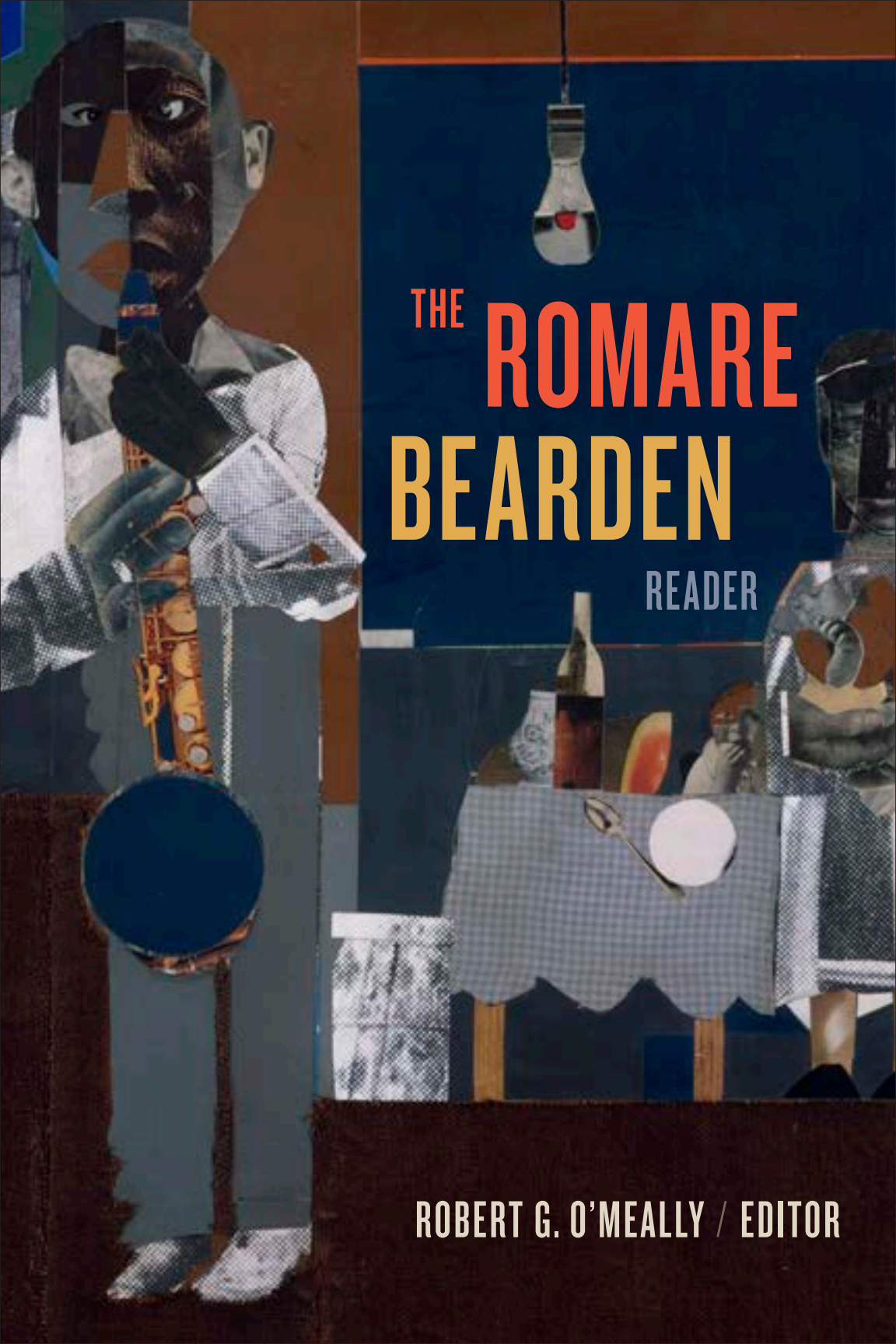

THE ROMARE BEARDEN READER

ROBERT G. O'MEALLY / EDITOR

THE ROMARE BEARDEN READER

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ROBERT G. O'MEALLY / EDITOR

THE ROMARE BEARDEN READER

Duke University Press Durham and London 2019

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Text designed by Mindy Hill. Cover designed by Courtney Leigh Baker
Typeset in Minion Pro by Westchester Publishing Services
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: O'Meally, Robert G., [date] editor.
Title: The Romare Bearden reader / Robert G. O'Meally, editor.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2018. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018047200 (print)
LCCN 2019000353 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478002260 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478000440 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9781478000587 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Bearden, Romare, 1911–1988. |
Artists—United States—Biography. | African American
artists—Biography.
Classification: LCC N6537.B4 (ebook) | LCC N6537.B4 R665 2018 (print) |
DDC 709.2 [B]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018047200

FRONTISPIECE: Romare Bearden. Photo by Frank Stewart

COVER ART: *The Woodshed*, 1969. Romare Bearden. © VAGA at ARS, NY. Photograph © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Courtesy of Art Resource, NY.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is a solitary endeavor — thank goodness! This is particularly true of an anthology, with so many parts and pieces. Certainly this anthology has benefitted from the generosity of many persons, across several categories of expertise.

The Columbia University community has provided indispensable support. Warmest thanks to the many undergraduates and graduates whose questions and writings impacted me. Certain students and former students were exceptionally helpful: Nijah Cunningham, Claire Ittner, Elleza Kelley, Kaveh Landsverk, Aidan Levy, Emily J. Lordi, and Hiie Saumaa.

The Jazz Study Group at Columbia has been invaluable in this and all my intellectual pursuits: for this project I am especially grateful to Dwight Andrews, C. Daniel Dawson, Gerald Early, Brent Hayes Edwards, Krin Gabbard, Maxine Gordon, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Diedra Harris-Kelley, Vijay Iyer, Robin D. G. Kelley, George Lewis, Jason Moran, Fred C. Moten, Richard J. Powell, Helen Shannon, J. John Szwed, and Daniel Veneciano. All are present, here and there, in this work. So are Columbia colleagues and friends Marcellus Blount, Julie Davidson, Mary Gordon, Edward Mendelson, Richard Sacks, and George Stade, as well as colleagues and friends beyond Columbia: Joseph W. Reed, Phyllis Rose, Richard Slotkin, Alfred J. Smith, Edgar Sorrells-Adewale, Daniel Soutif, and Andrew Szegedy-Maszak.

Deep thanks to Columbia for granting leaves and sabbaticals over the years, and particularly for my current fellowship at the wonderful new Institute for Ideas and Imagination at Reid Hall, home of Columbia Global Center | Paris.

I am deeply indebted to the richly fertile Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center of the New York Public Library, where I was a fellow in 2009–10. Special thanks to Akeel Bilgrami, Lauren Redniss, Jean Strouse, and Rosanna Warren.

Thanks to the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, and particularly to Marquette Foley, for always supporting my work on Romare Bearden.

Thanks to all the contributors to this volume, especially to Toni Morrison, whose talk at Columbia University's Center for Jazz Studies conference on Romare Bearden in 2004 was generative for this volume.

Heartfelt thanks to the Romare Bearden Foundation, and especially to Diedra Harris-Kelley, for steadily supporting this project and for locating and granting use of so much Bearden material included here. Thanks to my friends at DC Moore Gallery, particularly to Bridget Moore, for steady guidance and support.

Particular thanks to John F. Callahan, literary executor of Ralph Ellison's estate, for permission to reprint the two Ellison pieces in this book. Thanks to Lewis P. Jones, literary executor of Albert Murray's estate, for his work in making available the essay included here, and to Paul Devlin for his guidance regarding the Murray material. I am appreciative of the permission granted by the estate of August Wilson to reprint his work in this volume, and of that granted by Elizabeth Alexander and Grant Hill for inclusion of her essay.

This book would not have been possible without the professionalism and patience of Livia Tenzer, to whom I will always be grateful. Particular thanks also to Yulanda McKenzie, my colleague at the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University.

Special thanks to my sons, Douglass and Gabriel Malone-O'Meally, and to Sylvie Fortin.

