

**The Disjointed Self: Interrogating Interiority in the  
Collage Works of Romare Bearden and Wangechi Mutu**

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## SUMMARY

This thesis examines the collage works of modernist artist Romare Bearden and contemporary, postmodern artist Wangechi Mutu in order to examine a historical shift occurring between the mid-1960s and the early 2000s-2010s. Both artists are concerned with recontextualizing representations of black subjects, but while Bearden's disjointed figures are grounded in reality in their placement within urban scenes, Mutu's alien-human fusions are often depicted in extraterrestrial environments. Bearden's modern black figures signal a reach for universality through the very particularity of the manner in which they have been constructed, whereas Mutu's fierce glamazon goddesses abandon modernist selfhood for the shared language of critique, each seamlessly embodying a catalog of traumatizing subject positions. This project approaches both artists' works through an analysis of existing scholarship and suggests new frameworks through which to consider their work.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis puts into dialogue artists Romare Bearden and his mid-1960s collage works and Wangechi Mutu and her collage works made between the early 2000s and mid-2010s. This project aims not to offer a holistic analysis of these two artist's bodies of work, but rather, to offer an understanding of a particular historical shift as illustrated by Bearden and Mutu. This comparison reveals not only the formal evolution of collage with the ever-increasing availability of material from printed media, but also takes into account the two distinct worldviews portrayed by the subjects in both artists' collage works. Both artists take up the challenge of recontextualizing existing representations, mainly found in photographs displayed in mass media sources. By cutting images out of their original contexts and forming new, highly constructed figures out of multiple pictures, both artists seem to be concerned with creating subjects that are particular and visibly composite.

Essential to this project is an acknowledgement that these artists are both confronted with the impossibility of translating complex, abstract concepts—like particularity, universality, identity, subjectivity, race, and gender—into the flat image. This necessitates a meditation of how this project seeks to define these terms as they are understood to describe and explain how Bearden and Mutu navigate through these concepts in their collage work. Romare Bearden grapples with particularity and universality in an effort to reconcile a cultural rift between the two. Bearden's collages emphasize particularity in the way that each of his constructed figures is characteristically individual from the others surrounding them. Bearden uses cultural particularities in his collages by incorporating a kind of aesthetic language that had, at the time, been identified as a specifically black vernacular; notions of Bearden's influence from the improvisational nature of jazz, his use of fragments of tribal African masks, and his focus on

predominantly black communities in both the city and the countryside all point to his focus on cultural particularity. But, as I argue in the following section, Bearden simultaneously holds onto a desire to appeal to his audience through the universal language of art making. Although he imbues his figures with particularities, he also develops a distinct unity among the figures and the built environment portrayed in his collages. No singular figure in his collages stands out as the protagonist or the hero; rather, each figure contributes to the greater whole. As such, Bearden seeks to find common ground among a more universal notion of humanity in his figures, that although they are culturally particular, they also have a stake in art as a universal language that allows artists to reflect upon and reveal things about their experience of the world. In the following sections, I will argue that Bearden as a modern artist holds onto ideas of universality where Mutu seems to abandon notions of the universal in her contemporary moment.<sup>1</sup>

An understanding of identity and subjectivity is even more complicated, but in acknowledging the impossibility of truly defining a particular identity or an individual's subjective experience, I hope to elucidate how Bearden and Mutu approach these abstract ideas. In my understanding, identity is what makes up an individual person's self-expression. Identity depends on many factors: gender, race, sexual orientation, spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, and so on. An individual reflects this identification-based self-image in the ways they present themselves to others. Subjectivity, on the other hand, relates more to an inner life, one's own self-concept as constructed by conscious experiences. While the forces of identity and subjectivity are inextricable in the singular "self," this thesis leans in further into subjectivity in that I argue for a focus on the significance of interiority in the works of these two artists, whether emphasized (by Bearden) or camouflaged (by Mutu). Instead of relying on the very individual

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be mentioned that this notion of universality originates in the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity, which emphasized that all human beings shared the capacities for reason and for aesthetic judgment.

