

Standing at the Foot of the Cross: White Christians and Jacob Lawrence's *The Life of John Brown*

Catherine R. Osborne



Jacob Lawrence, "The Legend of John Brown"
(Gouache and tempera on paper, 1941; serigraph on paper, 1977)

1. John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America

In this picture the liberal can find no place. His favorite question when backed against the wall is 'What can I do?' One is tempted to reply, as Malcolm X did to the white girl who asked the same question, 'Nothing.' What the liberal really means is, 'What can I do and still receive the same privileges as other whites and—this is the key—be liked by Negroes?' Indeed the only answer is 'Nothing.' However, there are places in the Black Power picture for 'radicals,' that is, for men, white or black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom. There are places for the John Browns.²

¹ I have taught *The Life of John Brown* in several contexts, and thank my students for the discussions which spurred my thought on this subject. I am also thankful for the comments of my fellow panelists at a celebration of Michael Cothren's career; Cothren, my mentor at Swarthmore College, taught me everything I know about visual narrative, and his retirement celebration gave me my first opportunity to formulate this paper. My deficiencies as an art historian should not, however, be blamed on him! I would also like to thank Tracy Tiemeier and the other attendees at a faculty symposium at Loyola Marymount University who helped me workshop this essay.

² James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 28.

Interviewer: How would you define the existing relationship between white and black in America today?

*James Baldwin: Ask John Brown.*³

The names of the dead increase day by day, but as M. Shawn Copeland writes, Americans--especially white Americans--"conspire to not remember...choose to forget...repress and erase...edit and delete" the facts of our history. The nation, Copeland proclaims, "is the product of *structural historical amnesia*."⁴ We do not wish to remember that the theft of land, bodies, and labor lie beneath and behind our daily lives, and we cannot bear the revelation that this theft is ongoing and that nearly all of us, no matter how well-meaning, are beneficiaries. The result of our willful national blindness has been the maintenance of racist structures ranging from criminal sentencing to school segregation to financial systems to housing discrimination to the routine killing of black men and women by police who are virtually never called to account--a diseased, sinful system so entrenched, in so many elements of our national life, that to become aware of it is to exist in a constant state of anger and despair.⁵

Given the pervasiveness of white supremacy (including the structures which have long resulted in a very small number of black academic theologians) and the psychic rewards of avoiding, when possible, intractably difficult problems, it's perhaps not surprising that Catholic theological ethics has, especially until quite recently, so rarely engaged in depth with the sin of racism.⁶ Yet some of the most urgent and constructive theological writing of recent years--not to mention some of the most urgent and constructive journalism and political activism--has been dedicated to naming and centering racism and white supremacy as key elements to be reckoned with both as a society and as individuals.⁷ In 2014, Bryan Massingale laid out an "agenda for Catholic moral theology's future engagement with and reflection on racial justice...includ[ing] a deeper understanding of social sin in light of cultural (mal)formation; a renewed understanding of both conscience and the challenge of conscience formation, given the reality of unconscious racial motivation and bias; the ethical implications of belonging to a compromised or idolatrous faith; and further work on the spirituality needed for authentic lament and effective cross-racial solidarity in the midst of social conflict."⁸

³ James Baldwin, Frank Shatz, and Russell Banks, "John Brown's Body," *Transition*, no. 81/82 (2000): 263.

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, "Memory, #BlackLivesMatter, and Theologians," *Political Theology* 17, no. 1 (January 2016): 1.

⁵ Baldwin, as usual, said it first and said it better: "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you" (James Baldwin, "The Negro in American Culture," *Cross Currents* XI (1961): 205.)

⁶ Bryan N. Massingale, "Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014): 134-135.

⁷ Much of this theological work through 2014 is cited and summarized in Bryan Massingale's enormously helpful review essay "Has the Silence Been Broken?" Particularly influential work for the present essay includes James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011); Maureen H. O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012). More recent pieces which have claimed my attention are cited throughout.

⁸ Massingale, "Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice," 143. Direct responses to Massingale include Michael Jaycox, "Black Lives Matter and Catholic Whiteness: A Tale of Two Performances," *Horizons* 44 (2017): 306-41. Recent work related to the field (though not necessarily responding directly to Massingale) is collected in, for example, Vincent Lloyd and Andrew Prevot, eds., *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), though not all the essayists are Catholic.

By trade I am not an ethicist but a historical theologian, with expertise centering on Catholicism in the mid-20th century. Yet as a white American and a Catholic (one who belongs to a "compromised or idolatrous faith"), I feel compelled not only to understand the present moment as a result of a sinful history, but to reflect on my own complicity and to engage "the moral conundrum of being white," as Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil put it.⁹ The question of white Christians' responsibility for not only understanding the history of anti-blackness in Christian theology and American life, but choosing how to act within this context, is, it should go without saying, well beyond what I can address here.¹⁰ Rather, as a historian with highly personal ethical concerns, I want to suggest one subject (a cycle of paintings) for the kind of spiritual reflection called for by Massingale, and propose adding it to the treasury of artistic work investigated by James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and Maureen O'Connell's research on Philadelphia's community murals, among others.¹¹

In the summer of 1941, the 24-year-old artist Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) completed an extraordinary burst of creativity: five major narrative series, encompassing 186 individual paintings, in five years. Earlier biographical series on the Haitian revolutionary general Touissant L'Ouverture (1937) and the abolitionists Harriet Tubman (1938–39) and Frederick Douglass (1939–40), along with the sixty-panel masterpiece *The Migration of the Negro* (1940–41), were now joined by twenty-two panels recounting *The Life of John Brown*.¹² Like its predecessors, *John Brown* was thoroughly researched in the legendary Schomburg Collection at Harlem's 135th St branch library; each panel is meticulously labeled with captions drawn primarily from

⁹ Alex Mikulich, Laurie M. Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.

¹⁰ On "anti-blackness" (as opposed to "racism") see Lloyd and Prevot, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, especially xxi–xxii, where the editors note that "as a category of critical analysis, racism...is very general" and can lead to "conversations [that] remain at an unhelpful level of abstraction." For recent work on white Christians specifically, I have found these articles and essays especially helpful: Vincent Lloyd, "For What Are Whites to Hope?," *Political Theology* 17, no. 2 (March 2016): 168–81; Timothy McGee, "Against (White) Redemption: James Cone and the Christological Disruption of Racial Discourse and White Solidarity," *Political Theology* 18, no. 7 (November 2017): 542–59; Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007).

¹¹ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, especially chapter X, and O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk*.

