

# Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections

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In his 1958 essay on the jazz musician Charlie Christian, Ralph Ellison writes:

Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as an individual, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.<sup>1</sup>

The compositions and spatial interplays of the African American artist Romare Bearden have often been compared to jazz, but I begin with Ellison's observation not to compare Bearden's collages to a musical form, but because in talking about jazz, Ellison raises the very issues of identity—individual, communal, and artistic—with which Bearden grapples in his work.

In 1964, when Romare Bearden exhibited a series of images of black life entitled *Projections*, he initiated the simultaneous improvisation on canonical art history and the challenge to popular images of African Americans that would characterize much of his subsequent work. Conceived in part as an assertion of aesthetic mastery and in part as a response to contemporary politics of race, *Projections* combined Bearden's knowledge of art history and his personal experience as a black man with a progressive notion of art as an open-ended semiotic system, a preexisting visual vocabulary that the artist must acknowledge and revise according to personal and social-historical imperatives. This semiotic theory of art and art history in turn shaped Bearden's working methods: he created the montage paintings and photostat enlargements that comprised *Projections* by transforming fragments of art-historical reproductions and images from current magazines into unified compositions that reworked the spaces and structures of prior paintings. This technique, combined with narratives of black life, allowed Bearden to acknowledge the significance of the art-historical past even as he revised its forms to accommodate new representations of African American identity.

Identity formation (or, more accurately, re-formation) through art is one way to revise received images of blackness. Contemporary scholars, among them Robert Stepto, Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have argued

that the quest for a representative and representable identity, dating to the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, is one of the master tropes of African American cultural expression.<sup>2</sup> The critical theory and cultural praxis of identity formation have been aptly described by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*:

The "finding of the voice" of the speaking subject in a language in which blackness is the cardinal sign of absence is the subject of so much Afro-American discourse that it has become a central trope to be revised, as well as a sign of that revision and hence of the inner process of Afro-American literary history.<sup>3</sup>

To find one's voice thus signals a notion of presence that is not autonomous but intertextual. The assertion of identity acknowledges its origins in prior discourse, even as it supplements and thereby revises earlier texts. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker investigated two seminal examples of the "finding of the voice" as an intertextual act: W. E. B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. Dubois, Baker argued, "deformed" the mastery of hegemonic discourse through his exploration of black vernacular speech and customs, while Washington "mastered" the form of the late nineteenth-century text of moral and economic progress in order to undermine contemporary stereotypes of black life as existing outside the forward march of history.<sup>4</sup>

To follow Baker's terminology, one might say that by the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the deformation of mastery had joined with the mastery of form to provide African American writers and artists with a powerful means of representing the difference of black culture, the value of that culture's aesthetic production, and the relationship of African American identity to mainstream American art. In the 1920s, participants in the New Negro movement such as Alain Locke and Aaron Douglas advocated the self-conscious imitation of African sculpture and design as a way of deforming both academicism and exoticism and of mastering, with a black difference, the formalist ideals and pure expression praised by avant-garde artists and critics. By emulating African art, contemporary black Americans could, Locke argued, "recapture ancestral gifts and reinstate lost

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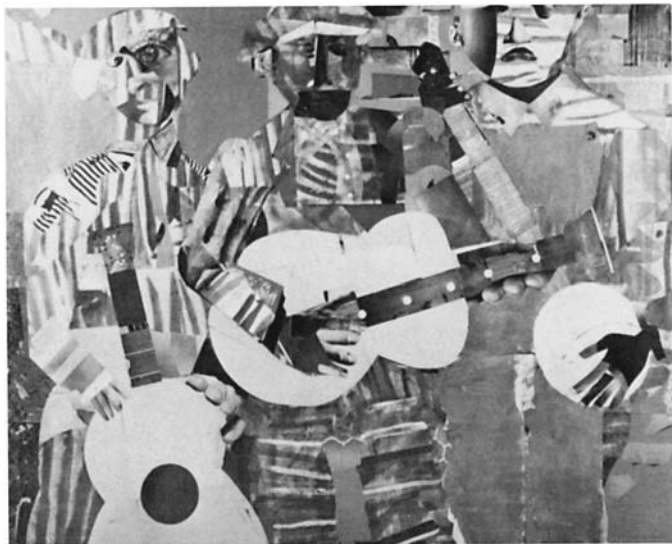
1. R. Ellison, "The Charlie Christian Story," *Saturday Review*, May 17, 1958, in R. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, New York, 1964, 229.

2. See, e.g., R. Stepto, "Narration, Authentication and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of 1845*," in D. Fisher and R. Stepto, eds., *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, New York, 1979, 178–91; H. A. Baker, Jr.,

*Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chicago, 1987; H. L. Gates, Jr., "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations*, xxiv, Fall 1988, 129–55; and Gates, *passim*.

3. Gates, 40.

4. Baker (as in n. 2), 25–36, 58–69.



1 Romare Bearden, *Three Folk Musicians*, 1967. Private collection (from Schwartzman, 119)

arts and skill" and "express the race spirit and background as well as the individual skill and temperament of the artist."<sup>5</sup>

Praising African art for its racial authenticity, historical significance, and formal rigor, Locke claimed that the appropriation of African-derived abstraction would allow black artists to enter into and revise discourses of modernism in the fine arts *and* to challenge existing representations of black identity in the realm of popular culture. "Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on," Locke proclaimed in the introduction to the 1925 anthology *The New Negro*.<sup>6</sup> Later in the same essay, Locke emphasized his belief that these stereotypes were being superannuated through the creation of new aesthetic forms and modes of interpretation: "Our greatest rehabilitation may possibly come from . . . [overtly political] channels, but for the present, more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective."<sup>7</sup>

Locke often conceptualized the "race spirit" and its refor-

mative power in quasi-essentialist terms, but he could also view the problems of African American identity formation from the perspective of Pragmatism. Indeed, Locke always insisted that racial consciousness and aesthetic values must be reencoded at each historical moment, responding to and revising received stereotypes. It is not surprising then, that despite his personal preference for the African style, Locke also praised the self-conscious use of African American folk traditions as an effective way of revaluing racial identity.<sup>8</sup> His legacy to second-generation artists of the Harlem Renaissance was not a mandate for imitating African art, but rather a model for using extant artistic forms to reinterpret the past in order to represent, and thereby revalue, contemporary racial identity.

In the 1930s and 1940s, artists and writers such as William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, and Zora Neale Hurston continued the tradition of using art to revise images of the black past and present. Rather than looking back to Africa, however, these artists concerned themselves with the more immediate past of Southern black experience, finding in still-remembered rituals of work, religion, music, and storytelling a rich, artistically powerful tradition that confronted stereotypes of African American identity more directly than Locke's Africanism.<sup>9</sup>

Romare Bearden chose to distance himself from the art of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Bearden's mature art, which often draws on memories and myths of the South, resonates with the aesthetic and political issues raised by African American artists and critics in the 1920s and 1930s. His work thus participates in the continuous tradition of representing and re-presenting African American identity so eloquently described by Ralph Ellison and addressed on a more theoretical plane in recent literary scholarship.

*Three Folk Musicians* of 1967 (Fig. 1), for instance, seems to conflate the artist's early childhood memories of Charlotte, North Carolina, with later memories of Harlem and Pittsburgh in the 1930s. Rather than emphasizing the specificity of individual memory, however, *Three Folk Musicians* functions as a metaphor for a more general presentation of one aspect of African American culture that, like Bearden himself, had its roots in the rural South (signified by the overalls

5. A. Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art*, XXIII, Sept. 1931, 211, 214.

6. A. Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), repr. New York, 1968, 5. Locke's definition of the New Negro first reached a wide audience when he guest-edited a special issue of the liberal monthly *Survey Graphic* (Mar. 1925) entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." After accepting an offer from Boni and Boni, Locke and his colleagues enlarged and expanded the "Harlem Number" into the anthology cited in this note.

7. Locke (as in n. 6), 15.

8. See, e.g., A. Locke, *Contemporary Negro Art*, exh. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939.

9. The validation of the Southern black experience remained problematic, however. In works such as Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), the South and its inhabitants are precisely what thwart Wright's efforts at self-development. Even in Jacob Lawrence's Migration series, the South is constructed both as a locus of enduring creative

significance and as a place from which African Americans had to escape.

