





**Kerry James  
Marshall**

**A Creative  
Convening**

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**Kerry James  
Marshall**

**A Creative  
Convening**

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**KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: A CREATIVE CONVENING  
JANUARY 28, 2017**

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# Alondra Nelson

**“The preservation of the soul, of the body, for honor and love becomes the work of activists and of artists like Marshall.”**



Alondra Nelson is an award-winning author and Dean of Social Science at Columbia University in New York City. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist, whose lectures, articles, and books explore the intersections of science, medicine, and social inequality.

BLACK ANGELS

I am an interdisciplinary social scientist who writes about the intersections of science, technology, and social inequality. I have loved science all my life, but I realized in college that I was more interested in studying science from a vantage point other than the laboratory. In my work, I have written most recently about the political use of direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing and also about the Black Panther Party's activism around disparities in treatment of genetic disease. So, I was absolutely delighted to hear Kerry James Marshall say that one of his favorite art magazines was *Scientific American*. [1] Civil rights activists and Black Power activists figure repeatedly in Marshall's work; it's gone underappreciated that these activists are kinds of muses for his work. Marshall and I share overlapping, idiosyncratic interests in the intersections of science and race.

Kerry James Marshall is a conjurer of history. He asks us to remember, to remember the long fight for freedom. *Souvenir I* [Fig. A], from 1997, is one of his well-known works, likely familiar to most. Floating above a picture commemorating assassinated leaders President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King Jr., are civil rights martyrs: Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, who were murdered during the Freedom Rides [2]; Freedom Fighters Medgar Evers and

[2] Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, who were helping African Americans in Mississippi register to vote, were abducted and murdered in June 1964. The Freedom Rides were a series of political protests by civil rights activists dubbed "Freedom Riders," who traveled by bus through the American South in 1961 and subsequent years.

[1] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 60.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Souvenir I*, 1997.



Malcolm X; Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Denise McNair, the four girls killed in 1963 at the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church; and slain Black Panther Party members Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. They all dwell together with the large Black angel who might seem to be tending to heroes in heaven.

Like some of Marshall's other works, *Souvenir I* features one of his now iconic ebony figures—in this case, a Black angel with golden wings, whose deep, rich hues render tangible the fact of blackness and remind us of the fullness and depth of Black life, the full spectrum that Marshall uniquely and marvelously depicts, and that he propels into the art-historical canon. Part of what Marshall offers us in this full spectrum of Black life are images of how we deal with violence and death, of how we think about spirits stolen and lives taken too soon. Marshall's work is a meditation on, among other things, ghosts and angels, the alternate registers of Black life that often sadly accompany the battle for human rights and human freedom.

[Blackness] [Freedom]

