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Mary Magdalene and the Dangers of White Feminism[1]

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This essay investigates the ways in which Mary Magdalene is characterised in line with white feminism, and as such, the ways in which this white Mary is weaponised against Jews and Black people. Rafia Zakaria defines white feminism in this way:

> A white feminist is someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and all of feminists. You do not have to be white to be a white feminist. […T]o be a white feminist you simply have to be a person who accepts the benefits conferred by white supremacy at the expense of people of color, while claiming to support gender equality and solidarity with 'all' women.[2]

Two scenes best illustrate this pernicious problem with the film: an introductory scene in which a patriarchal Judaism is juxtaposed with a radically inclusive Jesus, and a scene towards the end in which Mary and Peter's animosity comes to a head. In these scenes in particular, the film uses white women's limited solidarity with non-white and non-Christian people, and the ways that white women benefit from white supremacy in order to construct its rhetoric about Mary's inclusion within Jesus's inner circle and her exclusion from the Jesus movement after his death.

Mary Magdalene has been praised for its focus on one of Jesus' most overlooked followers. But the film, and its release just prior to the Easter season, is problematic for its subtly negative depiction of Jewishness.[3] *Mary Magdalene* dodges many of the anti-Jewish pitfalls of earlier Jesus films by avoiding the trial scenes before Pilate (where films sometimes include a furious Jewish mob lobbying an "innocent" Pilate for Jesus's death, e.g.) and Herod (whom Luke indicates as partially responsible for Christ's crucifixion, Luke 23:11). But it stigmatises Jews in less obvious ways that are nevertheless dangerous.

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[1] Portions of this essay originally appeared as Katie Edwards and Meredith Warren, 'Mary Magdalene is Yet Another Example of Hollywood Whitewashing', T*he Conversation*, 29 March 2018, https://theconversation.com/mary-magdalene-is-yet-another-example-of-hollywood-whitewashing-94134 and Meredith Warren and Katie Edwards, "Mary Magdalene – another Easter Jesus film that's bad news for Judaism," *The Conversation* 29 March 2018, https://theconversation.com/mary-magdalene-another-easter-jesus-film-thats-bad-news-for-judaism-94136. I am grateful to Katie Edwards for graciously allowing me to revise and rework our shared material.

[2] Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (Norton, 2021), author's preface.

[3] The respect I have for two of the film's consultants, Joan Taylor and Amy Jill Levine, along with their conscientious published works, leads me to believe that these subtler anti-Jewish features of the film were included without their knowledge.

The film also moves in a different direction from previous Jesus movies in its casting of Black actors.[4] In *Mary Magdalene* Peter, a hugely important figure in the history of the Church, and who is later claimed as the first pope, is played by BAFTA-winning actor, Chiwetel Ejiofor. While perhaps not as obviously problematic as casting the only Black actor in the role of Judas,[5] because of the antagonism consistently emphasized between Peter and Mary, as well as some directorial choices regarding accent, the film still portrays one of its only Black characters as a regressive, misogynist barrier to Mary's inclusion in the Jesus movement.

The 'Real' Mary Magdalene?

Since the film has been lauded as an "authentic" (and therefore feminist) retelling of Mary Magdalene's own story,[6] it's important to compare her depiction in the film with the historical Mary Magdalene reconstructed by scholars. Choices about Mary's casting, her age, and her character's relationship with her community and family, often deviate from scholarly findings about her likely identity; these deviations shed light on what the filmmakers deem significant to emphasise a feminist version of Mary Magdalene's story.

Mary in the film is depicted as hard-working, a valued member of her family. In an early scene she and another woman are pulling a pile of heavy nets, a regular task, and they remark disparagingly, later on in the film, that it would be nice to have the free time to be able to go and listen to prophets like Jesus all day, as Mary's brother seems to. Mary is also summoned to help with a difficult birth, and is praised by her family and the midwife for her role. Mary is young in the film, and has not yet married. She has very pale white skin and long black hair which is covered with a scarf in public places, though not always while in synagogue. Her father urges her to get married, and to become a mother, because he says this would please God and her deceased mother.