Robert G. O'Meally
December 2018
Paris

"PRESSING ON LIFE UNTIL IT GAVE BACK SOMETHING IN KINSHIP"
AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Robert G. O'Meally

As Bearden demonstrated here so powerfully, it is of the true artist's nature and mode of action to dominate all the world and time through technique and vision. His mission is to bring a new visual order into the world, and through his art he seeks to reset society's clock by imposing upon it his own method of defining the times.
—Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden"

The modern black American artist Romare Bearden's most urgently pursued subject was that of first-person identity, or, one might say, first-person *identities*. What does it mean to be "modern"? "Black"? Or "American"? What does it mean to be an "artist"? *Who am I?* These were Bearden's touchstone questions. And then, across these and other categories: Who are *we*? And how, in this world where "trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky," as Bearden's friend the writer James Baldwin once put it, do we deploy our best talents?[1] To weigh these old/new line items, this introduction mines Bearden's own twice- and thrice-told tales—the ones he recounted most often in interviews and conversations—an abundance of which narrative gold is spun into this anthology's pages. Some of it I collected firsthand, as a witness to his story-telling sessions with friends and collaborators.[2] There's other precious metal in this book as well, collected by others and reflecting not only on who Bearden is, but also on who Americans are, and trying to establish new ways of seeing ourselves and defining our times.

Bearden's most profound terms for order reside, as we shall see, in the forms of his art itself, and particularly in the U.S. black/global elements of a Bearden collage—its cut and sometimes torn layers and fragments of history flitting and flashing and "pressing upon life until it gives back something in kinship."[3] We are a fractured and fragile people, we black and white Americans—and we humans—in search of ways to reassemble ourselves to be stronger and more

beautiful than before. Seeking ways to heal ourselves and one another. To do more than merely survive and tolerate one another: to persevere together, to flourish as one people who, with all our differences, are more alike than unalike.

Who, then, was Romare Bearden, and how does he fit into the ongoing story of modern art history?[4] Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1911, Howard Romare Bearden was a painter, collagist, and printmaker whose name itself hints at important parts of his story. He rarely used "Howard," which he inherited from his father, but introduced himself as Romy ("*ROH*-mee") or Romare ("*ROH*-mery")—the middle name coming from a family friend, Fred Romare. (The artist's wife, with Franco-Caribbean roots, sometimes called him "*Roh-MARR*," with the French *rr*'s rolling.) Indeed the artist started and remained a "roaming" individual, physically speaking and in his imagination, body and soul. In 1914 he moved with his parents from Charlotte to Harlem, where he attended Public School 5. When Romare was seven he moved with his parents to Saskatchewan, Canada, where his father had found work on railroad lines connecting Alberta and Moose Jaw; from Canada it was back to Harlem, where the family settled permanently, with only-child Bearden spending extended periods of time with relatives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Lutherville, Maryland; and, most often, back and forth to Charlotte, North Carolina.

What this means is that Bearden was a person on the move who often told interviewers that he "liked journeying things." Birds, bridges, waterways, boats, and particularly trains figure throughout his oeuvre. He also frequently depicts shape-shifting spirit-travelers, most often women, posted at water- or forest-edge—crossroads between this and other worlds. Each of his childhood moves and stops contains a story of first artistic inspirations—the most persistent one, retold here by the artist and then re-retold in the shimmering fictional version by John Edgar Wideman (included in this volume), is of the summer in Pittsburgh when a neighborhood pal named Eugene Bailey taught twelve-year-old Romare how to draw the scenes Eugene secretly eyed through the floorboards of the whorehouse where his mom turned tricks.[5] Often when Bearden spoke of Eugene, who suffered from infantile paralysis, he would mention that the youngster inspired him and "might have been another Lautrec." Of course, it is Bearden himself whose many artistic representations of Harlem of the 1960s and 1970s reveal traces of the influence of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's racy Paris. But those drawings of little Eugene are part of Bearden's story, too.

It is significant that Bearden's first publicly presented works were humorous and political cartoons done for college magazines, followed by stark political

satires drawn for such black publications as the *Crisis, Opportunity,* and the *Afro-American*. At its best, Bearden's mature painting retained the power of the expedient lines of the cartoon figure and scene (elsewhere, truth be told, this quick work could devolve into cartoon simplicity at its worst). Once he chooses painting (not cartooning) as a profession—sometime in the college years—influences from a global caravan of canonical painters abound.[6] His teacher at the Art Students League, the German-born New Objectivity artist George Grosz, was a profound influence on Bearden's earliest paintings and drawings. Another League teacher, Carl Holty, would collaborate with Bearden on one of the key books in Bearden studies, *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting* (1969). Inspired by both the Mexican and the WPA muralists of the 1930s and 1940s, Bearden extended the lessons of cartooning and of Grosz-style satire into frames of broader and broader implication. (See Bearden's public art works of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s commissioned by the cities of New York, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Berkeley, among others.[7]) From the beginning, this artist aimed to create works that had meaning at first sight.

The influence on Bearden of canonical European modernism, particularly the experiments of Picasso with Cubist shapes and spaces and of Matisse with color, is profound and enduring. Explorations into the Cubists' aesthetic sources and practices led him in many fruitful directions, most importantly, Chinese ink-wash painting and calligraphy for its particular styles of brushwork and its leaving "open corners" where the eye could rest and gain perspective, and where, Bearden said, the viewer could participate in the creation of meaning.[8] Bearden's early studies introduced him to certain Dutch Masters, whose windows, doors, and other interior boxes presented a lifetime of homework, as Bearden's journals and forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* clearly show. Moderns, European and American (including African American), along with leading theorists of the Harlem Renaissance, also prompted Bearden's lifelong search for ways to incorporate African aesthetics into his work. (In this volume, see "Encounters with African Art" and the essay by Bearden and Harry Henderson on aspects of the Harlem Renaissance.) How might Bearden, particularly as an African American, seek the most profound revelations from that continent's art traditions without giving in to the "primitivist" uses of Africa as raw material (*sans histoire*) or as a simplified foil against which to regard Europe or the United States? How to see African art on its own terms, not just as geometry for Euro-modernization? And what would define a specifically *African American* aesthetic?

One may track Bearden's career from relatively realistic figurative painting of the 1930s to explicitly Picasso-like experiments in evocatively spare-line drawing and Cubistic design to his often maplike Abstract Expressionist canvases done from the early 1950s until about 1964. In the early 1960s Bearden's work underwent a sea change as he discovered and nurtured the media for which he now is best known: collage and printmaking.[9] During this last quadrant of his career (the final years, of mastery, are emphasized in Myron Schwartzman's essay for this volume), one sees the fullness of Bearden's achievement as an artist who loves bold color and layered mixes of media: cutout colored papers painted and affixed to other surfaces, also sometimes painted and overlain, added and torn away, one piece after another. At a Bearden retrospective show at the Whitney Museum in 2004, I asked the painter William T. Williams to help me see, in a Bearden collage, where the brushwork left off and the addition of colored papers and other materials began. We both stared at the work—layered, torn, painted over, cut. (A guard eyed us as we moved closer and closer to the collage.) Then Williams stepped back and looked at me. "Romy doesn't want us to know that," he said.

One common thread, from the cartoon work to the end, is Bearden's impulse to vivid statement—often with the richness of perspective by incongruity—in the form of narration. Taken as a whole, Bearden's works, even when "Untitled," have tales to tell, one work to another. Almost always Bearden's desire is to retell the epic story—possibly the world's best-known story of human struggle against injustice—of being black in the United States: to "[bring] his art to bear upon the task (never so urgent as now) of defining Negro American identity, of pressing its claims for recognition and for justice."[10] As these ringing words on Bearden by his friend the novelist Ralph Ellison (who is represented by two important essays in this volume) imply, Bearden's is the opposite of a local-color project. In his continuing engagement with the polis—with the broadest possible conception of the political/community sphere—Bearden hitched his artistic wagon to stories arching across the horizon. His aim was to frame the U.S. black story in terms of the Bible (a source throughout his career, in work after work), Homer's *Iliad* and then (years later) the *Odyssey*, Lorca's bullfight drama, Derek Walcott's Caribbean poetry, and the blues and jazz as tragicomic poetry. Telling his personal history in a series of collages done in response to Calvin Tomkins's superb *New Yorker* profile (included in this volume)—which as a nod to Tomkins the artist also called "Profiles" (part I and part II)—Bearden worked with the novelist Albert Murray, who helped with titles and with the sentence or two

accompanying each work (see Plate 1, *Artist with Painting and Model*; also figs. 1–3, 21, 23, 34). (One may read Murray's fiction and monographs on the blues as indices to Bearden's picture narratives, especially after 1960.) He also created several illustrated books for children (see Robert B. Stepto's essay in this volume). At times his oils and works on paper dance and swim with words, drawn in paint or assembled in letters cut out one by one: these images are rich with reference to the vast world of art and, as jazz musicians put it, were *sayin something!*

In fact, improvisation is another vital through-line in Bearden's oeuvre: one line, color, or shape leading, in sometimes quite surprising ways, to another, in the manner of a great jazz soloist like Charlie Parker, who improvised, said the writer Stanley Crouch, "at the tempo of emergency."[11] One feels in Bearden the fresh spirit of exploration and discovery à la Parker: the will to capture the zest of new invention, tone by tone, as the story unfolds.