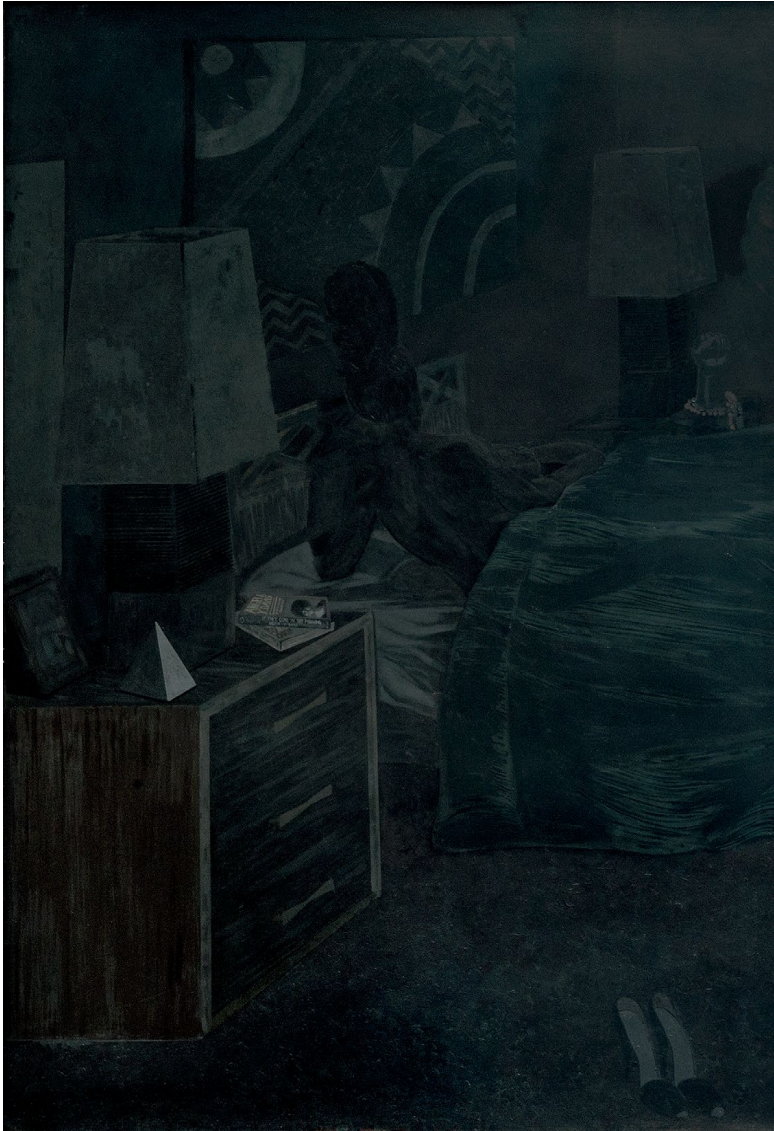
This theme of death as the price of insisting on life lived freely carries over into another image that depicts the life of Fred Hampton and also marks a shift, I think, in Marshall's civil rights visual lexicon. That is *Black Painting* (2003) [Fig. B]. We're in a bedroom. There's the iconic flag of the Black Panther Party hanging in the upper right. Two people are in a bed, a man and a woman—or are these ghosts? It's December 4, 1969. We are with Fred Hampton, leader of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, and his partner in life, Deborah Johnson, who's eight-and-a-half months pregnant with their child. Black Panther Party member Mark Clark, we will learn later, stood outside the room. Chicago police officers would burst through the door, killing Hampton. Although police would claim that Hampton's violence instigated this ambush-murder,

[Freedom]  
40-41 67 69 72-73  
75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
99 111 149 160 203  
214 222 252-253

[Blackness]  
9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

he was killed at rest and in bed, having been slipped sleeping pills by an FBI informer who had infiltrated the Chicago Black Panther Party chapter. And Hampton was, therefore, completely disarmed. The FBI, under the orders of J. Edgar Hoover, used a concerted program of disinformation among the Panthers and other Civil Rights groups called COINTELPRO. This insidious state-sanctioned disinformation campaign quickened the demise of the Black Panther Party and precipitated the loss of some of its members. In later years, this disinformation campaign would obscure the breadth and complexity of the Party's work, making it hard to discern their full story. As we struggle today to measure the cost of fake news, of propaganda, it is important to take a lesson from the damage that has already been done. We know that African Americans are the canaries in the coal mine of U.S. society, the first to bear the brunt of social and economic injuries. This is true of disinformation campaigns as well. The Panthers taught us that. Kerry James Marshall's work teaches us that.

In *Black Painting*, blackness is more metaphorical and impressionistic than in some of Marshall's other works [Blackness], and certainly more so than in *Souvenir I*. Here Marshall makes somewhat of a departure from the style that we have become familiar with, a style that is notable for its clarity of representational resolution and its sometimes pictorial quality, as well as its persistent vividness. Here, those properties are veiled. This new technique, this shift in visual register, tells a different account of Black life that helps to complete or fill in the broad spectrum that he envisions and helps us to see. What we might see here in *Black Painting* is the veil as an aesthetic departure that resonates with the strategic innovation that marked the audacious activism of the Black Panther Party. Their activism insisted on Black humanity, over and against a culture of treatment of Blacks that journalists and sociologist



[Fig. B] Kerry James Marshall, *Black Painting*, 2003.



