"If Jesus lived today, he would smell like smoke": Contemporary Visions of Jesus Christ in Philip Pullman's Novel and Tumblr Blogs[1]

DANIJELA PETKOVIĆ*

Abstract: Influenced by critical race theory and drawing on historical Jesus scholarship, the paper discusses the portrayals of Jesus Christ in Philip Pullman's novel *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), and the poems written by young, mainly anonymous, poets found online on the social media platform Tumblr. The interpretation of Pullman's novel and the selected poems is placed within the context of past and current struggles over the historicity, human/divine status, and politics of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Christianity; Jesus Christ; Phillip Pullman; *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*; Tumblr

Introduction

This paper discusses the representations of Jesus Christ in Philip Pullman's 2010 novel *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, and the selected poems written by young, anonymous poets on the US-centric social media platform Tumblr, as highly polemical and politicised deviations from the dominant narratives and images of this figure in Western culture. Specifically, some of these representations, just like the discussion of them in this paper, are informed by contemporary critical race theory: the Tumblr poets in particular demonstrate intense racial awareness and tend to rewrite Jesus as a person of colour exposed to the systemic racism and militarised police of the modern-day USA. Pullman, conversely, is less interested in race; his Jesus is an ordinary human being with an extraordinary passion for social justice, and is weaponised as such for Pullman's trademark criticism of the Christian Church as an institution. The main argument in the paper is that by rewriting Jesus

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* Danijela Petković, University of Niš, Serbia, danijela.petkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

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against the dominant Western narratives and representations, both the Tumblr poets and Philip Pullman look back on, and validate, the historical Jesus/Jesus from the gospels, and participate in the long tradition of politically charged (re) interpretations, (re)visions, and (re)creations of Jesus Christ. Before examining Pullman's and the Tumblr poets' specific visions, therefore, it is necessary to give a few examples of some of the ways in which Jesus has been imagined and interpreted so far. The examples, mainly drawn from historical Jesus scholarship, provide support for the central argument of the paper, as well as additional contextual illumination for the texts under discussion.

The struggle over the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ has in fact been continuous since the first century AD, when, according to Marcus J. Borg, the gospels were written (Borg 2008: 25). At the 2016 Women of the World Poetry Slam, an annual competition, which was held in New York that year, a young African-American slam poet Crystal Valentine recited her poetic response to Megyn Kelly's notorious 2013 statement that Jesus Christ and Santa Claus were both white men (Blay 2016). Valentine's poem bears the title "And the News Reporter Says Jesus Is White"; the poet exposes Kelly's inanity as white privilege, and expresses belief in the historicity of Jesus Christ, which is being whitewashed: "So sure of herself/Of her privilege/Her ability to change history/Rewrite bodies to make them look like her" (ibid.). The poem then offers the following portrait of Jesus Christ: "How can she say Jesus was a white man when he died the blackest way possible? With his hands up. His mother watching, crying" (ibid.). In 2016, as in 2024, the imagery is unambiguous: in Valentine's rendition, Jesus Christ appears as the racialised victim of brutal state power; the parallels with the militarised police of the contemporary USA and their lethal encounters with people of colour are both obvious and deliberate. Far from the beloved son of God who has triumphed over death and now "sits on God's right hand", and very far from the "Jeezus" of the American Christian Right, in Valentine's poem Jesus Christ is the emblem of the persecuted, the victimised, and the murdered in the contemporary US. And he is empathically not white. A similar portrait is found in a succinct summary on Tumblr stating "Your Jesus was a 33-year-old unarmed man of color wrongfully charged, executed publicly by an unjust militarized state". Again, the intended parallels with the present-day racial issues in the USA are impossible to miss, just like the fact that the author is a person of colour addressing white Christians specifically, reminding them that their religion originally told a story similar to those that now appear in the news with alarming regularity. In a similar vein, Tumblr user *lauralot89* gives a rendition that stresses Jesus' race and social marginalisation in an informal language, which is not to be mistaken for ignorance of both the New Testament and history:

> Jesus Christ was a brown Jew in the Middle East, conceived out of wedlock in an arguably interracial if not interspecies (deity and human) relationship, raised by his mother and stepfather in place of his absent father. He may not have had a Y chromosome. He spent his early youth as a refugee in Egypt, where his family no doubt survived initially on handouts from the wealthy.... He later returned with his parents to their occupied homeland and lived in poverty.... He was put to death by the occupying government because he was a political radical.