and complex notion of identity, I turn to subjectivity as a way to suggest that these artists are specifically concerned with *experiences* that are universal regardless of identity. For example, trauma is universal; every person experiences trauma in some shape or form, although the individual response to trauma and specific kind of trauma they experience are particular. Subjectivity points to feelings, desires, emotional reactions, and above all, an interior notion of the self. And what makes this notion of subjectivity so important to a discussion of Bearden and Mutu's collage work is not that they are trying to *define* what "black subjectivity" is (as this term is admittedly a misnomer, but is employed to point to the specific subject matter of these artists) but rather to emphasize the *existence* of subjectivity in subject matter that has been over and again dehumanized, essentialized, and erased of autonomy in the history of European and American art.

Definitions of race and gender are just as vastly complicated as notions of identity and subjectivity. This project follows art historian Kirsten Pai Buick's critique of discourse on race. She argues:

Almost without fail when the discussion is 'race' the subject is usually 'black,' with 'black' meaning 'race' while 'white' continues unchallenged. The syntactical construction of 'women and people of color'—the so-called language of inclusiveness—reaffirms the idea of 'white' as an essential, ontological category. The tenuous fiction of race demanded and demands clarity even as its 'reality' (racism) continues to be produced at the level of culture.<sup>2</sup>

As I will argue in the following sections, much of what Buick identifies here as the "problem" of race is that it is "blackness" that is socially constructed as the binary or opposite to "whiteness," which shows up in art history and criticism as a separate standard to which art made by black artists is held. Where white artists go unchallenged in matters of identity when their work is

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<sup>2</sup> Kirsten Pai Buick, "The 'Problem' of Art History's Black Subject," *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 36.

being discussed, the work of black artists is assumed to be referential to some aspect of their racial identity and their struggle as such, and often, mere biography overshadows artworks with intended interpretations beyond blackness itself. This shows up for Bearden, who openly condemns this practice in his own writing, but it also appears some forty years later in criticism on Mutu's work, albeit in a different form. Mutu, as a Kenyan-born African immigrant living in the United States, receives art criticism that often hones in on her personal biography, which may ring true for some works but critically reduces the other aspects of her work that actively contradict such readings. What Mutu reveals that explodes these limited discursive constructions celebrating aspects of her personal identity is that gender and race are highly constructed categories that are full of contradictions and damaging binaries that function to alienate and generate divisions much more than they accurately represent particular lives.

As I navigate through criticism and scholarship about both artists' work, I attempt to elucidate the limitations that existing scholarship presents and suggest other frameworks through which to interpret their work. Existing scholarship on Bearden has focused on his cultural cosmopolitanism and his embrace of a particular black vernacular. I bring in an argument that positions Bearden between the ideological poles of the universal and the particular as he negotiates a hybrid aesthetic form that is both figurative and abstract, but only abstract to the point where the artist still offers something recognizable for his viewers to hold onto. Existing critical frameworks for Mutu's work include hybridity and cyborg theory, Antihumanism, and Afrofuturism, but I argue those frameworks are insufficiently critical and I offer other views focusing on her unification of both the grotesque and the pleasurable along with her mode of deconstructing prevalent myths of black womanhood. These suggested frameworks seek not to function as a corrective, but hopefully a productive addition to the conversations about both

artists.

Also important to an introduction of this thesis is a baseline understanding of the history of collage and how it has been theorized. The “invention” of collage is most often attributed to artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who in the early twentieth century began to layer various packaging labels, newsprint, and other found papers onto their paintings. As such, collage and Cubism have familial ties in the way that the artist abstracts images to the point of fragmentation. The European avant-garde took hold of collage and called it Dada, a movement whose artists took text and images from mass media and constructed poster-like compositions that explicitly critiqued government and other systems of power. The Surrealists embraced collage as a way to juxtapose contradictory concepts to create dream-like alternate realities and Pop artists used collage to reflect contradictions between consumerism, domesticity and capitalist structures of power. Collage and assemblage were again popularized by artists in the 1960s, whose emphasis on the material of the everyday helped them make statements about the rapidly changing capitalist landscape and the resultant social consequences.