10. The extent to which the painters of the Harlem Renaissance may have influenced Bearden is a delicate matter. While Bearden always acknowledged the communal spirit of the Harlem Renaissance as a vital, creative force, he also tried to distance himself from the artists of the period, claiming that their work was trite and derivative and that their patronage by white collectors and the Harmon Foundation encouraged paternalistic attitudes. See R. Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," *Opportunity*, XII, Dec. 1934, 371-72. Scholars have not much questioned Bearden's self-proclaimed rejection of the Harlem Renaissance; most investigations have focused on the artist's autobiography and ties to canonical modernism rather than on his position within an African American visual tradition. See, e.g., M. S. Campbell, "Romare Bearden: A Creative Mythology," Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1982; *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940-1987*, exh. cat., Studio Museum in Harlem, New York,

1991; and Schwartzman, *passim*. P. A. Rogers, "Re-enchanting Blackness: The Photo-Documentary Image and the Collage of Romare Bearden," unpublished talk, delivered Apr. 2, 1993, University of Delaware, has moved away from these traditional methods and argues, as I do, that Bearden's collages challenge photo-documentary stereotypes. Although we reach similar conclusions, we have framed our investigations differently. Rogers does not consider Bearden's photostat enlargements, focusing exclusively on the collage originals. His argument is based primarily on close formal analysis and on poststructuralist interpretations of Bakhtin. I have taken a social-historical approach, considering Projections in its contemporary context and as an embodiment of Bearden's own interpretation of contemporary semiotic theory.

11. The Studio Museum's 1991 Bearden retrospective posited that the artist's autobiographical memories functioned as a metaphor for universal experience. This assessment is a fair, if reductive, interpretation of Bearden's stated intentions and,

worn by the figure on the right as well as by the title's designation "folk") and persisted, in somewhat modified form, in the industrial North.<sup>11</sup> In representing black Southern culture as a legitimate folk tradition and point of origin for contemporary black creative practices, Bearden links his own work to such African American precursors as William H. Johnson, Horace Pippin, and Jacob Lawrence.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, in *Three Folk Musicians*, Bearden seems to have defined his artistic identity in exclusively black terms, emphasizing the difference and distinction—in short, the presence—of black creativity. In 1966, Bearden explained why, after some fifteen years of experimenting with pure abstraction, he had recently returned to representing scenes of black life, saying, "I use subject matter to bring something to it as a Negro—another sensibility—give it an identity."<sup>13</sup> Yet if the subject matter of *Three Folk Musicians* allows Bearden to define himself as an individual and as a member of the black collectivity, the work also alludes thematically and compositionally to Picasso's *Three Musicians* of 1921. Thus, just at the moment that Bearden finds his identity as an African American, he willfully complicates it by locating himself and his work in the chain of tradition that is at once deformatively African American and masterfully art historical.

*Three Folk Musicians* embodies the complex aesthetic and racial identifications that Bearden had worked out earlier in the decade. Bearden had always been interested in establishing a link between his own art and the great masterworks of the past, but the Civil Rights Movement prompted him to rethink the relationship in terms of race. Inspired by the racially conscious interpretive community that existed in Harlem in the twenties and thirties, Bearden began, in the early 1960s, to work with other African American artists to create a similar community in which they could discuss, dispute, define, and display what the artists called "the image of the Negro."<sup>14</sup>

Spiral, a group organized by Bearden and thirteen other black artists in 1963, was the clearest example of this endeavor. The members first met in Bearden's studio on Canal Street to discuss what their role as artists should be in the Civil Rights Movement. Their discussions expanded to address such questions as whether or not essential racial

qualities existed (ultimately they answered in the negative—and thus distanced themselves from the radical separatism of the burgeoning Black Aesthetic Movement);<sup>15</sup> if culturally constructed black difference could or should be expressed artistically; and how cultural difference intersected with mainstream art and culture.<sup>16</sup>

As part of this general investigation, Spiral began to plan an exhibition.<sup>17</sup> Bearden suggested that the group members create a collaborative collage, a project that never materialized. The idea of working from fragmented images culled from magazines and Bearden's vast store of art-historical reproductions did, however, result in the series of works that became *Projections*, first exhibited at Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery in October 1964 and subsequently at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. This was the first time since the 1940s that Bearden had exhibited works devoted to African American themes: folk music and jazz, magic and religion, urban and rural work and recreation.<sup>18</sup> These themes, as well as the works' frequent allusions to the art-historical canon, would become the mainstay of Bearden's production until his death in 1987. Prompted by specific social-historical conditions and constructed as part of a continuously evolving semiotic system, *Projections* constituted an exemplary moment of African American identity formation.

As originally installed, the series consisted of twenty-one images; Bearden composed each image from photographic fragments that he unified through the manipulation of pictorial space and structure, borrowing and adapting elements from well-known masterpieces. Thematically, each image represents a scene of black life, including ritual narratives of the rural South, Bearden's memories of Harlem and Pittsburgh in the 1930s, and the contemporary urban scene. At the level of content, the exhibition formed a visual analogue to the use of folklore and dialect in literature, presenting black vernacular culture as a ritualistic, and thus continuous, creative presence.<sup>19</sup>

Cordier and Ekstrom chose to exhibit each image as a small-scale "original" montage painting and as enlarged photostat reproductions.<sup>20</sup> The title of the show, "*Projections*," thus referred to the mechanical process used for the enlargements and alluded to the scale relationship between

from the curators' point of view, redresses Bearden's marginalization in the history of American modernism. See M. S. Campbell, "History and the Art of Romare Bearden," in *Memory and Metaphor* (as in n. 10), 3–17.

12. The relationship between Johnson's and Bearden's work is noted by Richard J. Powell, in *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson*, exh. cat., National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., 1991, 227.

13. In J. Siegel, "Why Spiral?" *Artnews*, LXV, Sept. 1966, 51.

14. In 1969, for example, Bearden moderated a symposium sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in which he and Jacob Lawrence recalled the Harlem of the 1930s, emphasizing not only creative activity, but also the public exhibitions sponsored by Arthur Schomburg, the Harlem Artists' Guild, and others. See the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, xvii, Jan. 1969, 245–61. See also Bearden's remarks in Siegel (as in n. 13), 49–51, and in the more recent interview, "To Hear Another Language: Alvin Ailey, James Baldwin, Ro-

mare Bearden and Albert Murray in Conversation," ed. J. Breen, *Callaloo*, xii, Summer 1989, 438–42.

15. The Black Aesthetic was codified in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. A. Gayle, Jr., New York, 1971. For a useful critique of the movement's essentialism, see H. L. Gates, Jr., "Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext," in Fisher and Stepto (as in n. 2), 57–68.

16. The members of Spiral included: Bearden, Charles Alston, Felrath Hines, Norman Lewis, Alvin Hollingsworth, Merton Simpson, Earl Miller, William Majors, Reggie Gammon, Hale Woodruff, Perry Ferguson, Calvin Douglass, James Yeagans, and Emma Amos. See Siegel (as in n. 13), 48–51ff, for the most complete account of Spiral's activities and the group's history, as well as for lengthy quotations from the author's interviews with the group.

17. Planned for the spring of 1964, Spiral's first exhibition was initially organized around the theme "Mississippi, 1964," but the group later rejected this idea as too obviously political. The exhibition catalogue can be found in the Bearden Papers.

18. It is worth noting that when the exhibition of *Projections* opened, Bearden was a social case-worker for the city of New York; evidently, the critical and commercial success initiated by the show enabled him to give up that job in 1966 and devote himself to art full time.

19. See Gates, who has argued convincingly that black vernacular discourse constitutes a form of expression that is at once private (that is, unavailable to hegemonic discourse) and shared (fully meaningful within the black community). As the "ultimate sign of difference" (xix) and thus of identity, vernacular discourse is defined by Gates as "signifyin'" —a kind of verbal play in which preexisting codes are invoked in order to be revised. The vernacular, Gates says, "functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality" (xxi). The imperative for formal revision is, for Gates, found in written interpretations, but I have taken the liberty of applying aspects of his argument to Bearden's visual production.

