

Article

“Breonna Taylor Could Have Been Me”: Bearing Witness to Faith in Black (Feminist) Futurity at the Speed Art Museum’s *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* Exhibit

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Abstract: This article explores the Speed Art Museum’s exhibit, *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, as a site of meaning-making in the wake of the state-sponsored killing of Breonna Taylor. The article focuses on how the curators engaged the felt sense of vulnerability to premature death among Black viewers identified with Taylor in ways that held in tension a crisis of faith in, and an insistence upon, Black futurity.

Keywords: Breonna Taylor; the Speed Art Museum; faith; futurity



Citation: McCormack, Michael Brandon. 2021. “Breonna Taylor Could Have Been Me”: Bearing Witness to Faith in Black (Feminist) Futurity at the Speed Art Museum’s *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* Exhibit. *Religions* 12: 980. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110980>

Academic Editor: Antony W. Alumkal

Received: 20 July 2021

Accepted: 26 October 2021

Published: 9 November 2021

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1. Introduction

This article continues a trajectory of research explored in a series of articles wherein I describe and analyze how museums, cultural centers, and art spaces curate Black/Africana religion/spirituality and culture in ways that foster public discourse (and action) on “race” and “religion”, and other intersecting subject positions (McCormack 2017, 2019, 2020). In previous articles, I have argued that these cultural institutions, at their best, deploy curatorial strategies that make use of the arts and culture in ways that open and hold space for alternative conversations on the workings of race and religion that differ from discourses typically engaged within places of worship or the academy (though I do not understand these spaces to be mutually exclusive or necessarily in opposition). Nevertheless, the current moment calls greater attention to the ways that the national (and international) racial reckonings of the past year have forced American institutions, including museums and other cultural and art spaces, “to consider how they might address anti-Black violence and center marginalized voices, especially when their collecting, exhibitionary, and outreach practices have historically abetted rather than challenged the social reproduction of white supremacy” (Copeland and Glenn 2021). As one of the central flashpoints in the reckonings of 2020, the state-sponsored killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY, presented a significant challenge to institutions, artists, cultural workers, curators, intellectuals, activists, and religious practitioners attempting to respond in meaningful ways to this crucial moment.

As a scholar trained in Black religious and cultural studies, I am especially interested in how cultural and curatorial practices of meaning-making might inform our understanding of theory and praxis at the intersections of Black Study and the study of religion, in the wake of ongoing anti-Black violence and premature death. Here, I am influenced by the work of literary theorist Christina Sharpe, whose recent work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, asks us to sit with what it means to *live* “in the wake” of relentless anti-Black violence and death. However, Sharpe’s focus is not simply on theorizing anti-Black violence and premature death. Rather, her work calls for a more demanding practice of imagination in order to bring into view and enact what she calls the “largeness of black life”, or “black life insisted from death” (Sharpe 2016). Thus, Sharpe calls for social and cultural practices of “wake work” rooted in an ethic of care for Black people in an anti-Black world. Such

practices, including religious practices, take on various forms but are arguably all oriented toward what she refers to as “aspiration”. For Sharpe, aspiration can be understood as an attempt to put breath back into Black bodies who too often are made to exclaim “I can’t breathe!” drawing upon the dying words of Eric Garner, who was strangled by New York police officers in 2015. Yet aspiration can also be understood as a (spiritual) striving toward (or faith in) Black futurity. Thus, I am particularly interested in thinking with Sharpe about how the curatorial practices and, perhaps more importantly, the community-engaged programming associated with the Speed Art Museum’s¹ exhibit, *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, might be thought of as performances of “wake work” that offer possibilities for aspiration and the reaffirmation of faith in Black futurity in the wake of the premature and tragic death of Breonna Taylor.

Although *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* was an exhibit intended to respond to racial reckonings (both local and national) in the wake of the state-sponsored killing of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other Black Americans in 2020, the community-engaged programming surrounding the exhibit also engaged *religious* reckonings, namely crises of “faith”, in the wake of Breonna Taylor’s premature death. Along these lines, my interest in the exhibit was heightened by an invitation from the Speed Museum to participate in a community-engaged panel discussion entitled, “Faith & Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*”. The panel took up questions of the complex and sometimes contradictory roles of religion in the context of contemporary racial reckonings. More specifically, this panel sought to explore the role of religion, understood in terms of “faith”, during the Breonna Taylor protests and in ongoing struggles for freedom and justice in Black communities.

It quickly became clear, however, that we could not limit our conversation to a discussion of “religion” proper, or any taken-for-granted assumptions about the role or even meaning of “faith” in the wake of the killing of Breonna Taylor. We could not simply discuss the stated theme of “faith” and “justice” without also having the more pressing conversation about “faith” in “justice”. Indeed, there seemed to be a profound crisis, or loss of “faith”, religious and otherwise, among protesters and community members after witnessing the failure of the state to indict the officers responsible for Breonna’s death. In light of such a waning of faith, we were forced to raise questions about what “futures” Black people could imagine for themselves in an unjust society marked by seemingly intractable anti-Black racism, violence, and premature death. Thus, this article explores questions of Black faith and/in futurity raised by, and wrestled with during, my engagements with “Faith & Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*”.

Yet, the article situates these questions of “Faith & Justice” within a broader engagement with the curation of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* and its cultural production of meaning “in the wake” (thinking with Sharpe) of Breonna Taylor’s premature Black death. As such, the article takes, as a point of departure, guest curator Allison Glenn’s significant attempts to engage national and local audiences in, first of all, honoring the life of Breonna Taylor beyond a reductionistic portrayal of her life as overwhelmed by death, while also exposing the anti-Black and state violence that claimed this young Black woman’s life (and the lives of countless others), all while avoiding either the representation or reproduction of Black trauma. I take this curatorial “wake work” seriously, as I see it as an attempt to re-present the worth, value, and indeed, “sacredness” of Breonna Taylor’s life, despite the “profane” violence that led to her premature death. In light of the questions raised in “Faith & Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*”, I attempt to show how Glenn and her team’s curatorial practices work to establish a Black feminist ethos of care for Black life and also work to foster a deep sense of “aspiration” or “faith” in Black futurity, in the face of the anti-Black violence that led to the premature death of Breonna Taylor and countless others.

In what cultural theorist Stuart Hall once described as a necessary detour through theory, I shift attention away from an immediate discussion on “Faith & Justice” in the middle section of this article to engage the theoretical work of art historian and critic Tina M. Campt. I do so, however, to consider how certain images displayed within the exhibit, working in tandem with other installations, work to foster both a sense of sacredness

and of faith in Black (feminist) futurity. Such a Black (feminist) futurity, however, is held in tension with a profound crisis/loss/lack of faith, among many community members, in the possibilities of a future marked by freedom from injustice, white supremacy, and anti-blackness. Along these lines, throughout the article, I attend to resonances and dissonances of the Speed Art Museum's curation of, and community engagement programming surrounding, the *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* exhibit among local activists and community members engaged in protests for justice for Breonna Taylor, as well as the ongoing Black Freedom Struggle. These resonances and dissonances led to the Speed Museum's community-engaged PhotoVoice exhibit, *It Could Have Been Me*, an expansion of the original *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* exhibit, intended to more fully reflect the lived experiences and existential reflections of Louisville's Black community in the aftermath of a turbulent year of protests. The "Faith & Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*" panel discussion was organized to mark the opening of *It Could Have Been Me*, and to engage the profound questions of faith and futurity entailed in the sense of vulnerability that led community members to confess that the fate of Breonna Taylor could have easily been theirs and *still could be* in the (near) future. As such, this article explores, describes, and analyzes how the Speed Museum attempted to promote public discourse (and action)—through curation and community engagement—around questions of faith and futurity in the wake of the persistence of premature Black death, as exemplified in the state-sponsored killing of Breonna Taylor.

