

Article

My Soul Looks *Beyond* in Wonder: Curating Faith, Freedom, and Futurity at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

Michael Brandon McCormack ^{1,2}

¹ Department of Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, USA; b.mccormack@louisville.edu

² Department of Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, USA

Abstract: This article offers a description and critical reflection upon two recent exhibits on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC): *Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism, and Popular Culture* and *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. The article explores the interplay of mutually reinforcing themes of faith, freedom, and futurity that emerge when examining the exhibits together. This article also demonstrates the public significance of the curation of religion and culture in museums and other cultural spaces beyond the academy and religious institutions. It further shows how religion becomes a site of critical meditation upon and creative manifestation or materialization of Black futures. As such, this article contributes to more expansive discourses on the interplay between Black studies and the study of religion.

Keywords: Black religion; Afrofuturism; popular culture; museums; faith; freedom; futurity



Citation: McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2024. My Soul Looks *Beyond* in Wonder: Curating Faith, Freedom, and Futurity at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. *Religions* 15: 51. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010051>

Academic Editors: Carol E. Henderson and Christopher Metress

Received: 12 September 2023

Revised: 7 November 2023

Accepted: 5 December 2023

Published: 29 December 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In March 2023, the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR) held its 53rd annual meeting in Washington, D.C. On the second morning of the meeting, the Society organized a group tour of the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). The tour was led by SSBR member and NMAAHC curator of religion Dr. Eric Lewis Williams. After welcoming and orienting the group to the museum, Dr. Williams focused our visit upon two "Current Special Exhibitions": *Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism, and Popular Culture* and *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*.

Upon entering each respective exhibit space, I was immediately struck by the cacophony of sounds—emanating from musical, audio, and visual recordings. More impressive still was the awe-inspiring display of visual stimuli, from rapidly moving images to the static but seemingly pulsating collection of material cultural artifacts. In similar yet distinctive ways, each exhibit evoked a sense of wonder at the historical resilience and future possibilities of Black life in the New World and in new worlds yet to come. *Spirit in the Dark* and *Afrofuturism* remind us that Black life in the Americas, and throughout the African diaspora, has always demanded a deep sense of faith in the possibilities of a future that promises freedoms beyond those experienced in the here and now.

This article offers a description and critical reflection upon *Spirit in the Dark* and *Afrofuturism*, respectively, drawing out the interplay of mutually reinforcing themes of faith, freedom, and futurity that emerge when considering the exhibits together. The National Museum of African American History and Culture adds an important cultural and curatorial site of (inter-) national significance that expands upon my previous work—a series of articles on the scholarly and public significance of the curation of Black religion and culture in museum and other cultural spaces, beyond the academy and religious institutions, proper (McCormack 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021). In these previous works, I have

argued that via their use of the arts and artifacts, museum spaces and other cultural institutions contribute to the public understanding of religion, especially in relation to fraught social issues, in ways that are often more deeply resonant than discourses emerging from religious or academic institutions. As such, this article expands upon my previous work by first offering a descriptive account of the curatorial strategies at work in the National Museum's exhibitions to show how they create distinctive angles of vision that shape public perception of the interplay of race, religion, and culture. Moreover, the article moves beyond the descriptive to offer critical reflections upon how these exhibits offer insights into the role of religion in critical discourses in Black Studies, including Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism. Thus, this article also furthers a theme within my recent work on religion as a site of critical meditation upon and creative manifestation or materialization of Black futures.

2. Description of the Exhibits

Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism and Popular Culture, presented by the National Museum of African American History and Culture's Center for the Study of Religious Life, opened to the public on 18 November 2022. The exhibit is located on Level 2 of the NMAAHC, in the Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA) gallery. Displaying photographs from the Johnson Publishing Company archives, alongside other material artifacts from the museum's collections, and accompanied by a carefully curated selection of musical and spoken-word performances, sights and sounds of Black religious and cultural life reverberate throughout the small, intimate exhibition space. The curated playlist for the exhibit includes selections from artists ranging from Sister Rosetta Tharpe and The Sammy Price Trio to Prince and the New Power Generation, from Nina Simone to Sounds of Blackness. The playlist not only adds a powerful sonic dimension to the viewing experience but also expands that experience beyond the museum space as a downloadable soundtrack accessible via selected media platforms.¹

The exhibit entrance is marked by an arresting 8 ft image of Marvin Gaye, hands raised above his head, as if in a moment of ecstasy, or praise, or both. The black and white image is cast in a shade of midnight blue and is overlaid at the upper and lower edges with thick diagonal yellow, orange, and pink lines in rich and warm tones, signifying penetrating beams of light and the presence of spirit shining in the darkness. Organized around three distinct but overlapping themes—"Blurred Lines: Holy | Profane", "Bearing Witness: Protest | Praise", and "Lived Realities: Suffering | Hope"—the exhibit is curated to show the diversity and often unexplored dimensions, of Black religious experience, while also contributing to public understanding of "the role religion has played in the struggle for human dignity and social equality".² Just inside the exhibit, an introductory text reads, "Sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, and at times in the shadows—but always somewhere in the frame—religion is essential to the story of Black America".

Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures debuted on Friday, 24 March 2023. The exhibit is located on the Concourse Level in the Bank of America Special Exhibitions Gallery. It is a deceptively extensive exhibit that gradually unfolds from the compact, spacecraft-themed entrance and opens into a spacious area displaying a vast array of artifacts, images, videos, and sounds physically, visually, and sonically representing the expansiveness and capaciousness of Black futurity. A dimly lit introductory display, accented by more intense laser blue lighting, offers a working definition of Afrofuturism as "an evolving concept expressed via a Black cultural lens that reimagines, reinterprets, and reclaims the past and present for a more empowering future for African Americans". *The Cosmic Companion: Your Guide to the Exhibition*, which can be obtained at the entrance, encourages visitors to imagine themselves as space-time *travelers* and citizens of the universe, navigating a world of Black imagination.³

The *Afrofuturism* exhibit is carefully curated into three zones: "The History of Black Futures", "New Black Futures", and "Infinite Possibilities". Conceptually, the zones begin with "African Legacies" and, depending on how travelers navigate the space, end with either

“Building Black Worlds” or “Technofutures”. Six curated “Discovery Treks” (*Space is the Place*; *Alien(nation)*; *Fantastic Voyage*; *Speculative Sci-Fi, Arts, & Poetics*; *Black Worlds*; and *Future Casting*) offer travelers various pathways through the exhibition ranging from 30 to 60 min, based upon time and interest. No matter how travelers choose to navigate the space, they enter a Black sacred cosmos where they can become better in tune with the infinite possibilities of Black futurity, imagined beyond the limitations of an anti-Black world.

2.1. Afrofuturistic Themes in *Spirit in the Dark* Exhibit

The *Spirit in the Dark* exhibition displays the complex interplay between religion and culture, as well as religion’s role(s) in ongoing struggles for freedom, justice, and human dignity among Black Americans. The exhibit draws extensively upon the photographic archives of the Johnson Publishing Company, which published iconic Black magazines such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*). The NMAACH and the Getty Research Institute, new co-owners of the archive, worked to digitize and display (both within the museum and virtually) thousands of images, which bear witness to African-American spiritual and social strivings. Put another way, the photographs in this archive bear witness to Black American struggles—at once religious, cultural, and political—to materialize their freedom dreams or aspirations toward Black futures characterized by greater degrees of freedom.

In his opening essay for *Double Exposure: Movements, Motions, Moments: Photographs of Religion and Spirituality from the National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Eric Lewis Williams discusses how photographs of religion in the NMAACH’s archives not only bear witness to an essential dimension of Black American life, but also provide viewers an angle of vision into a “beauty that both resonates with and transcends our personal experiences, inspiring awe, reverence, wonder, and contemplation” (Williams 2023, p. 9). In an essay entitled, “The Presence of Power and the Power of Presence”, in the same volume, historian of religion Judith Weisenfeld describes how photographers have long attempted to capture experiences of divine power and presence in Black religious life. According to Weisenfeld, “From the time of photography’s invention, those who produced images and those who gazed upon them wondered whether the technology could reveal powers, persons, and dimensions beyond our material reality and open new means of access to the spiritual” (Weisenfeld 2023, p. 14). Both Williams and Weisenfeld evoke “wonder”, both in terms of captivation and contemplation, to describe how Black Americans deploy religion to imagine alternative possibilities for physical and spiritual freedom beyond (and indeed, within) the material conditions and constraints of this world.

For instance, the image of Marvin Gaye performing at Capital Center, Landover, Maryland, in August 1974, which marks the entrance to the exhibit space, is taken up within the “Blurred Lines” storyline as a prime example of the transgression of sacred/secular divides within Black religion and culture. For our purposes, however, I am interested in the way the exhibit not only shows how Gaye’s seemingly secular musical performances “further complicate conventional notions of the holy and the profane”, but also draws upon the archival material of *Ebony* Magazine to describe Gaye’s performance as “seemingly in ‘pursuit of some ethereal other-world.’” This seemingly “otherworldly” yearning for freedom can be seen more clearly in the exhibit’s curated storyline, “Lived Realities: Suffering | Hope”. However, themes of freedom in other worlds are also present in the storyline, “Blurred Lines: Holy | Profane”, which calls attention to the porous boundaries between the mundane and the sacred, or those moments when “divine” possibilities are revealed within the everydayness of ordinary time and space.