Part I of the present volume offers an encounter with Bearden's life and times: the *New Yorker* profile by Tomkins and an extensive interview of Bearden for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. Part II is the first gathering of this artist's most significant statements about art: indispensable essays and book chapters, speeches, reviews, and journal entries. His most far-reaching and definitive essay, "Rectangular Structures in My Montage Paintings" (1969), composed with the assistance of Murray, is here.[12] So is his detailed discussion on how he takes the "pulses" of African art and learns to use African masking in particular—an important though little-known work ("Encounters with African Art"). Gathered together, this selection of Bearden's writing from the late 1930s through the late 1970s offers a set of autobiographical notes granting rare insight into the artist's aesthetic values and practices. The texts register the shifts, as well as the overlapping planes, from Bearden's Left political and humorous cartooning of the 1930s through his (still *engagé*) mid- to late-century works on canvas and mixed-media collages. Very alive on the page, these written and transcribed words by the artist have much to teach about how to read modern black American art, and indeed any art, in our time. And again: much to teach as well about who we are as members of a collage of a human family, what time it is, and what to do about it.

Part III gathers some of the strongest texts ever written *about* Bearden. These particular works were chosen because of their broad interdisciplinary thrust. Here you'll find essays by art historians systematically tracking Bearden's stylistic trajectory, particularly the development of his work through Cubism and

Abstract Expressionism—modes he never completely abandoned—toward his signature printmaking and collage. Yet most of the essays in this section are written by novelists and poets, lending this part of the book a bias that is unmistakably *literary.* How apt that in response to Bearden's paintings, where so often scenes and characters are drawn from literature, these writers return the favor in flying word-colors! What this means is that in their heft and quickness of signification, and in artistic qualities so difficult to put into words, these literary responses to Bearden stand up to his paintings. Note, for example, the sinewy language of playwright August Wilson, who recalls, in the essay included here, making his way to the artist's apartment on New York's Canal Street, but then failing to muster what it took to knock on the man's door—Bearden's art had been so profound a guide for him:

> I have never looked back from that moment when I first encountered his art. He showed me a doorway. A road marked with signposts, with sharp and sure direction, charting a path through what D. H. Lawrence called the "dark forest of the soul." I called to my courage and entered the world of Romare Bearden and found a world made in my image. A world of flesh and muscle and blood and bone and fire. A world made of scraps of paper, of line and mass and form and shape and color, and all the melding of grace and birds and trains and guitars and women bathing and men with huge hands and hearts, pressing on life until it gave back something in kinship.[13]

In several cases, these writers create a practical vocabulary to spell out ways of working that they share with Bearden and with visual artists in general, and perhaps with all artists. All require *structure*, *color*, *and rhythm*, says Toni Morrison.[14] Put her triad alongside Bearden's assertion that all painting is "putting something over something else."[15] Is not all art a matter of placing one thing over the other (in the case of the writer, placing many-storied words and storylines one over the other): of collage-like layering? Put this query alongside Bearden's declaration that he learned much about the art of painting from jazz musicians, improvising layer on layer of rhythm and tune over the chord changes of a blues melody or atop a popular song like Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm." Jazz musicians have coined a wonderful phrase for improvisations on this Gershwin standard: "playing the 'Rhythm changes.'" I like to think of Bearden, too, as playing "Rhythm changes." (See Albert Murray's essay on Bearden and jazz in this volume.)

This part of the book has something to do, as well, with questions of influence and translation, not only from painter to painter but from painter to writer, writer

to painter, from painter and writer to musician—back and forth. One wonders if Brent Hayes Edwards is not right that *all* true works of art cry out for translation into other languages, including into the terms of other artistic forms.[16] Bearden belongs in the ranks of leading modern artists who translated literature and music into visual art. And how many writers, not just August Wilson, have taken Bearden and other painters as models for poetry and fiction?

Taking the advice of his friend Stuart Davis, whose jazz paintings Bearden much admired, Bearden studied masters of jazz whose additions, subtractions, and other rearrangements of received material, note-by-note and chord-by-chord, had made Davis think of painting as playing the intervals of a piano keyboard in the tradition of Earl Hines, in particular. "Interval" is a key word for Bearden studies: *the spaces between*. Miles Davis said, "It's not the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play. . . . Play what's not there." Bearden listened closely to what was there and not there in the work of jazz keyboardists as well as horn players and singers who could pronounce one note that implied several others; and who, in the cases of Louis Armstrong and Thelonious Monk, could make a single note *swing*. So many of Bearden's rhythmically placed images of singers and horn players, keyboardists and keyboards—some of them urban row-house keyboards—suggest jazz rhythms and layers: John Coltrane-like sheets of sound on canvas.[17]

By the early 1960s Bearden began to arrange his rectangular shapes in compositions that were strongly influenced by the Cubists and Dutch Masters Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer, in a way that gave his work more *movement*—the element he said was missing in the Europeans' paintings. As models for his jazz series, the Europeans offered "a classic quality to rival the Greeks," Bearden told an interviewer. But the jazz works forming in his mind could not be "as static as theirs." "I listened to jazz," Bearden continued, "and just drew. I did this for three months or so, just trying to pick up these rhythms. . . . By turning my rectangles from here to here, you make certain interval relationships which give a sense of movement."[18] Bearden's acute- and oblique-angle tilting of these rectangular boxes within his paintings gave them something of what the artist considered jazz's "speed." The Harlem painter did not want a Cubism that was too square!

This jazz analogy makes us wonder how August Wilson's plays or Ralph Ellison's fictions may also be jazzlike in their shapes, spaces, and colored improvisations—and what, as these influences circle around, Bearden learned from writers about jazz. How can literary works, which like paintings may be regarded as fixed on silent two-dimensional surfaces, nonetheless make a kind

of music? (Ellison's phrase for his technique for writing across the art forms is "planned dislocation of the senses."[19] Toni Morrison says she takes pains to use language that makes her readers literally move their lips and sound out her words aloud while reading.[20]) How to make literature speak and move? How to give it an improvised musical quality? The jazz composer/reed master Henry Threadgill calls literally *all* art improvisatory.[21] When, he asks, are Beethoven's first drafts of a sonata's score not like Charlie Parker's first takes on an on-the-spot blues composition like "Parker's Mood"? When not like the successive canvases (or layers on canvas) of a painter? With such questions ringing in the air (coloring it and, to borrow a term from Thelonious Monk, "rhythm-a-ning" it), Part III explores what Morrison terms the "liquid" spaces where the art forms melt, meet, and flow together.[22] It was the search for better understanding of this liquid space that informed my choosing so many literary writers to comment on this highly literary and musical painter.

"*Improvisation*," said Bearden's friend Murray, "*is the ultimate (i.e., heroic) endowment* . . . even as flexibility or the ability to swing (or to perform with grace under pressure) is the key to that unique competence which generates the self-reliance and thus the charisma of the hero."[23] Consider how many of the most heroic characters in Bearden's paintings, figures male and female, from this or some other world, are improvisers of the first degree. Consider his many Billie Holidays, Louis Armstrongs, Duke Ellingtons, Charlie Parkers. Or his many drop-dead beautiful Circes, as well as conjure women, Obeah women, and other supernaturals—all gifted with the peculiar strength and skill of the improvising artist to turn the world around (see the essays herein by Rachel DeLue, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Richard Powell). Routinely presenting such charismatic shape-shifters in his paintings, Bearden celebrated jazz as a model for the visual artist, while he developed ideas about improvisation required not only of Americans but also of citizens of the globe everywhere. What would it mean for the planet if more of us had the sense of self and community as one swinging band implied by the improvised music of top jazz musicians—whether in slow time or *at the tempo of emergency*?