Collage is generally characterized by the cut-and-paste action of the artist in which found images, text, and materials are recontextualized to create new images with new meanings.<sup>3</sup> Art historian Brandon Taylor theorizes the popularity of the medium of collage as a coincident of the rise of modernism in this way:

Modernity’s fragments, some collages suggest, *are* its history, its residue; they are what is left over when the great feast of consumption had ended for the day, when trading and exchange have ceased and the people have gone home for a rest. Collage in the fine arts allows us to see that it is somewhere in the gulf between the bright optimism of the official world and its degraded material residue, that many of the exemplary, central experiences of modernity exist.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yuval Etgar, “The Ends of Collage,” in *The Ends of Collage*, ed. Yuval Etgar (London: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2017), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 9. Emphasis in original.

Through this framework, we can understand collage as a direct result of modernity in the way in which it is a reflection of the excess of capital produced by human activity and the consequence of alienation that such a system creates. The role of the collage artist is to embrace these everyday scraps and use them to produce new visual forms.

Section II: The Self Behind the Mask: Romare Bearden's Modernist Collage deals with Bearden's Harlem-centered collage works and discusses some of his own writings about art. This section also navigates through major tropes found in art criticism directed toward black artists and unpacks some of the delimiting notions of the relationship between black artists and the politics of representation. Bearden specifically critiques scholarship that insists on a racialized aesthetic form, and he argues for the impossibility of making concrete definitions about black identity and experience. Looking to the past to the theoretical work that prefigured Bearden's collages and writing, I analyze the writings of French-African philosophers Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon who attached their thinking to the art of an anti-universalist black surrealism as a counternarrative to social realism. Influenced by a historical knowledge of these precursory thinkers, Bearden's collage practice was focused on constructing images of black life that emphasized the complexity and multiplicity of identities that make up black subjectivities and actively worked against singular and essentialist readings of his work that appeal to the racial imagination. The formal qualities of his work allow the viewer to see only the fragmentary nature of the external body, but Bearden's use of the mask suggests an interiority in his subjects that was not present in past, fallacious representations of black subjects. The mask serves as a critique of representations that serve to present a singular view of blackness because he suggests an inner self that goes beyond mere representation.

In Section III: Obscuring the Self: Wangechi Mutu's Postmodern Collage, visual analyses of Mutu's collages are paired with prevalent themes attributed to her work in recent art criticism, such as hybridity and cyborg theory, Antihumanism, and Afrofuturism. This section analyzes her works through a consideration of the balance between the grotesque and the pleasurable, and also considers how Mutu both reproduces and deconstructs myth. Mutu's otherworldly compositions call into question predominant stereotypes and myths about black womanhood, as she appropriates images from mass media to construct ambiguous alien goddesses and fragmented beasts. I analyze her work as postmodern in its representation of suffering as something externally imposed but I also explore whether if, like Bearden, she is offering an account of interiority, albeit in a new, contemporary mode.

Section IV: Interrogating Interiority in the Collages of Bearden and Mutu concludes this thesis with direct comparisons between the two artists' collage works. The comparison illustrates the shift of ideals and values from Bearden's historical moment to Mutu's: an abandonment of the universal ideal and optimism about unity, an emphasis on the uncanny figure as a mode of critique, and a loss of the direct reference to interior life. On Mutu's end of this historical shift, art is viewed in the way cultural critic Aruna D'Souza describes:

we both give art too much credit and place an undue burden on it when we imagine that it can interrupt or overturn such pervasive systems of power as white supremacy and capitalism. What art can do, in its best and worst forms, is reveal the mechanisms by which such powers assert themselves. Art can lay bare the way that it is used as a marker of boundaries and a sign of belonging in the culture at large.<sup>5</sup>

Through this framework of acknowledging art's strengths and weaknesses, one can analyze how Bearden and Mutu divulge to us the possibilities and limitations the category of 'culture' has offered them in their historical moments. In Bearden's moment, art was still thought of as

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<sup>5</sup> Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 10.

something that could do more than reveal structures of power, but in Mutu's more cynical time, critique is all that is asked of art. But what is gained in this shift? Mutu's emphasis on alienation, as a contrast to Bearden's value of belonging to a community, reveals to us how the powerful systems of the world function to create division. With this knowledge, is it possible that Mutu's work urges us to produce grounds for solidarity in our historical moment?