Beyond visual representations, a recording of “Up Above My Head I Hear Music in the Air” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Sammy Price Trio is featured in the musical soundtrack to the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibit—an inclusion that suggests the interplay between faith and/in futurity and freedom that I argue demonstrates the overlapping terrain of these exhibits. Via their collective ritualized performance of the spirituals, amid the mundane everydayness of their lives, enslaved Africans and their progeny imagined

divinely orchestrated deliverance that allowed them to hold on to the hope of freedom both *beyond* and *within* this world. Tharpe's performance of the lyrics to this spiritual bear witness to the testimony of the enslaved that their perception of sonic frequencies of freedom, beyond the material realities of their present, meant there must be a "heaven", an "other world", or a sacred space where they could enjoy freedom, "somewhere".

Such religious imaginings have long been critiqued (and often dismissed) as "otherworldly" and positioned over against "this-worldly" articulations of "prophetic", which is to say "political", religious thought and practice. However, more recent thoughts on Black "freedom dreams", Black (feminist) futurities, and the like demand a rethinking and reclaiming of the significance of this "otherworldly" dimension of Black religious thought and practice (Kelley 2002; Campt 2017). For instance, recent trajectories in Black Studies have taken up the notion of "otherwise worlds" of possibility for Black life, which share conceptual terrain with Black religious thought. However, too often, such trajectories within Black Studies fail to fully acknowledge the relationship between these secularized notions of a more foundational Black sacred imagination.⁴

Exceptions can be found in the recent work of scholars of Black religion and culture, Ashon Crawley and J. Kameron Carter, who both take up notions of "otherwise" in relation to religion and/or the sacred in their respective essays in the edited volume, *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*. Crawley's essay, "Stayed | Freedom | Hallelujah", signifies the Black musical tradition of the spirituals to ground his argument for otherwise possibilities found in the cultural performance of Black Pentecostalism. Carter's essay, "Other Worlds, Nowhere (or, The Sacred Otherwise)", is a more philosophical and poetic meditation on the significance of otherworldliness as a metaphorical space from which to imagine alternative possibilities of material and social relations. For Carter, such otherworldliness involves both political theology and what he calls a poetics of the sacred, which both critiques and reimagines the white supremacist order of things (especially property) in an anti-Black world. Crawley, drawing upon Black Pentecostal practices, describes a notion of "otherwise worlds" in terms of "excess", or that performance of blackness which exceeds the violence routinely visited upon Black flesh, and opens toward "the celebratory possibility of otherwise", as demonstrated in the ecstatic performances of Black Pentecostal practice (Crawley 2020; Carter 2020).

"Bearing Witness: Protest | Praise", a storyline focused on disrupting the often-overwrought bifurcation between ecstatic worship and political organizing within Black religious traditions, offers a narrative and visual representation of the theoretical arguments above. "Bearing Witness" displays an image of gospel artist Mahalia Jackson standing behind the lectern at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 28 August 1963. The image captures Jackson's performance of "I've Been Buked and I've Been Scorned". Insofar as Jackson describes her gospel performances as a mode of performance in which she "could talk to God", her music can clearly be understood and categorized as a modality of religious *praise*. Yet, performed within the context of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (emphasis added), it is simultaneously a voice of religious *protest* against the harsh historical conditions that gave birth to the spiritual. Jackson's *praise* music, which she sang before a crowd of hundreds of thousands of organizers, activists, and allies, took on added meaning as political *protest* within the context of the march and the movement.

Indeed, singing about the historical and contemporary hardships people of African descent have experienced on the National Mall not only bore witness to the anti-Black violence of *this* world but simultaneously bore (and continues to bear) witness to a religious vision of an "other" world of social (and yet no less spiritual) freedom, beyond and yet within, *this* world. To be sure, centuries after their origins in the antebellum era, the lyrics of "Up Above My Head" would be reinterpreted during the civil rights era by descendants of the enslaved as "up above my head, I hear *freedom* in the air".

It should not be surprising then, that Jackson, whose rendition of the gospel song "How I Got Over" (which she also sang at the March on Washington) remains unmatched, offered a musical testimony in which her "soul" not only "looks back", but also "looks

beyond” “this world”, in “wonder” at the infinite possibilities of Black futurity, in which she was actively engaged in building via her involvement in the struggle for civil rights. It should not be forgotten that later that day, it would be Mahalia Jackson who would intuitively shout, “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” prompting the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to improvise on his keynote speech to include his now-famous religious vision of a world “otherwise” than the Jim Crow South that had characterized Black life in the United States since the end of Reconstruction.