2. Honoring Breonna Taylor's Life and Memory: Bearing Witness to a Black Feminist Ethos of Care

"*Promise, Witness, Remembrance*", an ambitious exhibition at the Speed Art Museum, opened to the public on 7 April 2021.² Developed in the wake of local and national protests in response to the police killing of Breonna Taylor, the exhibit received national media acclaim and has been hailed by critics as perhaps the most consequential art exhibit of our time (Volk 2021). The centerpiece and anchor of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* is a stunning 54 × 43 inch portrait of Breonna wearing an elegant turquoise gown, striking a pose full of dignity and perhaps also defiance. The portrait, by Amy Sherald, who came to national prominence in 2016 after painting the official portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama, shows Breonna Taylor not as the slain victim of state violence, as she is often depicted in the media, but rather as a proud Black woman with one hand on her hip and the other resting by her side.³ Subtly displayed is an engagement ring, which symbolizes the love between Breonna and her partner, Kenneth Walker, who were planning a family and a future together.⁴ Concerning the significance of the portrait, Amy Sherald insisted, "I want to honor Breonna's memory, and to provide some inspiration to the ongoing struggle for justice" (Ross 2021). The gravitas of Sherald's portrait is magnified against the luminous darkness of the beautifully lit wall on which it hangs. The curation of this dark color—a deep, and almost black, purple (according to Sherald, purple was Breonna's favorite color)—throughout this culminating gallery creates the ambiance of a Black sacred space. The curation of this Black sacred space encourages a remembrance of, and reverence for, Breonna's life before and after death, which is facilitated by the display of an intimate timeline of Breonna's life, narrated by her mother, Tamika Palmer.⁵ Taken together, the curation of this and other galleries in the exhibit bears witness to the world that Breonna's life (and countless other lives ended prematurely by state-sponsored violence) *mattered*.⁶

With regard to the inception of the exhibit, Speed Museum director Stephen Reiley stated, "For the past year, we've been thinking about what's the role of the museum in serving a community that's been going through trauma since the killing of Breonna Taylor and the protests that followed? What is the role of an art museum and how can we find a way for art to help people process what they've been going through" (Scott 2021). The Speed Museum's description of the exhibit is worth quoting at length:

Promise, Witness, Remembrance at the Speed Art Museum will reflect on the life of Breonna Taylor, her killing in 2020, and the year of protests that followed, in

Louisville and around the world. The exhibition explores the dualities between a personal, local story and the nation's reflection on the promise, witness, and remembrance of too many Black lives lost to gun violence.

In 'Promise', artists explore ideologies of the United States of America through the symbols that uphold them, reflecting on the nation's founding, history, and the promises and realities, both implicit and explicit, contained within them. In 'Witness', they address the contemporary moment, building upon the gap between what a nation promises and what it provides through artworks that explore ideas of resistance across time, form, and context. In 'Remembrance', they address gun violence and police brutality, their victims, and their legacies.⁷

To conceive and achieve *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, Reily and the Speed Art Museum reached out to Allison Glenn, Associate Curator of contemporary art at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. In a virtual panel discussion hosted by the Speed Art Museum, Glenn described her painstaking efforts to "get it right" by creating national and local advisory councils, including especially Tamika Palmer, to help ensure the exhibit would resonate with both a national audience and the local Louisville community.⁸ In an interview with *The New York Times*, Glenn, a curator from Detroit, described how the recent loss of her own brother to gun violence informed her approach to the exhibit: "I wanted a cabinet of advisers that could relate on a personal level" (Mitter 2021). Glenn's consultants included nationally known curators, such as Theaster Gates, who has worked with the Tamir Rice Foundation, as well as lesser-known artists with familial ties to Trayvon Martin and Alton Sterling. According to Glenn, "That experience of loss from gun violence or police brutality—or both—brings a level of care".⁹

That "level of care" was of the utmost importance to Glenn, who was adamant that she did not want to exhibit artwork that represented or reproduced the trauma of anti-Black violence and death. In an interview with Glenn for *Artforum*, contributing editor and art historian Huey Copeland describes Glenn's curatorial approach as modeling "a Black feminist ethos of care in cultural production" (Copeland and Glenn 2021). At the local level, this ethos of care was demonstrated through Glenn's collaboration with the Speed Museum's community engagement strategist, Toya Northington, and a Louisville advisory committee. These collaborative curatorial practices of Black feminist care were intended to help ensure that those who are typically not represented in, and indeed excluded from, museum spaces such as the Speed, felt as though their voices had been heard and helped to shape the curatorial process. Along these lines, Glenn stated that the more collaborative curatorial process for this exhibit was an opportunity to "listen", but she also confessed, "I don't think museums are going to get everything right. Cultural workers aren't going to get everything right. But when you listen, you provide opportunities for accessibility, for inroads, for connection. And I hope the end result provides a platform for people to feel heard, and perhaps to process the past year".¹⁰

Unfortunately, despite such care and efforts to "get it right", I received a phone call on 8 April, just after the opening day of the exhibit, expressing the frustration of local activists and protesters, many of whom experienced a profound sense of dissonance after viewing *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*. Apparently, some protestors felt the exhibit, while certainly provocative within the high art establishment, did not capture, and even deadened, the energy and voices of the protests, and was not representative of the broader movement for Black lives.¹¹ Admittedly, my initial viewing of the exhibit was influenced by this phone conversation.¹² As I viewed the more conceptual and abstract pieces of the exhibit, I could certainly see why those who had risked their lives on the streets demanding "Justice for Breonna" might be frustrated. I could see why some felt the exhibit did not "speak" to them, was not *for* them.¹³ To be sure, Glenn recognizes the ways that people who do not regularly enter museum spaces can be made uncomfortable by their illegibility and inaccessibility (Copeland and Glenn 2021). Yet, despite the most sincere care and curatorial efforts, there is, no doubt, an inevitable disconnect between experiencing fine art hanging

above the pristine terrazzo floors of the Speed Art Museum, with its marble doorways, and the experiences of marching, kneeling, sweating, and bleeding upon hot asphalt streets in downtown Louisville during the long, hot summer of 2020.¹⁴ Ultimately, however, Glenn expressed a deep sense of satisfaction in knowing that Breonna's mother, Tamika Palmer, the primary consultant (and, arguably, *audience*) for the exhibit was "pleased", expressing that "she felt seen and she felt heard" (Brown and Davenport 2021).