She meets Jesus when he is brought to her home to 'heal' her, after she declines to get married to Ephraim (or indeed, to anyone). Calling her a stain on her mother's memory, her brother is furious that Mary rejects his and their father's desire for Mary to submit to normative women's roles. From Jesus's denial of her family's assessment that she has demons and from his arrival in Mary's life resulting in her leaving her father's home, it's clear the filmmakers are setting up a contrast between a reasonable, kind, Jesus who listens to women and her unreasonable, unkind, non-Jesus-following family.

Many of these cinematic choices are in line with how Mary has been depicted in the tradition of Jesus films (her youth, for example), even if this film avoids sexualising Mary in the same way

[4] Judas was played by Carl Anderson, a Black actor, in Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and in NBC's 2018 live iteration, several main characters were played by people of colour, notably John Legend as Jesus.

[5] *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973).

[6] Kayleigh Dray, "Why Rooney Mara's Portrayal of Mary Magdalene is So Very Important," *Stylist*, 2018, https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/mary-magdalene-rooney-mara-catholic-church-feminist-films-to-watch-in-cinema-2018-movies-trailers-sexism-bible-christianity/195959

that some others do. These choices are often not automatic, however, given what we know of Mary from the New Testament. Mary is mentioned in all four canonical gospels as well as several apocryphal ones.[7] It's likely, based on what we know from the gospels, that she was a central figure in Jesus's activities while alive. She certainly travelled with him and funded the movement from her own purse (as did other women such as Joanna, Chuza's unnamed wife, and Susannah (Luke 8:3),[8] indicating that she was financially independent. We have no mention of male relatives of Mary Magdalene (unlike Mary of Bethany, who has a brother, Lazarus, but similarly no named husband). There is therefore no reason to assume that Mary Magdalene is young; if she was wealthy enough to support Jesus and his followers and had the agency to control her own financial affairs, we might consider instead that she was an older widow, like Babatha,[9] or perhaps an independent businesswoman.[10] Luke 8:2 mentions that Jesus healed her; the 'evil spirits' need not be taken to mean spirit possession, since ancient theories of illness frequently identified disability with demonic activity. Jesus in *Mary Magdalene* therefore deviates from Luke's assessment of Mary in that regard.

Representations of Judaism in *Mary Magdalene*

Precisely because this film has been pointed to as an example of feminist storytelling, showcasing a woman whose tale is being "retold," it is important to examine closely what kind of feminism is at play here, and at whose expense this feminist retelling is. Two important elements of *Mary Magdalene*'s plot and characterisation reflect dangerous white/Christian feminist tropes still at play in our guild and in popular culture.[11]

As Sara Parks has most recently written, feminist Christians have had a habit of lifting up women from among the Jesus movement at the expense of Judaism.[12] Judith Plaskow reveals just how much scholarship about women in the New Testament pits so-called "Christian" women against

[7] She isn't mentioned in Paul's letters, meaning that she had either died by the time Paul began his work in the Christ movement or that they disagreed and he declined to mention her.

[8] Graydanus notes a "missed opportunity" by the filmmakers to include other women of means, also listed by Luke, in Jesus's inner circle in *Mary Magdalene*. (R Greydanus, Steven D. (2021), "Through Other Eyes: Point of View and Defamiliarization in Jesus Films," in Richard Walsh (ed.), *The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 86.

[9] Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld, and Meredith J C Warren, *Jewish and Chrsitian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Routledge 2022), 145-147.

[10] Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 127; Marianne Sawicki, ''Magdalenes and Tiberiennes: City Women in the Entourage of Jesus,'' in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 193, 196.

[11] These issues compound the complications around this film's production, which coincided with accusations, eventually leading to his arrest and conviction, against Harvey Weinstein for sexual assault and abuse (see Kate Erbland, "'Mary Magdalene': Rooney Mara and Joaquin Phoenix's Biopic Finds New Home After Weinstein," *Indiwire* 20 March 2019; https://www.indiewire.com/2019/03/mary-magdalene-rooney-mara-joaquin-phoenix-release-date-1202052369/). While the film did debut in the UK on schedule, its release in the United States was delayed; it eventually premiered around Easter 2019.