20. The copies were issued in a limited run of six each and were thus not intended for mass distribution.

the original and copy. Bearden's book *The Painter's Mind* (co-authored with Carl Holty and published in 1969) provides a further gloss on the exhibition's title. Conceived as a didactic text, *The Painter's Mind* employs a variety of art-historical examples in order to teach the aspiring artist to "see" and thereby master the two "unifying essences" of art: space and structure. In the first chapter, the authors justify their use of wide-ranging art-historical reproductions: "It is not idle daydreaming to imagine oneself in another time and place, to try to become—if only for a moment—an artist of the past. . . . *Through such a projection*, one might well find out how the great ones faced many of the same [formal] problems artists confront today" (my emphasis).<sup>21</sup>

"Projection," then, is a mode of establishing an identification with other times, places, and images in order to assert one's own formal mastery, an issue that concerned Bearden throughout his career. Already in 1947, after reading Delacroix's *Journal*, Bearden had begun to project himself into the history of art, systematically copying such masters as Giotto, Duccio, Grünewald, Vermeer, de Hooch, Manet, and Matisse.<sup>22</sup> In 1969 Bearden explained, "I read Delacroix's *Journal* and felt that I too could profit by systematically copying the masters of the past and present. Not wanting to work in museums, I . . . used photostats, enlarging photographs [of famous works] . . . [and] made reasonably free copies."<sup>23</sup> In his own journal, Bearden had described the process of copying as a progressive movement toward an original, if not autochthonous, artistic identity: "The great artist can destroy form after form, constantly seeking the unique twist that will appear in the end as if he owned the entire array of shapes and colors."<sup>24</sup> Although for some artists a process of fragmentation and quotation functions as a critique of originality and presence, for Bearden the techniques of collage and montage were eminently suited to an expression of ownership and mastery.<sup>25</sup>

In *Projections* Bearden literally destroyed preexisting forms and figuratively gained possession of them by inserting the resulting fragments into highly unified compositions. In an interview with Charles Childs that appeared in *Artnews* in October 1964, Bearden explained what he hoped to accomplish through these images:

I did the new work out of a response and need to *redefine the image of man in terms of the Negro experience I know best*. I felt that the Negro was becoming too much of an abstraction rather than the reality that art can give a subject.

James Baldwin and other intellectuals were *defining the Negro sociologically, but not artistically*. What I've attempted to do is *establish a world through art* in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic [my emphasis].<sup>26</sup>

Here Bearden described *Projections* first as redefinitions of universal human experience, and then as a response to a contemporary context. Finally, in the phrase "a world through art," Bearden invoked André Malraux and rhetorically placed *Projections* in Malraux's Musée Imaginaire.

"A world through art" abbreviates the argument of much of Malraux's *The Voices of Silence*, published in 1951 and translated into English in 1953. Bearden often spoke of his debt to Malraux and cited him, both explicitly and through allusion, in *The Painter's Mind*. Indeed, *The Painter's Mind* functions as a pedagogical companion to *The Voices of Silence*. "We are convinced," Bearden and Holty stated at the end of chapter 1, "that Malraux's principle 'art through art' remains of paramount importance."<sup>27</sup> It was Malraux's utopian ideal, the Musée Imaginaire, that most directly influenced Bearden, but more general aspects of Malraux's aesthetics informed Bearden's construction of African American identity as part of a meaningful signifying system: "a world through art in which my Negro experience could live and make its own logic."

In a 1936 speech to the antifascist International Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture, Malraux said, "All art is a way of possessing destiny. And the cultural heritage is the totality, not of works that men must respect, but of those that can help them live."<sup>28</sup> To possess destiny is, in this context, to rewrite or reinterpret history. History, or the "cultural heritage," need not be fixed, but should be continuously reimaged, and thereby revitalized, for each historical situation. Art as conceived by Malraux is not so much an aestheticized denial of history as it is an act of confrontation and repossession; creation constitutes an act of the individual will asserting its mastery over the joined forces of history, fate, and destiny.

Malraux's artist first attempts to escape the contingencies of history by retreating into a world of art. Here, however, he is confronted yet again by history, this time in the form of images from the art-historical past. Each cultural artifact functions, in Geoffrey Hartman's words, "simultaneously [as] symbol and broken sign of man's creative powers."<sup>29</sup> The

21. Bearden and Holty, 13–14.

22. Bearden, 12.

23. Ibid.

24. Quoted in Schwartzman, 44.

25. The notion that copying and revising one's strongest creative precursors is a paradigmatic modernist practice is most famously developed in H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York, 1973. Specifically art-historical considerations of the issue can be found in R. Shiff, "Mastercopy," *Iris*, 1, 1983, 113–27; and R. Benjamin, "Recovering Authors: The Modern Copy,

Copy Exhibitions and Matisse," *Art History*, xii, June 1989, 176–201.

26. C. Childs, "Bearden: Identification and Identity," *Artnews*, lxxiii, Oct. 1964, 62.

27. Bearden and Holty, 21.

28. Malraux, 1936, 32.

29. G. Hartman, "The Taming of History: A Comparison of Poetry with Painting Based on Malraux's *The Voices of Silence*," *Yale French Studies*, xviii, Winter 1957, 114.

30. Malraux, 1953, 623.

31. See, e.g., Malraux, 1953, where he notes, "Al

ways, however far we travel back in time, we surmise other forms behind the forms that captivate us" (285). He then goes on to deny the possibility of unconscious, unmediated artistic expression by contrasting representations by children with varieties of willed artistic forms, noting that even "folk art has its traditions, no less strict than those of academic art" (287). A similar belief underlies his characterization of African art, although he refers to tribal art as "savage," the explanation that follows denies the conventional meaning of the term: "Those who formerly praised Negro art as an expression of the unconscious viewed it, in effect, from the same angle as those who disdained it; both

artist responds to this symbolic potential and real loss with desire—to repossess and then reintegrate the discrete, and therefore incomprehensible, artifacts into a complete and fully unified signifying system. Thus, through the process of creation, the artist recognizes the destructive power of history, and that historical consciousness prompts him to assert his freedom as a creator. As Malraux argued in *The Voices of Silence*, “The history of art . . . is one long record of successive emancipations, since while history aims merely at transposing destiny on to the plane of consciousness, art transmutes it into freedom.”<sup>30</sup>

For Malraux, freedom comes not from a return to a primal moment of originality; that for him is an impossibility. His artist is born into a world of images whose origin is as unimaginable as its end.<sup>31</sup> Bearden and Holty’s use, in *The Painter’s Mind*, of art-historical examples as the path to understanding the universal significance of artistic form and attaining an individual but legible style reiterated Malraux’s belief. They criticized the Abstract Expressionists for their autochthonous strivings, for denying, rather than actively confronting, what Malraux would describe as history or the cultural totality. In a rare moment of irony, Bearden and Holty observed, “Many of the Abstract Expressionists attempted to break all ties with the past and, like the hero of E. M. Forster’s novel, *Howard’s End*, they wished to come upon art as the revivalist seeks to discover Christ.”<sup>32</sup>

For Bearden, as for Malraux, the artist necessarily confronts history, first imitating and then mastering it. Each new creation is part of a series; the new work acknowledges the past even as it asserts its own difference. Artistic style renounces its connection to a unique object or individual point of view to become a form of writing, a chain of signifiers in which each signifier possesses meaning through its relationship to already existing signifiers.<sup>33</sup> Only by operating within a semiotic system—by troping the styles of the past—can the artist hope to make a place for himself within the tradition. Style, then, signifies both difference from the past and distinction within a continuous aesthetic tradition: “Styles are *significations*, they impose a *meaning* on visual experience . . . replacing the uncharted scheme of things by the coherence they enforce on all they ‘represent’ ” (emphasis in the original).<sup>34</sup>

Signification through style, Malraux was careful to point out, is not predetermined: “The series’ existence does not in the least prejudice the way in which the achievements making up the life of the contemporary art around us will be arranged.”<sup>35</sup> While style always exists a priori, the artist’s use

of it varies according to individual or social needs. One can see already how the fluidity of this system encouraged Bearden to revise existing images and stereotypes.