## II. THE SELF BEHIND THE MASK: ROMARE BEARDEN'S MODERNIST COLLAGE

### a. Romare Bearden's Community-Oriented Collage

On a bustling residential city block, a group of ordinary folks go about their day. A crowd of people can be seen in front of large brownstone apartments, where they carry out routine activities: a few people, smoking cigarettes, sit on the concrete steps that lead up to their front door; others lean on stone railings, conversing with their neighbors; some move through the doorways of the buildings, perhaps to leave on an errand to the corner store or to return from work or school. Others lean out of open windows, looking down at the crowd from the second story or looking up at the street from the garden level. To the left, a woman standing next to a streetlamp appears to turn away from the unwanted gaze of a man. Behind her an older man holds up his right hand in a fist as he lectures the younger men around him. To the right, a man on a front porch with mouth open wide raises his voice to call out to a neighbor down the street. A black cat sits impassively on the sidewalk while a white cat bolts across the patched-up road, perhaps avoiding a car that is passing out of view. A white dove perches on the grey stone lintel of the central doorway, quietly surveying the street below. Each figure is individually distinct, yet inherently interrelated to others around them.

From a distance, this scene might register as a snapshot of a busy street in any urban neighborhood, but once your eyes have a moment to adjust, it becomes clear that the human figures on this city street are not typical bodies—rather, these are the intentionally fragmented, proportionally disjointed figures of a Romare Bearden collage. *The Dove* (Figure 1), cut and pasted together in 1964, is part of a collection of works that the modernist artist Romare Bearden created in his first year of a major transition in his art practice where he moved away from painting on canvas and began working entirely with the medium of paper and photo collage. As

viewers of *The Dove*, we observe the scene from a short distance between the street and the sidewalk, looking toward front landings of a large but unimposing block of tenement apartment buildings in front of which the residents of this street can be seen doing common, everyday things like chatting, moving about, or resting on front steps. This collage has no clear focal point, which causes the eye to move across the picture plane to explore Bearden's highly constructed world, inhabited by bodies with mismatched parts and buildings with patchwork architectural elements. The flatness of Bearden's collage allows the viewer to see within and without the building, as figures on the sidewalk inhabit the same parallel plane as the heads poking out of windows and doors.

The figure that seems to protrude most from the flatness of this collage also happens to be the largest figure and the one with some of the most disparate proportions (Figure 2). On the far righthand side of the collage, a man leans against a short, vertical bollard post that resembles a truncated Doric column. His white pants and black shoes are constructed in their most rudimentary form, cut from construction paper and angled against the post. The man's flat newsboy cap, although seemingly too small for his large head, tilts to covers his eyes so that only his nose and mouth are visible. A floating set of fingertips bring a massive cigarette toward his pursed lips; the hand and cigarette nearly the same size as his whole head and significantly larger than his jacket-covered torso. The face, hat, torso, and hand all appear to be cut from various photographs, while the lower half of the man's body is made up of cut papers. The portion of photograph used for the figure's face appears to be somewhat worn, as if the original picture was uncaringly folded up and stuffed into someone's back pocket before Bearden found it and incorporated it into this collage. With the detail of this man's body language and the garments he wears, Bearden imbues a sense of particularity about the subject, meaning that the figure is

individually distinct from the other figures around him. But to move back once more and take in the whole picture, this one figure becomes unified with the rest of the figures and the building making up the background.