3. It Could Have Been Me: Bearing Witness to Faith and Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*

Nevertheless, consistent with Glenn's notion of collaborative curation as a process of "listening", and in line with a Black feminist ethos of care, these rumblings of dissatisfaction prompted an expansion upon the original exhibition in an attempt to better capture the voices of the community. On 21 May 2021, I received a very different phone call, this time from the Speed's Community Engagement Strategist, Toya Northington, inviting me to participate in a panel discussion for the opening of a community-engaged PhotoVoice exhibition entitled, *It Could Have Been Me* (ICHBM).¹⁵ Northington, a Louisville native, described the project as an expansion of the original exhibit, in response to the expressed dissonance between the reception of the exhibit from the museum's mainstream audience and local protesters, Black and West Louisvillians, and everyday people who seldom frequent elite spaces such as the Speed Museum. In an official description of ICHBM for the museum's website, the project is described as aiming "to more fully understand the lived experiences of the Black community in Louisville in the wake of Breonna Taylor's killing", with a focus on "exploring experiences and engaging in social justice action within the community".¹⁶ In conversation and consultation with Breonna Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, the title of the exhibition came from conversations with community members, who often repeated the phrase, "*Breonna Taylor could have been me*". According to Northington, who also served as curator of this exhibition, "There is a sense of vulnerability that this could happen at any time to any Black person living in Louisville, especially those living closest to the West End. There is also a connection to Breonna Taylor as a person and with her family. Many see themselves in her story with her hopes, dreams, and untimely tragedy, thinking '*it could have been me*' or '*it could be me in the future*'".¹⁷ Thus, the opening of the ICHBM exhibit was consistent with Northington's sense of responsibility as "a believer in art healing and art activism" to ensure that the local Louisville community felt "seen, heard, and valued", which she hoped would bring "affirmation" (Ross 2021). According to Northington, "My job was really to make sure that not only was the Black community engaged, but that the voice and perspectives are heard not only in the exhibition, but with what's going on in the programming and engagement" (Ross 2021).

The panel discussion celebrating the opening of "It Could Have Been Me" was entitled *Faith & Justice in Promise, Witness, Remembrance*. According to Northington, the emphasis upon faith emerged as a recurring theme among participants in the PhotoVoice project, who intimated that religious beliefs and institutions, as well as a sense of belonging to a "spiritual family," were sources of strength and resilience in the face of the heightened sense of vulnerability in the wake of the police killing of Breonna Taylor.¹⁸ Indeed, the phrase "it could have been me" not only evokes a sense of vulnerability to state and vigilante violence, but also a refrain in contemporary Black religious/popular culture. Within the context of Black Christian gospel music and sermonic performances, this phrase often evokes a sense of gratitude for life in a death-dealing world in which the faithful are constantly wrestling with "spiritual wickedness in high places", which is often personified as "the devil" or "demonic" forces who are relentlessly seeking one's demise. Although such forces are often spiritualized within the context of Black churches in ways that obscure the workings of political power, the racial uprisings of summer 2020 challenged theological interpretations that denied the materiality of the "principalities and powers" and the ways they are made manifest in the "flesh and blood" of agents of white supremacy and the violently anti-Black systems of injustice they create and perpetuate.

Northington moderated the discussion, posing a range of questions to panelists concerning the role of the Black church in the movement for Black lives, the significance of the withdrawal of many younger Black activists from Black churches and organized religion, and the relationship between faith, trauma, grief, mourning, therapy, healing, and justice work. However, our discussion of “faith” was more expansive than a focus upon “religion” proper. We wrestled with what the failure to indict officers for the killing of Breonna Taylor meant for Black people struggling to keep faith in the possibility of justice in the United States. This evoked profound questions on the prospects of Black futurity in an anti-Black world and the implications for remaining engaged in the ongoing Black freedom struggle. This line of questioning became most intense toward the end of our discussion. The problem of “Faith and Justice” or “Faith in Justice” and its implications for faith in Black futurity were brought home by the invocation of a jarring response from one of the participants in the PhotoVoice project. Participants were asked to imagine a world without racism, a world that was socially just, a world in which Black people were flourishing, and to take a picture of something representative of that world. One participant balked at the directive, asking “How can I take a picture of social justice or a world without racism? Because thinking about a photo, I’m like, ‘whatever photo I want to take doesn’t exist.’ You know?” The Black male participant could only imagine a world without racism as “intangible”, a “hypothetical” notion that had been dangled in front of Black people, and Black men in particular, but was unobtainable and unimaginable. The participant responded by asking, rhetorically, if he should take a picture of “a unicorn, an empty screen, a black box”.¹⁹

As panelists, including myself, grappled with the gravity of the respondent’s question, it became clearer to me that underneath the question were deep theoretical, existential, and theological questions concerning the relationship between faith and futurity in Black life in the face of seemingly intractable anti-Black violence and death.²⁰ In the context of this panel on “Faith & Justice in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*” at the Speed Art Museum, the respondent’s pessimism provoked questions involving the (im)possibilities of religion, culture, and the arts to enable everyday Black folks to imagine the unimaginable, or to make tangible the intangible, in such a way that allows them to keep faith in their own futurity and to keep fighting for freedom. In the ICHBM exhibition, the respondent’s question is displayed below, and to the right of, images depicting the centrality of religion and spirituality in Black life, and their role in sustaining those struggling for justice. As I consider this juxtaposition of articulations of deep faith and profound doubt emerging from Black Louisvillians grappling with a heightened sense of vulnerability to anti-Black violence in the wake of the murder of Breonna Taylor, I return to the curatorial strategies of Glenn, Northington, and their team of primarily Black women curators, artists, and cultural workers. How do the curatorial strategies in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* work to engage Black art, culture, activism, religion, and spirituality in ways that prompt us to imagine the world otherwise? How does the *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* exhibit enable us to envision and enact Black life beyond the anti-Black violence that killed Breonna Taylor and threaten the premature deaths of all those who are made to feel that Breonna not only “could *have been*” them, but also very much still “*could be* [them] in the future”? How does the Black feminist ethos of care curated by Glenn et al. work to encourage faith in Black futurity in the face of pessimism induced by Black precarity, premature death, and the denial of justice?

4. Envisioning That Which Is Not, but *Must Be*: Bearing Witness to Black Feminist Futurity as Theoretical Insistence

Interestingly, the participant did not, or perhaps *could* or *would* not, provide a photograph of an imagined world without racism. In the absence of this photograph, Northington curated a representation of the respondent’s “intangible-hypothetical”, a solid black square, inscribed by a thinly stenciled white square creating the effect of a thick black frame encompassing the internal square—an image simultaneously representing an “empty screen”

or a “black box”. One might read this “empty” screen in terms of absence. An absence of racial and social justice that makes faith in a Black future marked by “freedom” all but unimaginable. Insofar as this image appears within a PhotoVoice project, the curation of the participant’s “black box” might also be understood as a moment of “silence”, whether in terms of a refusal to articulate a vision of a liberated future, or in the sense of a ritual of reverence and remembrance for the deceased—in this case, Breonna Taylor, and those who identify with her life and the vulnerability of her premature death.