In Malraux’s terms, the freedom promised by each creative act “depends on the will to transform the present,” but this will is necessarily “bounded by a certain futility.”<sup>36</sup> Futile, because the artist is aware that just as *he* has mastered and thus possessed the masters, he opens up his own work for repossession and reinterpretation in the future. To use Ellison’s terms, the artist challenges tradition but must still remain bound to it, losing his identity even as he finds it. Indeed, there is a fatalistic sense of loss in much of Malraux that links him to Walter Benjamin in his allegorical mode.<sup>37</sup> Bearden, however, responded more to Malraux’s utopian progressivism: rather than emphasizing the loss of past meanings, the artist should celebrate the liberating possibilities of present and future moments of creative interpretation. Part I of *The Voices of Silence*, “The Imaginary Museum,” most clearly exemplifies this aspect of Malraux’s aesthetics, but it reemerges throughout later portions of the text:

But though all craftsmanship is linked up with a past, creative art is given its direction by the future, and illuminated for us by what that future brings to it; its life-story is the life-story of its forward-looking works. Thus we shall see these works imparting its [*sic*] significance to the new world that is in the making and destroying for its benefit the world of the past.<sup>38</sup>

The medium of photographic reproduction, Malraux claimed, could facilitate the modern artist’s confrontation with destiny and his assertion of freedom. In his 1936 speech, Malraux rehearsed the idea that would form the basis for the Musée Imaginaire:

Need I stress the importance of the photo in the history of the plastic arts? . . . Need I stress, as W. Benjamin has done, the transformation that occurs in the nature of artistic emotion when it moves from the contemplation of the unique object to a casual or violent surrender before a spectacle that can be renewed an unlimited number of times.<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, Malraux did not simply claim that photographic reproduction could bring art to the masses for passive consumption. Rather, he argued that it would make the cultural heritage available for active reinterpretation by

its admirers and its detractors saw it as an art of children. . . . Children’s drawings have a calligraphy, not a style; whereas the masks of savage races, which illustrate a precise conception of the world, definitely have one” (562, 565).

32. Bearden and Holty, 10.

33. For an analysis of Malraux’s notion of *écriture*, see J. Darzins, “Malraux and the Destruction of Aesthetics,” *Yale French Studies*, xviii, Winter 1957, 107–13. The influence of structuralist linguistics on Malraux is not surprising, given his apprenticeship at age eighteen to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and his thorough understanding of Wölfflin. For an incisive description of this connection, see Krauss,

1001–3. For a discussion of the structuralist notion of meaning/identity through difference in African American culture, see R. Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” *Partisan Review*, Spring 1958, in Ellison (as in n. 1), 61–73.

34. Malraux, 1953, 324.

35. Malraux, 1936, 32.

36. Ibid.

37. Malraux’s idea that the past as such is irrecoverable, since it is necessarily available only as discrete fragments, is practically identical to Benjamin’s notion of allegory, an expressive mode prompted by historical consciousness that strives, through

supplementary interpretation and representation, to recover lost truth. Allegory both originates from and gives expression to nostalgic desire and thus acknowledges that essential knowledge and truth can never be possessed in the world of temporal experience. See W. Benjamin, “Allegory and *Trauerspiel*,” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne, London, 1977, 159–235. See also his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, New York, 1968, 253–64.

38. Malraux, 1953, 146.

39. Malraux, 1936, 33–34.



2 Bearden, *The Prevalence of Ritual: The Baptism*, 1964. Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966 (photo: Lee Stalsworth)



3 Francisco Zurbarán, *The Virgin as Protectress of the Carthusians*, ca. 1625. Seville, Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes (photo: Museo Provincial)



an entire group of people, and he contrasted this form of radical revision with the “essential, irreducible, and *unvarying*” (emphasis in the original) nature of fascist ideologies.<sup>40</sup> By liberating the work from a unique existence in time and space, photographic reproduction also frees the work of art from a fixed meaning, challenging the stasis of totalitarianism, “bearing knowledge, and works of art, to ever greater numbers of men . . . to preserve or create anew, not stable, particularist values, but dialectical humanist values.”<sup>41</sup>

*The Voices of Silence* reiterated the importance of photographic reproduction. Malraux explained that photography can fulfill the desire to possess and comprehend the art of the past by imposing on it a “specious unity.”<sup>42</sup> Camera angles, adjusted lighting, and, especially, distortions in scale would eliminate hierarchies and impose stylistic affinities. This, of course, was the main purpose of the Musée Imaginaire—the construction of a comprehensive, egalitarian, and infinitely variable combination of artistic reproductions whose relationships to one another were based on admittedly contrived stylistic unities. In the Musée Imaginaire, Malraux noted, each object loses its specific qualities: “In our museum . . . picture, fresco, miniature and stained-glass window seem of one and the same family. For all alike . . . have become color plates.”<sup>43</sup> Here Malraux’s debt to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is clear.<sup>44</sup> Like Benjamin, Malraux regarded the photographic reproduction as a dehistoricized fragment to be inserted into new situations. When all works have become color plates, Malraux insisted, contemporary artists would gain the power to interpret the history of art, “revising their notion of what it is that makes the masterpiece.”<sup>45</sup>

Mechanical reproduction, according to Benjamin, had obliterated the aura of the work of art and this, he maintained, would result in a new, socially productive function for art. Art loses its autonomous significance and the loss of this cultic status results in a direct engagement with social contingencies. Although Malraux also believed that the work of art renounced its autonomy through the process of mechanical reproduction, he nevertheless attempted to reinsert the photographic fragments into a fully meaningful signifying system. Indeed, he developed the Musée Imaginaire in order to recuperate universal artistic meaning from the vagaries of the historical moment and the ravages of temporal experience. The photographs of all the world’s art that comprise the holdings of the Musée impose, as Malraux acknowledged, a “specious unity”; but the constructed unity would nevertheless disclose the essence of artistic style as something separate from time, place, and social circumstance. Thus, even though the individual object renounced

its specific existence, its inclusion in the Musée Imaginaire guaranteed that it was part of a signifying system that owed nothing to other, nonaesthetic systems. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, “For Malraux, photography simply transferred the experience of aura . . . from the elitist spaces of the 19th-century museum to the more widely accessible . . . pages of the art book.”<sup>46</sup>

One could criticize Malraux’s Musée as hopelessly idealistic and ahistorical, his humanism another version of the mythologized “family of man” through art.<sup>47</sup> One might also take issue, as Georges Duthuit did, with Malraux’s constant recourse to imperialist rhetoric: “possession,” “mastery,” “confrontation,” and “surrender” occur throughout his writings.<sup>48</sup> I have chosen not to do this, however, and instead to focus on Malraux’s belief in art as a semiotic system that is constantly revising the images of the past in order to give meaning to the present. It was this reading of Malraux that Romare Bearden took as his own, and it provided him with a powerful means of representing African American identity.

In *Projections* Bearden willfully appropriated works by old masters, taking possession of their compositions and revising them as pictorial spaces for African American creative activity. Although the reunification of ephemera into a self-contained, integrated whole refers generally to the collage techniques of such modernists as Braque, Picasso, and Schwitters, Bearden also alluded to a number of specific “master works” that he had studied primarily as photographic reproductions. In *Prevalence of Ritual: The Baptism* (Fig. 2) the densely arranged figures are built up of magazine fragments as well as photographically reproduced bits of African masks, Oceanic sculpture, and perhaps Byzantine icons. The pictorial organization and the treatment of drapery are derived from Zurbarán, and while Bearden did not identify a specific source, the shallow space and overlapping of forms in a work like *The Virgin as Protectress of the Carthusians* (Fig. 3) come to mind.<sup>49</sup> Here Bearden not only took possession of the ritual objects of other times and places in order to invest them with a new, specifically African American significance, he also appropriated from a prior representation the very space in which the baptism occurs.