While many of the photographs and artifacts focus upon variations in an Afro-Protestant Christian theme, archival photographs of Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz, Muhammad Ali, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar call attention to the significant presence of Islam, and the Nation of Islam (NOI) in particular, within African American religious life and culture. A copy of the album *The Last Message* (X 1967), a vinyl recording of Malcolm X’s last speech, is displayed within the exhibit. The black album cover centers on a photograph of Malcolm standing behind a podium covered with microphones and cords. He is peering upward and askance, perhaps into the heavens, as if to carefully consider the weight of his next words to the gathered audience. In the background, on the wall behind the podium, is a large mural, which is only partially visible, but appears to be an apocalyptic image of Jesus “coming in the clouds”. This visual reference to the biblical book of Revelation calls up images of the prophetic judgment of “this world” and apocalyptic visions of a “new heaven and a new earth”. It is often argued that Malcolm’s militant Muslim rhetoric was more “nightmare” than Martin King’s “dream” of a world characterized by a beloved community. Nevertheless, the Nation of Islam’s teachings, in which Malcolm was steeped, were no less replete with esoteric cosmologies, visions, or “dreams” of an “other world”.

Stephen C. Finley’s recent work, *In and Out of this World: Material and Extraterrestrial Bodies in the Nation of Islam*, reminds us of how the NOI’s myth of Yakub, an origin story shaping the theological perspective and teachings of Elijah Muhammad, served as a mode of religious critique of “devilish” racialized violence against Black bodies in the United States and elsewhere. Moreover, Finley’s work discusses the NOI’s broader appeal to otherworldly ideas, such as the Mother Plane or the Mother Wheel, names given to unidentified flying objects believed to be agents of apocalyptic judgment upon a nation irredeemably committed to white supremacist violence against Black bodies. The Mother Plane or Mother Wheel was also understood by adherents of the Nation of Islam as a transcendent vehicle of deliverance to another world for Black people. According to Finley, the Nation of Islam is best understood as a *religious* nationalist organization committed not to political engagement in *this world* but rather religiously reorienting Black people in preparation for “the world to come, a new world after the age of white domination, a world that would disclose black bodies as preeminent and beautiful” (Finley 2023, p. 9).

Appeals to “the world to come” notwithstanding, the Nation of Islam was nevertheless invested in a Black nationalist project to transform *this world* (or open socio-economic and political space within it) into a place where Black people could survive and thrive. A copy of the album *Angela Davis Speaks* (Davis 1971), on display within the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibit, bears witness to this reality. The plain white album cover provides a stark backdrop for the iconic “Free Angela Davis Now!” image widely circulated by the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis and other activist groups—one of several images of Davis that would become embedded in Black popular culture. In this profile shot, Davis is looking off, and slightly upward, into the distance, her gaze suggesting that she is contemplating some reality beyond her then-present captive condition.

Angela Davis Speaks is a recording of an interview conducted by Davis’s lawyer, Margaret Burnum, while she was imprisoned in New York at the Women’s House of Detention as she was awaiting trial for the Soledad Brothers case.⁵ The exclusive interview recorded for the album was produced by WABC-TV “Like It Is”, hosted by Gil Noble, and distributed by Folkways Records. However, the interview was initially arranged by Joe Walker, the New York editor of *Muhammad Speaks*, the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam from 1960 to 1975.⁶ *Muhammad Speaks*, first published by Malcolm X, as *Mr. Muhammad Speaks*,

included in its masthead a mission statement, which read, “Dedicated to Freedom, Justice and Equality for the so-called Negro. The Earth Belongs to Allah”.

The album records Angela Davis’s response to thirteen questions, which were derived from a poll created by *Muhammad Speaks*, asking Black residents of Harlem what they would most like to ask Davis. The 1 January 1971 issue of *Muhammad Speaks* published the interview as “Exclusive: Muhammad Speaks presents people’s questions to Angela Davis” by Joe Walker (Hussain 2021). Chief among the people of Harlem’s questions was, “Why are you a communist?” Davis’s answer spoke to her desire to see a world “otherwise” than the one in which she lived, which she understood to be characterized by American capitalist exploitation. In an excerpt that begins the album, Davis argues, “As a communist, I have to demand radical change . . . now I maintain that only under a socialist reorganization of society can we even begin to deal with these basic material problems. . . Only after we eradicate the exploitation of man by man can we begin to build a humane society, both for Black, Brown, and white people”.⁷ While Davis’s vision of societal change may be decidedly secular, it shares with Black religion a certain faith in the future that envisions expanded possibilities of freedom. Moreover, Davis’s vision of radical transformation foreshadows themes of Black world-building that are prominent within the *Afrofuturism* exhibit.