According to visual culture theorist Tina M. Campt, however, silence among Black subjects should not be understood as an absence of voice or utterance. Rather, Campt argues that silence can be understood as a practice of *refusal* “honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life” (Campt 2017). Her recent work, *Listening to Images*, articulates a theory and method of “listening” to the photography of Black diasporic subjects, which appears to be “silent” or “quiet”, but resounds in ways that can be felt at a “lower frequency”, even though the subjects in the photographs cannot be heard. For Campt, Black photography can be understood as a “vernacular practice” or “an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility” (Campt 2017). These and other practices of Black vernacular expressivity signal “transfigurative potential” and gesture toward alternative possibilities of Black futurity. Though the respondent did not provide an actual photograph of an imagined world without racism, we might interpret his response as consistent with Campt’s understanding of “a practice of refusal” that nevertheless represents “the range of creative responses black communities have marshaled in the face of racialized dispossession” and giving voice (albeit pessimistically) to what Campt describes as Black subjects’ “persistent striving for futurity” (Campt 2017).

Campt understands such striving against what she calls, borrowing from Hortense Spillers, “a grammar of black capture” that circumscribes the possibilities of Black women and men alike, but especially Black women. Thus, for Campt, a decidedly *Black feminist* conception of futurity involves notions of “tense”, both in the temporal sense, but also in terms of “a tense relationship to an idea of possibility that is neither innocent nor naïve” (Campt 2017). Employing the technical language of grammarians, Campt distinguishes between the future tense, the future perfect tense, and the future real conditional tense. If the former connotes “*what will be* in the future,” the latter connotes “*that which will have had to happen*” (emphases original). As such, Campt argues:

The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn’t yet happened but must. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration. It is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be. It’s a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future *now*—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present (Campt 2017)

Campt is invested in what she describes as a black feminist future, lived in the tense of now (Campt 2017). She is also interested in the ways that Black art and culture work to imagine and create the possibilities for living such a future in the now. Along these lines, she reads, or rather, “listens” and “hears” in the vernacular practices of Black photography, which often include complex and contradictory and sometime unsettling depictions of Black life, a certain yearning or desire for futurity and freedom. As she puts it, “it is a desire to live a future that is now, because of the precarity of black quotidian life wherein tomorrow is fleeting and often too risky to wait for or imagine” (Campt 2017). It is that precarity of Black quotidian life that is so evident in the voices of the participants in the PhotoVoice project. To say not only that Breonna Taylor “could have been me” but also that Breonna “still could be me in the future” is to acknowledge the painful reality of the precarity of Black life, where a young Black woman can be killed in the middle of the night, in her own home, by agents of the state, in a botched police raid that ended in yet another premature Black death.

Critical theorist Judith Butler describes precarity as a politically induced condition that renders certain populations more vulnerable to injury, violence, and death. Recognizing that not all populations are rendered equally precarious, Butler notes that some live in “that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress” (Butler 2015). Breonna Taylor’s life and death are representative of Black precarity characterized by this “maximized vulnerability” to myriad modes of premature death.²¹ As Camppt rightly notes, “tomorrow is fleeting” for Black lives marked by such precarity. As such, it is also “risky to wait for or imagine”. Perhaps this is why the respondent in question refused to imagine a world without racism, because it is well beyond any tomorrow that seems to be on the horizon. What is the “risk” of imagining such a future? Does this refusal to risk signal a loss of faith in the possibilities of Black futurity? If so, how do scholars of Black religion and culture reckon with such Black pessimism? Or, put another way, what can those of us invested in the theory and practice of Black religion and culture, whether scholars or practitioners, learn from critics, culture workers, and curators working to intervene in public discourses involving premature Black death and the impact of the resulting threat of fatalism viz-a-viz Black faith and futurity? To put an even finer point on the question, what can we learn from the curation of a Black feminist futurity, consistent with Camppt’s notion of a “politics of prefiguration”, or an imperative, an insistence, upon living the future *now*?

5. There Are Black People in the Future: Bearing Witness to Black Feminist Futurity as Artistic Intervention

Gallery 2: Witness, the most extensive gallery of the exhibit, begins with a statement on the role of artists in helping society to understand the complexities of the contemporary moment in which we live and to imagine creative responses to our times. To be sure, this is also the work of creative intellectuals engaged in Black religious and cultural criticism, and other modes of critical inquiry oriented toward not only meaning-making, but also imagining possibilities for the transformation of material conditions and thus, lived experience towards Black flourishing. Therefore, I am interested in how the curators of this gallery attempt to bear witness to Black life, which is always already both vulnerable to and resistant to premature death. More specifically, I am interested in how this team of primarily Black women curators bears witness to the possibilities of Black *feminist* futurity.

The curation of the Witness gallery prompts a critical contemplation of both the historical and contemporary socio-political forces that led to the state-sponsored killing of Breonna Taylor. Yet, it also involves what Camppt describes as “a politics of prefiguration”, or a vision of “that which is *not* but *must be*”. Taken together, these curatorial strategies suggest a Black feminist futurity that encourage viewers to consider what concrete actions for social change can, or must, be taken now to intervene in the precarity that gives rise to Black articulations of vulnerability to anti-Black state and vigilante violence, such as “Breonna Taylor could have been me. . . and *still could be* in the future”. Towards these ends, the witness gallery includes “high” art, as well as the “low” cultural work of local photographers whose large, framed images display turbulent and tender scenes from the streets of downtown Louisville during the height of protests.²² There is an image of protestors peacefully demonstrating in the streets, demanding “Justice for Breonna!” Another image depicts protestors clashing with police after Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron failed to indict any of the officers for the death of Breonna Taylor. The most intimate image shows two women embracing one another (a visual portrayal of a Black feminist ethos of care) amid protests. Yet another shows protestors gathered at City Hall to demand an end to the no-knock warrants, which led to the police raid that killed Breonna. A final image shows a young activist holding a megaphone, encouraging protestors to keep fighting for justice despite the entrenchment of systemic racism and other seemingly intractable forms of injustice.²³ There is an immediacy to those photographs that captures

the full range of emotions of the protesters and the urgency of their demands.²⁴ These photographs of primarily Black, queer women- and youth-led demonstrations offer striking images of protesters “striving for the future [they] want to see, right now, in the present” (Camp 2017).

Gallery 2 not only curates past and present struggles against anti-Black violence, but also bears witness to (faith in) Black futurity. Framing the ceiling of the Witness gallery are the words, “There Are Black People in the Future”. Alisha Wormsley’s textual artistic statement compels the viewer to lift their gaze to the heights of the gallery’s 22-foot ceilings. If the protest photographs, positioned near eye level, suggest the constant struggles for freedom occurring on the ground, I read the heightened position of Wormsley’s art as a meta-statement of (faith in) Black futurity that stands above the fray. Wormsley describes the origins of the phrase as “a Black-nerd sci-fi joke”, which she began using in 2013, inspired by the words of writer Florence Okoye, who argues, “Afrofuturism dares to suggest that not only will Black people exist in the future, but that we will be makers and shapers of it, too” (Drew and Wortham 2020). Wormsley’s use of the phrase gained notoriety through its placement on a billboard in Pennsylvania as part of Jon Rubin’s *The Last Billboard Project*.²⁵ The text was subsequently forcibly removed from the billboard, due to objection over its content (Sharp 2018). According to Wormsley, she made the phrase a “movement”. Though Wormsley’s art began on a billboard, she recognizes that the artistic use of this phrase has taken and can take many forms. Moreover, she acknowledges and insists that “this text is a sentence I do not own; it is for anyone who wants to use it. Please, take it” (Drew and Wortham 2020). For Wormsley, this phrase is not only prophetic, but also holds out the possibility for affirmation and healing in a social climate fraught with tensions of racial injustice, antiblackness, and premature Black death.