Parts I and II of this anthology emphasize that for Bearden—as for many American artists black, white, brown, and beige—"the quest for identity" stands front and center. One is reminded of James Baldwin's definition of the layers of iden-

tity as loose robes "through which one's nakedness can always be felt."[24] Interview by interview, essay by essay, Bearden raises the question of what it means to "know thyself,"[25] to explore the planet from the hub of home and self. The question was connected directly with his art: "I didn't know what to paint," he says, over and over again, to his interlocutors.

Indeed, in public pronouncements, Bearden usually approached the question of identity in terms of finding his way as an *artist:* his search for subjects, perspectives, and techniques. His search, one might say, was for artistic "ancestors."[26] But Bearden also would surprise listeners by broaching these big subjects from a side door with references to his career as a young *athlete*—an important aspect of the artist's identity that Bearden scholars almost never mention. In 1931–32 Bearden was the starting fullback on the football team at Boston University, where, during the spring seasons, he was also an ace pitcher on the freshman and later the varsity baseball teams. During those years, Bearden earned summer money on a professional baseball team called the Boston Colored Tigers, a Roxbury-based sandlot outfit that was good enough to challenge top-ranked Negro League teams when they passed through New England. Bearden smiled when telling about his close loss of a pitching duel against Satchel Paige, probably the Negro League's most famous star. An equally emphatic testimony of the artist's baseball prowess, and of the larger question of Bearden's layered identity, came in 1932 when Connie Mack, owner/manager of the Philadelphia Athletics (of the then whites-only Major Leagues), invited Bearden to join the team that had won World Series championships in 1929 and 1930 and the American League pennant in 1931. Coming fifteen years before Jackie Robinson's historical breakthrough of white baseball's color line in 1947, the only way to understand the offer by Mack, who even in 1947 was not a proponent of integrating pro baseball, is that Mack did not realize that Bearden, who was light-skinned, was African American. Seeing that he could join Mack's team only if he "passed for white," Bearden—whose family (his mother, the community leader Bessye J. Bearden, in particular) had been active in the black freedom movement all his life—declined. Who strove to add a complexly heroic (one might say a big league *athletic)* blackness to the modern project of painting? Bearden did. Who could have disappeared in the white world but *chose* to be African American? Bearden did.

Bearden frequently would speak of race and American identity by referring to such black ball-field practices as celebratory solo end-zone dances and high-fiving one's teammates—this latter black athlete's gesture of the 1950s and

1960s having become part of the lingua franca of contemporary athletes all over the world and nowadays of young people and even babies everywhere.[27] With their jagged changes of pace and dancelike running games, American sports themselves are "jazz-shaped," writes Ellison.[28] Above all it is Ellison who argues that if Americans could only become more conscious of their deeply shared national-family inheritances—many of them passed along via popular or vernacular culture—perhaps next (ethical/political) steps would follow: from consciousness to conscientiousness. Seeing the other in oneself, the self in the other.

These sports references shed new light on Bearden's paintings and his ways of making them. There's athleticism in Bearden's protagonists, male and female (and sometimes androgynous): the Lorca bullfighters and Homeric warriors but also the conjure women and Sirens, guitarists, and even Deep South gardeners—with their mighty hands. Those assisting the artist in the studio report that he would stick with a painting that was resisting him—Bearden often said that "the canvas was always saying no to me"—by insisting that he would "not let the painting win": *he* would win.[29] If in a given moment the color he wanted was not available, he would work with whatever color he had. Whether in visual art, sports, or music, "necessity," said the composer Muhal Richard Abrams, "is the mother of improvisation."[30] (The saxophonist Lester Young once revised the maxim to declare that "Necessity is a *mother.*")

Nor should we forget that Bearden was a child of the 1910s and 1920s, when as the Harlem Renaissance was taking shape every other black barbershop in the United States sported a famous photo of the black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson. Blacks who had never heard of Langston Hughes or W. E. B. Du Bois would know that a handsome, trash-talking black dandy named Johnson had knocked out one white man after another en route to world championship, the brown-skin southerner crossing the color line every time he stepped into a "white men only" boxing ring or even inside "the workout circle around the punching bag."[31] Level the playing fields, the example of black athletes proclaimed, and they could go toe-to-toe with anybody. Few athletes figure in Bearden's works (notable exceptions are his watercolor, gouache, and ink painting of boxers, circa 1952; a 1976 collage made for the Montreal Olympics; and a 1977 collage made for a TV *Guide* cover). But when he speaks about sports he knows what he's talking about, and very often the underlying subjects are the making of art and, yes, the complexities of *identity.* Like Jack Johnson, Bearden the former pitcher and fullback wanted to be the best at whatever he did; he

wanted to win! Is not Bearden's highly competitive spirit akin to that of the contemporary African American artist Kerry James Marshall, who unabashedly compares his own desire and will to prepare to be the best with those of Muhammad Ali and Stephen Curry?[32]

Concerning identity, race, and American culture, Bearden routinely quoted the insights of Constance Rourke, the mid-century cultural historian also frequently cited by his close friends Ellison and Murray. To be an American, she argued, was to inherit three specific bundles of cultural traits: all Americans are part Yankee, part "Frontiersman" (including Native American), and part black.[33] With the blackness stirred into the American cultural mix (see Ellison's essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks"),[34] Americans at their best are not only masters of improvisation but also of masquerade, as well as the inheritors of other black practices and modes of self-presentation. Ironically it is the blacks, says Ellison, who serve as stubbornly undiscouragable guardians of the American Dream: who know the nation has not come close to living up to its promises, but who continue to challenge us all to make things right. You might say that among the many things blacks bring to American cultural life are the elusive qualities called (suggesting their own philosophical/political stances) *coolness* and *soul*. "The three figures [the Yankee, the Frontiersman, the African American] loomed large," says Rourke, "not because they represented any considerable numbers in the population, but because something in the nature of each induced an irresistible response. . . . Their comedy, their irreverent wisdom, their sudden changes and adroit adaptations, provided emblems for a pioneer people who required resilience as a prime trait. Comic triumph appeared in them all; the sense of triumph seemed a necessary mood in the new country." The spirit Rourke identifies as "comic" pervades American culture, including its literary culture. "Emerson had it in everything he wrote," she says. "Whitman had it, and was aware of the quality: it was that of improvisation. In one way or another every major American writer had shown its traces. . . . [Dickinson's poetry] has an abounding fresh intensity, a touch of conquering zeal, a true entrance into new provinces of verbal music."[35]

Bearden had it, too, this improviser's "abounding fresh intensity," an aspect of his Rourke/Ellison/Murray sense of American identity as substantially black. For all of them, Richard Wright's formula retained its measure of truth: "The Negro," wrote the author of *Native Son*, "is America's metaphor."[36]

Bearden expressed the mystery of a multicolored American/African American mix in painting after painting where the red-white-and-blue flies along-

FIGURE 1 Romare Bearden, *Profile/Part II, The Thirties: I'm Slapping Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe*. Art © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York

side the red-black-and-green, neither set of colors eclipsing or contradicting the other. His Harlem collages expressed the excitement of that neighborhood when it was a cultural mecca (see fig. 1, *I'm Slapping Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe*) as well as the edginess of a neighborhood under siege: Harlem as metaphor, "the 'harlemness' of the national human predicament."[37] Turning the tables, Bearden also sought characters, scenes, and storylines from cultural storehouses marked "global" or "universal" to tell the broad story of black America. And so his Bible characters are black, brown, and beige. And so, in his *Odyssey* series, the hero's search for father, family, and home spell not only an ancient Greek quest but a contemporary black American one—the outcast group's search for an at-home feeling in the strangely hostile land of their birth. Accordingly, Bearden chose to make all the *Odyssey*'s characters, deadly temptresses and loyal wife along with monstrous killers and magical saviors, using the blackest bolts of paper he could find. How interesting, too, that in that series Bearden identifies most strongly not only with Circe the witch but also with others tempting and threatening Odysseus: the man-devouring Cyclops and even the vile killer Scylla. Bearden's quest for an American/African

American identity involves a robust quest for the other in the self, the self in the other, going beyond race, beyond even the human race, to include empathetic identification even with genuinely dangerous monsters.