¹² [ETA: this link appears to be inactive as of April 2020. Text left in place until I can figure out what's going on: All five series can be viewed online at <http://jacobandgwenlawrence.org/gallery.php>. Open the "gallery search" tool and use the dropdown menu to select, under "Series," any of the five (unfortunately, not in order).] A chronology of this period in Lawrence's life can be found in Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 26–31. *John Brown* was painted during Lawrence's honeymoon trip to New Orleans, funded by a renewal of the fellowship used to paint *The Migration of the Negro*. Because he was traveling, Lawrence used different materials (gouache on paper rather than tempera on hardboard) and a slightly different process (each panel was completed individually, rather than, as with the earlier series, laid out and simultaneously painted with one color at a time.) By the 1970s the paintings were flaking badly and the Detroit Institute of Arts, the series' owner, commissioned Lawrence to create screenprints, which have mostly replaced the originals in public exhibitions. At this time Lawrence also retitled the series *The Legend of John Brown*; I use the earlier title. The prints have identical composition to their original paintings (the shapes and colors are the same) but, as Peter Nesbett writes, "no effort was made to match the color [tone], texture, or brushed nuances of the original works" (Peter T. Nesbett, *Jacob Lawrence: The Complete Prints (1963–2000)*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 10.) For the prints, see Nesbett, 38–40. Since this essay focuses on character and composition (which remained essentially identical), not on brushstrokes or texture, I will not comment further on the distinction.

Franklin Sanborn's 1891 *Life and Letters of John Brown*.¹³ Here I propose that Lawrence's cycle, like the Philadelphia murals analyzed by Maureen O'Connell and the spirituals and other works analyzed by Cone, has the character of a religious "classic," and that, like James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and other non-Catholic (and indeed non-Christian) interlocutors proposed recently by theologians, Lawrence deserves our attention as a "prophet."¹⁴ Specifically, I argue that, without proposing excessively clear solutions to the perhaps intractable problem of white complicity in the sin of anti-black racism, both Lawrence's choice of subject and his formal artistic technique in *The Life of John Brown* compel productive reflection on white Christians' responsibility in the struggle for racial justice.

Engaged Theological Aesthetics and Jacob Lawrence's Two Audiences

It is no accident that art should recently have been the topic of a great deal of ethical reflection related to race. As M. Shawn Copeland points out, since aesthetics is a critical part of racist projects, it must also be a critical part of antiracist responses; art is therefore intimately related to ethics.¹⁵ Bryan Massingale seems to agree, writing of the difficulty white Christians have in achieving true solidarity with those they have trouble recognizing (a visual move) as persons.¹⁶ James Cone, meanwhile, posits a failure of religious imagination as a key element of Christian racism; it is not "rational and historical language" that primarily combats white supremacy, but "poetry" (including the visual arts).¹⁷ If anti-black racism is a problem of social structures, it is also, among other things, a problem with white *vision*: an aesthetic problem requiring in part an aesthetic response. Aesthetics includes a dimension of contemplation; but an engaged theological aesthetics like that represented by Cone, O'Connell, and Copeland asks, with Alejandro García-Rivera, "*what moves the human heart?*"¹⁸ Art names the problem, but it also elicits emotion and therefore, hopefully, moves us to act.

Although classics impel action, great art, the kind that can reasonably be proposed as "classic," is never reducible to a single action, any more than it is reducible to a single interpretation or experience. In a 1970 speech the great civil rights leader Bayard Rustin differentiated Jacob Lawrence's socially engaged career from that of "an artist whose objective is

¹³ Ellen Sharp, "The Legend of John Brown and the Series by Jacob Lawrence," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 67, no. 4 (1993): 23; Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Seattle Art Museum, 1986), 65. On Lawrence's use of the Schomburg see Deborah Willis, "The Schomburg Collection: A Rich Resource for Jacob Lawrence," in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Washington, DC: Rappahannock Press with the Philips Collection, 1993), 33–39.

¹⁴ Classic: O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice*. Other suggestions of visual "classics" related to racial justice include John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201–02. On the necessity of encounter with non-Catholic and/or non-Christian 'prophets' see, among others, Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; Bryan N. Massingale, "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63–88; Jon Nilson, "James Baldwin's Challenge to Catholic Theologians and the Church," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013): 884–902.

¹⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, "The Critical Aesthetics of Race," in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Laurie M. Cassidy and Maureen H. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 73–85.

¹⁶ Massingale, "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," 79–80.

¹⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 92.

¹⁸ Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 9.

to sell a cause" (as art historian and Lawrence scholar Patricia Hills puts it, from "propaganda").¹⁹ Other members of Lawrence's extended community agreed; African-American critic Alain Locke wrote, recommending Lawrence for a fellowship, that, "there is little or no hint of social propaganda in his pictures...yet his work has a stirring social and racial appeal."²⁰

In differentiating Lawrence's work from perhaps equally visually compelling propaganda posters, cartoons, and so forth, Locke and Rustin alike also point to the effect it has on viewers. This effect is what I would call prophetic. Deborah Haynes, speaking of "ethical aesthetics," notes that artists' vocation "has moral and religious significance," in a prophetic mode following that of the Hebrew prophets whose "images and metaphors disrupted and destabilized dominant portrayals of reality and, in turn, offered alternate perceptions of reality. Artists, by analogy, are not passive onlookers, but potentially agents of social transformation by being true to their vocation as artists, not necessarily as social activists."²¹ Rustin would have agreed; in Lawrence's very avoidance of propaganda, Rustin said, he became "a part of the very struggle for justice and freedom by the fact that he paints...because, by so doing, he is expressing the imaginative creativity and creation."²² Rustin, like his fellow theorists of Christian nonviolent action, consistently used "creative" in its theological sense: protestors participated in God's creative activity, disrupting the scripts governing so much of everyday interaction between black and white Americans and opening up (or "creating") space in which something new and salvific could begin to grow. Lawrence's paintings, I suggest, are creative in the same way sit-ins and other movement techniques were creative. Neither, unlike either propaganda art or segregationist social scripts, dictates and therefore deadens the outcome. Both participate in the livingness of God. And both, I would say, have the capaciousness of classics, the surplus of meaning which allows them to speak differently to different audiences in different times and places.

Lawrence's narrative cycle tells a story, but its complex formal devices means it never simply *tells* a story. While it's possible to look at reproductions in a book or online, to see the originals in an exhibition is to walk slowly from one panel to the next, looking back and forth across the room and considering how each relates to each. As with the Stations of the Cross, the practice of contemplative walking and viewing invites exhibition-goers to enter into the scenes portrayed. By turns solemn and electrifying, we ask: what would it feel like to be a colonized slave in Haiti? to be part of Touissant's army? to creep through the night with Harriet Tubman? to attack Harper's Ferry with John Brown? That said, I would point out that "we" do not ask all the same questions as we pray the Stations. How individuals understand the call of these visual prayers has much to do with our own self-understanding. In particular, people who recognize themselves in the subjects of Lawrence's work (that is, primarily, black and white Americans), may experience them differently. Lawrence, Hills writes, served as a "community griot," telling black history's compelling stories to educate and inspire black Americans. But as beloved as he and his work were in Harlem, much of his celebrity in American art came through white viewership in downtown galleries and, shortly before he painted *John Brown*, at the Museum of Modern Art, where a largely white audience saw the *Migration* series, still his generally best-

¹⁹ Bayard Rustin, "The Role of the Artist in the Freedom Struggle," cited in Patricia Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Paintings During the Protest Years of the 1960s," in *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*, ed. Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 189.

²⁰ Cited in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed., *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (Washington, DC: Rappahannock Press with the Philips Collection, 1993), 42.