[12] Parks, *Gender in the Rhetoric of Jesus*, 63-64.

their Jewish sisters.[13] There is a persistent assumption that Jesus emancipated women from restrictive, patriarchal Judaism, an assumption that points directly toward latent anti-Judaism in a lot of feminist New Testament scholarship. Her work on this issue was groundbreaking in 1978.[14] Yet the problem persists. Amy Jill Levine has written about this, too. In "Second-Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women," she notices pervasive attempts to draw a clear line between, on the one hand, 'orientalised' Jews, and on the other hand, Jesus and his followers, who are distinct "culturally and ethically" from one another. [15] This is frequently done in depictions, scholarly or otherwise, of Jesus interacting with individual women in the Bible: Jesus is exceptional and magnanimous in his interactions with 'tainted' or suspicious women,[16] as Mary Magdalene is frequently depicted, including in *Mary Magdalene*, where her rejection of marriage and the implication that she is possessed render her socially outside normative behaviour.

This anti-Jewish trope, in which a Christianized Jesus[17] rescues women or a woman from a hopelessly regressive and patriarchal Judaism, is likewise visible in *Mary Magdalene*, despite apparent efforts by the filmmakers to represent some "authentic" version of first century CE Jewish life.[18] A culturally Christian audience, watching the film uncritically, might have trouble remembering that Jesus and his followers are all Jews; like in the Gospel of John,[19] consistent 'othering' of Jews serves to create a chasm in the film between controlling, patriarchal Jews and Jesus. The subtlety of the film's anti-Judaism is best illustrated in one of the opening scenes of the film, in which Mary and her family visit a synagogue to worship. This short scene might not look like much in the context of a film that runs for more than two hours. But it underpins the characterisation of Jesus as radically opposed to the Judaism of his day. Once the characters enter the synagogue and begin to pray, several problems become apparent. First, we have no archaeological evidence to support a division of genders in synagogue worship in antiquity, despite what the film shows.[20] Further, because textual evidence suggests that temporary divisions were sometimes established to create segregated spaces at certain festivals, it would

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[13] Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7.2 (1991): 99-108.

[14] J. Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," Cross Currents 33 (1978): 306–309.

[15] Amy Jill Levine, "Second-Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women: Yeast of Eden," "Second-Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women: Yeast of Eden." In A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament (edited by A. Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 302–331 here 303. Also published as Levine, A.-J. (1994). Second Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women Yeast of Eden. Biblical Interpretation, 2(1), 8–33. From a Christian perspective, see Melcher, Sarah J. "THE PROBLEM OF ANTI-JUDAISM IN CHRISTIAN FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: Some Pragmatic Suggestions." *CrossCurrents* 53, no. 1 (2003): 22–31.

[16] See discussion in Meredith J C Warren, "Slut Shaming the Samaritan Woman" Bible and Critical Theory 17.2 (2021): 51-69 esp. pp. 52-54

[17] On Jesus's whiteness in cinema, see Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 62. On the specific whiteness of Phoenix's Jesus, see Grace Emmett, ""'You Weakened Him': Jesus's Masculinity in *Mary Magdalene*," *Religion and Gender* 10 (2020), 102.

[18] The final scene of the film, which shows Mary returning to a group of other female Jesus followers, implies that Mary, who holds the 'true' vision of the Kingdom of God, will stand in for Jesus as the new white saviour.

[19] Adele Reinhartz, Cast Out of the Covenant.

[20] Bernadette Brooten*, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, 2nd ed. Brown Judaic Studies 2020, 103-138.

appear that mixed-gender worship was the norm.[21] Gender segregation is presented as an organic or natural aspect of Judaism that an innovative Jesus resists in his inclusion first of Mary and then of other women in his movement (notably, Peter is disinclined to include women in the movement).[22] This sets up the image of a "Radical Jesus" who revolutionises a "backwards" and "antiquated" Judaism and is killed as a result, reinforcing the anti-Jewish tendency in some feminist scholarship.[23]