Bearden's collage method is characterized by the combination of cut and torn paper and photographic material, which results in a composition filled with jagged, irregular forms, where figures are unique to themselves yet unified with other figures and the built environment by nature of mutual flatness. Bearden builds his figures in erratic formulations; he often leaves the viewer to mentally piece together disproportionate body parts to come to an understanding of limbs and trunk, to face and head. Unlike in many historical examples of collage (like Hannah Höch's poster-like Dada collages, John Heartfield's amalgamated portraits, or Henri Matisse's Cut-Outs), these amalgamated bodies do not float in space; rather, they are grounded to their surrounding environment, which is often just as fragmented as the bodies. In his collage practice, Bearden embraces the everyday space of the ordinary person, which, for this artist in the 1960s, often looked like the built environment of the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, but also took form in rural farming settings resembling his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina along with simple domestic interiors. Bearden's subjects are almost always black American people who live in communities within these ordinary domains. By inserting his disjointed figures into the realm of the everyday, Bearden sought to expand notions of black subjectivity, both within the history of art and the wider realm of visual culture.

In his collage works, Bearden strove to present black subjectivity not as an abstraction, nor did he want his work to claim to be a sociological account of the black American experience. Rather, he produced images of black subjectivity as grounded in a material reality, as a fact of ordinary life and not subject to generalized or essentialized definitions. In fact, in a 1964

interview, Bearden affirms: “I did the [collages] 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.”<sup>6</sup> Bearden understood racism in America as a consequence of the abstraction of black people from the category of the human that originated from the dehumanization of slavery. Bearden saw in the making of art the possibilities to express a more particularized identity for black subjects: because art making is a universal human activity, it has the potential to unify many distinctive identities, including those of his black American subjects. But, when “giving reality” to his collage subjects, it was important for Bearden not to homogenize them into a determinable category. In this way, Bearden’s method of abstraction holds onto something recognizable so that his subjects can still relate to human experiences while simultaneously deconstructing existing representations. Without a clear focal point or central character in the typical Bearden collage, every figure and surface of the built environment becomes a significant element that contributes to the whole picture, negating the pedestalization and tokenism of blackness that was being exploited in the race relations of the 1960s. His utilization of the figure of the ordinary tenement block dweller or tenant farmer, the lack of a singular focal character, and the near-overcrowding of cut-and-pasted elements across the picture plane negates such exceptionalism. Instead, there is an emphasis placed on multiplicity within community, an all-for-one system that values the way in which each divergent element contributes to the common whole of the collage. As such, Bearden’s collaged subjects appeal to a common humanity as he intrepidly inserts black subjects into the category of the everyday person, asserting black subjectivity as having a stake in the universal notion of humanity so sought after in the midst of sociopolitical turmoil of the 1960s.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Childs, “Bearden: Identification and Identity,” *ARTnews* 63, no. 1 (October 1964), 62.

The modernist mode through which Bearden's collaged figures are constructed is evident in the black subjects that occupy the urban space of *The Dove*. The constructedness of the collaged bodies is clearly articulated by their disjointed, jagged quality, which is disconnected from past art historical conventions of true-to-life proportions of the human body as well as to photographic realism, although the figures do contain clippings of photographs (but these are manipulated in such a way that interrupts their realism). Bearden infuses the picture with obstacles to making sense of the figures, obstructing the viewer's easy consumption of the image of the subject, thus requiring a closer look at their composite parts. The group of figures that make up the very center of *The Dove* appear to be sitting on the front stoop of the apartment building featured throughout the background of the collage (Figure 3). The frontmost figure is the most highly articulated of the group. This man appears to be sitting on the concrete stairs that lead up to the front door of the apartment building; he is hunched over with his elbows resting on his knees. In his hand, he holds a cigarette. The elements that make up his body are disparate; his head is made up of multiple photographs, the top half almost appearing to be cut from an abstract African mask and the bottom half clearly suggesting the use of a photograph of a human face. The nose becomes obstructed by the layers and disappears into the suture. His torso and legs are geometrically cut gray papers with the folds in his garments drawn in with pencil by the artist. His hands had been gathered from differing sources, too, as both appear to be clippings from photographs but have different skin tones. The figure's feet don't perfectly match up with the leg, as they are positioned in a pigeon-toed formation and don't quite connect up to the ends of the construction paper pants.

