with the poor and the oppressed. He is born among the humiliated and the abused. His baptism “defines his existence as one with sinners.” The public ministry of Jesus shows him standing squarely in the prophetic tradition on the side of the poor and the oppressed, both in his teaching and in his healing.<sup>64</sup>

This is critical because, as Cone states,

We want to know who Jesus *was* because we believe that is the only way to assess who he *is*. If we have no historical information about the character and behavior of that particular Galilean in the first century, then it is impossible to determine the mode of his existence now.<sup>65</sup>

Proponents of non-White Jesus iconography relied on arguments like this one in their work. They did not (and do not) just argue that a White Jesus is unhistorical in appearance, they argue that a White Jesus in many ways goes against Jesus’ direct actions and values. A White Jesus, they contend, supports and perpetuates White supremacy. A White Jesus cannot identify with the most marginalized groups in society. A White Jesus enjoys the privileges of White America, which people of color do not have. Thus, besides historicity, an important reason to

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<sup>62</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*.

<sup>63</sup> See Matthew 16:15, for example.

<sup>64</sup> Siker, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Cone, *Liberation*, 201 (italics in original).



promote non-White Jesus iconography is that this iconography better represents the poor and marginalized, which I believe aligns best with the values of Jesus as expressed in the Gospels.<sup>66</sup> If we understand the historical Jesus to be one who identified with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, then when we answer his question “who do you say that I am?” in today’s world, we must include African Americans who have systemically suffered under the domination of White Americans for centuries, and continue to do so today. The alternative is for the majority of Christians to continue worshipping a White Jesus, an image and ideology which factors heavily into White supremacy.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, the continued creation and proliferation of non-White Jesus iconography—and especially of Black Jesus iconography—is critical in our age of renewed race violence against Black communities. My analysis in the present study focuses on the Adult Swim<sup>68</sup> television show *Black Jesus* (2014–present)<sup>69</sup> and on John Legend’s performance of the character of Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert* (NBC, 2018).

*Black Jesus*, created by “radical” Aaron McGruder (creator of *The Boondocks*) and Mike Clattenburg (co-creator of *The Trailer Park Boys*), follows a Black “hood” Jesus around his neighborhood in Compton, where he curses,



<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Matthew 25:31–46; Matthew 15:22–39; Luke 6:20–21; Mark 10:21–22; Luke 14:12–14; John 8:1–11.

<sup>67</sup> Blum & Harvey, 609–610.

<sup>68</sup> Owned by Cartoon Network.

<sup>69</sup> Image from James Poniewozik, “REVIEW: *Black Jesus* Laughs With, More Than At, Its Son of God,” *TIME Magazine*, last modified August 7, 2014, <http://time.com/3086811/review-black-jesus-adult-swim/>.

hangs out with drug dealers, miraculously changes bottled water into cognac, and smokes weed.<sup>70</sup> In the first season, he and his friends try to start and run a community garden—first with the intention to grow weed, but then in the end renting plots out to farmers and working hard to create a profitable and community-enriching garden. Overall, the show is described in a *TIME Magazine* article as a lighthearted stoner comedy: “Jesus, while swearing and escaping drug deals gone wrong, is an expansive, wide-armed fountain of love, who exudes goodness even when he gets pissed off, because that’s who he is.”<sup>71</sup>

Reactions to the show, which ran for two seasons in 2014 and 2015 and has been renewed for a third season—although it is unclear when that will air—are varied, and are unsurprisingly split roughly along sociopolitical lines.<sup>72</sup> Both left-leaning and neutral media, such as *TIME Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera America*, *Vice*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *CNN* reported positively about the show.<sup>73</sup> Critics from those organizations expressed that the show is amusing, honest, and even a productive and accurate depiction of who Jesus was.<sup>74</sup> In general, these popular media outlets were unconcerned with Jesus’ somewhat criminal behavior and praised the show’s lighthearted nature. One *TIME Magazine* article criticized groups who dismissed the show as blasphemy without critically considering its content. The article says, “the joke here is not really on Jesus so much as people who don’t want to hear the modern version of his message.”<sup>75</sup> Two positive (or at least neutral) reviews were surprising. *The Christian Post*, an evangelical newspaper, reported that people asked about their thoughts on the show (based on a mural of *Black Jesus* in New York City and a short trailer) found that, while it was “crude,” it was also “honest and accessible;” Jesus on the show ““refers back to integrity, love, and compassion for all mankind

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<sup>70</sup> David Bienenstock, “Black Jesus Has Risen: The Gospel According to Aaron McGruder,” *Vice*, last modified August 7, 2014, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/ppmmk9/black-jesus-has-risen-the-gospel-according-to-aaron-mcgruder-807](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ppmmk9/black-jesus-has-risen-the-gospel-according-to-aaron-mcgruder-807).