The “Lived Realities: Suffering | Hope” storyline of the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibit also speaks to themes within Black religious culture that are voiced within the *Afrofuturism* exhibit. On the exhibit website (accessible via QR codes throughout the exhibit), just below an image of Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker at the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party state convention (1964), the following quote serves as the opening epigraph of the “Lived Realities: Suffering | Hope” storyline:

Through a myriad of creative social and political endeavors, many Black artists and activists have deployed their faith, talents, and moral visions to articulate the complex dimensions of the suffering and trauma of Black people in America. Further marshaling their creative genius, these same individuals offered *bold visions of Black flourishing and restructured new worlds of Black possibility*. (emphasis added)

“Lived Realities: Suffering | Hope” also includes a photograph of recording artist Stevie Wonder performing at a benefit concert for disadvantaged children at Madison Square Garden (New York City) in 1974. The soundtrack to the exhibit calls even greater attention to Stevie Wonder by including three tracks from his album *Innervisions* (Wonder 1973).⁸ In addition to “Living for the City” and “Jesus Children of America”, Wonder’s song “Higher Ground” points listeners toward a set of possibilities, motivated by faith, beyond the everydayness of Black life in America in the 1970s. Indeed, the album cover for *Innervisions* displays a drawing of the artist peering out of an enclosed place, suggesting a space of confinement or incarceration. The artist’s line of sight, or trajectory of spiritual vision, is portrayed graphically via two diagonal lines extending upward from his eyes at a forty-five-degree angle and extending beyond the frame of the album. The object of the artist’s gaze is unknown, although one might assume that it is the possibility of an “other world” seen more clearly in “the heavens”. We might also imagine that Wonder’s “inner visions” extend upward and outward to imagine what the “Lived Realities” storyline describes as “bold visions of Black flourishing and restructured new worlds of Black possibility”. Such bold visions, which are grounded in faith and freedom dreams of Black survival and thriving in the future, connect the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibit to the *Afrofuturism* exhibit, which will be taken up in the remainder of the article.

2.2. Religious Themes in the Afrofuturism Exhibit

The *Afrofuturism* exhibit does not explicitly foreground religion. However, themes of African-American spiritual strivings are interwoven throughout the exhibit. *Zone 1: The History of Black Futures* introduces travelers to “African Legacies”, or the African past of Black futures, via displays of art and artifacts from various African cultures. For instance, on display is a wooden stool from Mali, hand carved by a Dogon artist, symbolizing “the divine relationship between the Earth and sky”. An accompanying image of masked Dogon

dancers is contextualized via a museum label describing “African Cultural Astronomy”. The label explains how ancient African civilizations have long looked to the heavens, using various methods and technologies of astronomical observation to interpret the meaning and significance of their terrestrial lives on earth in light of cosmological realities well beyond this planet. The museum label makes interpretive links by informing travelers that “Creating art and social practices through the lens of scientific observation and technology, the cultural astronomy of African civilizations serves as a precursor to Afrofuturism”. This point is emphasized via a quote from author Ytasha Womack, which explains the following:

Afrofuturist artists cite Egyptian deities, the Dogon myths, water myths, and Yoruba orishas more than any other African cosmology in their art, music, and literature. . . the Dogon’s star bond with Sirius and ancient Egyptians’ unexplained technologies are the basis for Afrofuturist lore, art, and spectacle.⁹

As such, “Myths, Symbols, and Storytelling” provide an important interpretive lens through which to consider the African origins of the more recent development of diasporic aesthetic theories and practices of Afrofuturism. The “African Legacies” section of the exhibit helps travelers to trace a genealogy of Afrofuturist thought that extends back to ancient traditions and wisdom that forged African cultural identities via the imagination and narration (whether iconographic or oral) of “the interstellar identities of Egyptian deities such as the god Ra”. The wisdom of these traditions has been transmitted and adapted, often through the arts, throughout the centuries and has been taken up by Afrofuturist artists and intellectuals to imagine liberated futures and expansive identities for Black people in the present. In her essay, “I Came to Africa on a Spaceship”, in *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*, published as a companion volume for the exhibit, Ytasha Womack traces the religio-cultural significance of these ancient “African legacies”, throughout more contemporary Black cultural productions such as Beyoncé’s visual album, *Lemonade*, as well as HBO’s series *Lovecraft Country* (Womack 2023, pp. 51–53).

Zone 1 traces these African artistic and *intellectual* inheritances from the ancient through the modern era. “Freedom and Deliverance”, prominent refrains within *New World* African American religious thought and practice, are critical themes woven throughout Zone 1 and the entirety of the exhibition. This theme first emerges within the exhibit to call attention to 18th- and 19th-century US-based articulations of “proto-Afrofuturists” who, it is argued, “reimagined Black futures amid the backdrop of slavery and societal racism”. This theme also extends to the literary and visual productions of early twentieth-century artists, such as those who gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance or The New Negro Movement. Here, we see another moment of thematic overlap between *Afrofuturism* and *Spirit in the Dark*. An image from the Johnson Publishing Company Archive of Langston Hughes signing a copy of his novel *Tambourines to Glory* (Hughes 1958) for Adam Clayton Powell Jr. is featured within the “Lived Realities” storyline of *Spirit in the Dark*.¹⁰ Commenting on the prominence of religious themes, such as suffering and salvation, in Hughes’ work, the exhibit website draws upon a quote from the *Negro Digest* by Addison Gayle Jr. Gayle wrote of Hughes that even as the Harlem Renaissance poet gave profound voice to the depths of despair in Black life, “his words made visible to you a new universe, aglow with promise and hope”. We can hear in Gayle’s commentary an attention to a vision of not only an “other world” but a religious revelation of an alternative “universe” of infinite possibilities for Black life, a theme that runs throughout the *Afrofuturism* exhibit.¹¹

