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Queer Jesus, Black Jesus, and Cool Jesus
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Category: Religion

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“Who do people say that I am?” Asks Jesus to his disciples in an ancient village in Golan Heights, two thousand years ago in thirty-some C.E.. Several answers are offered—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, some prophet or another. Peter answers decisively that he is “the Christ.” This same story is told three times in the Bible, in three different gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In each Gospel Peter’s seemingly conclusive answer is presented a little differently: it could be simply “the Christ,” “the Christ of God,” or even “the Son of the living God.” As such, the identity of Jesus has always been contested, questioned, interpreted, imagined, and re-imagined in different ways by different people. It is not so much of a stretch to see Jo Clifford’s transgender female Jesus, Gerard “Slink” Johnson’s black Jesus, or Reddit’s mildly alcoholic Jesus as part of this millennia-long process. People have always molded Jesus in association to their own identities.

Albert Schweitzer pushes against the idea of a clearly defined, historically accurate Jesus “designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb” (Schweitzer 2001, 398). In his discussion of the historical Jesus, Schweitzer seems to imply that whoever the actual man named Jesus of Nazareth was, it does not and should not affect Jesus Christ as he is perceived today. “It is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world” (401). In summary, not only is the idea of a variously interpreted Jesus not a new phenomenon, but it could be said that a Jesus who is not so richly nuanced and construed is unheard of and virtually meaningless.

In his book *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero talks about of human Jesus versus the metaphysical Jesus. The latter, who is abstract and overshadowed by God, gave way to the human Jesus after the enlightenment and the ensuing degrading of Christian traditions. Prothero writes that the decline of these traditions did not necessarily mean a decline of Christianity, for: “This assault on tradition might have killed Jesus, but it did not. On the contrary, it freed him up to be a hero to those who could not embrace the beliefs and practices of traditional Christianity” (Prothero 2003, 12). Although the figure of Jesus was interpreted in wildly different ways even before this event, it could be said that the shift in

social values within the European Christianity allowed for a new form of Jesus more readily be adapted by individual believers.

Prothero thinks of America in particular as unique, and of American Jesus as particularly flexible and multifaceted: “Like the apostle Paul, who once wrote that he had become “all things to men” so that he “might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22), the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon” (Prothero 2003, 8). After the First amendment, Americans have been able to separate and “disentangle” Jesus from previously instated beliefs and practices that they found themselves to be incompatible with. This, writes Prothero, “made Jesus into a “near-and-dear person, fully embodied, with virtues they could imitate, a mind they could understand, and qualities they could love” (13). Regardless of specific religion, or even whether one believed in a religion or not, Jesus became an entity that could be freely sought out for the fulfillment of wishes and salvation.

Why, then, is there a continuous desire to reimagine and redefine Jesus? In her book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Jacquelyn Grant writes that because each individual is limited in their understanding of Christ due to their specific social context, “Jesus Christ has been defined within the narrow parameters of the male consciousness” (Grant 1989, 64). In other words, that very social context is the “normative criterion” upon which the traditional interpretation of Jesus has been based. Historically it has been white, middle-to-upper class men whose experiences have molded the common understanding of Jesus—the same group of people that Carter Heyward writes about when she criticizes Christians “Putting ourselves under the authority of a deity we have created in the image of kings and lords—men of the ruling tribe...” (Meyer & Hughes 2001, 218). If Jesus is based on the social context of those in ruling positions, then, Grant and Heyward say, it is difficult for those Christians who do not identify with that Jesus—and indeed, see themselves oppressed and limited by him—for look to him as their lord and savior.

Christology is the study of the role, person, and nature of Christ, a branch of Christian theology. In talking about such Grant emphasizes the ideas of Rosemary Ruether, a feminist and Catholic theologian, saying: “Consequently, it is Jesus’ maleness which is the primary characteristic which defines who is Jesus Christ—the Christology question. For this reason, Ruether is on target when she asks the question, “Can a male Jesus help woman?” If it is primarily the male Jesus which has been used as the

criterion for oppressing women, can women look to this same male Jesus as the source of their salvation?" (Grant 1989, 78) The Jesus who is more similar to the oppressors than the oppressed cannot easily understand and listen to the struggle of the oppressed, much less be the source of their salvation. Grant calls for a dramatic change in the field of Christology, arriving at the conclusion that, "If women are indeed to be saved they must begin to re-articulate Christology starting from the questions which arise out of their experiences" (83).