That this depiction of Jesus is a Christian one, juxtaposed against a caricature of Judaism viewed through a Christian lens, can be seen in the film's obsessive focus on "faith": the film seems to situate faith in God as oppositional to Jewish ritual concerns or patriarchal traditions. The Jesus of the Gospels, in contrast to Phoenix's portrayal of him, is urgently concerned with upholding and reinforcing Jewish law.[24] Matthew 5:17-48, for example, is vociferous in its insistence that "not one letter…will pass from the law" until the end of days. The valuing of faith over works reflected in the film represents a post-Reformation misunderstanding of the Pauline discussion (which is really a debate about whether Gentile followers of Jesus need to adhere to Jewish dietary practices[25] and circumcision).[26] The film's Jesus is so focused on his opposition to Jewish ritual practice in general that the famous Temple scene where Jesus overturns the stalls of the money-changers is reimagined (Matt 21:12-16//Mark 11:15-19//Luke 19:45-48//John 2:14-22). In the film, Jesus rejects the *sacrifices* that take place in the Temple rather than the *specific marketisation of worship*, which is what the gospels' Jesus opposes. The pericope demonstrates Jesus's preoccupation with *correct* temple practice, not that he disapproves of temple sacrifice itself.[27] Phoenix's Jesus does quote Isaiah 56:7, following the Gospels; in that sense the film is true to the biblical account. But he also questions the entire practice of sacrifice,

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[21] Brooten, *Leaders*, 134-35.

[22] Though like his New Testament counterpart, Jesus in *Mary Magdalene* is hardly unambiguously supportive of women (see, e.g. Meredith J. C. Warren, "Five Husbands: Slut Shaming the Samaritan Woman." *The Bible and Critical Theory* 17.2: 51-70). Phoenix is a talented performer, but the way his Christ delivers his lines reminds me of the "enlightened" guys who cornered me at parties in my university days; at one point he mansplains forgiveness to women who express anger about rape and femicide, equating his interlocutor's rage at the rape and murder of her friend with the 'hate' Jesus identifies as the cause of the rapist-murderers' actions.

[23] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 2nd ed. (T&T Clark, 2015), 90.

[24] Matthias Henze, "Did Jesus Abolish the law of Moses," in idem, *Mind the Gap: How the Jewish Writings between the Old and New Testament Help Us Understand Jesus* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2017), 115-146.

[25] For an overview of the slipperiness of the idea of Jewish "law" in the first century, see Shayna Sheinfeld, "From Nomos to Logos: Torah in First-Century Jewish Texts." Pages 61–74 in *The Message of Paul the Apostle within Second Temple Judaism.* Edited by František Ábel. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington/Fortress, 2020. For a discussion of Jewish dietary customs in antiquity, see Jordan Rosenblum, "Jewish Meals in Antiquity," in A Companion to Food in the Ancient World, (Edited by John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau. Wiley Blackwell 2015), 348-356.

[26] Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle* (Yale 2017), 109; Bernadette Brooten, "Is Belief the Center of Religion?" in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 471-479; Donald S Lopez Jr, "Belief," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21-35.

[27] Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld, and Meredith J C Warren, *Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Routledge 2022), 121. Matthew Theissen writes that Jesus exercises "a fierceness" in relation to the Jerusalem temple (*Jesus and the Forces fo Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2020), 12, 27.

asking: "Does God demand that this is how the people should show their true repentance? A flick of your knife on the altar. … Have their hearts been altered when they leave this place?" These additional lines of discourse suggest that Jesus's anger is not at the money changers but rather at the rite of sacrifice in and of itself. This small but significant addition reinforces the supersessionist idea that Jesus opposed "archaic" ritualistic or legalistic Judaism in favour of Protestant "faith". *Mary Magdalene*'s retelling of the Cleansing of the Temple story deviates from the Gospel accounts in important ways which fortify the casual anti-Judaism of Jesus's characterisation, reinforced by his rescue of Mary Magdalene from the patriarchal clutches of her (Jewish) family.