Bearden sometimes explained the blackening of his Homeric characters in terms of audience: a black child in Alabama or Africa viewing his black translation of the work "might see the myth the way I did." Concerning his Africanizing the *Odyssey*, Bearden told an interviewer:

> After Odysseus leaves Circe, he has to go and see an old prophet in the netherworld who will tell him how to get back home. Circe had recommended that he see the prophet. So in that particular work I have Odysseus with a mask of a crocodile to protect him from the terror. He's going down into the land of the Shades. It would seem perfectly appropriate if this were down in Africa [that] he would have this kind of protection as a warrior. You say it's universal. It's universal to me in *this* way.[38]

In any case, "We all live in a mask," said Bearden. "We all have a hundred different identities. Sometimes a mask can be a truer indicator of a person than his true face."[39]

Before further exploring Bearden's long artistic range, let us unpack a few more of his anecdotes concerning the question of identity, these now with an emphasis not on sports but on self-discovery through the labor of making art—or trying to make art.[40] By far Bearden's most frequently told tale in this category is one set in the late 1930s.[41] He and his friend the writer Claude McKay were strolling through black Manhattan some time during the Great Depression. Like most people McKay had no money. Still, the novelist so valued his signed copy of George Grosz's volume of reproduced drawings and watercolors called *Ecce Homo* (a work that was also highly important to Bearden) that he (McKay) could not bear to sell the book. Walking near the Apollo Theater, Bearden and McKay heard the peremptory jangling of keys, the prostitute's signal of that era. "There she was," says Bearden, "the homeliest woman I ever saw in my life. 'Gentlemen, two dollars,' she said to us. And then 'A dollar' and then 'Fifty cents?' and then at last, "'*Gentlemen please, just take me!*'" Informing her that she was "in the wrong profession," Bearden directed the woman, whose name was Ida, to see his mother Bessye, whose community-mindedness and contacts

extended all over Harlem, and beyond. Bessye Bearden did find Ida a job, and to thank Bearden and his mother, Ida cleaned his studio, which was upstairs in the Apollo, once a week.

During this period the brown paper on Bearden's easel remained blank week after week (as often happened in his artist-as-young-man stories). He was stuck for a subject to paint. "You told me *I* was in the wrong profession," said the woman, observing the blank paper. "Why don't you paint me?" She could tell by Bearden's expression what he was thinking. ("She was not exactly a beauty-contest winner" as he sometimes put it.) "I know what I am," she told him. "But when you can look at me and see something beautiful, maybe you'll be able to put something on that paper of yours." She stared at him. "That," says the artist, "was the most important lesson in art that I have ever received." In 1947 Bearden made this journal entry: "Rembrandt took beggars, draped them in exotic garments and painted them as kings. They were kings, but his greatness consists in the fact that you can see that they were also beggars."[42] The former streetwalker's challenge—one interpretation of which is that the true artist can see beauty and discern truths about the human family in absolutely anyone and everyone—"was a lesson I've never forgotten," said Bearden.

A related Bearden anecdote is set in 1950, when the artist was living in Paris.[43] At a Left Bank café across from Notre Dame, someone handed Bearden what he thought was a strong, bad-tasting French cigarette, hand-rolled. It turned out to be hashish. "I don't know how I got there," Bearden said, "but suddenly I found myself across the river, standing in front of the cathedral. And as I stood there I saw one of the angels step down from Notre Dame, and she began walking on the Seine, in the moonlight. And I thought, 'I'll paint that angel, walking on water.' Just then a lady of the evening appeared and said, 'Don't you want to come home with me?' And I said, 'No, I want to paint that angel on the water. I wonder what she's doing there.' And she said, 'You men are all alike. Those angels hold up that big church all day. Don't you think they get tired!? Don't you know she needs to take a rest!?' After that I never could paint that angel. The streetwalker had spoiled it for me!" Bearden said he never could paint at all while in Paris. There was just too much going on. But note that in this scene, frequently repeated by the artist, another workingwoman gives him a lesson that produces a kind of revelation. Whether in Paris or Harlem—America's "own homegrown version of Paris"[44]—great lessons in art could be taught not only by Picasso and Jacob Lawrence but by wise persons from all walks of life. One part of the lesson learned has to do with finding art-subjects

in the world as it is, the world the artist knows best—all hashish-fueled fantasies notwithstanding!

Another story along these lines that Bearden liked to tell is set in the 1950s and features the artist and two box turtles called Abercrombie and Fitch, whose owner was leaving town and seeking new homes for his matching pets.[45] Abercrombie already had a new place to stay. "Well," said Bearden, "I thought, 'Maybe I'll paint the turtle,' so I took Fitch. Right away he disappeared. Turns out he bored into the mattress and hid there. I didn't want to paint him anyway!" Once again at a loss for a subject, Bearden had contemplated the turtle and recalled a conversation with the painter William Baziotes. "How do you decide what to paint?" Bearden had asked him. Baziotes said he'd had the same problem and solved it by asking himself what it was that he really liked. "I came up with goblets," he told Bearden, "wine goblets." He just loved their shape. "So he started painting them," said Bearden, "and everyone thought they were mountains and liked them very much. . . . I had run out of things to think about by this time, so I started to just paint remembrances of Charlotte, North Carolina, where I was born [see figs. 2, 3, *The Daybreak Express* and inscription]. When I finally did that, the turtle crawled out of the mattress, so I guess he must have liked what I was doing."[46] *What do you really like?* the artist asked himself.

Back in New York from his seven months in Paris, Bearden was still excited about his memories of the place, but confused about what to do next as an artist. He wanted to return to the City of Lights. How to get there? Bearden's studio had an old upright piano in the corner—maybe he could tap out a hit song that would buy him a ticket back to France. This effort produced modest success. His friend Billie Holiday was interested in one of his songs (evidently never recorded). Another, "Seabreeze," was recorded by Billy Eckstine and then picked up as an advertisement melody.[47] Still, one friend, Heinrich Blücher the philosopher/poet (then the husband of Hannah Arendt, also a friend of the artist), warned Bearden that he'd better get back to painting—that pursuing the secondary talent of songwriting could mean he'd "soon dissipate any meaningful ability I had and I'd never paint again."[48] It was during this period of straining to make song lyrics with a musician friend that Bearden became seriously ill. Sometime in 1953 he collapsed in the street and woke up in the psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital. "You blew a fuse," a doctor there told him.

Once the artist was pronounced fit to return home, his father came to pick him up. In interviews Bearden recalls walking down the hospital stairs and suddenly remembering that his old friend the Mexican artist Luis Arena had had a

FIGURE 2 Romare Bearden, *Profile/Part I, The Twenties (Mecklenburg County): The Daybreak Express*, 1978. Collage on board, 10 1/4 × 14 7/8 in. (26 × 37.8 cm). Collection of Joseph McConnell. Art © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York

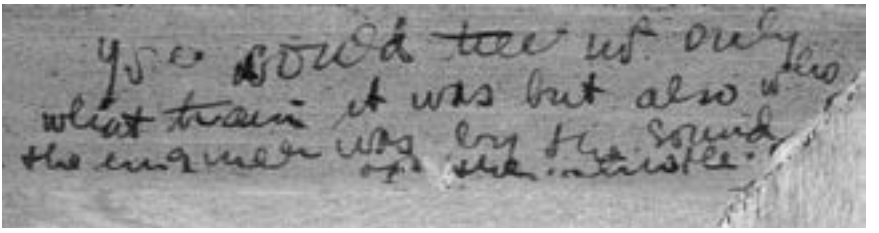

FIGURE 3 Romare Bearden, *The Daybreak Express*, inscription: You could tell not only what train it was but also who the engineer was by the sound of the whistle. © Romare Bearden Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York

job with the WPA helping to create frescoes on that same hospital wall. "When you do a fresco you put wet plaster on the wall and you have to work into this wet plaster," said Bearden. "You can't let it dry. If you don't finish what the plasterer put down for the day, he has to knock all that down and put fresh plaster on because only in the drawing do the colors fuse and get into the wall." So the

artist has to work with the plaster as it is put on, and as fast as possible. Bearden continued:

> Well, I came down and said to my father, "Gee, I was here before, in the 1930s. The fresco was over here. These people must have painted over it." I went to the wall and was trying to prove it to him by feeling for a seam. I was going along the wall with my hand, feeling like a blind person, and there happened to be a guard who was standing there looking at me. He called my father over and said, "Is that your son? I'm afraid that boy is not well. *He's coming back!*" We laugh at it now, but this is what the artist has to do. You have to take all of that and make it into your art, and then make it look like it's easy.[49]

Bearden's way of telling this incident recalled not only the difficult discipline, teamwork, and psychological support that it took to make art look easy; but also that despite its being plastered over and forgotten, the art could still be experienced—if not seen, literally *felt.* Somehow the art would not be denied. According to this important anecdote, then, Bearden's exit interview from the mental ward included his rediscovery of the power of art and the calling of the artist. Heroic through all of this was his wife, Nanette Rohan: Bearden often told the Bellevue story in her praise, remembering that once he was back home, she told him to throw away all the pills he had been given and get back to painting. "She saved my life," the artist often said.