²¹ Cited in De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 199.

²² Bayard Rustin, "The Role of the Artist in the Freedom Struggle," cited in Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Paintings During the Protest Years of the 1960s," 189.

known work. If Lawrence painted for his community, I suggest, the black and the white members of that community might have been addressed somewhat differently, and may see the paintings differently. As with all prophets, his words (or images) should be heard differently by the comfortable and by those in need of comfort. So, as Patricia Hills argues Lawrence was a "griot," I would argue that he was also a practitioner of public theology. In the following sections of this essay, I intend primarily to walk the Stations from my own perspective as a white member of Lawrence's audience, asking what *John Brown* says to me within the context of Lawrence's work as a whole.

Reading *The Life of John Brown* Within Jacob Lawrence's Black History Cycle and the History of Portrayals of Brown

In his long and enormously productive career, Jacob Lawrence did not make a particular study of religion; his primary subject was black life in Harlem, and most of his work dealt with work, leisure, the home, and the street. Paintings of religious life do exist as part of this landscape, but are relatively rare. *The Life of John Brown* is his most sustained reflection on Christianity. Perhaps because of this, or perhaps because it was painted in the aftermath of the dominant series *The Migration of the Negro*, rather than (like the L'Ouverture, Tubman, and Douglass series) as its precursor, *John Brown* has received somewhat less scholarly attention than the others. But it also may be because the earlier four can be more clearly read as Lawrence's attempt to "take on the role of community *griot*," retelling the inspirational stories he had heard on the streets of Harlem.²³ Lawrence's work was and is important not only to the art world overall, but to an African-American community highly conscious of the need for artists "to select as our content black history," as Lawrence recalled lecturers' and teachers' requests.²⁴ *John Brown*, the only one of the five series with a white protagonist, may appear to be an outlier, despite Lawrence's recollection that "the adults of our community" told the stories of Tubman, Douglass, and Brown in the same breath.²⁵ Yet it could also be regarded not as an afterthought but, in Ellen Sharp's words, as "a culmination of his preoccupation with the historical past," after which he focused mostly on the present.²⁶

My own view is that *John Brown* is neither an outlier nor a culmination, but a counterpoint that takes up, in concentrated form, a minor theme of the first four series: the question of white Christians' role both in entrenching and in redressing racial injustice. Lawrence's series work has been described as "dialectical;" each series can be read in sequence, but later panels cast new light on earlier ones. This technique is common to visual narratives, since viewers are often looking at multiple scenes simultaneously. Citing influences "ranging from Egyptian and medieval wall painting to Mexican mural cycles," Patricia Hills notes that for Lawrence "the serial sequence, rather than an individual work, could better convey the range of emotion and ideas in the great stories he wished to tell."²⁷ Lawrence himself described this aspect of his work: "I think I like to put things against things...seeing one thing, how it reacts against something else, the push, the pull of things." This sophisticated visual narrative technique included the repeated deployal of elements (in *John Brown*, for example, a cross, a book, a whip,

²³ Patricia Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series: Weavings of Pictures and Texts," in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Washington, DC: Rappahannock Press with the Philips Collection, 1993), 142.

²⁴ Cited in Hills, 142. See also Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, 35–36.

²⁵ (prints book page 38)

²⁶ Sharp, "The Legend of John Brown and the Series by Jacob Lawrence," 22.

²⁷ Essay in Ellen Harkins Wheat, ed., *Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40* (Hampton University, 1991), 16.

pikes, and bullet belts), continually recombined so that the associations and questions they raise echo both within individual series, and within the five series as a group. As the fifth and last of the cycle, *John Brown* must especially be seen in light of Lawrence's earlier thinking; it should also be seen as the product of a moment in Lawrence's career when his white viewership increased dramatically, as the *Migration* series vaulted him to art-world fame. In this light, it is significant that *John Brown* repeatedly features two images (a 'good' white man—scare quotes definitely intended—and a cross) which were both present, but rarely, in the earlier series.

The vast majority of Lawrence's painted characters, in the historical cycle and elsewhere in his work, are black. White men, therefore, when they do appear, function much like other commonly repeated visual elements: they are not major characters, but are critically important because of the effect they have on the protagonists. Unsurprisingly, this effect is typically negative: as Ellen Harkins Wheat puts it, "A white man in a position of exploitation or ruthless dominance will become a familiar symbol in Lawrence's early series."²⁸ White men are overseers, judges, employers, treacherous soldiers.²⁹ They routinely do violence to the black protagonists. The regularity of this symbol makes it striking, then, when occasionally the pattern is broken. In *Frederick Douglass*, after 16 panels where whites appear exclusively as owners, and usually as violent, Lawrence introduces William Lloyd Garrison, "denouncing" (as Lawrence's caption states) "the slave system in words that were mighty in truth and mighty in earnestness." Garrison's cadaverous figure hunches over a table in what is clearly a church: a hanging candleabra, several arches, and a stained-glass window of a blond, bearded Jesus set the scene. In panel 19, several white Garrisonians suffer the consequences of their position: along with



Lawrence on Brown, previously, in "The Life of Frederick Douglass" #24 (tempera on board, 1938-39)

Douglass, they are attacked and beaten during a speaking stop in Indiana. In panels #23 and #24, Lawrence introduces John Brown for the first time in the cycle.

Frederick Douglass, apart from Garrison's church, has no overtly religious imagery. The *Migration* series, likewise, features a single panel (#54) in which migrants take solace in church. *Touissant L'Ouverture* and *Harriet Tubman*, however, each feature striking Christian

imagery. In *Harriet Tubman* #6, the bodies of slaves are seen only in the shadows they cast on the ground, but the caption describes "their groaned-out prayer, 'Oh Lord, have mercy.'" *Harriet Tubman* #2, one of the most stunning individual paintings in the cycle, openly raises the question

²⁸ Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, 40.

²⁹ For example: *Migration* #14: judge; #17: planter (exploiting sharecroppers); #42: policeman preventing migrants from leaving the south; #50 & #52: race rioters. #19 and #49 feature white characters drinking/eating at segregated facilities.

of whether white Christians are, in fact, Christians. Lawrence nearly fills its frame with the body of a beaten slave, head bowed and arms extended in classic cruciform fashion. He captioned this panel, which visually equates the slave to Christ, with a quotation from Kentucky senator Henry Clay: "I am no friend of slavery, but I prefer the liberty of my own country to that of another



Jacob Lawrence, *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1938-39)
(Tempera on hardboard)

#2: "I am no friend of slavery, but I prefer the liberty of my own country to that of another people, and the liberty of my own race to that of another race. The liberty of the descendents of Africa in the United States is incompatible with the safety and liberty of the European descendants. Their slavery forms an exception (resulting from a stern and inexorable necessity) to the general liberty in the United States." —Henry Clay

people, and the liberty of my own race to that of another race. The liberty of the descendents of Africa in the United States is incompatible with the safety and liberty of the European descendants. Their slavery forms an exception (resulting from a stern and inexorable necessity) to the general liberty in the United States." But the next time a cross appears in the Tubman series, it is also associated with a white man: in #25, Tubman, Douglass, and John Brown pray together. As Patricia Hills points out, the three are arranged such that the entire design of the panel is "cross-shaped," while another cross is cast in shadow on the floor.³⁰

The cross is deployed quite rarely in the four earlier series, making its ubiquity in *John Brown* notable. However, Lawrence did use it twice in the earliest series, *Touissant L'Ouverture*, and *John Brown*, at the end of the cycle, seems to respond directly to these opening frames. The first panel in the cycle, *Touissant L'Ouverture* #1, features a priest (with large cross) accompanying Columbus as he plants the Spanish flag in Haiti. The cross is a tool of European colonization. This impression is cemented in #10, as a white planter wearing a large gold cross viciously beats a bound slave, drawing blood. These two early images of the cross, I suggest, cast

³⁰ Essay in Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40*, 37.