*Evening, 9:10, 461 Lenox Avenue* (Fig. 4) counters its own temporal and spatial specificity through a compositional and thematic allusion to Velázquez’s *The Luncheon* (Fig. 5).<sup>50</sup> Although Bearden did not mention Cézanne as a source for *Evening, 9:10*, he owned a reproduction of the Metropolitan Museum’s *Card Players* (Fig. 6), and his 1982 collage *Card Players* explicitly borrows from and revises Cézanne. In

40. Ibid., 35.

41. Ibid., 36.

42. Malraux, 1953, 36. For a critique of Malraux’s faith in the unifying power of photographic reproduction, see D. Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, Port Townsend, Wash., 1983, 43–56.

43. Malraux, 1953, 44.

44. See W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (as in n. 37), 217–51. In this essay he notes, as Malraux would do later that same year, that “in photography, process reproduction can bring out those

aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will” (220).

45. Malraux, 1953, 17.

46. Krauss, 1002.

47. For a critique of this myth, see R. Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” in *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, New York, 1990, 100–102; and J. Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and Modern,” *Art in America*, LXXIII, Apr. 1985, 164–77ff.

48. For a summary of Duthuit’s criticism, which began with a review of *The Voices of Silence* and was

subsequently expanded into a three-volume text, *Le Musée imaginaire*, see Krauss, 1005.

49. Bearden, 15. The explanation of Zurbarán’s influence is confined to formal concerns: the robes in *The Baptism* “function as areas of pacity [sic] . . . in the counterpoint of occupied and empty areas. Zurbarán [sic], in some of his great figural compositions, employed flatly modeled drapery for the same purpose.”

50. D. Ashton, “Romare Bearden: Projections,” exh. cat., Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery, New York, 1964, in *Quadrum*, xvii, 1964, 109. Ashton made the connection to Velázquez but did not cite a specific work.



4 Bearden, *Evening, 9:10, 461 Lenox Avenue*, 1964. Davidson, N.C., Davidson College Art Gallery (photo: Davidson College)



5 Diego Velázquez, *The Luncheon*, ca. 1617–18. St. Petersburg, The Hermitage (from J. López-Rey, *Velázquez*, New York, 1968, pl. 13)



6 Bearden in his studio, 1940s (from Schwartzman, 129)



*Evening*, 9:10 the bulk and volume of the right-hand figure, the ambiguously placed chair on the left, indeed the circular arrangement of the figures' hands, and their status as card players suggest that Cézanne was a likely source for this image as well.

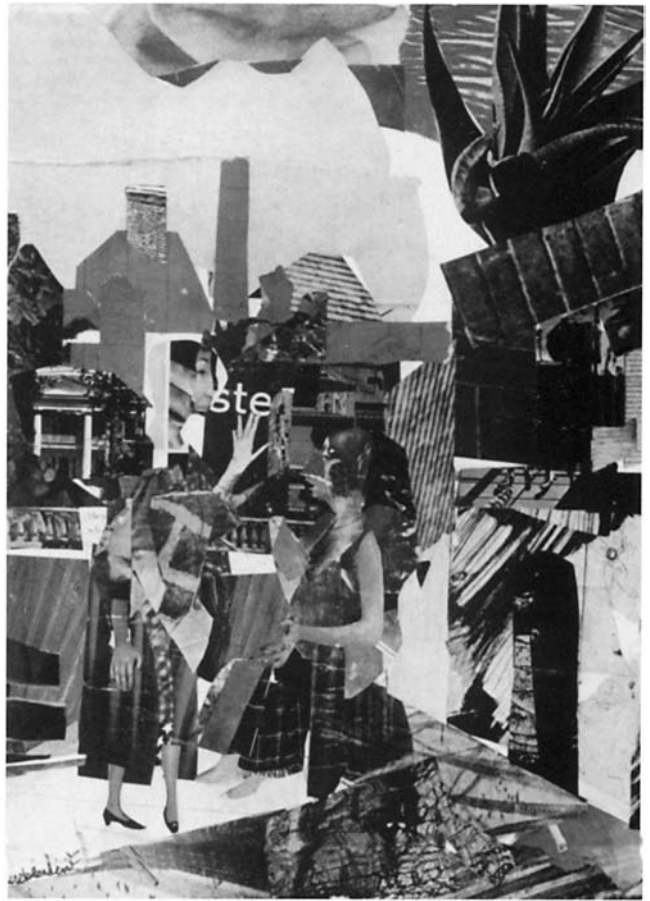
The borrowings and revisions continue: *Woman in a Harlem Courtyard* (Fig. 7) refers to Pieter de Hooch's *A Courtyard in Delft at Evening: A Woman Spinning* (Fig. 8).<sup>51</sup> The frontality and iconic gesture in *Conjur Woman* (Fig. 9) repeat the format of countless Byzantine Madonnas. *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman as an Angel* (Fig. 10) reworks conventional Renaissance Annunciations and, as Bearden noted, Pieter Bruegel the Elder provided the general inspiration for the crowded street scene in *The Dove* (Fig. 11).<sup>52</sup>

These works resonate with the history of art, but the echo is not a simple repetition. It is a reworking of that history in order to discover that its spaces and structures are remarkably similar to the spaces and structures that belong to African American life and ritual. For Bearden, Projections embodied Malraux's humanist notion of form as a timeless universal element capable of establishing affinities and revising the cultural heritage. The borrowings and revisions subvert hegemonic claims to formal values, even as they pay homage to the art-historical past. As Bearden explained, "I want to show that the myth and ritual of Negro life provide the same formal elements that appear in other art, such as Dutch painting by Pieter de Hooch."<sup>53</sup>

It is worth noting that the allusions in Projections that seemed most obvious to contemporary critics, as well as those most often mentioned by Bearden, were the references to famous genre paintings. The connection was well established by 1970, when a headline writer for the *New York Times* called Bearden the "Brueghel [sic] of Harlem." Bearden himself explained the analogy:

It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda . . . that has caused me to paint the life of my people as I know it—as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day. One can draw many social analogies from the great works of Brueghel—as I have no doubt one can draw from mine—my intention, however, is to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know."<sup>54</sup>

In reworking prior pictures' formal structures and genre themes, Projections participates in a straightforward way in Malraux's aesthetic of "art through art." Yet in Projections Bearden transgressed the boundaries of the Musée Imaginaire by introducing images from the nonartistic realm of popular culture, particularly documentary journalism. The black-and-white photostat reproductions resemble news-



7 Bearden, *Woman in a Harlem Courtyard*, 1964 (from M. B. Washington, *The Art of Romare Bearden*, New York, 1972, pl. 23)



8 Pieter de Hooch, *A Courtyard in Delft at Evening: A Woman Spinning*, ca. 1658. London, Royal Collection (photo: Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd.)

51. Childs (as in n. 26), 54, reproduces both images, with the de Hooch titled *The Spinner and the Housemaid*.

52. Bearden, 18. Bearden consistently uses the idiosyncratic spelling *conjur* in his titles.

53. Quoted in G. Glueck, "A Brueghel from Harlem," *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1970, 29.

54. Bearden, 18.



9 Bearden, *Conjur Woman*, 1964. Birmingham, Mich., Collection Sheldon Ross (photo: Sheldon Ross Gallery)



10 Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman as an Angel*, 1964. New York, Collection Merton D. Simpson (photo: Ken Cohen, courtesy Merton D. Simpson Gallery)

print and documentary photography, an affinity enhanced by the reproductions' effacement of the materiality and facture of the original montage paintings. Of course, the originals are themselves composed of fragmented photographic reproductions; but upon close scrutiny, they bear the evidence of the artist's process of cutting and joining. In this way they refer to their own coming into being, an event whose apparent uniqueness is enhanced by the dual indexicality of the facture: the traces refer both to the montage itself and to Bearden's presence at the moment of its making. Mechanical reproduction, however, erases the aura of the originals, allowing each copy to function more in the mode of an iconic, documentary representation.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, because many of the "original" fragments came from contemporary magazines, it is reasonable to suppose that Bearden saw *Projections* as participating in a dialogue with images from popular culture.