While the film avoids much of the explicit antisemitism previous cinematic interpretations of Jesus have included, we are left with a film that is arguably supersessionist. Intentionally or not, it helps to prop up a view of Judaism as hopelessly patriarchal and misogynistic, opposed to the dominant valued idea of what it means to be "truly" religious or spiritual today, which entails a suspiciously Protestant focus on faith as opposed to "empty" ritual, associated with the temple. The film leans into the idea that Jesus was radical in his inclusion and treatment of women at the time, and that women had little agency within the Judaism of Mary Magdalene's day. In reality, Jesus is not very distinct from the Judaism of his day, and if anything, he is slightly more conservative than his Pharisee colleagues;[28] Jesus had women among his followers not because he was radically deviating from Jewish practice, but rather because women joining different groups within Judaism was part of how women engaged with Judaism.[29] These messages might serve a film seeking to draw in Christian women as audience members but likewise they arguably send a dangerous message in the context of increasing numbers of antisemitic attacks often carried out by those who understand Christianity to support white supremacy.

The Karenification of Mary

The intersection[30] of white supremacy and white feminism is also of concern in other areas of *Mary Magdalene*, in part because it is the latest in a long line of Hollywood-produced biblical films to whitewash its cast.[31] Rooney Mara, who plays Mary, is almost translucent in her pallor.

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[28] Meredith J. C. Warren, Shayna Sheinfeld, and Sara Parks, "The Pharisees," forthcoming in *Confronting Judeophobia in the New Testament* (Sarah Rollens, Eric Vanden Eykel, and Meredith J. C. Warren, eds; Eerdmans, 2023).

[29] Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld, and Meredith J. C. Warren, *Jewish and Christian Women*, 138–145.

[30] Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reveals how one form of marginalisation is not separated from another, and that identities are complex in their oppressions and privileges. The term, together with other critiques by Black feminists and Womanist scholars, demonstrates how white feminism, which often ignores issues of race or class, is a tool of white supremacy. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1/8 (1989): 139-167; idem., "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1241-1299

[31] Jonathan Merritt, "Why Does Hollywood Keep Barring Minorities from Biblical Blockbusters," *The Week*, 11 January 2015, https://theweek.com/articles/441860/why-does-hollywood-keep-barring-minorities-from-biblical-blockbusters The classic biblical epic The Ten Commandments kicked off the trend in the 1950s, and more recently,

Jesus is also played by a white actor: Joaquin Phoenix.[32] Alongside Mara, whose complexion often matches her cream costuming, the whiteness of the actors in the film is startling.[33] Graydanus notes the problematic casting decisions in light of the characters' development: "Only Mara's white heroine understands Phoenix's divine white man; Ejiofor's black patriarchal leader rejects the truth, while Arabic actor Tahar Rahim's naive Judas betrays Jesus and commits suicide."[34]

The decision about the array of accents in the film compounds the issue.[35] While the white leads, Phoenix and Mara, were allowed to speak with their natural American inflection, other characters, such as the main Black actor Chiwetel Ejiofor, who plays Peter, affect a variety of accents. Ejiofor – who has won a flurry of awards over the years, including a best actor Oscar for *12 Years A Slave*– swaps his natural English accent for a generic "African" accent. Given his natural speaking voice, Ejiofor's African accent in the film is a deliberate directorial choice. If being African was an essential part of the characterisation of Peter, then one wonders why Davis didn't just hire an African actor. As it stands, it's strikingly peculiar in the film that Ejiofor puts on an accent while others – the lead white actors – do not. That Phoenix and Mara use 'unmarked' American accents contributes to their perceived neutrality, inflected by their whiteness;[36] although their whiteness is anything but neutral in reality.[37] This is the same kind of "white invisibility" that has been identified and critiqued in biblical studies and historical Jesus studies.[38] Having a Black actor depict one of Jesus's followers would ordinarily be seen as a progressive decision, and in this case, one that could highlight the presence of African Christians from the earliest days of Christianity (Tertullian, Augustine, Perpetua, etc.) as well as the continuous existence since antiquity of African Jews. But as one of only two Black actors in Mary

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Ridley Scott's biblical blockbuster *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) attracted widespread criticism and a social media boycott campaign for having a white cast.