In the *New Yorker* profile by Tomkins (and elsewhere) Bearden records a related, if earlier, story.[50] The date of the incident is not given, but evidently it was during the 1930s when Bearden was trying to find his artistic voice that a local gangster commissioned him to create a portrait of his beloved children. The man gave Bearden a photograph of the kids from which to work, a conventional black-and-white snapshot. Bearden wrestled in vain with the project—nothing seemed to work, not even trying a Degas-like treatment of the subject. And then he followed a friend's advice and took the photo downtown to have it blown up on sensitized canvas, and then to have someone touch up the enlarged photograph to give it color. The result was not at all good. "The kids looked like they were made up for Forest Lawn!" recalled Bearden, referencing one of New York's larger cemeteries. Shortly after, the gangster came by Bearden's studio with two bodyguards to check on the commissioned portrait's progress, and when he saw the garish blow-up he broke into tears of joy. "*My babies!*" the man said. He paid fifty dollars over the set price, at that time a big bonus, and insisted that Bearden sign the work. Not wanting to be embarrassed

by it later, Romare spelled his name backwards as a *nom de plume*: "Eramor." "Eramor," the man said, "You're one helluva painter!"

Start looking for self-discovery stories in the Bearden file and they turn up everywhere. Their punchlines vary, but repeatedly the point is to resist the temptation to imagine drawing strength for artistic creation from some fanciful source, whether deep in the heart of nature, in Paris, in some magic imaginary realm or get-cash-quick scheme. Nor does the answer lie in traveling under false colors into the "big leagues," whether in sports or in the world of art, where one person's source of inspiration (touched-up photos or goblets or turtles or whatever) is probably not yours. Rather, the true source of originality lies in the raw fabric of one's own lived experience, in the creative processes of "re-membering" that experience (to paraphrase Toni Morrison),[51] and in the solitary study hall that jazz musicians call *the woodshed*: the hard place of self-investigation and practice-practice-practice.

The other side of this true-to-home-base aesthetic or "vernacular imperative" (Albert Murray's term) is that throughout his career Bearden took issue with those who advocated artistic inspiration all by itself, the *isolato*'s inwardness without outward study and responsibility to others, to the polis. That Bearden started his professional career as a satirical political cartoonist is a fact from which much may be learned: the sense of political urgency of those first cartoons remained in his work.[52] It is just as important that when telling of his early 1960s discovery of collage as a new path-finding ("Frontiersman's") way of working, Bearden typically points to the formation of the black artists' collective Spiral, convened at first in his Canal Street studio to consider how black artists might participate most meaningfully in the Civil Rights movement. (See Brent Hayes Edward's essay on Bearden's politics, in this volume.) "It was at this time," says art historian Lowery Sims, "that Bearden came up with the idea of organizing a group project that would express or symbolize some kind of consensus and unity, so he proposed that the group work on a communal collage."[53] By all reports no other Spiral members wanted to follow up on this suggestion. But Bearden started a first collage to show Spiral what he had in mind, and in so doing found himself hooked on the form. Given the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, small wonder that Bearden's first series in this genre—the photomontages—have a jagged-edge in-your-face challenge quality: the staring Harlem eyes and hands "pressing on life." Not created for a commercial market but for his own purposes as woodshed practice pieces as he and Spiral were finding their way, these first montages were too direct and strong to

sell to the public, Bearden felt. But indeed they did form an important gallery show—at precisely a point when the gallerist Arne Ekstrom was concerned that Bearden was experiencing a stylistic lull; and, as we know now, they were a key to Bearden's oeuvre going forward.[54] This Spiral narrative forms another landmark Beardenian sense-of-direction story: the beginning of his signature artistic mode as an act both of art and of politics.

Bearden's sense of the artist's task as more than loner's introspection is seconded by his reports on his artistic training beyond the early cartoon work. Art, he repeatedly said, comes not from sincere emotion or inspiration or "nature" alone. Not from overcooked technical tricks or mundane faithfulness to original scenes or sources, however beautiful, art comes from other art—from finding one's own artistic ways by studying the ways of other artists. So in making the transition from cartoonist to fine artist, Bearden enrolled in 1936 at the Art Students League, where Grosz, the German emigré artist, offered studio classes. Considering his piercing anti-Fascist paintings (some of which appear in the illustrated book treasured by Claude McKay), Grosz was an exceptionally apt mentor for Bearden. As a teacher his goal was to build upon Bearden's quick-draw cartoonist's skill: to create a more detail-oriented draftsman. "He taught the fundamentals of drawing," said Bearden. "He made me draw a hand, a foot, a face on a large sheet of paper—with very accurate attention to detail. He introduced me to the great draftsmen of the past—Holbein, Dürer and Ingres." Bearden could not wait to get into the classes with Grosz. "I studied from seven till ten at night drawing from the models. Every day I was learning something. . . . I hated to see ten o'clock come!"[55]

The young artist's education continued through the war years. By 1945, when his affiliation with the Samuel Kootz Gallery began, his horizons had expanded. He had known the black artists Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Charles Alston (Bearden's cousin), but the Kootz connection signaled a break in the pattern of New York's race-divided art world. "The great thing about being in a gallery was meeting the [other Kootz] artists, because I hadn't had that kind of exposure," Bearden told an interviewer. "And Kootz would have a meeting about every month; all the artists would be there and there would be exchanges of ideas which at that time meant a great deal to me. My work became more and more, you might say, non-representational."

Upon his return from his 1950 stay in Paris, Bearden continued to feel he had nowhere near enough formal training in art. Grosz had taught little about oil painting, for example. Then came the breakthrough that Bearden mentions in

almost every interview: his discovery of the journals of the nineteenth-century French artist Eugène Delacroix. "I noted how Delacroix almost to the end of his life was always going to the Louvre and copying paintings," said Bearden. "I felt that I wanted to do the same thing, so I took perhaps two years and made a very systematic study of the old masters. Starting with Early Renaissance painters like Giotto, Duccio, I made copies of their work—right on down to the High Renaissance, men like Veronese."[56]

Realizing that doing this copy-work in the rooms of museums was not for him, instead Bearden would take his own photographs of paintings he admired to a friend who would print them on large sheets of paper. In his studio Bearden could create his own oil-on-canvas copies. Working from such blow-ups (how interesting it is that photography has so often been important to Bearden's processes of making art as well as learning about art), Bearden could study works from New York museums and from elsewhere. "I did very interesting and good copies of these paintings," says the artist:

> It taught me a lot about painting. . . . The copy that gave me the most difficulty was a Rembrandt, *Pilate Washing His Hands*, because, while it looks so easy, it looks so simple on the surface, you find it's so intricately involved. Because, if a painter has certain rhythms going and these things are all done right, say five or six rhythms that intertwine right, these things kind of expand even more. Even without the painter's intention, it becomes even more intricate.[57]

"An artist is an art lover who finds that in *all* the art that he sees, he sees something is missing," said Bearden. "And to touch at the core of what he feels is missing, what needs to be there, becomes the center of his life's work."[58] In an important interview he elaborated: "You go to see art in the museum, you know, all the paintings. You say, 'Well, this is fine; *there's only one thing missing.*'" In the monograph he co-authored with his teacher and friend Carl Holty, *The Painter's Mind*, this subject of the *something missing* is broached again and again. Throughout that book Bearden and Holty present reproductions of historically important paintings coupled with their own re-drawn images of them—their exploratory outlines of the pathways in and through the Manets, Monets, Picassos, and the Dutch Masters (including, prominently, Rembrandt)

are particularly telling. These dramatic pairings uncover the originals' underlying strategies for using space and structure, as detected by these modernists in search of techniques they could use, as well as the "something" found missing in every case: something of their own.