One example of this idea being fleshed out amongst Christian communities would be the popularization of Hippie Jesus, a "long-haired rebel" and a "rebel with a cause" (Prothero 2003, 13)—and he was popular, supported by those who were called "Jesus Freaks" in the 1960s and 70s. Stanislaw Zagorski's 1971 *Time* cover illustration shows this particular brand of Jesus, complete with psychedelic colors. In a similar vein, Prothero comments that Hippie Jesus perhaps even takes drugs, much like his devotees. "Whether this Jesus was communing with his people or tripping on LSD is open to interpretation, but he was clearly experiencing an altered state of consciousness" (131). American interpretations of Jesus associated him with smoking weed surprisingly often, as will be shown in further examples. A white Jesus, a straight Jesus, an older, conservative, "un-cool" Jesus—because that Jesus is represented by oppressive figures in society, people push for a more relatable Jesus they can find salvation in. This gave birth to Hippie Jesus in the 1960s and in modern days, has birthed the Jesus of the Internet memes—both forms of Jesus that share ways of thinking with their imaginers and believers.

An article by Ed Stetzer on a Christian website criticizes this very tendency. "When we shape Jesus in our own image, we end up putting our failures and sinful brokenness on Jesus in a way that warps His holiness. Instead of seeing the glory of Jesus being a perfect human (the God man), we tend to cast Him as our kind of human," (Stetzer, 2012) writes Stetzer, a Christian author and speaker. He suggests that although people were made in God's image, modern-day people seem to want to make God in their image. Stetzer's understanding of this phenomenon is that instead of striving to reach Jesus' level, people attempt to give him flaws so that he is more human and accessible to them. This is fairly true, except that in many cases these "flaws" that distance Jesus from people are attributes that are part of their identity and a source of social struggle, such as race or sexual orientation. As a way of looking deeper into the

different faces of Jesus today, three of these “flaws” or identities traditionally incompatible with Jesus and Christianity can be studied in depth.

Sexual orientation or gender identity is often cause of great tension and suffering when paired with a Christian identity, as many believe that Christianity teaches and condones only traditional gender roles and identities. Pieces such as Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* and Jo Clifford’s *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven* push against this idea and attempt to create a space within the Christian communities for LGBT people by offering a presentation of Jesus as queer. Performances such as Ray Navarro’s dressing up as Jesus during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s or the Youtube phenomenon Jesus Christ showing up to Long Beach Pride Parade perhaps do not go as far, but still attempt to create a new illustration of Jesus that is closer to queer people than the heterosexual cis Jesus traditionally imagined.

Terrence McNally is a famous American playwright and the winner of a Tony award. His passion play *Corpus Christi*—meaning “body of Christ” and presumably the Texas city in which the play is located—was faced with much hate for its depiction of Jesus and his disciples as gay men. Asked in an interview about his writing of the play, McNally said that, “The story of Christ—I just wanted to tell it again and I wanted to tell in terms that made it accessible and understandable and realer to me.” He also says that, “If I’m writing a play to show that I am as made in God’s image as the next person, this casting says we all are—me, women, young, old, very many different colors--are also made in God’s image.” Stetzer’s criticizing the egg-chicken paradox treatment of the reimagined Jesus is especially significant in this regard, and McNally seems to be saying that perhaps making God’s image in one’s image is the start to reclaiming the statement that one is made in God’s image.

Jo Clifford’s play *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*, stars a transgender female Jesus as its main and only character. Clifford states that, “To put on this play is like an act of resistance, it’s a resistance to prejudice, it’s a resistance to closed minds, and it’s a resistance to all those people that call themselves Christians but use their Christianity as a cloak for their own prejudice” (“The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven”, 2:18). Having also played the part of Jesus in her play and a transgender woman herself, Clifford says that her play is very important to her in representing a place for her in Christianity. She also talks about what Jesus would say or do, stating her belief that Jesus would not

approve of the discriminatory words and harassment present in the world. Here Clifford calls into question the morality of Jesus and whether he would condone discriminating against queer people—because he would not, she says, he is close to her and other people who identify as transgender like her.