Zone 1 of the Afrofuturism exhibit also includes the thought and speculative fiction of early twentieth-century intellectuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois. In an essay entitled “W.E.B. Du Bois: Documenting the Present, Reinterpreting the Past, and Imagining the Future”, William S. Pretzer, senior curator of history at the NMAAHC, describes how DuBois’s early twentieth-century writings, such as his short story, “The Comet” and his full-length novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* imagined alternative futures for Black Americans characterized by deliverance from the inequalities of his era and by faith and in a freer future (Pretzer 2023). Thus, Pretzer argues that Du Bois “anticipated the elements of what two generations later would be called Afrofuturism” (Pretzer 2023).¹² Of course, DuBois’s writings also

included interpretive essays on the religious lives, or spiritual strivings, of the formerly enslaved and recently emancipated. Among the religious practices that DuBois discussed were the spirituals, or “the sorrow songs” as he would refer to them, much to the chagrin of later intellectuals, such as Zora Neal Hurston. To Hurston’s point, the spirituals not only gave voice to the tragic experiences of the enslaved but also bore witness to hope—to alternative possibilities for the future (Hurston 1981).

It is this imagination of “otherwise worlds” or alternative possibilities of Black world-making that mark zones two and three of the exhibit—“New Black Futures” and “Infinite Possibilities”, respectively. Indeed, “world-building” is a prominent theme running through both zones. In *Zone 2: New Black Futures*, travelers are asked to consider not only how African Americans draw upon various technological advancements to construct new identities (and new ideas about what it means to be human, more broadly) but also how “Black creatives and intellectuals [are] envisioning new futures for African Americans outside the realities of racism and segregated life”.¹³ In this sense, the *Afrofuturism* exhibit is linked to curatorial themes that run throughout the National Museum of an African American tradition of activism. For instance, an image of young Black activists in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, circa 1964, shows a young woman holding a makeshift picket sign that reads “Open Our Future”. Arguably, Afrofuturist artists, creatives, and activists are expanding upon that tradition of activism, which seeks to open space to build other worlds more hospitable to Black futurity.

In order to aid travelers in the envisioning of such Black futurity, displays in Zone 2 include objects and stories that “explore how Afrofuturism not only exists as an intellectual platform for building vast, imaginative worlds but also functions to foster realized, physical spaces that develop and nurture Black creative and activist expression”. In other words, if J. Kameron Carter imagines “otherwise worlds” as a metaphorical conceptual space for imagining Black futurity, this exhibit presses us to consider the ways such imaginings of worldbuilding concretize into physical and virtual cultural spaces for Black flourishing. This theme builds upon a series of panel discussions hosted by the NMAAHC in January 2022. The series was entitled “Claiming Space: A Symposium on Black Futures—Past, Present, and Potential”.¹⁴ Panels in the series included “Aquatic Space: Water in the Afrofuturist Imagination”, “Terrestrial Space: Reclaiming Landscapes”, “Cyber Space: Political Activism and Afrofuturism in the Digital Age”, and “Personal Space: Afrofuturist Bodies and Beyond”. Each panel interrogates concrete possibilities for Black worldbuilding in various dimensions of time and space beyond the here and now.

Zone 3: Infinite Possibilities expands upon this theme of building Black worlds. In this zone, realist images and artifacts of state-sponsored violence against Black bodies and resistance to such violence are juxtaposed with displays of the Black fantastic, namely the futuristic world of Wakanda, popularized in the blockbuster film *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). Wakanda’s futuristic utopian world of post- or anti-colonial African flourishing was in many ways responsible for the popularization of Afrofuturism. Indeed, for many viewers, yearning for just the kind of aesthetic visualization (the problematic political vision of the Marvel film notwithstanding) of blackness in all its beauty and complexity represented the epitome of the “infinite possibilities” articulated in Afrofuturism. However, this zone also brings travelers face to face with the violent and death-dealing practices of an anti-Black world that gave rise to the contemporary movement for Black lives. Images and artifacts from protest movements spanning from the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin to the 2020 killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor remind travelers of the urgency of Black world building or the imagining and materialization of “otherwise worlds” that are conducive to Black futurity and flourishing.