Intense racial consciousness surrounding the figure of Jesus, however, is not reserved for the politically engaged 21st century social media users. The work of Nazi scholars such as Walter Grundmann during the Second World War exemplifies the whitewashing of Jesus, whose echoes are found in Kelly's 2013 statement. Grundman, a professor of New Testament at the University of Jena, worked with his associates in the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life, tirelessly producing publications that "proclaimed an Aryan Jesus fully divorced from Judaism not only in terms of practice and ideology but also by ethnicity". The publications were "widely disseminated in Europe" as an inextricable part of Nazi Germany's war efforts (Mitchell and Young 2008: 8–9). Moving further into the past, one encounters different, less racially conscious but still political, battles over the nature of Jesus. The reshaping of this figure throughout the 18th and the 19th centuries as exemplified by the work of Reimarus, Renan, Holtzman, Harnack and Strauss proceeds from the (post-)Enlightenment tensions between faith and science. In the 18th century, Reimarus studied the gospels, and concluded that "classic Christian doctrines, such as the Atonement and the Trinity, were not revealed by Jesus, and that Jesus was a Jew who upheld the Law, did not preach to the Gentiles, and did not institute baptism or eucharist" (Mitchell and Young 2008: 15–16). In the 18th century, such views could be made public only posthumously. Over the following century, the dominant scientific, interrogating attitude was increasingly applied to the Bible, resulting in David Friedrich Strauss's notorious *Das Leben Jesu*, translated by George Eliot in 1846 as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. In this work, Strauss, more forcefully, denied both the historical value of the gospels, and their supernatural assertions. In response, Ernest Renan, Oskar Holtzman and Adolf Harnack produced their "biographies", the so-called "liberal lives of Jesus" which "tried to present a personality capable of inspiring the legendary gospel material", but in doing so "abstracted [Jesus] from first-century Jewish society", (Mitchell and Young 2008: 17), much like Grundmann and his followers. Needless to say, each of these versions – as any version of Jesus, actually – was "dependent on select citations from the gospels" (Levine et al. 2006: 6). These revisions and

reinterpretations of Jesus Christ were the products of their own cultural and political context characterised by the struggle for hegemony between religion and science, and, as evidenced by Aryan Jesus, they were openly utilised in the Nazi warfare. They were also political in the sense that they all went against the officially sanctioned interpretations.

Yet the officially sanctioned interpretations themselves are heavily implicated in the political struggle for power: the early history of the Christian Church, the first four centuries of it in particular, is the history of the attempts "to defeat alternative versions of Christianity" (Woodhead 2005: 54), such as Jewish Christianity and the gnostics, whose views are expressed in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Mary, and the scrolls of Nag Hammadi. As Linda Woodhead explains, these early versions of Christianity, just like the official Christian doctrine and the 21st century visions under discussion here, revolved around differing interpretations of Jesus Christ, looking at his human and/or divine status in particular. Jewish Christians, being strictly monotheistic, proposed adoptionism, i.e., the idea that Jesus was an extraordinary human adopted by God. The gnostics, conversely, saw "Jesus as a teacher who sought not to humble but to exalt his followers" (Woodhead 2005: 14–19). Here it is worth calling attention to the fact that even the canonical gospels are not unified in their visions of Jesus Christ, representing him variously and contradictorily as "as a Jewish reformer" and "the antinomian who 'declared all foods clean' and dismissed Temple and Torah as antiquated and irrelevant"; "the Cynic-like philosopher [who] teaches a subversive wisdom" and "the apocalyptic eschatological proclaimer". Other portraits of Jesus found in the gospels include "Jesus the Rabbi", "Jesus the universalist", "Jesus the nationalist"; "Jesus the magician [who] uses spells and incantations to facilitate cures"; "Jesus the social reformer"; "Jesus the celibate", "Jesus the affirmer of family values", "Jesus the mystic", "Jesus the pacifist"; "Jesus the nonviolent resister", and "Jesus the revolutionary [who] has a Zealot in his entourage and advises followers to buy swords" (Levine 2006: 12–13)[2]. It was in the fourth century that the Church authorities, by that time already in cohort with secular leaders – Eusebius of Caesaria, for instance, named the emperor Constantine "the deputy of Christ" (Woodhead 2005: 53) – made one interpretation of Jesus the official one, with the considerable help of state