Ray Navarro, an artist and activist during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, would dress up as Jesus Christ—complete with robes and crown of thorns—and go to rallies and protests. Jesus Christ on Youtube, also known as “SoCal Christ”, has garnered a million subscribers and much interest on the Internet. Recently he posted a video in which he went to the Long Beach Pride Parade in his Jesus Christ garb plus a rainbow flag draped across his shoulders. These depictions and representations of Jesus, while they may not explicitly take the minority identity upon themselves, do ally themselves as a plausible savior and lord of the people within the parade. It is also especially meaningful that Jesus is present in situations in which there is a rebellion and a taking-back of the streets by those who have been oppressed, their oppression having been enacted by those who imagined Jesus to be one of themselves. Yet this time Jesus’s parade consists of homosexual and non-binary people instead of the men and women traditionally accepted by the Christian community.

Race has been a particularly important player in the building-up to what the U.S. is today, as it played, plays, and will continue to play a huge role in the identities, conflicts, and movements that made up American society. As such, it is interesting to see how people who have been discriminated against for reasons due to racial identity attempt to reclaim Jesus as their own lord. Unlike the sentiment towards a queer Jesus, the sentiment towards a person of color Jesus is warmer and more accepting, especially as the fact that Jesus of Nazareth lived in Israel is not highly contested. This essay focuses more on African-American representations of Jesus for two reasons. Firstly, due to America’s history of slavery, it is the identity that has most often been discriminated against by the American majority. Secondly, the idea of Black Jesus is less historically and more personally inspired than that of a Middle Eastern Jesus, and thus will hopefully provide more insight into how Jesus is interpreted.

Famalam, a satirical comedy show on BBC Three, ran a comedy skit called *There Is No White Jesus*. The synopsis is as follows: a white man is praying in a church and desperately asks for Jesus to help him. A black Jesus with dreadlocks approaches him, accompanied by holy organ music which is cut off when the man asks Jesus who he is. The man reveals that he was expecting a Jesus resembling the

images—of blonde-haired, blue-eyed white Jesus—on the walls of the church, and their conversation is continued in the exchange below.

“Black Jesus: You thought I’d be white.

White man: Kind of, yeah.

Jesus: Look, I don’t know what to tell you. I was born in the Middle East two thousand years ago, the Bible’s very clear about that. Should be pretty obvious that I don’t have blonde hair and blue eyes... Plus, have you heard my story? I was arrested by a mob of angry government officials and beaten for a crime I didn’t commit. That shit doesn’t happen to white people.

Man: And there was some confusion over who your father was.

Jesus: Okay, that’s just racist.” (“There Is No White Jesus”, 1:58)

The Famalam skit calls attention to the historical aspect of Jesus, but at the same time it also inserts Jesus into the same situation that black people in America face today. He is subject to police brutality and crude jokes based on racial stereotypes. This Jesus has experienced the same discrimination and pain of the people who look to him and is thus differentiated from Heyward and Grant’s group of Christian men who have defined Jesus—so it only makes sense that the British white man in the skit is not able to connect to Black Jesus and get help from him.

Venita Blackburn’s short story *Black Jesus* centers around the protagonist and her relationship with the image of a black Jesus on her Nana’s wall. The following is a quote from the story: “She told me Jesus had copper skin and hair of wool, which sounds a lot like my uncle Sheldon. I confessed my reason for kissing Nana’s Jesus... Kissing that photo meant kissing the best of all men because the best of all men is the one very carefully imagined.” (Blackburn 2017, 17-18) This resource is meaningful in that it offers a world in which the default image of Jesus is not the traditional Anglo-Saxon image—and this allows the audience to see how people can relate to him when they see him as innately different.

The American sitcom *Black Jesus* perhaps takes this to the maximum, creating a Jesus so human and relatable that in many ways he is more flawed than the average viewer. Located in Compton, California, Black Jesus walks around all day with his long cloak and his “homies,” smoking weed, drinking, barbecuing, and turning down requests to grant financial miracles. Black Jesus faces problems such as homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, and racism, all exacerbated by his status as a black man

in a ghetto without a proper home or background. Much like the Black Jesus from the Famalam skit, he is a Jesus who shares the struggles and pains of his believers. Additionally, Black Jesus's questionable habits and undeniable "coolness" also draws connections to the idea of Cool Jesus discussed further below.

In the STARZ TV show *American Gods*, based on a novel of the same name by popular author Neil Gaiman, there appears at one point a whole house of Jesuses celebrating Easter together. With a great variety including those Jesuses such as Asian Jesus, Latino Jesus, Black Jesus, Anglo-Saxon Jesus, even Black Albino Jesus, the show's producers seem to have visualized the idea that there is a Jesus for every believing community, imagined in their own respective images. For Queer Jesus, their representation seems important merely in its existence. For Black Jesus, he is a representation of the struggles that African-Americans have faced within their own country, a critique and an attack on society.