[32] Grace Emmett ("You Have Weakened Him", 102n.14) notes that Phoenix's mother is Jewish. On the interplay of whiteness and Jewishness, see David Schraub, "White Jews: An Intersectional Approach." *AJS Review* 43, no. 2 (2019): 379–407.

[33] White supremacy is not just a problem for Hollywood, but also for the academy. See e.g. Richard Newton, "Racial Profiling?: Theorizing Essentialism, Whiteness, and Scripture in the Study of Religion." *Religion Compass* 14.9 (2020): 1–15

[34] Graydanus, "Through Other Eyes," 86.

[35] Grace Emmett reports that, according to Joan Taylor, accent coaches were employed to ensure "a range of broadly Mediterranean accents," though as Emmett notes this was more pronounced in some cases than, e.g., in the cases of Mara or Phoenix. Emmet, "You Have Weakened Him," 105n.21.

[36] Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007): 149-168.

[37] Denise Kimber Buell, "Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (Katherine M. Hockey and David Horrell, eds.; Bloomsbury 2018), 149-167, here 150-151.

[38] Wongi Park, (2017). The Black Jesus, the Mestizo Jesus, and the Historical Jesus," Biblical Interpretation, 25(2), 190-205; R. S. Tshaka, R 2020. "If the Colour of Jesus Is Not an Issue, Why Are You so Incensed at the Suggestion That Jesus Is Black? Black Theology of Liberation and Iconography". Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 46 (1):11 pages

Magdalene,[39] Peter's consistent anger at Mary's inclusion, when Mary is played as a white woman, is a dangerous image for the film to prop up.

Peter's assumed African accent also tends to signify negative racial and ethnic stereotyping in the film. Peter repeatedly proves himself to be the misogynist in the apostle group. While the other apostles embrace Mary Magdalene and, in the case of Judas, become her friend, Peter remains as hostile to Mary at the end of the film as he is at the start. In the scene when Mary leaves her family to join the apostles, Peter says that she will divide them, a sentiment he repeats in their final scene together (an episode borrowed from Gospel of Mary 9 and Gospel of Thomas 114); there, after she is the first apostle to witness the resurrected Jesus, he tells her that she has "weakened" the group and Jesus. In another scene where Peter and Mary come across a town ransacked by Romans, Mary rushes to the aid of the starving and suffering inhabitants. Peter, however, tells an appalled Mary that they don't have time to help. The character of Peter, then, is in danger of portraying Black African men as regressive, misogynistic and self-serving. This portrayal also feeds into stereotypes about Black men's potentially violent anger.[40] These depictions are not neutral, but rather have implications for the real world.[41]

Mary's whiteness functions in a strong way in this construction. We can read Mary's characterisation in light of the figure of the Karen. Karen is a term to refer to a white woman who weaponises[42] her white privilege against people of colour, frequently against Black men.[43] Importantly, Karens use their perceived fragility as women to police the behaviour and presence of Black people in their communities. This can be seen in the example of the white woman who called the police on a Black birdwatcher in Central Park, NY; when queried on her choice to call the police, Amy Cooper said, "I don't know that as a woman alone in a park that I had another option."[44] Here she invokes the fear many if not most women have of stranger rape (which is disproportionately the focus of anti-rape campaigns aimed at women) in an attempt to evoke empathy: she believes (white) women listeners are likewise afraid of coming across a Black man in a park while walking alone. Amy Cooper herself weaponises this systemically racist trope: in the video that went viral at the time of the incident, Amy Cooper can be heard saying "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life," which she then did once she had emergency services on the line. A Karen's goal is to present the Black person as a threat to

[39] British actor Charles Babalola plays Andrew.

[40] Taylor, E., Guy-Walls, P., Wilkerson, P. et al. The Historical Perspectives of Stereotypes on African-American Males. J. *Hum. Rights Soc. Work* 4, 213–225 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-019-00096-y; Pieterse, J. N. (1992). *White on black: images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

[41] Oliver, Mary Beth. "African American Men as 'Criminal and Dangerous': Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the 'Criminalization' of African American Men." *Journal of African American Studies* 7, no. 2 (2003): 3–18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819017.