[2] Nor has the modern scientific quest for historical Jesus resulted in any unitary vision: "So the quest at the turn of the millennium is characterized by the production of different 'types' of figure which more or less plausibly capture the Jesus of history: the Jewish 'holy man', the rabbi, the Pharisee, the Galilean peasant, the Cynic philosopher, the social revolutionary, the sage, the seer, the prophet of the end-time, the true Messiah" (Mitchell and Young 2008: 22–23).

power. In 325 Constantine called a council at Nicaea with the explicit goal of having bishops and other learned men anathemise Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria in Egypt, who "proposed that Jesus should be understood neither as God nor man, but as a quasi-divine being whose status hovered somewhere between the two. He argued that Jesus was created by the Father and that there was therefore a time 'when he was not'. Consequently, the Son must be of lesser status than the Father" (Woodhead 2005: 54). The presbyter's views were growing popular, but the church authorities realised that they undermined the very basis of the church.

> If Jesus were not truly God and truly human, he would not be able to assume human nature and save it by bringing it within the scope of divinity. Christianity would be a second-rate religion that put human beings in touch not with the exclusive mediator between God and man, but with a middle-ranking deity. Its sacraments, priesthood, and church would lose power as a result.... The Creed of Nicaea made sure that such loss of power could never take place: Arius was anathemized, and the creed proclaimed that Jesus was 'homoousios': from the Greek, of one (homo) substance (ousios) with the Father. In other words, Jesus shared the very essence of divinity. (Woodhead 2005: 54–55)

It is only from the fourth century onwards, therefore, that "[a]t the heart of the Christian cult lay worship of the Son of God, who pre-existed with God, was incarnate in Jesus, is risen from the dead, and now lives and reigns with the Father in glory" (Mitchell and Young 2008: 12); the distinctive characteristic of this dominant version of Christianity and Jesus, moreover, is "an orientation towards higher power" (Woodhead 2005: 2), which proved suitable for the secular authorities as well. The summary also makes it quite clear that Church Christianity's portrayal of Jesus relies much less on his teaching, as written (down) in the gospels, and more on the "crucifixion-resurrection narrative" (Brintnall 2011: 62). The "crucifixion-resurrection narrative" proved multiply useful to the political ambitions of the rising Christian Church, as it strengthened the existing oppressive systems, such as monarchy and patriarchy: "the maleness of Jesus has been used to establish the male as God ... the suffering of Jesus has been relied on to admonish oppressed people to suffer in silence" (ibid.). The council at Nicaea thus illustrates not only that the conflict between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith", familiar to any scholar of Christianity, has existed from the very beginning of the Christian Church as an institution, but also that the reimagining of Jesus Christ to suit specific political goals – from the radical exalting of all creation to the radical subduing of believers, male and female – is as old as Christianity itself. On the subject of the "Christ of faith", moreover, it should be emphasised that the

Christian Church was based not (only) on the gospels, but on Paul's *Epistles*, and on the doctrines of St Augustine such as original sin, all of which were invested in instilling fear, discipline, and obedience rather than reinforcing Jesus' message of social justice, compassion, and radically inclusive love. In fact, Paul's *Epistles*' "lack of interest in the life and teaching of Jesus is one of the great conundrums of early Christianity" (Mitchell and Young 2008: 31). As Frances M. Young puts it, "it is entirely possible that, during the second century, developing Christianity could have lost its moorings in the Jesus of history, as over the centuries it did lose its anchorage in Judaism" (ibid. 33). Deliberate distancing from the Jesus of history might explain why early Church Christianity refrained from "questioning the patriarchal nature of the family, masculine domination in general, or the slave-based economy of the Roman Empire" (Woodhead 2005: 51). With Jesus specifically, Young continues, "[t]here were apparently two ways in which the significance of the fleshly historical person of Jesus was downplayed. The first involved separating the heavenly being from the earthly body" (Mitchell and Young 2008: 33); the second was the "even more radical denial" of Docetists, who claimed that Jesus only seemed human but was never human, only divine (ibid.). Docetism thus goes against the Nicene Creed itself, which proclaims Jesus "very man and very God".