<sup>71</sup> Poniewozik.

<sup>72</sup> “Black Jesus,” *Premiere Date*, last modified August 27, 2017, <https://premieredate.news/tv-series/2173-black-jesus.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Poniewozik; Mike Hale, “A Holy Guy Keeps His Worldly, Common Touch,” *The New York Times*, last modified August 6, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/07/arts/television/slink-johnson-is-black-jesus-on-adult-swim.html>; Leslie D. Callahan, “Black Jesus: We Have Other Things to Boycott,” *TIME Magazine*, last modified August 8, 2014, <http://time.com/3092051/black-jesus-boycott/>; Malcolm Harris, “TV needs ‘Black Jesus’ more than ever,” *Al Jazeera America*, last modified October 21, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/black-jesus-comedycentraltelevision.html>; Bienenstock; Greg Braxton, “Black Jesus’ comes in peace, according to his formerly angry creator,” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified August 7, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-black-jesus-aaron-mcgruder-20140807-story.html>; Jay Parini, “What’s wrong with ‘Black Jesus’ comedy?,” *CNN*, last modified July 30, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/29/opinion/parini-black-jesus/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Parini.

<sup>75</sup> Poniewozik.

[sic]” and ““gives Christians [...] an opportunity to speak to some of the endearing qualities about Jesus, meaning some of his non-judgment and willingness to meet people where they are.””<sup>76</sup> The Catholic League, a Catholic organization working “for religious and civil rights,” says the show is a mixed bag, but praises that it represents Jesus as “forgiving, kind, respectful, and [condemning of] violence.”<sup>77</sup>

The negative reviews of the show focus mainly on Jesus’ swearing and drug use, a view which, quite frankly, misses the larger message of the show and reveals more about the critics themselves than about the show; these reviews examine the surface-level actions, words, and appearances of Jesus rather than digging into the content of his message. A pastor in Shreveport, LA called for a boycott of the show, citing that ““Our Jesus is not an alcoholic. Our Jesus is not riotous and unruly””—an interesting statement from a pastor, considering that Jesus is depicted in the Gospels as breaking rules of the religious establishment of the time and even physically overturning tables in the Jerusalem temple, which seems a quite riotous activity.<sup>78</sup> *USA Today* reported in 2014 that *Black Jesus* was raising the “ire of pastors, faith groups.”<sup>79</sup> The article quotes many religious leaders who refer to the show as “blasphemous” and “mocking” of Christianity.<sup>80</sup> In another extremely negative reaction to *Black Jesus*, the group One Million Moms (which advocates against what it calls “trash” in the media based on its fundamentalist Christian values), asserts that the show makes “a mockery of our Lord,” and asks supporters to contact sponsors of the show and request that they pull their support from it.<sup>81</sup> One Million Moms’ parent group, American Family Association, called the show “denigrating” to Christians.<sup>82</sup> According to McGruder, the show’s co-creator and executive producer, ““The show is not an exercise to offend people [...] It has lots of heart””;

“And as much as it may seem to be a completely upside-down depiction, the more we do it, the more it feels honest, sincere and actually grounded in what Jesus is supposed to be about. It's only

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<sup>76</sup> Nicola Menzie, “‘Black Jesus,’ Though Crude at Times, Is Honest and Accessible Portrayal of Christian Savior, According to Critics,” *The Christian Post*, last modified August 31, 2014, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/black-jesus-though-crude-at-times-is-honest-and-accessible-portrayal-of-christian-savior-according-to-critics.html?page=2>.

<sup>77</sup> Bill Donohue, “Hip ‘Black Jesus’ TV Show Airs,” *Catholic League*, last modified August 8, 2014, <https://www.catholicleague.org/hip-black-jesus-cartoon-air/>.

<sup>78</sup> Bienenstock; see e.g. Mark 2:23–28 and Matthew 21:12–17.

<sup>79</sup> J.D. Gallop, “Black Jesus’ raises ire of pastors, faith groups,” *USA Today*, last modified August 6, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/06/black-jesus-raises-ire-pastors-faith-groups/13655537/>.