Here again Ellison provides a helpful perspective. During Q-and-A after a 1990 public reading in New York, a young black woman asked what advice he might give her as an aspiring writer. "Read the Russians," Ellison said, chuckling as he stood to leave the stage. "Read the Russians!" No doubt he was thinking of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in particular, two of his indispensable models for *Invisible Man*. Maybe he was thinking of Turgenev or Chekov, other important models. But beyond such specifics, I think Ellison was advising the young woman to read widely, across all categories. He was advising that she choose her own artistic "ancestors" and do it boldly—without regard to color lines or any lines of "race," nationality, or gender.

In this spirit, Bearden's range of reference is global by design. Again and again, his paintings' lyrical horizon lines, their strings of stylized letters, their open corners—places for the viewer's eye to rest and to co-sign the creation of meaning—reflect Bearden's lifetime of studying Asian art, particularly the Chinese calligraphers. The references to Africa are just as explicit: not only to masks and textiles but also to the dance-beat rhythmical play of structural elements and the prevalence of troubled water, these last offering reflections on the Middle Passage and the many thousands gone, as well as black diasporic rituals of purification. Asia and Africa overlap the many European references—particularly to Manet, Picasso, Matisse, and the Dutch Masters. "I am a man concerned with truth, not flattery," says Bearden, "who shares a dual culture that is unwilling to deny the Harlem where I grew up or the Haarlem of the Dutch masters that contributed its element to my understanding of art."[59]

And so Bearden's *Two Women in a Harlem Courtyard* (1964) alludes specifically to Pieter de Hooch's *A Courtyard in Delft at Evening: A Woman Spinning* (1657) and, of course, to spaces in black Manhattan.[60] Most interesting of all are the works where a chorus of influences sounds off. Consider, for example, the collage *Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin)*, from 1976, where Bearden repeats the figures and structures of the Italian Renaissance painter at the same time that he pays tribute to the classical bronzes of Benin. By the way, while Ulysses/Odysseus is Pinturicchio's protagonist, Bearden seemingly reduces him to a shadow, shifting the narrative to Penelope, who

stands toe-to-toe with her African-masked counterpart, evidently one of the intruding suitors against whom she (and now Odysseus, ready to enter) must contend. Or, in this Beardenian reinvention, is the foregrounded male figure Odysseus himself, the old lion returning to a wrestling match with his wife (who in some versions of the folktale, not Homer's, has been consorting with various suitors) and to a hard-edged and dangerous home place, perhaps the best the world-full-of-blues has to offer? Improvisation and ambiguity—in this case, suggesting a turn of the tale in new directions—help provide Bearden's "missing piece."

In general, the missing part of the world of art that Bearden is adding is the African American piece, defined with extraordinary richness: an interpretation of the world's art traditions through a wide black American lens. See his classic genre images, blues figures, and highballing trains—hugely resonant black American tropes. See his many images of quilts and black women's quilting circles, so brilliantly outlined by Elizabeth Alexander in this volume. And see his repeated retellings of classic literary texts from a black American perspective. His Poseidon, for example, is not an arch-enemy but an African king who is furious about the way his son the Cyclops has been treated. His Sea-Goddess is a black woman savior, extending an African cloth as a sign of the way home—or is her ritual fabric a winding sheet for those black and unknown victims of the slave trade whose spirits haunt those waters? When finally Bearden's Odysseus does arrive at home to Ithaka, he meets his father there, beneath a structure showing the star and crescent of the Islamic faith.

So the "home" sought in Bearden's Homeric series (and throughout his oeuvre) is both local and global. For here the motive for the return journey is not a matter of nostalgia but of being at home everywhere, as global citizens who recognize kinship across lines of race, nation, gender, and continent—across Bearden's sparkling blue, instead of the Greek epic's "wine-dark," seas. For again, Bearden sees the human as not as homestead settler but instead as a man or woman *ever on the move.* Perhaps Bearden would agree with Edward Said's ambiguous "ideal" of being at home *nowhere*—that is, happy enough everywhere and anywhere, without sacrificing the impulse to question and push back intellectually, aesthetically, and politically against a planet out-of-joint.[61] Maybe above all Bearden's point here is that we are all one global family, saints and sinners, all a collage of a human race living in a monumentally unfair and often bleak world. Let us ever strive for greater and greater awareness of this global kinship and the mighty sense of responsibility it brings, not forgetting the

joys: this seems to be the over-riding message of Romare Bearden's bright blue pieced-together pictures.

A few final words about collage. So many people writing about Bearden's collages emphasize their presentation of fragmented black selves and communities: the pulverizing effects of life under the long cannons of American racism. Those taking this approach to Bearden certainly are more than justified, lest any of us forget that injustice maims and kills, or that its hardiest survivors pay a terrible price for the ticket to stay alive. Before going on to praise the survival skills of these oppressed, may those Baldwin icily calls "the splendid ones" recall that by the cruelest turns of fate their heroic darker sisters and brothers remain endangered precisely for these very skills/cultural forms, for which they also are so eagerly praised and for which they are so universally imitated. These blues/jazz people and their offspring hip-hop stylists influence the globe's cultures, but, with obvious star exceptions, no one seems to want to hire them—much less to accept them as family. Who can wonder at the blunt-weapon lyrics and heavy beats of their musical forms (or at the let's-have-a-party-anyway spirit ironically going with them, as in the blues), any more than at the hard knife-cuts in Bearden's collages?

Still it is just as important to see that Toni Morrison and Elizabeth Alexander (and others in this volume) are right to regard Bearden's collages as indicating not only the fragmentation of black selves and communities but their complex *layeredness*, their refusal ever to be only one thing. This is a matter of black Americans' will to step out, as Édouard Glissant has said, from any single identity as they become citizens not only of a city or county or nation here or there but of the world in motion.[62] These Bearden banners reflect the many kinds of people who comprise black America as well as the ever-turning kaleidoscope of perspectives and personae that comprise each individual self. "Collage lets us think about identity as a spoked wheel," writes Alexander,

> or gyroscope on which its aspects spin and recombine. . . . In other words, the disparate aspects of personalities and of influence that might seem contradictory can actually coexist in a single personality, or a single identity. . . . Collage . . . is a continual cutting, pasting, and quoting of received information, much like jazz music, like the contemporary tradition of rapping, and indeed

like the process of reclaiming African-American history (or of any historiography). African-American culture from the Middle Passage forward is of course broadly characterized by fragmentation and reassemblage, sustaining what can be saved of history while making something new. Collage constructs wholes from fragments in a continual, referential dialogue between the seemingly disparate shards of various pasts and the current moment of the work itself, as well as the future the work might point toward.[63]

In an environment where simple racial stereotypes are easier to imagine than the truth of human selves in black skins, this fact of complex layered blackness, so magnificently articulated by Bearden, is most important to assert.

It is his proclaiming, through collage, the truth of both these perspectives, fragmentation and reassemblage, that may be Bearden's greatest achievement. For in his quiltlike and stained-glass-windowlike work, Bearden insists on a multiplicity of perspectives on the questions of identity that are central to his project as an artist. His "open corners" invite viewers to try to work with him to compose new answers-in-progress to the galaxy of problems that his paintings raise. Here is Bearden's most forceful gesture toward bringing "a new visual order into the world," as Ellison says, his best effort to "reset society's clock": not by replacing one meaning with another—not even with the highly oxygenated meanings of irony and ambiguity—but by his insistence on sharing the power to make meaning. Even more profound than his work's answer to the question repeated in this essay's paragraphs—Who am I?—is the set of answers to that other question implied everywhere in Bearden's oeuvre: Who are *we*? For starters, Bearden's pictures say, we are the collage people: individuals and communities with big hands and big hearts, scarred and battered but reassembled and layered. We are drawn together.