Ida B. Wells described as “dwarfing the soul and preserving the body.” [3] This culture preserved the Black body for labor and tedium, but not for love and honor. [Blackness]

The preservation of the soul, of the body, for honor and love becomes the work of activists and of artists like Marshall. [Freedom]

The Black Panther Party took up the urgent work of Black thriving and flourishing in October 1966 in Oakland, California, proclaiming to serve the people, body and soul. And we might think of this as a reworking of what Wells identifies as the relationship, the damaging paradox, between body and soul that was notable in chattel slavery. The Party responded to discrimination faced by Black communities that were surveilled and impaired by institutions and individuals that were supposed to protect and serve and heal. Citing the industrialization, poverty, stubborn segregation, racist law-and-order policing, and deficient services in Oakland, Chicago, and elsewhere, the Party addressed barriers to equality. A cornerstone of its work was policing the police, as well as creating community service programs. The Party’s array of innovative serve-the-people programs held transformative potential. This was a strategic innovation in their activism. And this was a perspective that was encapsulated in the words of Fred Hampton when he described the work of the Party, saying, “First you have free breakfasts, then you have free

[Freedom]

40-41 67 69 72-73  
75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
99 111 149 160 203  
214 222 252-253

[Blackness]

9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

[3] Ida B. Wells, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings* (Chicago, 1895).

[4] Fred Hampton, quoted in Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 58.

medical care, then you have free bus rides, and soon you have freedom!” [4] [Freedom] As Hampton conveyed, the Party prized these community-based programs as essential elements of its wider social and human justice campaign. The Party’s activism extended a long struggle against forms of oppression that act quite literally on Black bodies with impunity, in such ways as to hamper flourishing, in the depths of night—as on that Chicago evening, December 4, 1969, when a veil descended. This is a battle that stretches back to the era of slavery, when people of African descent were deemed fractional beings, three-fifths of a human, and when the fitness of Black enslaved bodies for work took precedence over their livelihood [Blackness], a devaluation that faces a wall of refusal, that endeavors to cast beyond the boundary of the human. This is what Kerry James Marshall’s work, all of it, confronts. Full humanity is what his work insists upon.

W. E. B. Du Bois was reconciled to life behind the veil. You might recall this passage from *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.” [5] Marshall powerfully shows what the costs of the veil are for visionaries who see and seek a better life. His work shows us what can happen to people like Hampton, who try to make a way out of no way, who refuse life behind the veil. Namely, what happens when

[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 2.

escaping the veil of racism may bring the veil of death closer still. The stakes are high and leave communities strewn with ghosts. And Kerry James Marshall shows us that our ancestors are angels, too [applause].

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### FRONT COVER AND FLAP

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Studio)* (detail), 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 119<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (211.6 × 302.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015 (2015.366) ©Kerry James Marshall.

### INSIDE FRONT COVER

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *7am Sunday Morning* (detail), 2003. Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 120 × 216 in. (304.8 × 548.6 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Joseph and Jory Shapiro Fund by exchange, 2003.16.

### BACK FLAP

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Portrait of a Curator (In Memory of Beryl Wright)* (detail), 2009. Acrylic on PVC, 307<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 247<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Collection of Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

### INSIDE BACK COVER

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012. Acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 × 158 in. (274 × 401 cm). Birmingham Museum of Art; Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

### KERRY JAMES MARSHALL:

#### A CREATIVE CONVENING

Photographs of the convening, pages 21-34 ©Stephanie Berger

### TOSHI REAGON

Photo of Reagon by Erica Beckman.

- Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Voyager*, 1992. Acrylic and collage on canvas, painted surface: 87 × 86<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (221 × 220.4 cm), overall: 917<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 86<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (233.4 × 219.7 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Corcoran Collection (Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art) (2014.79.52).

### MARSHALL AND MOLESWORTH

Photo of Marshall by Kendall Karmanian; photo of Molesworth by Myles Pettengill.

- Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980. Egg tempera on paper, 8 × 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (20.3 × 16.5 cm). Steven and Deborah Lebowitz.
- Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Beach Towel)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panel, 607<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 72<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (154.6 × 184.5 × 7 cm). Private collection ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, London.
- Fig.C Édouard Manet (French, 1832-83), *Olympia*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 51<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 74<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (130.5 × 190 cm). RF644. Photo by Patrice Schmidt. Musée d'Orsay ©RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource NY.
- Fig.D Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Baobab Ensemble*, 2003. Milk crates, cinder blocks, found objects, and ink-jet prints on paper, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp, October 4-February 2, 2014 ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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Photo of Nelson by Laylah Amatullah Barrayn.

Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Souvenir I*, 1997. Acrylic, collage, silkscreen, and glitter on canvas, 108×156 in. (274.3×396.2 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Bernice and Kenneth Newberger Fund, 1997.73.

Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Black Painting*, 2003. Acrylic on fiberglass, 72×108 in. (182.9×274.3 cm). Private collection ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

JOE HALL

Photo of Hall by Amanda Gentile Photography.

Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on PVC panel, 61<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>×72<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>×3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (155.3×185.1×9.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Purchased with the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund and a gift from Jacqueline L. Bradley, B.A. 1979 ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

MICHAEL SHADLEN

Photo of Shadlen by HHMI (Howard Hughes Medical Institute).

Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub>×119<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (211.6×302.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015 (2015.366) ©Kerry James Marshall.

Fig.B Illustration of the human brain. Kandel, E.R., Schwartz, J.H., Jessell, T.M., Siegelbaum, S.A., Hudspeth, A.J., Mack, S. (2012). *The Brain and Behavior in Principles of Neural Science*, 5th ed. ©2018 McGraw-Hill Education. All rights reserved.

Fig.C Courtesy of Michael Shadlen.

ROBERT O'MEALLY

Photo of O'Meally ©Stephanie Berger.

Fig.A Romare Bearden (American, 1911-88), *The Woodshed*, 1969. Cut and pasted printed and colored papers, photo-stats, cloth, graphite, and sprayed ink on Masonite, 40<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>×50<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (102.9×128.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1970 (1970.19). Art ©Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Fig.B Norman Lewis (American, 1909-79), *City Night*, 1949. Oil on wood, 24×18 in. (61×45.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, 549.2010. ©Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Digital image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

IAN ALTEVEER

Photo of Alteveer by Jackie Neale.

Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *De Style*, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 104×122 in. (264.2×309.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Ruth and Jacob Bloom ©Kerry James Marshall.

Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub>×119<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (211.6×302.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015 (2015.366) ©Kerry James Marshall.

FRED EVERSLEY

Photo of Eversley by Maria Larsson Eversley.

Fig.A Fred Eversley (American, b. 1941), *Parabolic Flight*, 2016. Stainless steel, neon, and plastic, 432×162×152 in. Miami International Airport. Photo courtesy of Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs.

Fig.B Courtesy of Fred Eversley.

Fig.C Courtesy of Fred Eversley.

[Blackness]

9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
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[Creativity]

46 50-51 93 101 134 148  
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[Freedom]

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[Mastery/Mastry]

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[Portraiture]

57 61 62 66 207

**Kerry James Marshall**  
**Darren Walker**  
**Sandra Jackson-Dumont**  
**Toshi Reagon**  
**Helen Molesworth**  
**Alondra Nelson**  
**Joe Hall**  
**Michael Shadlen**  
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