Behind this figure, the bodies of two other subjects are much more difficult to articulate. One man appears to be sitting on the ledge of the stairs, where an indistinct form perhaps

alluding to his lower trunk rests on the railing of the stairs. Moving up the body of this figure, we see that the two arms and head erupting from the torso are tilted frontally toward the viewer, whereas the torso appears to be twisted to the left. The man's arms and shoulders as well as his face are bisected. Above this figure, the head of another figure emerges, but his body is hidden from view, or perhaps parts of his body he shares with the figure below him; as such, it is difficult to interpret where one figure's body ends and where the other begins. The figure's head itself is composite, as a pair of eyes not belonging to the original photograph are haphazardly superimposed on top, creating a cock-eyed look on the figure's face.

Each of these figures can be understood only fragmentarily, as Bearden's construction technique hinders our full perception of the subjects' bodies. As a result, *The Dove* is an image characterized by the amalgamation of heterogeneous parts that urges the viewer to be sympathetic to the figures' disjointedness in the way their composite parts are imperfectly fitted together. Individual figures can be made out only occasionally; some bodies seem to be carefully constructed while others are constructed in such a way that makes them indistinguishable from the figure next to them. There doesn't seem to be a single protagonist in the picture, only some passersby and local residents of the block. Bearden's groups of figures are intrinsically ordinary; no one individual is more special and put into the forefront; as such, the unity of figures and environment is emphasized across the picture. Bearden shows us the individual qualities of each figure as a way to understand the human and to understand the particulars of black subjectivity. Simultaneously, while emphasizing particularity, Bearden also infuses his collage with a sense of ubiquity and familiarity, that though the hustle and bustle captured in the composition can be visually overwhelming, there is still a feeling of the continuity of daily life, of the constant

movement of everyday people and a quality that demonstrates collective ideas of the metropolitan space of New York City.

This widely relatable scene helps unify the distinctly individual bodies. Ultimately, Bearden abstracts the black American subject, taking it from one singular representation and transforming it into multiple representations all at once. By doing this, Bearden pulls away from the real only to the extent that the real becomes fragmented and complicated, so that he can make statements about black subjectivity that hadn't yet been widely accepted: that black identity is more than a collection of generalized stereotypes, that art by black artists should be critically considered as a part of the mainstream art world, and to critique representations of black subjectivity in media and literature that were delimiting to the point of dehumanization. Bearden understood particularity as the gateway to achieving universality in his work. In other words, Bearden wanted both particularity and universality all at once, because he believed that particularity helps to humanize people, but universality helps to unify people. Therefore, Bearden argues for a more complex view of black subjectivity in order to normalize black subjects in the realm of the everyday and ordinary and in the category of the human. Through this framework, Bearden negotiates particularity in the attention to each individual fragment that makes up one of his subjects, which connotes his recognition of the complexity and multiplicity of every individual subject, but his method of unifying the figure with other figures and the surrounding environs deemphasizes cultural particularities to make them more broadly relatable to universal themes. Bearden reveals how the particular is often universally significant: without using universality to erase the particularity of the black community or positing an unbridgeable gulf between the two terms, the artist embraces the possibility for both particularity and universality to exist on one plane.

Particularity in Bearden's collage has been interpreted in different ways across scholarship on the artist's work. Art historian Kobena Mercer incisively characterizes Bearden's synergetic formulation of figures within their urban environment in this way:

these are not classical bodies who stand apart from, and thereby transcend a pictorial space that was somehow 'empty' before they arrived to 'fill' it; rather, Bearden's subjects have an immanent relationship to the social environment of fragmentation in which they are shaped and formed. These are empathetically modern bodies given form by historical circumstances not of their own choosing, although the agency of human hands gives equal emphasis to a materialist view in which *Bearden's subjects actively make something out of what history has made of them.*<sup>7</sup>

In Mercer's view, Bearden demonstrates particularity in his collages by making figures nearly indistinguishable from the background of the city street, thus conflating social fragmentation with the formation and fragmentation of black identity.<sup>8</sup> Mercer suggests that in the modernist tradition, Bearden seeks to reveal the way in which socially constructed notions of black experience and black communities have affected the way in which they have been historically represented, both in art history and in visual culture at large.