<sup>80</sup> Gallop.

<sup>81</sup> “Conservative Group ‘One Million Moms’ Upset by Black Jesus,” *Ebony*, last modified August 7, 2014, <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/conservative-group-one-million-moms-upset-by-black-jesus-981/>.

<sup>82</sup> Parini.

because this story has been hijacked for so long, that the idea of Jesus as an actual poor person seems crazy. So really this is a show about people who are just like anyone else, except they don't have s\*\*\*. And in many ways, Jesus's message is that you don't need s\*\*\*, you just need love and kindness.”<sup>83</sup>

An important critique of the show brought up in a *Daily Beast* article is that its seemingly humorous characters may be perpetuating damaging racist stereotypes.<sup>84</sup> It was not clear how McGruder or Clattenburg responded to these claims. Still, I feel that depicting Jesus as a poor Black man serving and cultivating his community is a positive and constructive attempt at reimagining Jesus in one of the more marginalized sectors of society—for those who will listen.

A second contemporary depiction of a Black Jesus came with musical artist John Legend’s performance as Jesus in *NBC’s Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*, which aired on Easter in 2018. The rock opera, which originally debuted in 1970, tells the story of the last seven days of Jesus’ life as told in the Gospels; however, it tells the story from the point of view of Judas. Jesus is portrayed as a superstar who has garnered more fame and attention than is good for him, and Judas, after warning Jesus of the error of his ways, decides to turn Jesus in to the authorities seeking to silence him. The opera depicts both Jesus and



<sup>83</sup> Braxton; Bienenstock.

<sup>84</sup> Rawiya Kameir, “‘Black Jesus’ Resurrected: Racial Stereotypes or Subversive Comedy?,” *The Daily Beast*, last modified August 8, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/black-jesus-resurrected-racial-stereotypes-or-subversive-comedy>.

Judas as misunderstood and tragic, bringing the stories of Holy Week to life with energetic music, dancing, and a hippy-ish nature very reminiscent of the seventies.<sup>85</sup>

The show and the popular 1973 film adaptation, where Ted Neeley played Jesus, was popular among audiences, but many Christians boycotted it, picketed at performances, and “condemned it as blasphemy.”<sup>86</sup> However, it has continued to be performed since then, generally with a White Jesus (and a Black Judas—significant, but for analysis in another essay).<sup>87</sup> Ted Neeley, the iconic Jesus of the film, was very White and very British—he matched what many Americans believed (and believe) Jesus to be.<sup>88</sup> While the original film adaptation did not shake up viewers’ perceptions of Jesus’ race, it did cause Jesus to be seen as more human and conflicted than—perhaps—ever before. The creators of the live musical casting Jesus in 2018 as a Black man—John Legend—on national television shook viewers up in another way: it “raised eyebrows” and caused both consternation and celebration among critics and the popular media.<sup>89</sup> Many reports celebrated the casting choice. A *Daily Beast* article hailed the choice in an article entitled “How John Legend Became the Black Jesus We Need in ‘Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert,’” saying that the show’s “creative team [was] bracing for conservative religious backlash, but expecting audiences to applaud the audacity of casting a black performer as Jesus.”<sup>90</sup> In an interview with *The Grapevine*, Legend is quoted as saying

I think it’s cool [to be playing a Black Jesus.] I think we’ve seen a version of Jesus most of the time that was kind of ahistorical or he

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<sup>85</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*; Image from Kevin Fallon, “How John Legend Became the Black Jesus We Need in ‘Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert,’” *The Daily Beast*, last modified March 27, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-john-legend-became-the-black-jesus-we-need-in-jesus-christ-superstar-live>.

<sup>86</sup> Gillian Brockell, “‘Jesus Christ Superstar’: Why Jews, Christians and even its composer hated it at first,” *The Washington Post*, last modified April 2, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/04/01/jesus-christ-superstar-why-jews-christians-and-even-its-composer-hated-it-at-first/?utm\\_term=.cf4d038ce69f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/04/01/jesus-christ-superstar-why-jews-christians-and-even-its-composer-hated-it-at-first/?utm_term=.cf4d038ce69f).