NOTES

1. James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dial, 1965), 140. The full sentence is: "And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky."

2. I was witness to Bearden's conversations with a number of his collaborators and friends, and heard many of his stories first-hand, beginning in 1979–80, when I met weekly with him and Albert Murray, initially in connection with my research on Ralph Ellison. Over the subsequent years, I visited Bearden's home on Canal Street on oc-

casion, and I attended all of his gallery openings, as well as performances by his wife Nanette Bearden's dance company and events involving Murray, where Bearden was a regular. I saw him off and on until he passed away, in 1988, and attended his funeral service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

3. From the essay by August Wilson, in this volume.

4. Biographical data presented here is drawn from Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990), and Ruth E. Fine et al., *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2003). See in particular "Romare Bearden: A Chronology," by Rocío Aranda-Alvarado and Sarah Kennel with Carmenita Higginbotham, in the Fine volume.

5. Recounted in Calvin Tomkins's profile of the artist, in this volume, and reflected upon in the essay by John Edgar Wideman, also in this volume.

6. His friend the cartoonist Elmer Simms Campbell, also African American, urged Bearden to stick with cartooning, where he was more likely to earn a living than as a museum artist. See Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*, 73.

7. The Romare Bearden Foundation's website offers the most comprehensive list of these public works; https://beardenfoundation.org/public-art/.

8. On the influence of Chinese brushwork, see Tracy Fitzpatrick, *Romare Bearden: Abstraction* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2017), pp. 13–38. On the "open corner" in Chinese landscape painting, see the Tomkins profile, in this volume, p. 31.

9. New scholarship has shown that Bearden's first experiments in collage came as early as the mid-1950s. See Fitzpatrick, *Romare Bearden: Abstraction*, pp. 48–52.

10. Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden" in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 231; for full text, see "The Art of Romare Bearden," pp. 196–203, in this volume.

11. Stanley Crouch, *Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 19.

12. Calvin Tomkins, Papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

13. See August Wilson, "Bearden: Black Life on Its Own Terms," pp. 175–77, in this volume.

14. From Morrison's talk on Bearden, transcribed for this volume.

15. From the Tomkins profile, in this volume.

16. Edwards made this point at a Bearden conference at Reid Hall, Columbia Global Centers, Paris, January 19, 2015.

17. Speaking of his painting called *The Block* (1971; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1978.61.1–6), Bearden compares his presentation of Harlem row houses to a piano keyboard; in *Bearden Plays Bearden* (1980, dir. Nelson Breen; 2012 DVD, Third World Cinema Production). See also Lawrence Toppman, "Romare Bearden: Painter of Memories" *Charlotte News* (October 4, 1980): 2C; and for the Coltrane example, see the *Charlotte Observer* (October 12, 1980): 11F.

18. Tomkins papers, MoMA Archives.

19. From John Hersey, "'A Completion of Personality': A Talk with Ralph Ellison" (1974), reprinted in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 284.

20. From the transcribed talk by Morrison, in this volume, where she refers to her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," presented as the Tanner Lecture on Human Value at the University of Michigan, October 7, 1988; see *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. 2, ed. Henry Louis Gates et al. (New York: Norton, 2014), 1099–1100.

21. Threadgill made this point at a conference of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians at the University of Chicago campus in Paris, October 19, 2015.

22. From the transcribed talk by Morrison, in this volume.

23. Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 107.

24. From *The Devil Finds Work.* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 80.

25. These words were inscribed on the gate of Apollo's temple at Delphi; see, for example, Plato, *Charmides*, 164e.

26. The "ancestors" reference comes from "The World and the Jug," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 155–87, where Ellison argues that all artists are free to move beyond the tents of their immediate "family" to claim whatever artistic models and influences they choose.

27. See "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, 27.5 (January 1969): 254.

28. See Ellison's "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 110.

29. Paul Richard, "Romare Bearden's Blues," *The Washington Post* (March 14, 1988), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1988/03/14/romare-beardens-blues/7fe69eaf-dc74-4ee4-8711-61cca7cc66c6/?utm_term=.55febee2a218; Lawrence Toppman, "Romare Bearden: Painter of Memories," *Charlotte News* (October 4, 1980): 2C.

30. Abrams said this at a conference at Columbia University, May 2008.

31. From Albert Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 33.

32. See the public interview with Marshall by William C. Rhoden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, December 15, 2016; https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/lectures/evening-with-kerry-james-marshall.

33. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the American Character* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931). This formulation by Rourke was routinely cited by Bearden, who often would associate Rourke with Ellison and Murray.

34. Written for *Time* magazine (April 6, 1970); reprinted in *Going to the Territory.*

35. Rourke, *American Humor*, 86–101.

36. Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 109; Wright's novel *Native Son* was published in 1940.

37. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 232.

38. From Charles H. Rowell's interview with Bearden published as "Inscription at the City of Brass," *Callaloo* 36 (Summer 1988): 433–34.

39. Tomkins papers, MoMA Archives.

40. Most appear in printed interviews, including ones included in this volume; some are stories told directly to me in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

41. This version of the story was told directly to me—though it also appears in the Tomkins profile in this volume. Another version is recounted in Bearden's recorded museum talk of October 20, 1982; Archive, Office of Public Programs, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

42. From "The Journal of Romare Bearden," in this volume.

43. This version of the tale was told directly to me. It can also be found in the Nelson Breen documentary *Bearden Plays Bearden* (1980), issued on DVD in 2012 with bonus material that includes, along with this anecdote, a version of the prostitute's jangling keys story.

44. This phrase by Ralph Ellison appears in his jacket blurb for Jervis Anderson's *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).

45. This version of the tale is told by Guy Trebay, "Talking Heads: Romare Bearden's Way," *Village Voice* (October 14–20, 1981): 63. Bearden also tells it again on the bonus disk included with the 2012 DVD of the documentary *Bearden Plays Bearden* (1980).

46. Trebay, "Talking Heads," 63.

47. Eventually "Seabreeze" was also recorded by Dizzy Gillespie, Tito Puente, Oscar Pettiford, and Chick Corea, among others. Branford Marsalis recorded it as part of a Bearden tribute album, *Romare Bearden Revealed* (Marsalis Music, 2003).

48. Tomkins papers, MoMA Archives.

49. "Interview of Romare Bearden by Camille Billops and James V. Hatch," *Artist and Influence* 17 (1998): 36. (The interview was conducted on December 6, 1972.)

50. See Bearden's "The 1930s: An Art Reminiscence" in this volume.

51. Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," *Thought* 59.4 (December 1984): 385.

52. It also is important to remember that before he could earn a living with his art, Bearden did so as a New York City social worker (Department of Welfare), from 1935 until 1969, when sales of his paintings finally permitted him to retire from this "day job." This was a job from which there was much to learn about people on the outskirts of official U.S. urban history. How significant that Bearden's assignment was to assist New York's Romani population, popularly (some would say offensively) called "Gypsies." See Aidan Levy, "The Quilt of Romare Bearden's Life," *The Nation* (July 13, 2018), https://www.thenation.com/article/the-quilt-of-romare-bearden-life/.

53. Sims, "The Unknown Romare Bearden," *ARTnews*, 85.8 (October 1986): 120.

54. Sims, "The Unknown Romare Bearden," 120. Ekstrom and his French partner, Daniel Cordier, represented Bearden at Cordier & Ekstrom gallery from 1960 until Bearden's death.

55. From an undated article, evidently unpublished, commissioned by *Essence* magazine; Tomkins papers, MoMA Archives.

56. From the Tomkins profile, in this volume.

57. From the Tomkins profile, in this volume.

58. "Artist's General Remarks," undated, Tomkins papers, MoMA Archives.

59. Charles Childs, "Romare Bearden: Identification and Identity," *ARTnews* 63 (October 1964): 62.

60. Bearden's version is represented by *Two Women in a Harlem Courtyard*, photostat collage on fiberboard, 41 × 30 in., from an edition of 6 (unrealized), DC Moore Gallery, New York; de Hooch's oil painting belongs to the Royal Collection Trust, London, RCIN 405331.

61. See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

62. See the documentary *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, directed by Manthia Diawara (2010, Third World Newsreel).

63. From the essay by Elizabeth Alexander, in this volume.