Bearden attempted to underplay the topical, political significance of *Projections*, but they were received as a

pointed response to contemporary events, namely the Civil Rights Movement. Dore Ashton's catalogue essay noted that these images "arrived at a particular moment in American history and cannot be seen—at least not for the moment—as divided from the crisis."<sup>56</sup> Critics reiterated her interpretation and emphasized the works' realistic presence. The *New York Herald Tribune*, for example, described the images as "startling" and having "the shock and impact of a swift cinematic passage."<sup>57</sup> The *New York Times* noted that *Projections* attained "degrees of actuality that straightforward images could never achieve. This is knockout work of its kind . . . propagandist in the best sense."<sup>58</sup>

The idea that *Projections* revised received, mass-media images was taken up by Ralph Ellison in his catalogue essay to the 1968 exhibition "Paintings and Projections by Romare Bearden," held at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany. That show included some of the same images as the 1964 show, as well as new, but formally similar, montages and photostat enlargements. In his essay Ellison

55. For a discussion of the icon, index, and symbol, see C. S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *The Philosophy of Charles Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. J. Buchler, New York, 1978, 98–119. When I refer to the indexical quality of Bearden's montage paintings, I am following Peirce's definition of the index as that order of sign that produces meaning not through resemblance or conventional notation, but through a physical trace. Thus, the

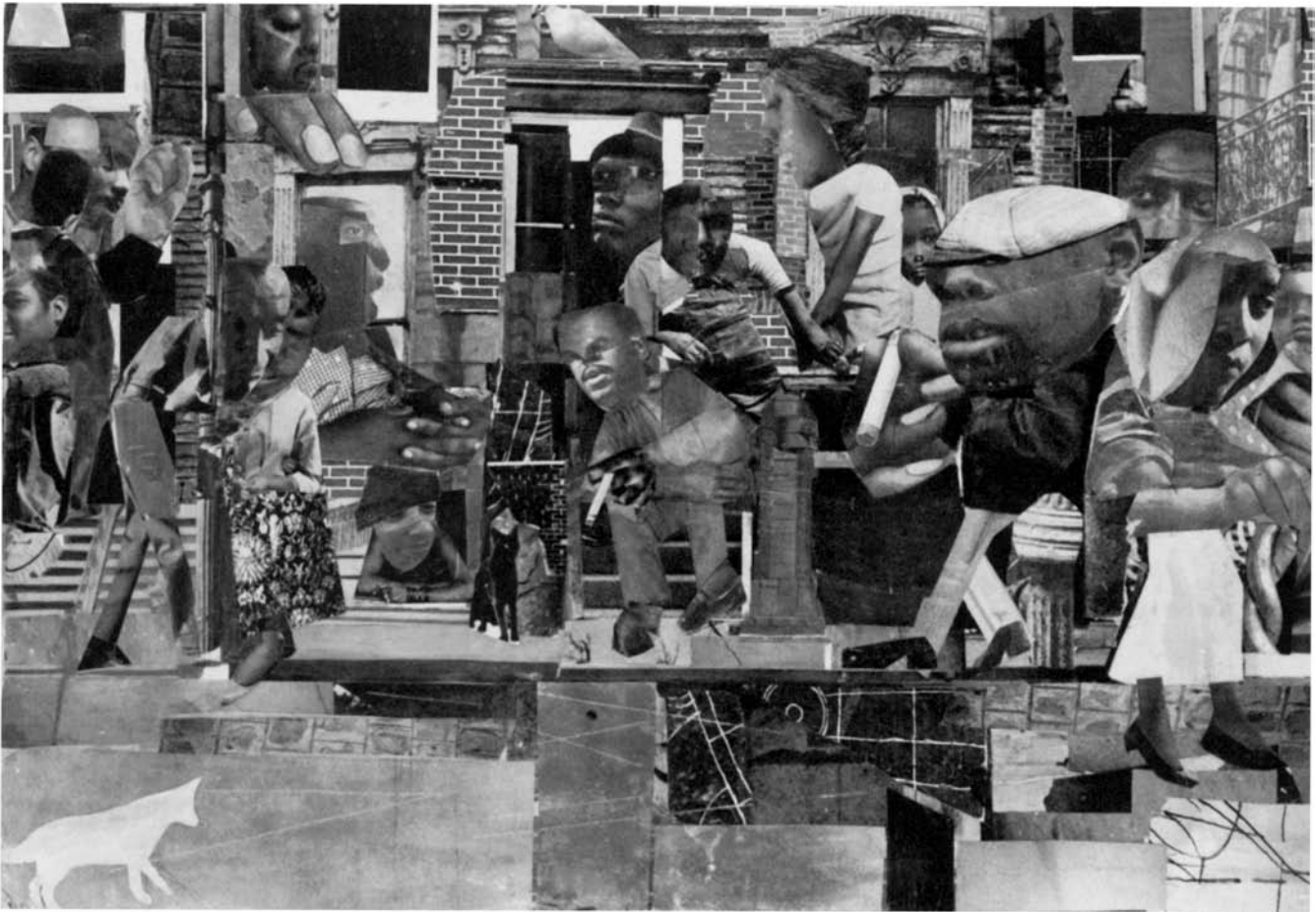
tactile quality of the montage paintings and the marks of cutting and joining that appear along the edges of montage elements are indexes both of material qualities of the works themselves and of the artist's process of creation. See B. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, xxx, Fall 1984, 83–119, for a discussion of the transformation of indexical images into iconic documents. Buchloh is concerned with this shift in the work of

early avant-garde artists in the Soviet Union, but I have found his argument useful in my reading of Bearden's photostat enlargements.

56. Ashton (as in n. 50), 100.

57. *New York Herald Tribune*, Oct. 10, 1964, Bearden Papers.

58. *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1964, Bearden Papers.



11 Bearden, *The Dove*, 1964. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Blanchette Rockefeller Fund (photo: Museum of Modern Art)

emphasized the visual poetry of Bearden's works, which he also interpreted as social correctives: "He has sought here to reveal a world long hidden by the clichés of sociology and rendered cloudy by the distortions of newsprint . . . , television and much documentary photography."<sup>59</sup>

The 1960s saw a revival of interest in documentary photography, which, in America, had developed in the context of turn-of-the-century progressivism. Its uses as an avant-garde form and an instrument in promoting social reform gained new momentum in the 1930s, when Farm Services Administration (FSA) photographers' interpretations of devastated farms and downtrodden workers established conventions of documentary photography that are still with us. As many scholars have pointed out, such photography often denies its subjects an identity that transcends their representation as abject victims.<sup>60</sup> For Ellison, as for Bearden, good intentions did not compensate for photographs that reduced black life to a sociological phenomenon. When Ellison contrasted Bearden's works with documentary photo-

graphs, he was no doubt reacting to the genre's tendency to depict black life—and black identity—as pitiable, without cultural value or creative traditions and thus desperately in need of reform.

A study of five popular middlebrow magazines—*Ebony*, *Life*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*—from January 1960 to June 1964 has provided a context from which to assess exactly how Projections revised conventional documentary representations of African American identity. Generally, all of these magazines supported the Civil Rights Movement and characterized black identity as different from that of middle-class white America only in terms of economic and social opportunities. This difference was, however, crucial. The difficulty of attaining middle-class status—symbolized in photographs and textual descriptions of well-funded schools or, more frequently, home ownership and its attendant furnishings—was a recurrent theme in all of the periodicals under consideration. Perhaps to counter the perception that African Americans had not yet achieved a recognizable social

59. R. Ellison, "Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections," exh. cat., Art Gallery of SUNY Albany, 1968, in *Crisis*, LXXVII, Mar. 1970, 84.

60. See W. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New York, 1973, for a thorough history of New Deal documentary and the assumptions on which it was based. M. Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," 1982, in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of*

*Photography*, ed. R. Bolton, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, 303–42, offers a now-standard critique of the genre as an instrument of hegemonic ideology. For an analysis of the intersection of documentary photography and aesthetic discourse, see A. Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Media and Society, IV, Minne-

apolis, 1991, 169–83; and A. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History from Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*, New York, 1989, passim. For a consideration of the representation of African Americans in documentary photography, see N. Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*, Knoxville, Tenn., 1992.