On display within this zone is *The Mirror Casket* sculpture, created by a collective of St. Louis-based artists, which was carried through the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. The intentionally cracked mirror, which adorns the lid of the casket, invites meditation not simply on one’s own mortality but on the imminent threat of a violent death at the hands of the state or those vigilantes who presume to act in the interest of, and with immunity from,

the state. Yet, when viewed within the exhibit space as a sculpture, *The Mirror Casket* also seems to signify something beyond Black death. The cracked mirror reflects and refracts not only the bright spotlight of the display case in which it rests but also the ultraviolet lights set against the expansive cosmic blackness that forms the sacred canopy above and surrounding the exhibit space. The ultraviolet glow, which resembles a constellation of stars against the mirrored surface of the casket, suggests African-derived cosmologies in which death opens into ancestral afterlife. Here, we are invited to imagine an Afrofuturist vision of transcendence in which death is denied the final word over Black life.

The final message of the *Cosmic Companion* is a reminder of the simple quotation, “There are Black People in the Future”,¹⁵ which is prominently displayed as a billboard within the exhibit and is also featured in bold red letters set against the bright yellow back cover of the volume, *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. The *Cosmic Companion* deploys this powerful quotation as both an invocation and benediction to the exhibit, inviting travelers to envision and enact an Afrofuturist vision of social transformation where “white supremacy holds no power”.

3. Conclusions

Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism, and Popular Culture and *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* are separate and distinctive exhibitions, to be sure. They map different conceptual and cultural terrain, emphasizing distinctive aspects of Black cultural experience and work in the United States, and throughout the African diaspora. Nevertheless, these exhibits share significant areas of overlap that, when taken in together, as was the case with our SSBR guided tour, reveal how the aspirational and forward-looking postures of faith, freedom, and futurity (or faith *in* futurity) become bound up with one another in Black life in profound and sometimes provocative ways. In one way or another, both exhibits speak to the ways that Black creatives and cultural workers, including those creatively engaged in religious culture work and those whose culture work creatively deploys religious themes, have long been committed to imagining and materializing what Black Arts Movement writer and critic, Larry Neal, referred to as “visions of a liberated future” (Neal 1989). Put another way, these culture workers demonstrated their commitments to Black survival and thriving in an anti-Black world by aiding in the cultural politics and poetics of Black freedom dreaming, which is to say, casting visions of possibility beyond the socio-economic and political violence against Black bodies which marked their own historical present. Thus, Black religious and cultural workers have not only looked *back* in wonder at how we got over or marveling at our collective survival but have also looked *beyond* in wonder at infinite possibilities of Black futurity, uninhibited by white supremacy and anti-Black violence and death. More importantly, perhaps, these exhibits invite us to imagine and to *create* an “otherwise world” or a “sacred otherwise” in which “possibilities of joy, liberation, invention, and freedom” can flourish.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that the curatorial strategies to make the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibition accessible virtually via NMAAHC’s “Searchable Museum” website and to make the site sharable via X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, while also making the exhibition “soundtrack” available via platforms such as Apple Music, Tidal, and YouTube Music, are demonstrations of the exhibition’s theme of the intertwinement of religion, music, and popular culture.
- ² This quotation was obtained from the museum label in the *Spirit in the Dark* exhibit. Unless otherwise noted, quotes throughout this essay directly pertaining to either exhibit are from information printed on official museum labels.
- ³ *The Cosmic Companion: Your Guide to the Exhibition* is a twenty-five-page booklet produced by the NMAAHC containing supplemental information for the exhibit. The companion offers introductory commentary for each “Zone” of the exhibit,

reflections on selected artifacts within the exhibit, as well as guiding questions to be considered when moving through the exhibit space (Strait and Conwill 2023) in association with the NMAAHC. *Afrofuturism* is a more expansive, 216-page, edited volume, which contains over twenty essays on Afrofuturism and is filled with a range of images, some of which are contained within the exhibit, but many more that expand the visual representation of the *Afrofuturism* exhibit for visitors who desire a deeper dive into the subject, as well as for those who are unable to visit the exhibit in person.

In his recent work (Sorett 2023), Josef Sorett argues that Black studies has become not only a secularized but also a secularizing discipline that too often fails to acknowledge, or denies, its Afro-Protestant roots.

For an account of Davis's life and legal trials, including the Soledad Brothers case, see Davis (1974).

Joe Walker not only arranged the interview for *Angela Davis Speaks*, but he was also actively engaged in campaigning for Davis's release from prison.

Angela Davis Speaks, 2004 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings/1971 Folkways Records.

Stevie Wonder's three tracks are the most tracks from any single album or artist on the exhibit soundtrack.

For the full context of this quotation, featured on the exhibit's museum label, see Womack (2013, p. 80).