This last category of "Cool Jesus" is not as straightforward as the first two, but is extremely important nonetheless. For many youths Jesus is associated with authority and age, with conservatism, tradition, and uptight morals. The fact that youth pastors exist specifically to preside over young Christians is telling of the tension and incompatibility between the Christian church and youth. It is perhaps due to a certain generational gap, or something to do with media and the Internet, or maybe even a collective personality trait such as "baby boomer," "millennial," or "Gen Z." Thus in this hyper-modernized world of the Internet and instantaneous communication is born "cool" Jesus, also known as "meme Jesus," "homeboy Jesus," or even "dank Jesus." In essence, this Jesus is the casual, relatable, imperfect Jesus depicted in Internet humor, a far cry from and a direct assault on the Jesus promoted in traditional religious settings.

The medium for Cool Jesus is less mainstream; less of a speaker or savior and more of a young college student scrolling through social media. On websites such as Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Youtube, and more, Cool Jesus is spread through "memes," humorous content—usually images, videos, or text—circulated rapidly amongst Internet users. In these depictions, Jesus seems far more accessible for the young adults who are posting these images and "memes". He uses profanity, takes advantage of his ability to turn water into wine, and interacts with modern things such as Vine, Star Wars, Calculus, and Facebook. Cool Jesus is cool in that he is exceedingly relatable, especially in that his morals are maybe not completely pristine, yet still manages to be an incredibly likable person. Youtube

Jesus Christ and Compton Black Jesus from the above examples could also be defined as examples of Cool Jesus.

Common themes include specific stories from the Bible, possibly ones that the creator of the memes grew up learning about. For example, there are many memes humorously emphasizing that Jesus had the ability to turn water into wine, and many that hint at him abusing that particular ability to the extreme. For example:

“Bartender: I’m cutting you off. only water from now on

Jesus: [sarcastically] oh no”

Another recurring story is that related to Communion, that bread is Jesus’s body and wine is his blood. The following meme utilizes that story to make a linguistic joke while also creating an image of Jesus who gets drunk, do silly things when drunk, and also find the humor in said joke.

“[last supper]

drunk jesus: *swinging baguette wildly* You want a piece of me?!”

Some depictions of Jesus are more negative. For example, one thread in Reddit was that of depicting Jesus as a casual, noncommittal male figure—not a completely condemnable figure but a mere annoyance of sorts, using the linguistic jokes related to the connotations of “loving Jesus” and of “Jesus loves you.” Some of the comments talked about Jesus Chad—a modern, internet bastardization of Jesus Christ. Other depictions are political, like that of Jesus disliking Trump. Yet others are more personal, like one joke about how Jesus’s true miracle was having twelve close friends in his thirties, or the one about how someone finds it relatable that Jesus hid in a dark cave for three days after people were mean to him.

Not only do these memes create a more relatable, human Jesus, but these memes change the vocabulary of Christianity. They take the language of Jesus Christ, originally full of rules and implications of the holy, and merge it with the language they use for humor and silly jokes. None of this is done with malcontent, and rather this seems to make the figure of Jesus more endearing to the consumers of these memes, and the idea of Christianity more attractive.

“Me: hey wanna join my religion?

Friend: what’s your religion

Me:*plays this video*

Friend: I'm interested"

The above is a common comment found in many of Youtube Jesus Christ's videos. Despite all the jokes and lighthearted blasphemy that internet Jesus memes engage in, they showcase a real appreciation for this form of Jesus—alongside whom, perhaps, they do not feel as incompatible with the idea of Christianity.

The continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of Jesus has been conducted over the last two thousand years. Queer Jesus, Black Jesus, and Cool Jesus are simply three of the manifestations of Jesus that have been born in modern American society, in response to its people and their values. For the most part, the adaptable of Jesus into a minority or oppressed identity is a matter of necessity—how is the oppressed supposed to seek salvation from a Jesus who is created by the oppressors? It is also an expression of rebellion and taking-back; a rightful claiming of a figure who is said to have embraced all equally. It is lastly an effort to change Christianity as a religion: to create, through the existence of a Jesus with a certain identity, a place for people with that identity.

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