During a guided tour of the exhibit, prior to the ICHBM Faith & Justice panel, Toya Northington explained that the Speed Museum’s curatorial team originally desired to place these words on a billboard in downtown Louisville, consistent with Wormsley’s initial installation. Instead, they settled upon using the phrase to frame the top boarder of the museum’s Witness gallery. Installed like tickertape, this sentence becomes more than a singular statement. The words are repeated eight times without punctuation, creating a seamless flow that conveys a sense of faith in, or *insistence* upon, Black futurity. The curation of Wormsley’s declaration of, and insistence upon, Black futurity, conveys Camp’s sense of Black feminist futurity as “imperative rather than subjunctive” (Camp 2017). Yet, there is a complexity to the curation of Wormsley’s piece, which holds the tension of insistence and uncertainty or anxiety concerning Black futurity. Because the words are repeated continuously, without punctuation, bending around the four corners of each gallery wall, the message reads differently depending upon which wall is being viewed. One wall begins assertively, with black vinyl letters printed on a stark white wall: “There Are Black People in the Future”. Following the repetition of those words to the end of that wall and beyond, the words begin on the next wall with white vinyl letters printed on a black wall, which sound a more interrogative or uncertain note: “Are Black People in the Future”. Turning yet another corner, the message reads, “In the Future There Are Black People”.

Each of these turns of phrase signify slightly different meanings. The shift between asserting the persistent presence of Black people into the future and a gaze into the future that spies Black people provokes questions concerning the situation of Black people in the present. Most unsettling, however, is the invocation of doubt concerning Black futurity, given the precarity of Black people in the present, signaled by, “Are Black People in the Future”. The curation of Wormsley’s art provokes poignant questions, even as it offers affirmation and assurance. It captures the tensions of the lived experiences of faith, futurity, and a dangerous temptation toward fatalism in Black life. Bearing witness to the life and premature death of Breonna Taylor risks the latter insofar as it demonstrates the myriad ways the “promise” of the United States has been seemingly foreclosed to Black Americans.²⁶ This failure, and outright refusal, of the US to fulfil its democratic promise

underscores the structural, and for some, metaphysical, depths of anti-Blackness and leads many not only to a mood of pessimism, but further toward a sense of futility and fatalism.²⁷

To be sure, it is unclear whether the community (non)participant in the PhotoVoice project has become fatalistic, or what his apparent lack of faith in the realization of an anti-racist, socially just America means for his sense of Black agency and possibility in the present or future. What does seem clear, however, is that his perspective is not isolated, but representative of a growing number of young Black Americans who have become increasingly pessimistic, if not fatalistic, concerning Black futurity in the United States. Nevertheless, such Afropessimism is held in tension with Wormsley's Afrofuturism, inspired by Florence Okoye and others, who "dare to suggest that not only will Black people exist in the future, but that we will be makers and shapers of it, too" (Drew and Wortham 2020).

6. A Spiritual Commitment: Curating Black Feminist Futurity as a Fugitive Praxis of Faith

In many ways, such an insistence upon Black futurity in the face of horrific and unrelenting anti-Black violence and death is the subject matter of Jon-Sesrie Goff's four minute and forty-seven second looped video installation, *A Site of Reckoning: Battlefield* (2016). The video portrays scenes from the grounds of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in South Carolina, in the wake of the massacre that killed nine parishioners, including the pastor, during a bible study in 2015. As somber images of the church, and the assemblage of items left by mourners around its perimeter, are displayed visually on screen, the film is driven by the insistent voices of Black women—Sweet Honey in the Rock and Sonia Sanchez—performing a powerful rendition of the hymn, *Stay on the Battlefield*.²⁸ The only audible voice, besides those of Sweet Honey in the Rock and Sonia Sanchez, is the voice of the Black (male) preacher, who insists, "faith is greater than fear". This notion of fear viz faith is significant, as a central aim of acts of domestic terrorism, like the one carried out by Dylan Roof, is to instill fear and a deep sense of fatalism that would immobilize Black progress toward a future beyond white supremacy.

As Sweet Honey in the Rock sings and repeats the chorus of the hymn, "I'm gonna stay on the battlefield (till I die)," Sonia Sanchez begins her poem, written in 1999, with words that could have easily been those of Breonna Taylor or her mother, Tamika Palmer, upon moving to Louisville from Michigan:²⁹

"i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes
amid rumors of death" (Sanchez 1999)

As Sanchez's poem unfolds, the narrator describes calling out to the city for freedom and justice in a spirit of peace before repeating the lines "i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes". Yet, this yearning for life (and the fullness thereof) was met with premature and violent death as the narrator describes being followed, shot, and bombed by domestic terrorists who were hellbent on denying freedom and justice.³⁰ Undoubtedly, Black viewers of this film likely experience the sense that like Breonna Taylor, any one of those parishioners whose lives were stolen at Mother Emmanuel, "could have been me. . . and still could be me in the future". It is this sense of heightened vulnerability to anti-Black violence and premature death, rendered ungrievable by the state and denied justice with only the rarest of exceptions, that generates feelings of fatalism that lead many to abdicate faith in Black futurity and abandon the ongoing Black freedom struggle. Unexpectedly, however, Sanchez's poetic narrator interrupts, and intervenes within, this litany of terror:

"but we kept on organizing we kept on teaching believing
loving doing what was holy moving to a higher ground".

Sweet Honey in the Rock returns to, and repeats, the chorus, "I'm gonna treat everybody right ('til I die)", before Sonia Sanchez offers a poetic invitation, perhaps to those who have succumb to, or are on the verge of succumbing to, fatalism: "come. i say come,

and return to the fight". It is a fight "for our life" and for the children and for the earth. Sanchez beckons all—brothers and sisters, Black and white, gay and straight—to come to the battlefield, which has many sites of struggle, in pursuit of justice. In Sanchez's characteristic poetic voice, she repeats the invitation, removing spaces for emphasis:

"Comecomecomecome to this battlefield
called life, called life, called life. . ."

It is Sanchez's invitation to come to the battlefield called life, and Sweet Honey in the Rock's insistence upon *staying* on that battlefield, that directly precede viewers' entrance into the gallery that displays Amy Sherald's portrait of Breonna Taylor and the timeline of Breonna's life, narrated by her mother. Arguably, the curatorial strategy of exhibiting Goff's video directly before the culminating encounter with Sherald's portrait of Breonna Taylor, hung in what has been described as a "chapel-like space", casts Breonna's life in an aura of the sacred (Cotter 2021). Sacred, too, is the insistence and persistence of "staying on the battlefield", or fighting for justice for Breonna Taylor and other Black lives in the face of seemingly intractable anti-Black violence and death that threatens to foreclose upon Black futurity.