I would like to go further than Mercer to argue that Bearden uses the medium of collage to recontextualize the image of the black subject in such a way that gives rise to the complexity and multiplicity of identities that make up black subjectivities, negating the racial imagination of singularity in essentialized discourse on race. As the poet Elizabeth Alexander has theorized, Bearden's collage gives us new ways to "think about the complexities of African-American identity," that through his process of fragmentation Bearden shows us how "the disparate aspects of personalities and of influence that might seem contradictory can actually coexist in a single

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<sup>7</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden's Critical Modernism: Visual Dialogues in the Diaspora Imagination," in *Romare Bearden in the Modernist Tradition*, ed. Ellie Tweedy (New York: Romare Bearden Foundation, 2008), 12-13. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>8</sup> This connection between the social and the formation of identity can also be read in Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

personality, or a single identity.”<sup>9</sup> Put differently, Bearden’s method allows for a more complex view of the subjectivity of his figures, that the cut photograph of the black American Civil Rights Movement protester and the segment of African mask and the posture of repose as the figure leans against a concrete stoop can all exist in one of his constructed bodies, asserting that all of these different facets and elements of identity are not mutually exclusive but rather can all, at once, be true and real.

Bearden had been a trenchant critic of essentializing discourse on black artists and art from the early days of his career, which clearly motivated his 1964 shift into his methodology of recontextualizing black subjects through the medium of collage. In 1946, the short-lived contemporary art magazine *Critique* published an essay written by Romare Bearden titled “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma.” In the essay, Bearden, writing from a relatively early point in his career, articulates his critical perspective on a concerning dilemma of relegation in the art world and in the history of art at large, wherein black artists had been pressured to make use of their art as a reflection of their own racial identities at the service of qualifying generalizable definitions of black life and experience.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of art historians and critics at this time, work created by black artists was seen to singularly reflect issues concerning their anger toward being marginalized in the social world, the struggle of the black subject, and/or pride in the development of a specifically racialized aesthetic form. Bearden points out that throughout the history of art and into his present moment, the production, exhibition, and critical discursive

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “The Genius of Romare Bearden,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 186-187. Originally published in *Something All Our Own: The Grant Hill Collection of African-American Art*, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Bearden’s dilemma could be seen as stemming from W.E.B. DuBois’s reading on blackness in the United States (although this reading has been criticized as reductive in more recent scholarship). W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.G. McClurg, 1903).

construction surrounding the work of black artists was held to an entirely different standard than that of their non-black contemporaries.

To give an example of the treatment of Bearden's work, art critic Calvin Tomkins has recently pointed out an article in the *New York Times* that refers to Bearden's collages as portraying "'tormented faces,' 'visions of beauty and horror,' and the travail and anguish of the Negro's existence..."<sup>11</sup> The commiserative evocation of feelings of pain and tragedy in the *Times* article about Bearden's collage work seems to look past the artwork itself and into the pain and suffering caused by the marginalization of the black community, thus overburdening Bearden's work with readings of black struggle that the artist did not necessarily intend to evoke in his constructions of black subjects inhabiting ordinary urban, rural, or domestic spaces.

Bearden's early point of view in "The Negro Artist's Dilemma" prefigures a debate a few decades later in the 1960s and 1970s when black artists were split between, on one side, seeking access to the critical acclaim of the mainstream art world through expressive freedom and on the other, searching for a distinctively black visual form and an "insistence that the primary value of black art was its relevance to the struggles of the black community."<sup>12</sup> At the time he was writing this essay, he was most likely referring to the treatment of black artists in the history of art and also of the delimiting critical discourse surrounding fellow black painters in the late 1940s. He lays out three major standards against which work by black artists had been measured, both in the past and in his historical moment: first, that black artists should draw inspiration from African art and strive to continue in its tradition; second, that black artists should establish a

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "Putting Something Over Something Else," in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 50. Tomkins does not mention the author or the date of the *New York Times* article he is referring to.