Marcus J. Borg, one of the world's greatest authorities on historical Jesus, makes a useful distinction between a "pre-Easter" and "post-Easter" Jesus – the difference between the historical person that Jesus is speculated to have been and the incarnation of God he would become in the official "crucifixion-resurrection narrative":

> [T]he pre-Easter Jesus was a Jewish mystic, healer, wisdom teacher, and prophet of the kingdom of God; he proclaimed the immediacy of access to God and the kingdom of God; he challenged the domination system, was executed by the authorities, and then vindicated by God. Easter is the beginning of the post-Easter Jesus. In the decades after Easter his followers spoke of Jesus and his significance with the most exalted language they knew: Son of God, Messiah Lord, Light of the World, Bread of Life, and so forth. This language is the community's testimony to him. (Borg 2008: 303)

Much like the young poets or Philip Pullman, Borg, moreover, explicitly fleshes out Jesus, in direct opposition to the Docetists:

> Before his death, they [Jesus' disciples] knew him as a finite and mortal human being. He was a flesh-and-blood, corpuscular and protoplasmic Galilean Jew; he weighed around 110 pounds and was a bit over five feet tall; he had to eat and sleep; he was born and he died. This Jesus, the pre-Easter Jesus, is a figure of

> the past, dead and gone, nowhere anymore. This does not deny Easter, but simply recognizes that Easter does not mean that the flesh-and-blood Jesus who weighs 110 pounds is still alive somewhere. (Borg 2008: 44)

As this brief and incomplete outline demonstrates, revisions of Jesus, in terms of his historicity, physicality, and especially his human and/or divine nature, have a long tradition, the origins of which coincide with the establishment of Christianity as an organised religion and its implication in the worldly struggles for power. It must not be forgotten that the Christian Church effectively colonised Europe in the Middle Ages, and then helped colonise the world. In this context, it is also clear that any act of reclaiming, reimagining, and reinterpreting Jesus Christ is bound to be political because it takes place in the world where Christianity centres on a very specific version of Jesus Christ. Thus, as Marcus Borg insists, "how we tell the story of Jesus matters crucially" (Borg 2008: 6).

"This is a story": *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*

Philip Pullman's 2010 novel tells the story of Jesus in such a way that it deepens the already outlined dichotomy between "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith" to the degree that Jesus Christ is split into a pair of twins. Specifically, Pullman proposes that Mary gave birth to two boys in Bethlehem: strong and healthy Jesus, and sickly, puny Christ. It is Christ who becomes his mother's favourite, Christ who is a diligent student of religion, and Christ who is seduced by an unidentified stranger (most likely Satan) into creating a Church based not on Jesus' teaching and passion for social justice, but on his death and (staged) resurrection. The novel retells Luke's gospel specifically, but it deviates in several significant details from it, including the identity of Jesus' betrayer. Instead of Judas, here it is Christ who betrays Jesus, twice. First, Christ betrays his brother to the Romans; second, the institution to the creation of which Christ contributes by carefully writing down, editing, censoring and downright inventing Jesus' words and deeds (which become "miracles"), betrays Jesus' teaching. Eventually, Christ understands the impact of the Church he helps come into being: "Under its authority, Jesus will be distorted and lied about and compromised and betrayed over and over again" (Pullman 2010: 244). Hence, in Pullman's version of the Garden at Gethsemane, Jesus is tormented not by the possibility of his own death, but by the future potential of the Church for terror. In the night before he is arrested, Pullman's Jesus thus prays to God that "any church set up in your name should remain poor, and powerless, and modest. That it should wield no authority except that of love. That it should

never cast anyone out. That it should own no property and make no laws. That it should not condemn, but only forgive" (Pullman 2010: 199).

As already stated, Pullman relies on the Gospel of Luke for his novel. It is worth remembering that all gospels "proclaim Jesus", but they each proclaim a different one: Luke emphasises Jesus as "the champion of the poor" (Levine et al. 2006: 11). Canonically, Jesus "the champion of the poor", or Jesus "the social reformer", is sharply against the love of wealth, and socio-economic inequality; he promotes social justice and elevates the lowest of the low, including children. It is these aspects of Jesus' teaching that are emphasised in the novel, as well as the deeply anti-Christian significance of the physical world and earthly life. One of the best illustrations is Pullman's alternative temptation in the desert. In the canon, when Jesus goes to the desert to fast for forty days, he is tempted by the Devil to turn stones into loaves of bread, i.e., to use his status as the Son of God to his own advantage, which Jesus refuses, famously quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 ("man lives not on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"). In the novel, it is Christ who comes to tempt his twin, and Jesus reproaches him for not bringing any bread. Pullman thus highlights mutual help and solidarity in this earthy life, not higher power and words coming from the mouth of God.