12 Bearden, *Mysteries*, 1964. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Ellen Kellerman Gardner Fund (photo: courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

identity, *Ebony* featured numerous articles with photographs of wealthy and middle-class blacks in up-to-date homes, proudly displaying manicured lawns and stylish living rooms.<sup>61</sup>

In the January 14, 1964, photo-essay "New Neighbors," *Look* constructs an assimilationist identity which utterly denies black difference. The opening photograph shows two suburban home owners, one white, the other black, with their children. In the background are trim houses, shrubbery, and a bicycle. The theme develops in subsequent photographs of a black man doing yard work and home repairs and of women planning integrated children's birthday parties.<sup>62</sup> One particularly telling caption beneath a black man named Dr. Mason states, "He and all his neighbors are proud of their property."<sup>63</sup>

What is striking about these ostensibly positive depictions of black life is that they deny the possibility of a black identity that is both different and comprehensible. The moment that black difference is introduced, absence and illegibility replace presence and meaning. The July 29, 1963, issue of *Newsweek*, which was devoted to defining African American identity, explicitly documents this shift. The issue's cover depicts a close-up photograph of an unidentified black man gazing up and beyond the viewer. The bold-face type reads

"THE NEGRO IN AMERICA," and, in smaller print, "The first definitive national survey—who he is, what he wants, what he fears, what he hates, how he lives, how he votes, why he is fighting . . . and why now?" The series of articles inside support the Civil Rights Movement, but finally, as in all of the magazines included in this study, one is left with the impression that until Congress enacts decisive legislation and African Americans acquire "a bigger share in the plenty . . . dishwashers and clothes driers as well as human rights," the "Negro in America" will not possess—as he has historically not possessed—a recognizable identity.<sup>64</sup>

One reporter, for example, noted that the black American community exists "in a world as remote and as unfamiliar to most white Americans as the far side of the moon—the dark side."<sup>65</sup> The purpose of the articles was, apparently, to make that world familiar, but the reporter went on to define current African American identity in terms of absence. Following a series of articles outlining unemployment, poverty, limited educational opportunities, and their deleterious effects on the black family, one reporter concluded, "Most Negroes say they simply want what they now lack."<sup>66</sup>

A passage from the same article described a "typical" black house in the rural South in terms that Projections may have sought to reinterpret: "Negroes *still* live in *old*, unpainted

shacks with collards in the garden, petunias in a coffee can . . . a dimstore picture of Christ or an almanac ad for Sweet Railroad Mills Snuff tacked on the wall" (my emphasis).<sup>67</sup>

Not only does this passage emphasize the lack of modern home furnishings, it also constructs a typical house, and by extension its occupants, as existing in a historical time that is different from the real time of the disinterested reporter and reader. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian has characterized this sort of temporal distancing as "allochronic discourse"; following Fabian, one might say that the *Newsweek* reporter's manipulation of temporality denies his subjects the opportunity to exist *as subjects* in his time and space. Thus objectified, the occupants of the "old, unpainted" shack become available to the reporter's impoverishing interpretation of their social identity.<sup>68</sup>

This journalistic account of Southern black life contributed to a well-known stereotype and might profitably be compared with the image from Projections called *Mysteries* (Fig. 12), which gives Bearden's interpretation of the unpainted shack. At first glance, the image bears a remarkable similarity to the *Newsweek* description: newspapers patch the corrugated walls of a dwelling supported by rough wooden beams; one of the newspapers (above and to the left of the center figure) includes an advertisement for chewing tobacco. A family group sits around a table, and in the background, just above the head of the center figure, hangs a "dimstore picture" of Jesus.<sup>69</sup>

The title of the work, *Mysteries*, confronts the received belief that black life and culture are unknowable and ultimately unrepresentable except as absence. Bearden counters this belief in a variety of ways. First, if the photostat enlargement refers to the ostensibly transparent, seamless quality of documentary photography, the original montage painting possesses tactile qualities (cuts and joins, as well as the various surface textures: glossy magazine pages, fabric, newsprint, and so forth) that the viewer must interpret in terms of physicality, presence. Even in the more iconic photostat, the montage technique and the related disjunctions in scale force the viewer to participate self-consciously in the production of meaning, to reassemble the various parts of the work into a unified image.<sup>70</sup>

The treatment of the figures in *Mysteries* further counters the tendency to read blackness as absence or abjection. These figures dominate their space: their hands form a continuous barrier across the lower part of the composition; their imposing faces meet the viewer's gaze and prevent the outsider from entering their house and assessing its contents. The large-scale faces and even larger eyes engage the viewer in a form of direct address that is nothing short of confrontational. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of all of Projections is Bearden's emphasis on faces, especially eyes. Often, as in the far left figure in *Mysteries*, the eyes are cut from images of a larger scale than those used for the rest of the face, resulting in an exchange of gazes that challenges the expected relationship between viewer and viewed.<sup>71</sup> In *Mysteries*, this strategic use of direct confrontation combines with the technique of montage to revise the prior image of the anachronistic unpainted shack and replace its rhetoric of absence and objectification with an assertion of presence and a demand for recognition.

Bearden's use of direct address links Projections to strategies employed by his friend and sometime adversary James Baldwin. I have in mind here a series of quotations that accompanied a photo-essay in *Life*, May 24, 1963, in which Baldwin's highly personalized mode of address not only challenges contemporary conceptions of black identity, but encourages his audience to rethink the historical invisibility of African Americans as well.<sup>72</sup> The feature begins with Baldwin announcing to the reader: "I've been here 350 years but you've never seen me."<sup>73</sup>

The strategy of direct address, Baldwin asserts, forces recognition and thus redefinition on the part of both speaker and listener, viewer and viewed. By invoking the first and second person, Baldwin urges the readers of *Life* to renounce passivity and to participate in the nonobjectifying, dialogical relationships enacted on the magazine's pages. The personalized call to action is directed at blacks as well as whites: "As soon as we are discontent with what you've told us is our 'place,'" Baldwin states, "we destroy your myth of the happy nigger, the noble savage, the shiftless, watermelon-eating darkie."<sup>74</sup>

Two photographs of Baldwin at a Manhattan party (Figs.

61. See, for example, "America's 100 Richest Negroes," *Ebony*, xvii, May 1962, 130–34; "How to Meet Negroes," *Ebony*, xvii, Aug. 1962, 86–87; W. M. Young, Jr., "The Role of the Middle-Class Negro," and L. Bennett, Jr., "The Negro Woman," *Ebony*, xviii, Sept. 1963, 64–71, 86–94; "Bachelors for 1964," *Ebony*, xix, June 1964, 210–18.

62. "New Neighbors," *Look*, xxviii, Jan. 14, 1964, 38–41.

63. *Ibid.*, 40.

64. "The Negro in America," *Newsweek*, lxii, July 29, 1963, 16.

65. *Ibid.*, 15.

66. *Ibid.*, 21.

67. *Ibid.*, 16.

68. See J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, 1983, *passim*.

69. While a detailed consideration of the history of photo-documentary is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the *Newsweek* description of the rural Southern dwelling and Bearden's *Mysteries* participate in a tradition that dates to the

1930s, when FSA photographers documented the life of sharecroppers; a standard in the FSA repertoire was the newspaper-patched shanty, photographed both with and without its inhabitants.

70. S. Eisenstein, "Word and Image," *The Film Sense*, ed. J. Leyda, New York, 1942, 3–65, argues that montage is a crucial element of realistic film, in part because it involves the conscious participation of the real-life viewer, who reunifies the disjunct parts of montage into a visual representation of a conceptually meaningful whole. See also Trachtenberg (as in n. 60), 258–76, who applies Eisenstein's analysis to the work of Walker Evans.

71. For an analysis of similarly confrontational devices in the collaborative work of Walker Evans and James Agee, see M. Olin, " 'It Is Not Going to Be Easy to Look into Their Eyes': Privilege of Perception in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Art History*, xiv, Mar. 1991, 92–115.

72. For other, earlier examples, see the essays gathered in J. Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, Boston, 1955.

73. "At a Crucial Time a Negro Talks Tough," *Life*, lvi, May 24, 1963, 81.