[42] Armstrong, Megan. "From Lynching to Central Park Karen: How White Women Weaponize White Womanhood," Hastings Women's Law Journal 32, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 27-52

[43] See the list in Wellington, 5.

[44] Sebastian Murdock, "Central Park Karen" Who Called Cops on Black Bird-Watcher Continues to Play Victim," *Huffington Post* 4-5 August 2021. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/central-park-karen-who-called-cops-on-black-bird-watcher-continues-to-play-victim_n_610addaee4b0e882ab663a03

(white) women, and thereby alienate them from their own community, often employing state violence to do so.

While Mary in this film does not call the police—the action takes place not in New York City but first-century Jerusalem—she is used by the filmmakers in a similar way: her whiteness and her fragile appearance are juxtaposed against an angry Black man with an African accent, whom the filmmakers depict as threatening Mary's inclusion or participation in their shared community. Key to this identity is that "the identity of the Karen juggles and prioritizes being oppressed by this misogynistic system while also benefiting from its white power."[45] In other words, Mary Magdalene's characterisation vis a vis Peter employs her whiteness to construct an even greater animosity between the characters, since Peter's Blackness is made to engage within the modern trope of the "angry Black man," a trope which "taps into the long history of white fears of Black male predators and the trope of the white woman victim."[46] Michelle Fletcher has observed how the stances of both Mary and Peter in this scene of confrontation play into issues of race in troubling ways, writing,

> Mary standing gaze-to-gaze with Ejiofor's Peter highlights the complexity of power dynamics... As the other disciples turn away, it almost feels like they turn away in shame as a white woman lectures a [B]lack man about the true meaning of faith. The scene may be a feminist…rewriting of Mary Magdalene's last appearance in Jesus of Nazareth, but it fails to consider the power dynamics of the gaze in what bell hooks (2014a) calls the West's white supremacist patriarchal capitalist society.[47]

Despite the assurances of Davis that the whitewashing of the Mary Magdalene movie was merely a side effect of making the best casting choices,[48] the film is undoubtedly troubling in its representations of race because of the dynamics of the characters' relations in the plot as well the directions given regarding their interactions with one another. This scene, as Fletcher also observes, is an example of white feminism, in which a white woman exploits white supremacist structures to her own benefit.

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[45] Wellington, 6.

[46] Megan Armstrong, "From Lynching to Central Park Karen: How White Women Weaponize White Womanhood," *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 36; Taja-Nia Y. Henderson & Jamila Jefferson-Jones, "#LivingWhileBlack: Blackness as Nuisance," *American University Law Review* 69 (2020)

[47] Michelle Fletcher, "Seeing Differently with *Mary Magdalene*," in Richard Walsh (ed.), *The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film* (London: T&T Clark), 61. Fletcher here cites bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, New York: Routledge, 2014.

[48] On white feminism and "colour blindness," see Sara Salem, "White Innocence as a Feminist Discourse: Intersectionality, Trump, and Performances of 'Shock' in Contemporary Politics." Pages 47-70 in Chaddock, Noelle and Beth Hinderliter, eds. *Antagonizing White Feminism: Intersectionality's Critique of Women's Studies and the Academy*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2020.

Conclusion

Mary Magdalene may indeed be a feminist film, but it is one that shines a light on the problematic way in which white feminism is weaponised against people of colour and/or non-Christians. Mary's antagonistic relationship with Peter, suggested in Gospel of Mary and Gospel of Thomas, is racialized by the casting choices made for this film; as a result, a white, Karenified Mary harnesses the trope of the angry Black man to attempt to engage audience sympathy. Likewise, the film's depiction of Mary's relationships with her family, her Jewishness, and Jesus grow out of a trend in some feminist biblical scholarship to uplift Jesus as friend of women by employing negative and inaccurate stereotypes about the Judaism of the time. While Jesus was, if anything, more conservative than his contemporaries, Christian antisemitism in its feminist guise props up white supremacist readings of the New Testament for the sake of the white, Christian sisterhood. A careful examination of just two scenes in this film, among many possible options, highlights how entrenched white supremacist themes are in contemporary retellings of the Jesus story.

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