However, the most significant of Pullman's interventions is to be found in the way he deliberately undermines the crucifixion-resurrection narrative central to official Christian doctrine. The crucifixion itself, tellingly, is not described in much detail (it is covered on two and a half pages), as opposed to countless popular and graphic representations, especially from the fourteenth century onwards – from the paintings of Duccio and Fra Angelico, Andrea Mantegna, Botticelli, Tintoretto, Titian, Caravaggio to Francisco Romero Zafra's 2014 sculpture *Christ of the Sweet Death* – not to mention the Hollywood industry and Mel Gibson's notorious *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In this, Pullman remains dedicated to human Jesus and Jesus the social justice activist who dies a political and human death. His "resurrection", most provocatively, is staged by his twin Christ and the mysterious stranger, in order to start a religion. Pullman thus refuses to side with either of the two interpretations of Jesus' death: in the novel there is no hint of either "Christus Victor" or Jesus-as-penal-substitution, only a human being publicly executed for intersected political and personal interests. It is nonetheless important to distinguish between "Christus Victor" and penal substitution, or substitutionary atonement, as these differing takes on Christ's death further exemplify how political the interpretations of Jesus are, and how significant Pullman's choice is. "Christus Victor" appears in Gustaf Aulen's 1931 study bearing the same title; the author identifies this approach to Christ's death and resurrection as

the forgotten and suppressed one, "but whose suppression falsifies the whole perspective on resurrection" (Aulen 1970: 4). The approach is characterised by "the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself" (ibid.). As opposed to this hopeful reading of Christ's death which liberates the world from evil, the doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice, or Jesus Christ as penal substitution, sees Jesus as the sacrifice which is necessary for God's forgiveness. In this view, as Marcus Borg explains, "[w]e are all sinners. Nevertheless, God loves us. But God will not or cannot forgive us unless adequate atonement is made. Hence the necessity of Jesus's death.… This emphasis upon Jesus as substitutionary sacrifice leads to a vision of the Christian life as centred in sin, guilt, and forgiveness" (Borg 2008: 8).

It is against this immensely rich and influential tradition of Jesus as substitutionary sacrifice (very much alive in modern-day Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism) that Pullman polemically writes his own, historically accurate, version of the crucifixion, in which Jesus is a "political radical" who dies the death reserved for disobedient slaves. As for the miracle of resurrection, Jesus remains dead; it is his twin, Christ, who appears before Jesus' followers in a well-planned deception. Pullman represents it as yet another feat invested in the creation of the myth, and the establishment of the institution that will capitalise on it. Cowardly and intelligent, Christ finally recognises the tragedy of his choices, and attempts to justify himself: "without the story, there will be no church, and without the church, Jesus will be forgotten" (Pullman 2010: 245). But, Pullman concludes, it is precisely within the Church that Jesus is betrayed and his messages so altered that he is, in fact, forgotten.

"If Jesus lived today, he would smell like smoke": contemporary visions of Jesus on Tumblr

"Christ-forgetting country" is how Marcus J. Borg describes the USA in the twenty-first century (Borg 2008: 305). The portrayals of Jesus Christ found across Tumblr have to be read against the context of the rising power and influence of the American Christian Right and the attending lack of any knowledge of the canonical (let alone historical) Jesus Christ among the 200 million American Christians. "Although eight in ten Americans say they are Christians, only four in ten know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and only half could name the four gospels" (Schaffer 2011: 33). This ignorance of the canon is inseparable from the Christian Right as "the most

visible and vocal form of Christianity in America" (Borg 2008: 296). Doris Buss and Didi Herman define Christian Right as

> [...] a broad range of American organizations that have tended to form coalitions, both domestic and international, around an orthodox Christian vision and a defence of the traditional nuclear family formation, referred to by the CR as the 'natural family' ... The 'natural family' agenda also encompasses a range of related issues, such as the welfare state, environmentalism, and development and foreign aid. (Buss and Herman 2003: xviii)[3]

The coalitions find their material expression in the aptly named "mega-churches"; these gathering places and huge media presence allow them to spread their unique version of Christianity, which is "pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American" (Borg 2008: 299). In other words, as Alex R. Shaffer explains, the Christian Right disseminates "a triumphalist and self-congratulatory 'God-is-on-our-side' rhetoric that sanctified the American social order" (Shaffer 2011: 28), i.e., the growing gap between the rich and the poor, racial and international conflicts, and the intolerance of difference, primarily non-normative sexual orientations.