This insistence can be heard in the final words of Tamika Palmer on the curated timeline of Breonna's life: ". . . and never would I imagine being denied justice". On my first reading, I interpreted her words as a past-tense account, suggesting that she never would have imagined that African American Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron, and other political agents aligned with state power, would deny a Black mother's daughter justice. That reading still holds. However, I hear another interpretive possibility born out of a sense of faith in Black feminist futurity. I hear a refusal to imagine a future that does not include justice for Breonna and countless others whose lives have been cut short by anti-Black and state-sponsored violence. Ms. Palmer's refusal is simultaneously a sacred insistence that is consistent with what Tina Campt describes as a persistent commitment to a black feminist praxis of futurity to which she and other Black women feel a deep sense of accountability. Campt describes this commitment as follows:

I believe that the challenge of black feminist futurity is the constant and perpetual need to remain committed to the political necessity of what will have had to happen, because it is tethered to a different kind of 'must.' It is not a 'must' of historical certainty or Marxist teleology. It is a responsibility to create one's own future as a practice of survival. The future real conditional is an essential component of a black feminist praxis of futurity as an existential grammatical practice of grappling with precarity, while maintaining an active commitment to the every labor of creating an alternative future (Campt 2017)

Tina Campt and Tamika Palmer confront and attempt to intervene on the ominous sense of vulnerability, or what "*could be*", for those who see themselves reflected in Breonna Taylor's premature death, with a determined sense of what "*must be*", in order to create an alternative future of survival and thriving for Black people.

For Campt, a black feminist praxis of futurity is also a praxis of fugitivity insofar as her understanding of blackness, and Black people, is one that is bound up with creative acts of refusal that allow Black life to continually exceed (though not necessarily physically "escape") constraint, regulation, violence, and death. On Campt's account, the fugitivity of Black subjects also involves "the creation of new possibilities for living lives that refused a regulatory regime from which they could not be removed" (Campt 2017). Again, it is an *insistence*, even as it is a *refusal*, to remain in one's "proper" place. Such fugitivity is on display in Kahlil Joseph's video installation, BLKNWS®(2018–ongoing). Positioned at the conclusion of the exhibit, in a lower level, beyond Sherald's climactic Breonna Taylor portrait and timeline, Joseph's work would be easy for viewers to miss (or dismiss) altogether. Those who encounter and engage the two-screened video exhibition, featuring a barrage of sounds and images moving at various tempos, across multiple genres of media, experience Joseph's seemingly unending "fugitive newscast". Joseph's BLKNWS® signifies

the inexhaustive quality of Black (expressive) culture that is not, and cannot, be *captured* by mainstream media. There is no discernable beginning or end to Joseph's approximately one-hour loop of images, videos, news footage, social media, internet memes, interviews, and excerpts from intellectuals, artists, and activists.

After my third viewing, it became apparent, if frustrating, that I could never take in all of BLKNWS[®] in one sitting. After perhaps a fifth viewing, when I was certain that I had seen the video in its entirety, I learned otherwise through a chance encounter and conversation with award-winning "Affrilachian" poet and professor Frank X.³¹ Walker in the lobby of the Speed Museum. Walker, who has collaborated with Joseph, brought to my attention the "ongoing" dimension of Joseph's installation. BLKNWS[®] was never intended to be a fixed or static exhibit. Rather, Joseph constantly updates the video loop remotely, adding new images and footage of Black life. Hence the designation of the piece as circa "2018–ongoing". In the context of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, "ongoing" can be interpreted as a claim of Black futurity. Premature Black death is unrelenting and ubiquitous. Of this fact, there can be no doubt. Indeed, *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* ran simultaneously with the nonstop media coverage of the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer charged with (and ultimately convicted of and sentenced for) the murder of George Floyd. With incessant news coverage of this trial and the accompanying images and footage of Chauvin's knee upon Floyd's neck, Joseph's BLKNWS[®] represents a powerful alternative to the media's fixation upon Black death (news coverage of the police killings of Duante Wright and Adam Toledo and Ma'Khia Bryant was also running simultaneously with the trial and this exhibit).

The curation of BLKNWS[®], in a space beyond Sherald's portrait of Breonna Taylor and the timeline of her life and death, insists there is always more to Black life than Black death and that Black death shall not have the final word. There is always more Black news. More *to* Black news. More to Black *people*. More to *Blackness*. Blackness is in excess. Blackness escapes. Blackness is fugitive. Thus, Joseph's work reiterates and signifies upon Wormsley's "There Are Black People in the Future", from her Afrofuturist project of the same title (2011–ongoing). BLKNWS[®] is a celebration of the fullness and (Black feminist) futurity of Black life.

I became transfixed by Joseph's "fugitive newscast", sitting in awe of the sheer beauty of Black quotidian life, lived in the face of the brutalities of anti-Black violence. Indeed, it was hearing the voice of literary theorist Christina Sharpe reading an excerpt from her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* that first compelled me to sit down and watch nearly 45 min of Joseph's installation. As stated at the outset of this article, Sharpe's work asks us to sit with what it means to live "in the wake" of anti-Black violence and death, but also to imagine what she calls the "largeness of black life", or "black life insisted from death" and "black aspiration" (Sharpe 2016). In keeping with Sharpe's theoretical imagining and insistence upon Black life that cannot be reduced to, or ultimately extinguished by, the violence enacted against it, BLKNWS[®] is not only a praxis of fugitivity—a display of Black life persisting and insisting itself beyond the brutalities enacted upon it—it is also a Black vernacular praxis, or performance, of futurity and freedom. If Black vernacular culture has to do with "the manner in which Black people 'own' their bodies and the ways in which music, dance, clothing, attitude(s), posture, affect, optic, and opinion keep language and a range of practices both tied closely to the body and emanating from it", then perhaps it is better to say that BLKNWS[®] offers what the Caribbean scholar Rinaldo Walcott refers to as "*glimpses of Black freedom*, those moments of the something more that exist inside of the dire conditions of our present Black unfreedom" (emphasis original) (Walcott 2021).

According to Walcott, the ability to glimpse Black freedom is bound up with a politics and practice of refusal, which requires rejecting notions of freedom that is often refused by blackness and looking for other freedoms. On Walcott's account, "Blackness's refusals include, but are not limited to representative democracy; the institution of policing; modes of comportment in terms of fashion, style, and attitude; reformist logics that retain the present shape of the world; nationalisms of all kinds; as well as a more generally assumed

mode of human life as one of linear progression and human progression" (Walcott 2021). For Walcott, "A potential Black freedom is more like a set of eruptions that push against and within how we have come to understand what freedom is, that push against what is often offered to us as a logic of the maturation of human life" (Walcott 2021). This set of eruptions is precisely what is on display in Joseph's fugitive newscast. Joseph's depictions of scenes from everyday Black life offers us glimpses of Black freedom, or what Walcott also describes alternatively as "a future-oriented Black expressivity", "a project yet to come" and what freedom "might be".

Yet, within the context of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* and the Black feminist praxis of futurity that it evokes, BLKNWS[®] not only suggests what freedom "might be", but makes a more urgent claim concerning what freedom "must be", in order to ensure Black survival and thriving into the future. Indeed, this is consistent with Walcott's claims that while blackness, as constructed in the white Western imagination, is without a future, Black people "[force] the future on us" as a critique of white supremacy and its legacies (Walcott 2021). Walcott's claim of forcing a Black future is consistent with Camp's "imperative" and Sharpe's "insistence". The urgency of this claim, within BLKNWS[®], is articulated as "a spiritual commitment" to Black life. This phrase, "a spiritual commitment", appears on the screen intermittently throughout Joseph's video installation. Of course, "a spiritual commitment" can be interpreted in any number of ways. I read its repetition throughout BLKNWS[®] as Joseph's constant reminder of the sacredness of the vocation of Black artists, intellectuals, and culture workers to bear witness to this insistence upon, or *forcing*, of Black futurity. In the context of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, this "spiritual commitment" bears witness to *what must be* in order to intervene in the those (counter-)forces of anti-Black violence that create in Black communities the sense of vulnerability and precarity that evokes the notion that "Breonna Taylor could have been me. . . and still could be in the future".