Jacob Lawrence, *The Life of Touissant L'Ouverture* (1938)
(Tempera on hardboard)

1: Columbus discovered Haiti...The priest shows the influence of the Church upon the people.



10: The cruelty of the planters towards the slaves drove the slaves to revolt....

a long shadow across the entire cycle, a shadow cemented in *Harriet Tubman #2*, where Clay's quotation makes clear that the slave in the image has been crucified by the fundamentally idolatrous sin of white supremacy. *The Life of John Brown*, along with the earlier images of Brown and the occasional other white Christians (like Garrison) who stand in solidarity, offers an answer and an alternative to this sinful, idolatrous version of Christianity. In fact, the alternatives are quite directly stated, as the comparison of *Tubman #2* and *#25* makes clear; so, too, does the contrast of *Touissant #10* to *John Brown #1*. Both panels feature a white man, a cross, and blood, but the elements are completely reconfigured. In the *Touissant* panel, a white overseer wears a cross necklace while drawing blood from a bound black slave. In the *John Brown* panel, the white man hangs on a cross, and the blood which flows is his own.

Viewing *John Brown* in the context of the entire cycle, I think, is not only justified, but necessary, to try to avoid one real pitfall of focusing on this particular series. Although in the larger context of Lawrence's work white people are rarely central figures, in this one series a white figure is the hero: it is Brown's decisions which drive the narrative, Brown who is the central figure in the majority of the images. Not only that, he is (a point to which I will shortly return) quite literally a Christ figure, whose redemptive blood flows into the land. For excellent reasons, much Christian theological writing on race and white supremacy in the last few decades has insisted on *not* centering white figures and white voices. Furthermore, it has insisted, with James Cone and many subsequent writers, that in the American racial context we must

understand Christ as black. (In fact, Lawrence's cycle provides a perfect image for performing that meditation: *Harriet Tubman* #2.)

Yet despite the danger of overemphasizing a white man's story in Lawrence's work, on the one hand, and in the history of black liberation struggles, on the other, I argue that *The Life of John Brown*, especially within its larger context, asks white viewers to wrestle with ourselves as individuals who must make critical choices about our relationship to a Christian faith deeply implicated in racist structures. Are we going to be more like the priest and the overseer in *Touissant*, wielding the cross like a weapon? Or will we be more like John Brown? At the same time, especially read within the larger context of the cycle, I also think *John Brown* offers an opportunity for white and black viewers (though presumably in somewhat different ways) to see a white hero figure through black eyes—and to understand his relative place in the larger narrative.

It is instructive to compare Lawrence's *Life of John Brown* with portraits by white painters. Ellen Sharp, surveying 19th-century depictions of Brown, notes that they are largely "romanticized," casting the bearded abolitionist as "a Moses-like" but surprisingly "sentimental" figure. Not so the most famous 20th-century portrait, John Steuart Curry's 1937–42 hell-raising mural at the Kansas State Capitol.³¹ Lawrence, who seems to have been the first black painter to portray Brown, clearly admires him. But



John Steuart Curry, "Tragic Prelude" (1938-40)

Lawrence's Brown is far from the only important figure, even in the series of which he is the protagonist. In Lawrence's work we first meet Brown only as a collaborator of Tubman and Douglass; even when he receives his own series, Lawrence emphasizes his further collaborative work with less well-known black men and women. In #6, *Brown with three black men* "formed an organization among the colored people of the Adirondack woods to resist the capture of any fugitive slaves;" in #7, the "people he found worthy of trust" are two black men; in #15, Brown sits among a large group of black men in Canada "organizing for his assault on Harper's Ferry"; in #16 and #17 Brown himself virtually disappears, with the footprints of slaves he helped escape, and the black soldiers he trained, filling their respective frames. #19 takes an abstract approach, with pikes rising above a hill, as the caption informs us that "John Brown with a company of 21 men, *white and black*, marched on Harper's Ferry"; #20 depicts Brown's fighters as mostly black. *The Life of John Brown* is clear on the identity of its protagonist; Brown is alone in 7 of 22 panels, including the last two and the ambiguous opening panel. But one of the things it posits as remarkable about Brown is his extended collaboration with, not dominance over and direction of, African-Americans. Even in his own series, Brown is not the only player.

³¹ Sharp, "The Legend of John Brown and the Series by Jacob Lawrence," 20.

Who Stands at the Foot of the Cross? Anonymity as Artistic Moral Strategy

Having briefly viewed *The Life of John Brown* from the perspective of the entire cycle, I now want to zoom in, and to view the *Brown* series from within the perspective of its first panel, already introduced. Lawrence opens on a somber scene: Christ crucified, head hanging, golden spikes driven through his hands and feet and stylized scourge marks raked down his chest. Dark clouds roll in, casting a shadow across the bare dirt of Golgotha; the brightness of blood, flowing like tree roots into the earth, is undimmed. To one side of the cross a small human figure, roughly half the height of Christ, rests its back against the solid weight of the wood, reaching back with one visible arm to grasp it. The figure's face is turned away from the viewer, leaving only a sliver of pale skin to draw the eye.

Who is this figure? Art historian Ellen Sharp identifies this "small figure, hardly noticeable," as John Brown himself, apparently "pondering his own tragic destiny."³² Yet the figure's identification is notably insecure. For one thing, Brown seems to already be in this panel, as the man on the cross: the bent head and spiky hair obscuring Christ's face are repeated in panel 21, as Brown awaits execution, while Brown's long slim hanged body in panel 22 similarly echoes the crucified figure, closing the circle between the first panel and the last. But if John Brown hangs on the cross, then who stands at its foot? Historian R. Blakeslee Gilpin suggests that the figure "alludes to the biblical figure John the Apostle, who alone stayed by Jesus during his crucifixion," as well as, because of the shared name, to Brown.³³ It is also difficult to completely identify the figure completely with Brown because of its dress; it may be wearing blue jeans, suggesting a more modern person, but in any case Brown wears a funereal black suit throughout the rest of the series, so this clothing cannot refer us to him. Even the figure's gender is uncertain: its hair, blending into the shadows, seems to be long.