As expected, the Christian Right creates its own version of Jesus. Significantly, its leaders rely almost exclusively on the Revelation and on the Gospel of John for their portraits of Jesus. The Gospel of John appears after the synoptic gospels and while its historicity was explicitly denied by the aforementioned Adolf Harnak in the nineteenth century, it was as early as the second century that it was recognised as "the spiritual gospel" i.e., the gospel removed from historical Jesus (Borg 2008: 34). The common consensus in Christian scholarship, as Borg explains, is that John depicts the least human and the most divine Jesus; this gospel, like St. Paul's Epistles, is not interested in Jesus' birth and early life, and it is the only gospel in which Jesus proclaims himself the Messiah and the Son of God ("The Father and I are one"). Moreover, the so-called "I" statements – "I am the light of the world", "I am the bread of life", "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" – are found only in John, pointing thus to a very different Jesus than the one found in Mark, Matthew and Luke (ibid.). As for the Revelation, the difference is even more striking. In his study of the American Christian Right, Chris Hedges reports a sermon by a pastor who is "heard regularly on 600 Christian radio outlets"

[3] It is worth remembering that "the New Testament is in fact anti-family; it constructs the Jesus movement as an alternative community that leaves biological family behind.... Yet, despite the biblical failure to justify the 'natural family' and its purposes, and indeed Jesus's words, which appear to condemn it, conservative Christians continue to refer to it as 'God- given', time and time again" (Buss and Herman 2003: 4).

(Hedges 2008: 140). The pastor chooses to disseminate this portrait of Jesus Christ from the Revelation:

> His eyes are like a flame of fire. Out of his mouth goes a sharp sword, and with it he can strike the nations. He treads the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of the almighty God, and on his robe and on his thigh a name is written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus commands all men everywhere to come to the knowledge of Him. (ibid.)

The visual representations follow this cue as well: "Images of Jesus often show Him with thick muscles, clutching a sword" (Hedges 2008: 79).

It is against this background that young poets create their visions and "headcanons" of Jesus Christ. As opposed to Pullman's insistence on Jesus as a good man but above all only a man, some of these authors do not question the divinity of Jesus Christ. Quite the opposite, they claim that divinity for a Black Jesus, a marginalised Jesus, a homeless Jesus, as a weapon of their social justice activism. Seemingly deviating from the official representations, some of the poems' portrayals of Jesus, moreover, are much closer to the gospels, and even Paul, than the Jesus of the Christian Right. And even when a poet relies on the Gospel of John explicitly preferred by the Christian Right, the vision of Jesus is still in keeping with the one from the synoptic gospels, a political revolutionary preaching and practising radically inclusive love.

A poem by Tumblr user *blessedarethebinarybreakers*, for instance, describes Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, which appears only in John; the synoptic gospels do not mention it. The poem bears the title "The Washing of Feet", and it affirms a Pauline, anti-Arian view of Christ: Christ as the ordering principle of the universe, who was with God from the beginning. This is quite evident in the opening lines that draw attention to the incongruous physicality of this divine human: "These hands once cradled stars/In the throes of their birth pangs/From these lips once burst a Word/That expanded outward into a universe". The speaker then goes on to focus on Jesus' hands, which are "brown, calloused", "the hands of a shepherd, a carpenter" but also "a king, a God". The poem is written in the second person, addressing the unnamed disciple who observes the hands from his vantage point: "the hands that cradle your feet now, worship with oblation of water". The final two lines "Here is the Act that topples monarchies: the Universe's Ruler on his knees" allow Maundy to be interpreted in the traditional way, as Jesus humbling himself and performing the demeaning task out of love for his disciples. But there is, inevitably, a suggestion of both homoeroticism and the subversive power of love in relation to oppressive systems: radically inclusive love disrespectful of socially enforced divisions is, indeed, a political praxis that topples monarchies.