7. Conclusions

"Breonna Taylor could have been me" was a constant refrain in the wake of Breonna's premature death at the hands of the Louisville Metro Police Department. A derivation of these words became the title for the Speed Art Museum's community-engaged PhotoVoice project, which was an expansion of the original *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* exhibit, intended to better reflect the voices and experiences of Black Louisvillians. The phrase speaks to the profound sense of vulnerability to state-sponsored, vigilante, and other forms of anti-Black violence and death felt by those who saw themselves in the young Black woman, a 26-year-old EMT who was killed by the police in the middle of the night, in her own home, during a global pandemic. Moreover, the perception that Breonna Taylor "still could be me. . . in the future" speaks to the ways that anti-Black violence and death threaten to foreclose upon the possibilities of imagining and enacting Black futures of survival and thriving beyond white supremacy and anti-blackness. This notion was forcefully articulated by a Black male participant in the PhotoVoice project who refused to produce a photograph of, or indeed attempt to imagine, an anti-racist world without injustice or white supremacy.

This article has been an extended reflection upon the profound crisis of faith in the possibilities of justice and Black liberation represented by this participant's response, which is representative of a growing number of young Black people who have become increasingly pessimistic, if not fatalistic, concerning the prospects of a Black future beyond white supremacy and anti-blackness. Throughout the article, I have described and analyzed how Allison Glenn, Toya Northington, and local and national teams of Black women-led curators, artists, and culture workers bore witness to a kind of curatorial "wake work" or Black feminist ethos of care and an aspiration toward or faith in Black feminist futurity in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*. Drawing upon the theoretical work of Tina M. Camp, I have argued that the curation of the exhibit not only captures the reality that the fate of Breonna Taylor "could have been" and "still could be" that of any Black person in America, but also

offers glimpses of what Black freedom “might be”, and furthermore goes beyond hope to insist on envisioning “that which is not, but must be”. It is this “must”, this “insistence,” that is captured in the curation of Tamika Palmer’s words, “. . . and never would I imagine being denied justice”. *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* bears witness to, and summons us toward, Camp’s Black feminist praxis of futurity, “a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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

Notes

- 1 The Speed Art Museum is noteworthy as the largest and oldest art museum in Kentucky.
- 2 *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* was on display at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, KY, during the writing of this article. The exhibit ended just prior to the article’s completion. It was on display between 7 April and 13 June 2021. The Speed Art Museum also waived its USD 20 admission fee, making the show free and open to the public. According to Speed Museum director, Stephen Reily, the museum did not want to “monetise a cultural experience or the grief we have all gone through”. See Angeleti (2021).
- 3 This portrait was originally commissioned by Vanity Fair and appeared on the cover of the magazine’s September 2020 issue. The portrait was jointly acquired by the Speed Art Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Amy Sherald was insistent that the portrait first be exhibited in Breonna Taylor’s hometown of Louisville.
- 4 The museum label below the painting reminds the viewer, “this is a story about love as much as it is about loss”. See: <https://www.promisewitnessremembrance.org/experience/> (accessed on 16 April 2021).
- 5 The timeline provides intimate, but also seemingly mundane details about Breonna’s life. It also provides only the barest sketch of her life, prompting the viewer to ask further questions concerning not only who Breonna was, but what her aspirations were, what future she imagined for herself. What might she have become if not put to death prematurely? Likewise, the viewer must consider what other young Black people, especially women, aspire towards and might become if allowed to survive and thrive unhindered by anti-Black violence. The timeline prompts significant questions concerning Black futurity.
- 6 The portrait and timeline of remembrance are especially remarkable as the climactic experience of a racially charged exhibit, in a nationally renowned art museum, displayed at the center and not relegated to the margins of the main gallery space. In her work, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Susan E. Cahan traces the resistance of not only museums but also the wider system of institutions that comprise the art world, from galleries to government funding agencies, to racial equality and the inclusion of African American artists and curators. Since the civil rights era, she argues, the visibility of African American art and artists in American museums correlates with the waxing and waning of racial politics in the United States, with moments of heightened racial unrest producing greater visibility. However, that visibility often comes belatedly, after the unrest has died down. Thus, *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* is noteworthy insofar as it was displayed in the midst of ongoing local protests in Louisville, and throughout the country. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the Speed Museum will maintain the visibility of African American art related to struggles for justice once the current uprisings subside.
- 7 See: <https://www.promisewitnessremembrance.org/experience/> (accessed on 16 April 2021).
- 8 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adnKXLujRmc> (accessed on 28 May 2021).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 I received this call from a local activist on 8 April, just after the opening day of the exhibit on 7 April. I visited the exhibit for the first time on 16 April. It would not be until 28 and 30 May that I viewed the exhibit for the second and third times, and a fourth time on 2 June.
- 12 It would not be until my next viewing of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* that I began to fully appreciate the significance of the exhibit and contemplate what it might mean or how it might shape public discourse on the ongoing pursuit of justice for Breonna. It is also noteworthy that my initial viewing, on 16 April, was on a weekday and there were scarcely any visitors to the museum at the time of my visit. My second and third visits, however, were during Memorial Day weekend and the museum was quite crowded. Watching visitors, across lines of race, class, gender, and age, engage with different aspects of the exhibit also shifted my perspective on the importance of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*.
- 13 For instance, there was no small amount of controversy over the inclusion of the “protest art” that had been on display in Jefferson Square Park throughout the protests. One piece in particular, *Say Her Name: BREONNA TAYLOR (2020)* by local artist Aron Conway, is a large profile portrait of Breonna Taylor, painted on plywood that was displayed in the park for the majority of protests and took on heightened meaning for a number of protesters who gathered in the space weekly, if not daily. On the back of the painting are the words, “THEY TRIED TO BURY ME THEY DIDN’T KNOW I WAS A SEED NOW WE ARE A MOVEMENT” with a set of 165 tally marks representing the number of days that protestors occupied Injustice Square. The piece

was not initially included in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, but was later added in an adjacent gallery area prior to entering the official exhibit, which was dedicated to “Art & Activism” and displayed the research of students in a University of Louisville Fine Arts class of the same name, taught by Professor Chris Reitz.