In his article "Who is the Bishop in the Virgin Chapel of Beauvais Cathedral?" art historian Michael Cothren confronts a similar identification challenge.³⁴ A 13th-century narrative window at Beauvais Cathedral depicts the life of a bishop-saint. Previous interpreters, stymied by the "generic" nature of many scenes showing ordinary events like preaching, leading processions, and distributing offerings, rather than distinctive depictions of miracles clearly associated with particular saints, suggested multiple specific persons as the subject of the window. Cothren proposes, however, that the generic nature of the scenes was intentional. The window narrative was meant for a specific context: the bishop of Beauvais would frequently be seen in front of it, creating a much stronger association between the bishop and his sainted predecessor than would have been possible with a less generic narrative. Among the window's possible messages is that its patron, bishop Robert de Cressonsacq, used the generic, 'anonymous' iconography to "embody his own aspirations" for his episcopate.³⁵ I would add that future bishops, seeing the bishop-saint in the window and being seen against it, would be encouraged to aspire to similar sanctity. The anonymity of the bishop-saint makes his image available for the viewer to identify with and reflect upon.

Similarly, it is less important to identify *John Brown's* figure at the foot of the cross than it is to understand how it functions in viewers' experience of the series. Nothing is clear about it

³² Sharp, 23.

³³ R. Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives! America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, & Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 171.

³⁴ Michael W. Cothren, "Who Is the Bishop in the Virgin Chapel of Beauvais Cathedral?," *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* 125 (1995): 1-16.

³⁵ Cothren, 12.

except that its ambiguity is deliberate and in keeping with Lawrence's general strategy. Across his long career, Lawrence rarely painted a detailed portrait, preferring to deploy various levels of anonymity. Already in these early series, art historian Patricia Hills notes "Lawrence's aversion to personalizing the features" of his protagonists; for Lawrence, Hills argues, L'Ouverture, Douglass, Tubman, and Brown transcend individuality to become "iconic embodiments of the experience of social and political struggle."³⁶ The figure at the foot of the cross is, however, iconic not in the typical secular sense used by Hills, but in the theological sense: gazing away, it draws our eyes in, inviting the meditative viewer to 'enter' the painting and thence to come into contact with a divine reality 'beyond' it. Confronting this image, we immediately ask: who is that? The ambiguous signifiers (possibly modern clothing, possibly long hair, lack of face) invite viewers to look again, to reflect at greater length, and, eventually, to ask if it may not be some other person, or not only some other person, but ourselves. *Were you there when they crucified my Lord....?*

The first panel is not the only place where the viewer is drawn into the scene, although it is the only place where (he or she) is portrayed. Elsewhere, Lawrence shifts perspective so that the viewer interacts with, rather than gazing upon, the scene.³⁷ In #2, we sit at the foot of the table at Brown's prayer meeting, "reflecting on the hopeless and miserable condition of the slaves" (and also on the rifles hanging behind his head). In #8, we gaze at the mountains of West Virginia through Brown's eyes. In #14, we are being supplicated by Brown to donate money to his cause. In #18, a sudden close-up yanks us into the barn where Brown has stockpiled the weapons: what will we do?

Lawrence is one of the great poets of the anonymous masses, with powerful works like *The Migration of the Negro's* "And the migrants kept coming" giving visual form to his fellow Harlemite James Baldwin's observation that "history is not a procession of illustrious people. It's about what happens to a people. Millions of anonymous people is what history is about."³⁸ *The Migration of the Negro* casts black sharecroppers as victims of a viciously racist system, but also as the heroes of their own lives. In *The Life of John Brown*, Lawrence develops the theme in the faceless portraits of Brown's ex-slave



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro* (1941) #60: "And the migrants kept coming"

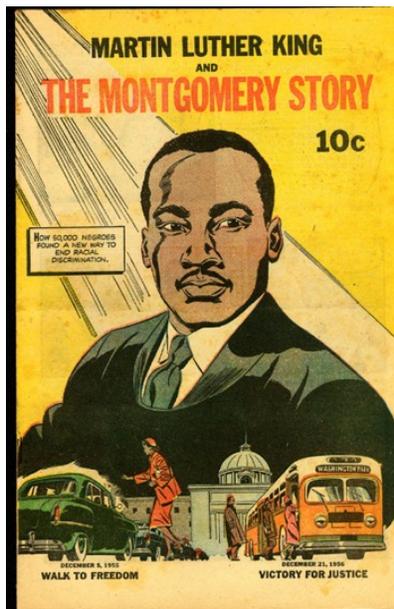
³⁶ Patricia Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Expressive Cubism," in *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, by Ellen Harkins Wheat (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Seattle Art Museum, 1986), 17.

³⁷ As art historian Jeffrey Stewart notes, this is a frequent Lawrence technique; the *Migration* series often uses a perspective which inserts viewers directly into the scene: "we are in line, in panel 59, waiting to vote under the watchful eye of a cop...." (Jeffrey C. Stewart, "(Un)Locke(ing) Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series," in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Washington DC: Rappahannock Press with the Philips Collection, 1993), 50.)

³⁸ "James Baldwin...in Conversation," *Arts in Society* Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer 1966): 556. Lawrence so frequently re-established this as one of his great themes that it is difficult to pick out individual works, but I would include cycles like *Struggle: From the History of the American People* (1955-56) and *Hiroshima* (1983); dozens of Harlem scenes including the "Builders" and "Library" sequences; and single works like "Confrontation at the Bridge" (1975). See Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, for a representative career retrospective.

collaborators, while simultaneously employing anonymity in a new way: to spur ethical reflection on the viewer's own role in the struggle for black liberation.

At this point, I want to pause to examine another, slightly later work which uses an everyman figure in a narrative series format. In the aftermath of the successful bus boycott, the Fellowship of Reconciliation produced and distributed several hundred thousand copies of an educational comic book, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957).³⁹ (FIG) The script balanced a hagiographical account of King (pictured on the cover in a beam of divine light) with a black narrator, a Montgomery resident who introduces himself to readers on the second page: "Call me Jones. My name doesn't matter. But my story's important for you as well as me. We're all caught up in it one way or another!" After Rosa Parks's arrest, "Jones" can't sleep, and suddenly decides on a plan, which he explains to his wife and to some friends. The next panel shows "Jones" and a male friend at a mimeograph machine, with the explanatory caption "we got out a mimeographed sheet protesting what had happened to Rosa Parks and calling for a one-day boycott of the buses." The rest, of course, is history.



(Published in 1957 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, still in print today)



"Jones" organizes the Montgomery bus boycott



Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story was highly successful, teaching future leaders like John Lewis and the Greensboro 4, along with tens of thousands of civil rights demonstrators nationwide, about the theory behind the nonviolent tactics used to such great effect in Montgomery. Yet its use of the anonymous "Jones" is, in retrospect, troubling. Portraying the boycott as the

³⁹ Available at <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Comic%20Book%201957.pdf> [accessed 2/7/18]. For the history of this comic see Andrew Aydin, "The Comic Book That Changed the World" (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/557709>.

spontaneous brainchild of "Jones" and lionizing King, the comic erased years of planning, training, and organizing work on the part of activists like Parks, E.D. Nixon, and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. It also substituted the fictional everyman "Jones" and his male friend for the real women of Montgomery's Women's Political Council, led by Robinson, who stayed up late the night Parks was arrested, personally mimeographing thousands of fliers at the college where she taught, then distributed them the next day, setting the boycott in motion.