<sup>87</sup> “*Jesus Christ Superstar*,” *Wikipedia*, last modified December 9, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus\\_Christ\\_Superstar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ_Superstar). All productions listed in the almost-exhaustive *Wikipedia* article featured a White Jesus; however, there is one notable instance of an all-Black cast performing the musical with an Illinois theater company in 2017. See Kelly Wallace, “What It Means to Have an All-Black *Jesus Christ Superstar*,” *Playbill*, last modified April 7, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/what-it-means-to-have-an-all-black-jesus-christ-superstar>.

<sup>88</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, directed by Norman Jewison, performed by Ted Neeley, Carl Anderson, Yvonne Elliman et al. (1973; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 1973), DVD.

<sup>89</sup> “CNN: Are Americans Ready for a Black Jesus?,” YouTube Video, 4:09, posted by “www.MOXNEWScom,” December 20, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4\\_NYXIHcdU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4_NYXIHcdU).

<sup>90</sup> Fallon.

was from Oslo or Berlin, when he [actually] was from a region of the world where his skin probably was a lot more like mine than a lot of [the] other people who played Jesus over the years. But I think part of what NBC decided to do, from the beginning, was to explicitly make the show multiracial/multicultural in a way that didn't have to align with what people thought people may have looked like in that era, but just be a reflection of how beautiful and diverse America is, and that's what we've done with these casting decisions, and I'm excited to play Jesus.<sup>91</sup>

While many popular media sources celebrated the casting choice, other outlets were more doubtful about the production. The doubts, however, were not explicitly about the race of the actor playing Jesus; they were about the blasphemous nature of the show in general. It strikes me that, perhaps, critics were able to hide their racism under cries of “sacrilege,” avoiding having to say explicitly that the casting of a Black man as Jesus was what they were truly opposed to. Lisette Verri of *Salt Radio Ministries* writes, “We have an all-star cast of godless liberals rehashing a blasphemous interpretation of the most important event of all time, to be broadcast on the holiest day of the year,” bemoaning that “Jesus is portrayed by Judas as a fallible, conflicted, nondeified man occupied with his own fame while in a romantic relationship with Mary Magdalene. This is revolting and deeply insulting to most Christians” (though Verri fails to provide proof that “most Christians” feel this way).<sup>92</sup> Though it is impossible to know for certain, it seems plausible that if “most Christians” still worship a White Jesus as displayed in their churches, on their televisions, and in their artwork, that the blasphemy they see in the new production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is aimed less at the musical itself than at the race of the one starring in it. In an America where White Jesus still reigns supreme and it is necessary to state explicitly that Black lives matter, it seems unsurprising that *CNN* wondered whether “mainstream American audiences” were ready for a Black Jesus in April 2018.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps, if producers, actors, artists, and directors can slowly begin to accept, write, draw, and cast non-White Jesuses, the mainstream American public can begin to accept these Jesuses as well—Jesuses who look a whole lot more like the historical Jesus than any White Jesus ever could.

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<sup>91</sup> Danielle Young, “This Easter, We Get a Black Jesus and His Name is John Legend,” *The Grapevine*, last modified March 31, 2018, <https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/this-easter-we-get-a-black-jesus-and-his-name-is-john-1824163320>.

<sup>92</sup> Lisette Verri, “Controversial Jesus Christ Superstar to Air Live on NBC Easter Night,” *Salt Radio Ministries*, last modified March 27, 2018, <https://www.saltradioministries.com/single-post/Controversial-Jesus-Christ-Superstar-to-air-live-on-NBC-Easter-night>.

<sup>93</sup> “CNN: Are Americans Ready for a Black Jesus?”

Conclusion | “*In every culture, ideas about the cosmos are expressed through the medium of the body.*”<sup>94</sup>

An embodiment of God is a curious thing; it allows both for deep and intense human identification with the divine, and for rampant, seemingly divinely-ordained discrimination against those who look less like the embodied God—or the varied iconography thereof—than others. As the human embodiment of God for Christians, and as an important teacher and prophet in the eyes of many others, the body that Jesus comes in—including its visible features, such as race, sex, and ethnicity—is ascribed certain significance and meaning. When the human representation of God is only, or overwhelmingly, portrayed in a White body, White bodies are also ascribed religious, cultural, and political power. Siker powerfully states, “The history of Western Christian theology (often articulated in art) has seen the ascendancy of Jesus as a white Christ with a resultant *de facto* white God endorsing white power claims over other racial/ethnic groups.”<sup>95</sup>