- 14 Indeed, protests have been ongoing. In an interview with PBS News Hour, the Speed Museum’s Toya Northington recalled, “we were in a time where we would come in right from protests”. Undoubtedly, this heightened the dissonance for some, while creating affirmation and space for reflection and meditation for others. See [Brown and Davenport \(2021\)](#).
- 15 Susan E. Cahan’s (2016) work, in *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, demonstrates the ways that African American artists and arts activists pressured museums and other arts institutions in the late 1960s and 1970s for not only greater representation in exhibitions, but also for positions of power. Positions like Northington’s can be traced directly back to such decades-old and ongoing struggles for self-determining power among Black artists, curators, and cultural workers within the art world, but also to tactics by museum officials to appease and manage Black demands. Northington’s invitation to participate in this panel came as a follow-up from a previous invitation to serve as a panelist for a discussion of the film *Judas and the Black Messiah*, directed by Shaka King, which debuted at the Speed as part of the Sundance Film Festival in February. The panel discussion for the film followed several weeks later, on 25 March, and was a kickoff event in anticipation of the opening of *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* in April. Local activists and politicians were among the panelists, including former Kentucky State Representative Charles Booker, who campaigned to challenge then Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the 2020 Senate race. Both the film screening of *Judas and the Black Messiah* and the virtual panel discussion were well-attended events, despite the former’s capacity being limited due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- 16 For the official description of the “It Could Have Been Me” project, as well as the artistic method of PhotoVoice, see: www.promisewitnessremembrance.org/could-have-been-me/ (accessed on 30 May 2021).
- 17 www.promisewitnessremembrance.org/could-have-been-me/ (accessed on 30 May 2021).
- 18 Two images of local Black church buildings were included in the exhibit with accompanying descriptions that emphasized the significance of the Black church as “a rest haven for the weary” and as a site of mutual love and support. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, approximately one hundred community members were invited to the Speed Museum for a guided tour of the main exhibit and ICHMB, which was followed by brunch and a panel discussion with “faith and social justice leaders”.
- 19 This difficulty with imagining a world without injustice, white supremacy, or anti-Black violence is not an isolated sentiment, but rather it is widespread, in the United States and beyond, among young Black people in the era of Black Lives Matter. For instance, in a similar project, exhibited at the CORE Gallery in Seattle, Curator Natasha Marin asked respondents to respond to three prompts: “What is your origin story? How do you heal yourself? Describe/Imagine a world where you are loved, safe, and valued”. In response to the latter prompt, a Black respondent from Auckland, New Zealand, answered, “When I imagine a place where I feel safe and loved it’s completely unrealistic—so not really that relatable to this world. . . It’s hard for me to imagine a realistic world as a human where I feel safe and loved, you know, completely”. See [Marin \(2020, p. 29\)](#).
- 20 These are questions circulating in contemporary discourses within Black Studies that fall under the umbrella of Afropessimism. See [Wilderson \(2020\)](#).
- 21 Of course, Breonna Taylor is always far more than a symbol of Black precarity. Her life cannot be reduced to, nor defined by, her death. The curatorial work of Glenn and her team attempt to make this clear. Nevertheless, the ICHBM exhibit attempts to reckon with the reality of what her premature death represents to members of the community.
- 22 Among the local photography featured in the exhibit is an untitled image captured by Tyler Gerth, a young white photographer who was documenting the protests when he was tragically shot and killed during an altercation in Jefferson Square Park. Notably, Gerth was the only non-Black artist feature in *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*.
- 23 This photograph, “Open Up the Cells, 24 September 2020” (printed 2021), by Jon P. Cherry, shows 21-year-old Travis Nagdy, who emerged as a vocal leader during the protests. Nagdy was tragically shot and killed on 23 November 2020.
- 24 However, other pieces in the exhibit are more conceptual and do not seem to carry the same affective charge or signify at the same emotional register as the images from the protests—at least not on their initial encounter. For instance, the renowned artist Sam Gilliam’s 120 × 900-inch *Carousel Form II*, which is a massive acrylic-on-canvas piece that is suspended from the ceiling, employs abstraction and, therefore, does not immediately reveal the origins of its creation during the tumultuous civil rights movement, nor its relevance to the Black Lives Matter movement or the death of Breonna Taylor (of course, Gilliam’s abstract painting was intended to challenge the expectation of what Black artists should create. In this sense, his choice of abstraction is itself a form of protest against “the burden of representation” or the reduction of Black art to “realism”). Nor does Rashid Johnson’s expressionistic work, 3 November 2020, offer viewers an immediate sense of connection to the “heightened state of tensions and traumas” experienced by people of color in the wake of the highly contested 2020 presidential election, and presumably the ongoing protests for racial and social justice that intensified earlier that year, as the museum label suggests. These and other pieces are powerful. However, they require patience, reflection, and a second or third viewing before their potential meaning(s) and significance become clearer. Of course, such patience and the necessary leisure time for multiple viewings and contemplative reflection is a luxury, a privilege not readily afforded to most protesters, many of whom are among the most marginalized and vulnerable in the community. Yet, following Campt, ironically the urgency of the moment demands that we take time to “listen” to not only the photographic images, but also the other installations, whose urgent sounds might initially seem muted.

- 25 See: <https://www.thelastbillboard.com/> (accessed on 2 June 2021).
- 26 This point is powerfully illustrated in the Promise gallery. As visitors enter the space, there are two large navy flags extending from the poles near the ceiling that gather in folds upon the floor. The flags are covered with white stars, each representing the death of an American killed by gun violence, including Breonna Taylor, Travis Nagdy, David McAtee, and Tyler Gerth, who were all victims of gun violence in Louisville. The flag installations, by artist Hank Willis Thomas, are entitled *15, 433 (2019)* and *19, 281 (2020)*.
- 27 In a recent webinar on the work of the late Stuart Hall, featuring Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Paul Gilroy, sponsored by Theory from the Margins, Gilroy makes an important distinction between understandable and warranted “pessimism” and a more problematic and dangerous sense of “fatalism” in recent theorizing in Black Studies. See: <https://www.facebook.com/theoryfromthemargins/videos/829614944325151> (accessed on 13 May 2021).
- 28 As a video installation, *A Site of Reckoning* makes use of *moving* images rather than *still* photographs. All the same, the subjects in the video remain silent or perhaps have been rendered silent by the tragedy of the acts of white supremacist violence. Nevertheless, as Campt argues, regarding still photographs, the subjects in these moving images “speak”, and as such call forth a practice of “listening” to these images of Black pain and persistence in the face of anti-Black violence.
- 29 In the timeline of Breonna’s life, narrated by her mother in the Remembrance gallery, Tamika Palmer offers the following account of her move from Wyoming, Michigan, to Louisville, Kentucky: “. . . I felt my girls had more to offer the world than Michigan had to offer them, so I made an abrupt decision to move to Louisville, Kentucky. I had only visited Louisville a few times before to see friends, but those visits made me want my girls to be a part of this city”. Palmer goes on to say that one of the main things that attracted her to Louisville was what the city had to offer for kids: “There were a number of things that kept them busy. . . out of the streets, and away from the vicious cycle that I watched repeat itself over and over again in Michigan”.
- 30 When heard in the context of Goff’s film, shot in the aftermath of the Charleston massacre, Dylan Roof obviously comes immediately to mind. However, Sanchez’s poem was written in 1999, at the close of the 20th century. Thus, her poem recalls all of those acts of domestic terror that occurred in her lifetime of involvement in the Black freedom struggle, during the civil rights and Black Power movements and beyond.
- 31 Frank X. Walker is Professor of African American and Africana Studies and English and Director of the MFA program at the University of Kentucky. He is a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets and author of numerous books of poetry, including his recent work, *Masked Man, Black: Pandemic and Protest Poems* (Accent Publishing, 2020). For more on Frank X. Walker, see: <https://www.frankxwalker.com/index.html> (accessed on 2 June 2021).

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