74. *Ibid.* Obviously, the social effect of direct address depends on preexisting relationships of power. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster, New York, 1971, 127–86, argues that when representatives of hegemonic discourse invoke the second person it serves to construct a subject always already bound to/by ideology: "Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals . . . or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects . . . by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace . . . 'Hey, you there!'" (174). Baldwin and Bearden, however, invert this notion of interpellation, assuming the active role in direct address in order to assert presence and thereby revise hegemonic constructions of black identity.





13 James Baldwin at a Manhattan party, 1963 (from *Life*, LIV, May 24, 1963, 83, © Steve Schapiro)



14 James Baldwin at a Manhattan party, 1963 (from *Life*, LIV, May 24, 1963, 83, © Steve Schapiro)

13, 14) visually reiterate his rhetorical use of the first and second person. In the first photograph (the original layout placed Fig. 13 directly above Fig. 14), Baldwin points at a white addressee, while in the other the roles are nearly reversed and an African American points at Baldwin. The figures in the first photo, actors Rip Torn and Geraldine Page, would have been well known to contemporary readers, and it is interesting to see how Baldwin, probably less familiar to the audience of *Life*, upstages the actors and forces them—and us—to engage in a dialogue that he has initiated. Although Baldwin is outnumbered two to one, his lunging arm allows him to occupy practically the entire composition. Proximity enhances the sense of his physical presence: Baldwin's hand appears to rest on Torn's shoulder, and his index finger barely misses the tip of Page's nose.

The other photograph relies on a similarly demonstrative, even accusatory, gesture. This time, however, it is Baldwin who is at the receiving end. The small-print caption for this image states that Baldwin "is told by a Negro girl: 'You're not my spokesman, James Baldwin!'"<sup>75</sup> The sequence of photographs implies that Baldwin's goal is not necessarily to replace a received definition of African American identity with one of his own making, but rather to initiate a dialogue in which stereotypes will be questioned and racial identity subjected to redefinition from a variety of perspectives.

The urgency of Baldwin's demand for a redefinition of black identity seems to exist without significant editorial interference. The text is almost entirely from Baldwin; the photographs strengthen, rather than destabilize, his words. The photo-essay effaces the multivalency of Baldwin's more literary writings and functions as straightforward propaganda. At least in this context, Baldwin's confrontational strategies redefine black identity in political, rather than aesthetic, terms. The appearance of artless directness held no charms for Romare Bearden, however, for whom signifying identity always involved broader, more complex frames of reference.

Although Bearden uses direct address throughout *Projections*, he also counters it by incorporating iconic images like *Mysteries* into a larger context of ritual narrative. As part of a series that includes street scenes evoking both real life and literary descriptions of signifying, as well as themes of magic, religion, and music, *Mysteries* becomes part of a rich, culturally productive world that must be seen as intertextual.

The intertextuality of *Projections* is, of course, multiple, signifying continuity and tradition in African American culture and signifying *on* received images and revising them. *The Funeral* (Fig. 15), for example, refers to other images in the series: the visitor to the 1964 exhibition might first have connected it to scenes of religious or ritual transformation such as *The Baptism* and the various conjure women. Next, because of similarities of form and technique, the viewer would have established a connection between those images and the more temporally specific images such as *Evening, 9:10*. The totalizing effect of these relationships was not lost on contemporary observers. As a critic for the *Washington Star* noted, "From picture to picture . . . a whole world is presented."<sup>76</sup>

The world presented is not, however, a self-contained one. The timeless, ritual quality of *The Funeral* notwithstanding, it, like all of the images in *Projections*, also functioned as a general reinterpretation of contemporary documentary photography and reportage. In fact, *The Funeral* may go beyond a general revision and attempt to reinterpret a specific received image. The only image in *Projections* to employ a markedly vertical format, *The Funeral* bears a striking formal and thematic resemblance to a photograph of mourners outside the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church (Fig. 16) that was reproduced to accompany *Newsweek's* cover story on September 30, 1963, "Bombing in Birmingham."

The original photograph, by Associated Press, has been cropped and reproduced as a skinny vertical, a format that Bearden also employs in *The Funeral*: both images lead the

75. "At a Crucial Time a Negro Talks Tough," (as in n. 73), 83.

76. F. Geitlein, "Confrontation at Corcoran," *Washington Star*, Oct. 3, 1965. Worth noting is the headline writer's serendipitous selection of a Malrauxian noun.



15 Bearden, *The Funeral*, 1964 (from Washington, pl. 13)



16 "A Phantasmagoria of Grief," Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala., September 18, 1963 (photo: AP/Wide World Photos)

eye downward through a sharp diagonal in the upper right. In each image, spatial depth is flattened out, so that the figures who stand one behind the other appear to press against the picture plane. The woman in the photograph who holds a handkerchief may be repeated in the far left figure in *The Funeral*, who also covers her face with a handkerchief, here held in a white-gloved hand.

The *Newsweek* image is arguably more real than Bearden's artful interpretation. To be sure, the layout editor has manipulated the original photograph, cropping the uncomposed straight news shot provided by Associated Press to create a claustrophobic space and melodramatic emotional tone. But because the photograph appears in a journalistic context, it stands as an ostensibly factual image; its formal and ideological history are not available to the casual viewer. The photograph renounces its status as a disinterested fragment of reality, however, and gains a point of view through its caption. *Newsweek's* editors chose to characterize the image as "A phantasmagoria of grief," a phrase that dislocates the mourners, placing them in a realm apart from real time and space. Indeed, the magazine's decision to de-emphasize spatial signifiers, crowding the picture with figures whose bodies are only partly visible and who do not return the viewer's gaze, augments the notion that this image exists in a phantasmagoric realm in which the mourners' grief is severed from its historically significant cause: an act of racial terrorism in which a bomb blast killed three young girls as they sat in Sunday school.

If the documentary photo purports to express objective reality, *The Funeral* declares its interpretive stance forthrightly. In the small-scale "original" it does so through indexical cuts and joins signifying the artist's interpretation of a modernist technique and a black community ritual. As a photostat copy, *The Funeral* alludes both through similarity and difference to the photo-documentary image. As an iconic image that exists in multiples, this version of *The Funeral* refers generally to newsprint or black-and-white film and, more specifically, to the photograph of the Birmingham mourners as reproduced in *Newsweek*. Whereas this version of the photograph denies its figures a narrative or spatial context, Bearden's work struck visitors to Cordier and Ekstrom as startlingly realistic. Recall that the reviewer for the *New York Times* praised Projections for "degrees of actuality that straightforward images could never achieve."<sup>77</sup> A year later, when the show opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the *Washington Star* observed that Bearden's "doctored" photographs "get more of the feeling of actuality . . . than would be likely to appear in simple photographs of Harlem or in the Negro South."<sup>78</sup> While contemporary commentators tended to emphasize the realistic effects

achieved through mechanical reproduction, it seems to me that the weight of actuality—of presence—came also from the works' deliberate placement within an intertextual realm. As Bearden noted in 1964, artistic signifying can validate experience and identity in ways that journalism and sociology, which remain dependent on an external referent, never can.

Projections documented Bearden's attempt to create images of black life whose meaning derived from their triple relationship to other images. First, he established a ritual context for black vernacular practices that signified continuity and difference. Next, he destabilized the ideological content of journalistic stereotypes through acts of confrontation and revision. Finally, Bearden's formal mastery allowed him to reinterpret not only the documentary images of his own time, but, through compositional and thematic allusion to old masters, to reinterpret the canonical history of art as a visual system that could accommodate and affirm African American identity. It may now seem that Romare Bearden's critique of the canon was insufficient, that he accepted unquestioningly the transcendent significance of artistic style. But Bearden also believed that style, even while transcending the particularities of social and political history, could revise the cultural heritage in powerfully liberating ways. With Projections, Bearden used art to respond to the world around him and, through his acts of inclusion and revision, constructed Malraux's ideal: a history of art composed "not of images that men must respect, but of those that can help them live."

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77. *New York Times* (as in n. 58).

78. Gettlein (as in n. 75).