Lawrence's anonymous figures, like "Jones," and his use of a formal technique that often breaks the fourth wall (as when "Jones" addresses the reader) enable the viewer/reader to enter into the story being told, demanding that we ask what *we* could or would do in this situation. But by contrast with "Jones," Lawrence's figure at the foot of the cross in *John Brown* #1 does not take an active visual part in the narrative action of the next 21 panels. This means that if I, the viewer, identify with and embody this figure, I do not simultaneously overwrite a real person's struggles and resistance. The figure's true anonymity, its obscurity, is part of its strength as both an aesthetic and ethical device: it compels, but quietly, and therefore more rigorously. *Were you there....?* The longer I look at this panel, the more my attention is drawn to this question. And I find that it is also drawn to the one unambiguous signifier Lawrence allows: the figure's pale skin. If the Fellowship of Reconciliation meant "Jones" as a model for black readers, this anonymous figure is certainly white. While in other panels with other anonymous figures the question may apply more universally, here it's *to me* that the question is addressed.

"The Crimes of This Guilty Land": *John Brown's Atonement Theory*

The Life of John Brown, while it bears some resemblance to a comic strip, with its flat colors and strong lines, is not an action manual; it is the Stations of the Cross. The cross itself recurs at regular intervals, appearing in at least five and up to nine of the twenty-two panels.⁴⁰ Walking along an imaginary wall where the paintings are displayed in sequence, we begin with the 'opening prayer' of the crucified Christ and the figure at the cross's foot. We then follow Brown's journey to execution: his 40 years of "reflection on the hopeless and miserable condition of the slaves" (#2), his years of business failure and "accepted poverty" (#3 and 4); his decision to work with his family and with "the colored people of the Adirondack woods" to attack and resist slavery (#5, 6, 7); the killing fields of "bleeding Kansas" (#9, 10, 11, 12); the decision "after long meditation" to "fortify himself somewhere in the mountains of Tennessee and there make raids on the surrounding plantations, freeing slaves" (#13); the 1859 raid in which Brown "liberated 12 Negroes from Missouri plantations" (#16); recruiting and training (#14, 15, 17); the attack on Harper's Ferry itself (#18, 19, 20); and finally, Brown's long trial and preparation for execution (#21) followed by the final image of the execution itself (#22). This panel both echoes and completes the first: Brown's long hanged body, slipping either downward or upward (it is impossible to tell) mirrors Christ's, while a white cloud sweeps across the blue sky just as a dark thundercloud rolled in over the cross. If the first panel asked us, via that small figure, a question—*were you there?*—the subsequent panels ask a different question: what did it mean to John Brown to take up the cross and follow? By returning after a long journey to the opening panel's formal qualities, Lawrence makes clear that the two questions are related: contemplation, action, contemplation. By the time the jagged hair and linear dead body from the first panel reappear in the final two panels, it seems Brown has earned his visual identification with the crucified Christ.

⁴⁰ #3, #9, and #16 feature bent, twisted trees which evoke the cross; in #6, #12, and #20, weapons are configured in a formal cross.

John Brown, the historical person on whom Lawrence's work reflects, is among the most famously difficult ethical figures in history. So many writers, artists, poets, playwrights, theologians, and politicians have returned to him in the last century that books about these interpretations have become a cottage industry themselves.⁴¹ This essay is long enough without trying to definitively pronounce on Brown the historical person, or on the questions about the legitimacy of "divine violence" which he continues to provoke.⁴² Instead, I want to raise several points about what continues to make Brown such a central figure in American culture. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his biography of Brown, famously asked if Brown was "an episode, or...an eternal truth? And if a truth, how speaks that truth today?"⁴³ This is also the classic question of the Stations: how does this truth speak today?

The first point I want to note is that, as has been extensively documented, black and white thinkers have often had starkly different views on Brown.⁴⁴ This may have become less true in the last few decades, but my general impression is that white Americans are still far more likely to stumble over Brown's violent—indeed, murderous—acts. And, as with Malcolm X, it is often difficult to tell whether we are wary of Brown because of his actions themselves, or because we fear the truth of his analysis that (in Bryan Massingale's words) an approach to solidarity that centers "the voluntary divestment of privilege" by social elites is impossible, at least insofar as that approach precludes a role for "struggle."⁴⁵ Brown, unlike many of his fellow white abolitionists, clearly understood that (again in Massingale's words) "authentic solidarity cannot evade social conflict, resistance, and recalcitrance if it is to be of genuine service in the quest for social transformation."⁴⁶ His violent actions, along with those of his collaborators, are widely understood as a precursor to the Civil War, during a time when it was increasingly clear that slavery would never end voluntarily. Freedom would have to be taken—a realization that continues to sit uneasily alongside the pacifist lineage of the white American Christian left.

White commenters on racial justice in search of a usable past have been overwhelmingly persuaded that this pacifist lineage is the major, if not the only, source of desperately needed white "role models." One recent survey of *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice*, for example, relegates Brown to a short appendix entry, highlighting instead the biographies of the Quaker pioneers John Woolman, Angelina Grimké, and Levi Coffin.⁴⁷ While this pacifist lineage is in many ways my own most natural home, nevertheless, I feel called to think again when I find such an unusual and central role for Brown in black thinkers from Douglass to Du Bois to Lawrence to James Cone ("there are places for the John Browns," he wrote in *Black Theology &*

⁴¹ Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives! America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, & Change*; Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Andrew Taylor and Eldrid Herrington, eds., *The Afterlife of John Brown* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴² Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁴³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: Random House, 2010).

⁴⁴ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., "Black People's Ally, White People's Bogyman: A John Brown Story," in *The Afterlife of John Brown*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Eldrid Herrington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11. For black opinion on Brown from his lifetime through the 1960s see Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), on whose work DeCaro draws.

⁴⁵ Massingale, "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," 81–82.

⁴⁶ Massingale, 83.

⁴⁷ Drick Boyd, *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015).

Black Power, but not for "white liberals").⁴⁸ Jacob Lawrence made a little space for Garrison, for Thomas Garrett, and for a few other radical white pacifists in his historical cycle. But only Brown merited sustained attention in the form of his own series. Why?

Here again I want to pause and compare Lawrence's series with *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. The comic did not stop with an account of the boycott campaign, but followed up with two pages on Gandhi's victories in India and, crucially, four final pages of instructions narrated by "Jones:" how *you*, the reader, can do what "we" did in Montgomery. It



made multiple attempts to generalize and universalize, not only using an "everyman" narrator but explicitly telling readers that the "Montgomery Method" "can be used anywhere...against any kind of evil" and encouraging them to put it into practice in their own communities. Despite, again, acknowledging the comic's enormous success as an empowering organizing tool, I find the positioning of the final instructional section, narrated by "Jones," troubling. Scripted by the white FoR staffer Alfred Hassler (though approved by King), it envisions those who will put the "Montgomery Method" into action as entirely black. Young black readers, embodied in the drawings, are instructed to "understand" and "sympathize" with their white "enemies": to learn to love them. "Even in your thoughts you must not strike back. You must go on loving him," the script instructs, next to a drawing of a white woman screaming abuse at one of the Little Rock 9.