The line quoted in the title of this article comes from the poem "Love", which opens with a simple statement: "If Jesus lived today, he would smell like smoke". The author, Tumblr user *freshairandspearmint*, then clarifies, "Not because he would partake in it himself, but because he would go out of his way to go to where the smokers were". Reimagining, just like Philip Pullman, the Jesus of Luke, the author has Jesus visiting bars, socialising with alcoholics, heavy smokers, mentally ill and suicidal people – "He'd know the feel of gauze beneath his fingers as he wrapped it around a friend's bleeding wrist" – always offering his company, his compassion, and, having experienced homelessness himself, his spare bedroom. Money, love, and encouragement are freely given by this Jesus, but it is equally important that he accepts insults, too, understanding that "sometimes a broken heart just needs to shout". The last lines in the poem repeat the opening, and solidify the vision of Jesus which, though easily found in the synoptic gospels, is practically alien to the contemporary American Christian Right: "If Jesus lived today, he would smell like smoke. Not because he approves or because he doesn't care, but because he knows that to love isn't just being pleasant to other people and giving them a smile, it's crawling into the trenches with them".

S. T. Gibson's "The Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist" offers a vision of Jesus as "a poor boy living in the projects", a phrase that allows for clear, though unspoken, racial identification. In the twenty-first century, St. John the Baptist lives in a trailer, and Jesus is his "baby cousin" who arrives one day, having driven sixteen hours, to ask John to baptise him, over a bottle of elderflower wine. The river is the American one, located in the Deep South, but the scene is straight from the New Testament:

> As the sunlight split the horizon, John lowered Jesus into the Chattahoochee, and when the boy broke back up through the water, there was the deafening rush of the flurry of wings … John could faintly make out a voice.
>
> This is my son, with whom I am well pleased.

In the last part the focalisation is through Jesus, who, it is revealed, has known from the day he was born the path he would take as God's son: "He would die, he knew that too, but how could that be a reason to stop? No, it just meant he had to make it good". Again, this revision is more a return to the gospels in opposition to the Christian Right, than a radical deviation from the canon, despite the unmistakably modern, American setting.

In the poem "Intro to the gospels" by the Tumblr user *labadbourgeoisie* the meaning of "making it good" is explicitly reimagined as a violent conflict with the police during one of the many Black Lives Matter protests. "The savior is a mixed child from nowhere/With kinky curl hair and skin brown*black*" [italics

in the original]. Echoing "Jesus the revolutionary [who] has a Zealot in his entourage and advises followers to buy swords" (Levine 2006: 13), "He's got his fellow soldiers at his side, leading a soldier's cry/With posters and signs pleading for Black Lives". Not surprisingly, "the savior" ends up in the familiar manner:

> His brother don't get 30 pieces of silver,
> But Brother got stacks of green,
> And he gets a round of bullets.

Placing modern Jesus within the context of racialised capitalism maintained by police brutality, the poem further humanises "the savior" by showing him struggle with being chosen. Lacking the confidence exhibited in "The Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist", this Jesus harkens back to the one agonising over his near-future death in the Garden at Gethsemane: "He's got a holy name, and a holy story. He knows this. (*He hates this*)" (italics in the original). Because holiness, here defined as a very physical struggle for justice in a deeply unjust world, is inevitably achieved through violence, pain, and death (his own and others'), this saviour's struggling with it is both deeply human and understandable.

Conclusion

Positioning themselves against either the officially sanctioned, or popular representations of Jesus Christ, and contributing to the centuries of debate on his very nature and historicity, the contemporary portrayals created by Phillip Pullman and Tumblr poets are primarily focused on Jesus' human life. In Pullman's rewriting of the major gospel episodes, Jesus-as-a-human-being is weaponised against Pullman's frequent target, the Christian Church; in the poems written by the Tumblr authors, Jesus Christ emerges mostly as a Black or mixed-race social justice activist, rather than the ubiquitous white body on the cross. What makes Pullman's and the Tumblr poets' portrayals remarkable and politically charged is their focus on, or knowledge of, the historical context of Jesus' life and death (poverty, Roman occupation, corrupt local authorities) and the parallels that they implicitly, or explicitly, draw with the current socio-political climate in the West, marked by increasing injustice and racial conflicts. Proceeding, like all the others, from a specific cultural and political context, Pullman's and the young poets' visions of Jesus Christ provide a humanistic alternative to the dominant Christian portrayals and discourses, and, arguably, help renew the relevance of Jesus' teaching and praxis in our current moment of multiple crises.

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