Despite studies indicating that race and ethnicity are social constructs, both factor heavily into almost all social interactions.<sup>96</sup> With the recent resurgence of White supremacy and anti-Black violence (though, of course, they have lingered more quietly in our society since the end of slavery), depictions of non-White Jesuses and especially Black Jesuses are critical. What is at stake is an implicit understanding of which bodies are good, holy, and worthy. What and who we see as divine—how we envision God—strongly influences how we interact with ourselves and the people around us. Again, Siker makes the implicit explicit: “to talk of the color of Jesus means by definition to talk about the color of God.”<sup>97</sup>

It is not enough, then, to only lift up Black Jesus iconography; rather, other non-hegemonic Jesus iconography must also be created, disseminated, and celebrated. Examples of such work are abundant but not as visible as they could be; I briefly mention some of them here. Douglas, author of *The Black Christ*, challenges the limitations of the liberatory power of a Black Christ, stressing that other oppressed identities should also be identified within the divine in order to

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<sup>94</sup> See for example Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982 [1970]), as well as Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1966]).

<sup>95</sup> Siker, 27.

<sup>96</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “Race and Racial Identity are Social Constructs,” *The New York Times*, last modified September 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/16/how-fluid-is-racial-identity/race-and-racial-identity-are-social-constructs>.

<sup>97</sup> Siker, 27.

advocate for liberation in more realms than just race.<sup>98</sup> Siker’s case study of the “Mestizo Christ” hints at the further work to be done in deconstructing Jesus’ White American identity. Eklund explores Jesus’ Jewishness and how classic and contemporary cinematic depictions of Jesus perpetuate and reinforce both racist and anti-Semitic viewpoints. Artists have also stepped into this work. Edwina Sandys created the *Christa*, a nude woman depicted on the cross, in 1974 in order to “portray the suffering of women;” the *Christa* is analyzed and celebrated in several scholarly works as well.<sup>99</sup> Revered Jewish artist Marc Chagall painted numerous crucifixion scenes and often depicted Jesus as Jewish—he wears a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, as a loin cloth in some of them; both Christian and Jewish imagery surround him in many paintings; he watches over depictions of pre-Revolutionary Russian pogroms and Holocaust-era Nazi invasions and synagogue demolitions.<sup>100</sup> Such works of art provoke critical thought about what and whom we see in Jesus, and vice versa—in what and whom we see Jesus. Continuing in the same vein, what if Jesus’ immigrant identity were made more visible in iconography, or his low socioeconomic status? What if we pushed further and portrayed Jesus as LGBTQ, or as someone suffering from an addiction? What if we portrayed Jesus as he historically looked—Middle Eastern—and confronted our xenophobia and Islamophobia?

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<sup>98</sup> Douglas, 84; Image below from Priscilla Frank, “30 Years Later, A Sculpture Of Jesus As A Nude Woman Finally Gets Its Due,” *Huffington Post*, last modified October 6, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/christa-edwina-sandys-art\\_us\\_57f55296e4b0b7aafe0b8999](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/christa-edwina-sandys-art_us_57f55296e4b0b7aafe0b8999).

<sup>99</sup> Frank; Julie Clague, “The Christa: Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain.” *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 1 (2005): 83–108.; Teresa Berger, “A Female Christ Child in the Manger and a Woman on the cross, or: The Historicity of the Jesus Event and the Inculturation of the Gospel,” *Feminist Theology* 4, no. 11 (1996): 32–45.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret O’Brien Steinfels, “Painting the Jewish Jesus: ‘Chagall: Love, War, and Exile,’” *Commonweal* 140, no. 18 (2013): 8; Image above by Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, oil on canvas, 1938, from *Chicago Art Institute*, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/59426/white-crucifixion>.





As a starting point, particularly for majority-White Christian congregations, I propose that White Jesus iconography not be completely removed from our churches, but that we critically examine the iconography with transparency and humility, considering what it would mean to really worship a Black Jesus. If accompanied with direct social action and dismantling of White supremacist structures (necessarily done by White people ourselves, but also necessarily in dialogue, collaboration and community with people of color), I believe this shift in our belief and practice, though certainly tedious and painful, can serve as a path towards racial reconciliation and healing. Taking a non-White image of Jesus—God—seriously means taking people of color seriously; this requires taking action against our own privileges and against the structures that benefit us while oppressing others.

“Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ  
 Who are you? What have you sacrificed?  
 Jesus Christ, Superstar  
 Do you think you’re what they say you are?”  
*Jesus Christ Superstar*

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