⁴⁸ Cone: cited in McGee, "Against (White) Redemption: James Cone and the Christological Disruption of Racial Discourse and White Solidarity," 54.

While this is true to the basic logic of Gandhian nonviolence, the absence of instruction for white readers is glaring. If black readers under duress were to put away their guns and love their enemies into salvation, what creative sacrifices were white readers of *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* called to make?

While many people, both black and white, have thought deeply about this issue, when I read the news today I often see concerns about "violence" and "peaceful protest" that do not seem cognizant of the relentless Christological logic of the civil rights movement's use of Gandhian protest: that nonviolence is not a passive but an active practice in which the innocent shed their blood for the salvation of the nation. Nonviolent protest in this sense is justifiable in both Christian and practical terms, but it is profoundly morally dangerous for the privileged to call for "nonviolence" with no recognition of what they are asking for, and which communities they are asking to bear the cost. Theologian Anthony Pinn, among others, sharpens this point by rejecting the "normalization of suffering" embedded in atonement doctrine as a whole, especially as applied to racial justice movements: the idea that African-Americans are "the means by which transformation takes place. Their bodies become the necessary substitute for (socio-political and cultural) 'sin.' They are 'pulled apart' and 'consumed' for the sake of others."⁴⁹

What makes John Brown, along with the small collection of other "race traitors" enumerated by theologian Dwight Hopkins, special, is that he understood that it was and is not justifiable to ask black Americans to bear the cost of white Americans' liberation from the sinful structures of white supremacy.⁵⁰ This is neither the answer of Christian nonviolence which, as too often practiced in the United States, has invested responsibility in black activists for saving the soul of the nation, nor the answer of black nationalism, which despairs of national salvation and seeks to save a remnant. Instead, the historical John Brown offered a reinterpretation of atonement theory in which salvific blood would be offered not by the innocent, but by the guilty. If it is true that, as Brown claimed, "the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away; but with Blood," then *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* accurately predicted that during the Civil Rights Movement the blood in question would be primarily that of black protestors. The most striking fact about Brown, however, is his conviction that if a blood price had to be paid, white men, whether slaveowners or, eventually, himself, should be the ones to pay it.⁵¹ This is why James Baldwin could say with perfect accuracy that Brown "was trying to liberate a *country*, not simply the black people of that country."⁵² Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, Baldwin said, "horrible as it may sound...was an act of love. Love. It failed.... [but] what's left is an impression on the conscience of a few people. And that travels down in time. So it wasn't futile, no."⁵³

When I walk the Stations of Lawrence's *Life of John Brown*, I do not think the series offers a clear answer on the question of whether Brown's revolutionary violence (in Kansas or Harper's Ferry) was "good." Answering this question seems less important to Lawrence than

⁴⁹ Anthony Pinn, "Looking Like Me? Jesus Images, Christology, and the Limitations of Theological Blackness," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 174.

⁵⁰ Dwight N. Hopkins, "Theological Basis of Ecclesial Anti-Racist Witness," *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 1 (2008): 7–21.

⁵¹ In this connection I always think of Abraham Lincoln's stunning admission, in the Second Inaugural, that 'if God wills that [the war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword...so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" [Emphasis added]

⁵² Baldwin, Shatz, and Banks, "John Brown's Body," 255.

⁵³ Baldwin, Shatz, and Banks, 264.

does Brown's motive: like Touissant L'Ouverture, Tubman, and Douglass, he wanted to free black people. Across the entire historical cycle, from *Touissant* to *Brown*, Lawrence offered multiple strategies for black liberation--escape, education, and revolution, among others--without necessarily privileging any. That said, while four of the 22 panels in *John Brown* feature battle scenes or dead bodies, they strike me as more sad than openly heroic. Other panels, like #13, in which Brown sits over a map between guns and bullets on one side, and a cross on the other, seem to me to be entirely about raising questions, rather than answering them. Perhaps most compelling to me, however, are not the four panels which feature violence against whites, but the two (#9 and #16) which call viewers to contemplate the bloody consequences of white supremacy. In #16, an oddly quiet painting for a triumphant episode in Brown's life, bloody tracks in the snow refer us back to the only other instance of blood in this series, that which flows from the crucified white Christ of the first panel. This blood, however, is shed by slaves, and is (unlike, arguably, the blood purging away the crimes of the land), entirely unnecessary. To return once more to *Touissant L'Ouverture*, a series which also features flowing blood and "white allies," is to clarify the demand of *John Brown*. In *Touissant*, blood flows copiously from slaves in two panels; white Christian abolitionists are present in another panel, offering moral support from far away. *John Brown* collapses these subjects: a white man's blood flows from the cross to mingle in American soil with that already shed by slaves.

Panels 1, 9, and 22 offer another example of Lawrence's sophisticated "pairing and sequencing."⁵⁴ Viewing #9, a landscape view of Kansas, it takes a while to notice that deep in the background, a shadowy body swings from a twisted tree. Together with the first and last panels, we overlay the three figures of the crucified Christ, a lynched black body, and the hanged John Brown: the cross and the lynching tree, indeed. But rather than the dyad of the crucified Christ and the lynched black American, Lawrence here triangulates to include third figure, a specifically white body, in this mix. What is he doing? As he showed explicitly in *Harriet Tubman* #2, and implies with the inclusion of the body in *John Brown* #9, Lawrence was as capable as any other black artist of identifying Christ as black. Here, then, I argue that Lawrence asks his white viewers not only to see Christ as black (as he does in multiple places) but to



#1, #9, #22



⁵⁴ Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 75.

consider whether we can follow in John Brown's footsteps and participate in his (necessary?) atonement offering.

If the first and the last panels are a guide to the series as a whole, I suggest, Lawrence is less interested in Brown as a violent revolutionary than he is in Brown as a race traitor.⁵⁵ Against commenters who argue that Lawrence's Brown shows "the universality of the theme in which a man lays down his life in the struggle for freedom and justice" or that he is "timeless and abstract," I would say that this series specifically tells the story of a white man who chooses to spend his entire adult life engaged, one way or another, in the struggle for black freedom.⁵⁶ In this way, the series does what James Cone asks: it makes "the cross...God's answer to the lynching tree" without making it an "easy answer." This cross may not be "sufficient" as an "answer to the challenge of persistent and deep suffering"; the final panel holds open Brown's ultimate fate, dead or resurrected, and as 21st century viewers we know how much suffering remained to come.⁵⁷ I suggest that Lawrence gave Brown an entire series, rather than the single panels earlier in the cycle, in part to explore exactly how "un-easy" that answer is. If there is something redemptive about Brown's blood, too, I think it is worth asking who exactly, in these paintings, he is redeeming. While Lawrence's earlier series tell how the black heroes Touissant, Tubman, Douglass, and the migrants liberated themselves and fellow African-Americans, the 22 panels of *John Brown* explore one way a white person might liberate himself.⁵⁸