The soundtrack to the exhibit includes a recording of a performance of "Tambourines to Glory" by Second Canaan Baptist Church Porter Singers on the album *Gospel Songs by Langston Hughes and John Hundley*, produced by Folkways Records (Hughes and Hundley 1958).

Langston Hughes could certainly have also been featured within the "Blurred Lines" storyline, as his work as a "secular" literary artist of the Harlem Renaissance era demonstrates the porousness of the "sacred" and the "profane" in Black life. Indeed, the presence of Hughes and Powell—A U.S. Senator and pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem—in the same photograph shines further light upon the ways that both figures transgressed and blurred boundaries of African American religio-socio-cultural-political experience.

Pretzer notes DuBois's commitments to exploration and experimentalism in his fictional writings, which he argues were coupled with a strongly held belief in a better future.

As referenced in the unpublished exhibition guide to the *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* exhibit, *The Cosmic Companion: Your Guide to the Exhibition*, 11.

For more information on this panel series, see <https://airandspace.si.edu/afrofuturism/claiming-space-symposium> (accessed on 17 July 2023).

This quotation, rendered art, is attributed to Alisha B. Wormsley, who placed the quote on a billboard in a gentrifying neighborhood in Pittsburgh in 2017. Wormsley states that she was inspired by Afrofuturist artists who asserted the need for Black people to (re-)claim their space. See Wormsley's website: <https://www.alishabwormsley.com/tabpittf> (accessed on 26 June 2023).

References

- Campt, Tina M. 2017. *Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity*. In *Listening to Images*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Carter, J. Kameron. 2020. Other Worlds, Nowhere (or, The Sacred Otherwise). In *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*. Edited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smit. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 158–209.
- Coogler, Ryan, dir. 2018. *Black Panther*. New York: Marvel Studios.
- Crawley, Ashon. 2020. Stayed | Hallelujah | Freedom. In *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*. Edited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smit. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 27–37.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1971. *Angela Davis Speaks*. Washington, DC: Folkways Records.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1974. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: Random House.
- Finley, Stephen C. 2023. *In and Out of This World: Material and Extraterrestrial Bodies in the Nation of Islam*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hughes, Langston. 1958. *Tambourines to Glory*. New York: The John Day Company.
- Hughes, Langston, and John Hundley. 1958. *Gospel Songs by Langston Hughes and John Hundley*. Washington, DC: Folkways Records.
- Hurston, Zora Neal. 1981. *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: Turtle Island.
- Hussain, Khuram. 2021. Muhammad Speaks for Freedom, Justice, and Equality. *JSTOR Daily*, May 13. Available online: <https://daily.jstor.org/occ-reveal-digital-muhammad-speaks/> (accessed on 28 August 2023).
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2017. Fighting Injustice and Intolerance: Re-Presentations of Race and Religion at the Muhammad Ali Center. *Religions* 8: 241. [CrossRef]
- McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2019. 'I'm Muslim, What's Wrong with That?': Representational Interventions in Islamophobia at the Muhammad Ali Center. *Journal of Africana Religions* 7: 152–63. [CrossRef]
- McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2020. "But We are Still Living in Maafa": Commemorating 1619–2019 through Ritual Performances of Healing and Hope in New Orleans and New York. *Liturgy* 35: 42–50. [CrossRef]
- McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2021. "Breonna Taylor Could Have Been Me": Bearing Witness to Black (Feminist) Futurity in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* at the Speed Art Museum". *Religions* 12: 980. [CrossRef]
- Neal, Larry. 1989. *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*. New York: Thunders Mouth Press.

- Pretzer, William S. 2023. W.E.B. Du Bois: Documenting the Present, Reinterpreting the Past, and Imagining the Future. In *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. Edited by Kevin M. Strait and Kinshasha Holman Conwill. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, pp. 78–85.
- Sorett, Josef. 2023. *Black Is a Church: Christianity and the Contours of African American Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strait, Kevin M., and Kinshasha Holman Conwill, eds. 2023. *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.
- Weisenfeld, Judith. 2023. The Presence of Power and the Power of Presence. In *Double Exposure: Movements, Motions, Moments: Photographs of Religion and Spirituality from the National Museum of African American History and Culture*. Lewes: GILES.
- Williams, Eric Lewis. 2023. Through a Glass Darkly: Movements, Motions, and Moments in African American Religious Photography. In *Double Exposure: Movements, Motions, Moments: Photographs of Religion and Spirituality from the National Museum of African American History and Culture*. Edited by Douglas Remley and Kevin Young. Lewes: GILES.
- Womack, Ytasha L. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Womack, Ytasha L. 2023. I Came to Africa on a Spaceship. In *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. Edited by Kevin M. Strait and Kinshasha Holman Conwill. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.
- Wonder, Stevie. 1973. *Innervisions*. Detroit: Tamla.
- X, Malcolm. 1967. *The Last Message*. Englewood: All Platinum Records.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.