As we see Brown's life through Lawrence's eyes, we begin with a white man praying alone and with his family (#1-5). But after the fifth panel, although white members of the Harper's Ferry strike force are mentioned in the caption, all of Brown's associates, friends, colleagues, and comrades whom we see (and whom we are told he "trusts") are African-American. By the final panel, as his lynched body hangs against the clear blue sky, Brown's identification with black Americans is complete. As Louis DeCaro Jr. points out, Brown's legacy has been more vexed than that of other white abolitionists in part because "he does not conform to the accepted paradigm of national virtue: he was *too close* to blacks, and all too eager to win for them by force what many of their forefathers had withheld from them by force."⁵⁹ Through the choices he has made in the preceding panels, and in real life, Brown has put himself into a position few white Americans have ever occupied: lynched for resistance to normalized racial hierarchies.⁶⁰ Lawrence's visual assimilation of Brown to Christ simultaneously affirms his

⁵⁵ Among ethicists making this call to white Christians is Jennifer Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for Disidentifying with Jesus," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 97-99.

⁵⁶ Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, 65; John Stauffer and Zoe Traub, "Meteor of War: The John Brown Cycle," in *The Afterlife of John Brown*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Eldrid Herrington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 120. That we have so few stories like this, I would say, accounts for the persistence of Brown in the national imagination; its rarity is pointed up by a 1945 *Art News* reviewer who called *John Brown* "a theme removed from real life" (cited in Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, 66.) At first I thought this was a crazy comment, but the more I think about it the more I think it's all too true.

⁵⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 89.

⁵⁸ On Lawrence's practice of using series to explore transformative personal journeys, see Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40*, 17.

⁵⁹ DeCaro, Jr., "Black People's Ally, White People's Bogyman: A John Brown Story," 11.

⁶⁰ In this connection I note--though I am not entirely sure how to interpret--Eldrid Herrington's fascinating suggestion that while "many might place John Brown on the side of, say, the Black Panthers," the "parallel" may not be "apt" because "John Brown demonstrated passive resistance on the scaffold. He acted with blacks" (Eldrid Herrington, "Introduction: The Anguish None Can Draw," in *The Afterlife of John Brown*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Eldrid Herrington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7.)

victory over the death-dealing white supremacy which killed him, and calls those viewers drawn into the painting to question whether we are prepared in turn to take up the cross.

Action and Contemplation

I have been reading (and viewing) a lot about John Brown lately, and I can say conclusively that commentary on him almost inevitably shades into the grandiose. Whether denouncing him or praising him, commentators since the moment of his death have attributed to him a cosmic significance which, in fact, he attributed to himself. I want to close my meditation on Jacob Lawrence's *The Life of John Brown*, which has many of its own moments of high drama, by re-attending to that small figure nearly lost in the shadows of the first panel. What is it doing there? I have argued that it is best understood as a cipher into which viewers, and white viewers in particular, are called to project ourselves, as we ask what role we play in the drama unfolding across Lawrence's entire historical cycle, what role we would have played in Brown's time, and, inevitably, what role we play in our own. It is worth noting, however, that even if we are called to action by the series as a whole, this figure itself does not *do* anything. It stands, and it clings to the cross.

A number of ethicists, white and black, have noted that, in Timothy McGee's words, "white people aiming at becoming good moral

subjects...or overcoming their whiteness exhibit a lack of patience."⁶¹ Laurie Cassidy, for example, cautions white Christians against "action plans" that leap to fix the social problems created by hundreds of years of systemic racism, asking instead that we seek our own salvation in a stance of acknowledgment of our own "complicity" and lack of "innocence." This stance is "a radical interruption of white privilege because it is not pretending to know how not to be white, or how not to be complicit."⁶² If the same circumstances can call for different responses from different audiences, perhaps the "beautiful impatience" M. Shawn Copeland and Willie Jennings identify in Black Lives Matter activists is proper to the oppressed, whereas patient lament and penance is proper to the person who recognizes her own complicity in sin.⁶³

John Brown is a peculiar figure to invoke in this context; he certainly had an "action plan," and it's not unfair to read the historical Brown as another in a long line of white Americans



Jacob Lawrence, "The Legend of John Brown" (Gouache and tempera on paper, 1941; serigraph on paper, 1977)

1. John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America

⁶¹ McGee, "Against (White) Redemption: James Cone and the Christological Disruption of Racial Discourse and White Solidarity," 556.

⁶² Laurie M. Cassidy, "Grotesque Un/Knowing of Suffering: A White Christian Response," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 48.

⁶³ Copeland, "Memory, #BlackLivesMatter, and Theologians," 3.

who felt they knew more than their black friends and comrades about how to organize a revolution. This is, however, another place where I would say encountering Brown as a white person through Lawrence's eyes balances a practice of impatience for justice with a practice of patience and personal humility. John Brown's actions occupy much of the series, but are framed and occasionally punctuated by contemplation. The Brown of panel 21, awaiting execution, may finally know the "despair" Vincent Lloyd speaks of as the best hope of whites: the despair which is the true prerequisite for the abandonment of all idolatry, and therefore "a training in hope."⁶⁴ This Brown has ceased to put his faith in his own plans for the destruction of slavery, and has reoriented his struggle against an eschatological horizon which, hunched over the cross, he cannot see.

In 1940, Lawrence wrote of his historical cycle: "I didn't do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe these things tie up with the Negro today. We don't have a physical slavery, but an economic slavery.... Today we can't go about [liberation] the same way [as Touissant L'Ouverture.] Any leadership would have to be of the type of Frederick Douglass. How will it come about? I don't know. I'm not a politician. I'm an artist, just trying to do my part to bring this thing about."⁶⁵ My argument is not that *The Life of John Brown* provides a specific action plan for white viewers, but that its holding of the tension between the specifics of Brown's life and the larger drama of (white) Christians' simultaneously idolatrous and salvific religion elevates it to the level of religious classic: a work which continues to demand today that its viewers, and especially its white American viewers, embrace the bleeding cross as we try to do our part to bring this thing about. In his advocacy of revolutionary violence, Brown himself remains difficult, perhaps impossible, for Christian theological ethics to absorb. Even by secular standards of success, his legacy is difficult to judge; was the Harper's Ferry raid, for example, a disaster in which Brown killed more black men than slaveowners? Or was it the opening bell of the Civil War, a battle which hastened slavery's ultimate downfall? Viewing *John Brown* as a white Christian, I do wrestle with that question. But I am more drawn by Lawrence's suggestion that contemplative absorption in the cross could lead us to gradually transform into race traitors: a people who reject the bondage of sin so thoroughly that we escape it, even if it is only against that clear blue eschatological sky that we can ever find ourselves beyond history. If then.

⁶⁴ Lloyd, "For What Are Whites to Hope?," 179.

⁶⁵ Cited in Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Expressive Cubism," 16.



22: John Brown was found 'guilty of treason and murder in the first degree' and was hanged in Charles Town, Virginia, on December 2, 1859