<sup>12</sup> D'Souza also refers to this as "the tokenization of artists of color by writers and curators in search of multicultural diversity who valued them mainly to speak to issues of race and perform a kind of race-based 'authenticity.'" Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling*, 38.

“unique, nationalistic, social expression” that attempts to bring form to black American culture; and third, that black artists should create work that mirrors the political and social aspirations, as well as the urgent needs, of the black community as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

Well aware of the myriad of social constraints and structural inequalities black individuals experience on a daily basis but also wary of art that functioned for propagandistic purposes, Bearden makes clear in “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma” the double-standard against which the work of black artists was expected to function solely to articulate the struggles of being black in America, serving those in power who uphold structural inequalities by insisting upon a flattened view of what the “black experience” looks like. Bearden writes that there had been “evident pressure exerted on the Negro artist to use his art as an instrument to mirror the social injustices inflicted upon his people.” Bearden warns fellow black cultural producers of the consequences of this type of expression and encourages an alternative, encouraging his fellow black artists to reclaim their expressive freedom:

the artist tends to either limit his point of view or become subservient to a political ideology, rather than to the dictates of his own concepts of right and wrong. It is not necessary that the Negro artist mirror the misery of his people. Since freedom of expression is a prerequisite for any artist, there is no reason why the Negro artist should not paint whatever moves him. His greatest service consists in making his individual creations as strong as he possibly can.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Bearden is not only advocating for black artists to move past the anachronistic burden of representation in art and expand their expressive horizons, but he is simultaneously critiquing

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<sup>13</sup> Romare Bearden, “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 95. Originally published in *Critique: A Review of Contemporary Art* (November 1946). Henceforth referred to as Bearden’s 1946 essay. An earlier text written by cultural critic Sterling Brown gives various opinions about how to repair a damaged group psyche among the black community. He offers five methods for the black artist to achieve this: “(1) a discovery of Africa as a source of race pride, (2) a use of Negro heroes and heroic episodes from American history, (3) propaganda of protest, (4), a treatment of the Negro masses (frequently of the folk, less often the workers) with more understanding and less apology, and (5) franker and deeper self-revelation.” Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* (Washington D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Bearden, “Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” 97.

those “discursive constructions of black cultural difference” that reduce interpretive critical writing about black artists’ work to mere biography or self-referentiality.<sup>15</sup>

Bearden’s work at this time was largely made up of paintings of black subjects in rural and domestic scenes, but even Bearden’s artist contemporaries who were moving into creating abstract work intended to be nonrepresentational were obstructed by critical interpretations of art critics and historians who made cursory connections to the artist’s racial identity or made generalizations about how their work reflected the experience of black life, thus critically depriving their work of its artists’ intentions “to paint what moves them,” and explore more universal themes. Although Bearden did represent the black subject throughout his career in both his paintings and collages, his attitudes about how he wanted to present those subjects differed from the tenets of black art that he critiques in his 1946 essay. Bearden’s collage marks a decisive move toward universal themes while retaining the use of the black subject to bring into the collective consciousness notions of the black community’s stake in universal humanity, releasing themselves from the ideological and historiographical limits of the past.<sup>16</sup>

Art historian Darby English has on many occasions theorized about the subject of the racial bind of art criticism toward the work of black modernists. Like Bearden, English’s critiques of black art history expose the racialized discursive construction of difference that put pressure on black artists to mirror the struggles of, or to make blanket statements about, black identity. One of English’s most incisive critiques of this constructed category of “black art history” considers how a black artist’s personal biography often overshadows actual visual analysis of their art. English argues that this kind of limited criticism

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<sup>15</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen,” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005), 131.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

tends to give priority of interpretation to an artist's blackness as such—over and again those attributes of the work that belong to the work in question and need therefore to be remarked differently (for example, aesthetically and historically)—the resulting discussions are distressingly destitute of aesthetic interest and often pitched to the work as if it were, in itself, a fully worlded and instantaneously occurring social phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

English emphasizes how such critics look beyond the work and into the life and experience of the artist. While biography is often a helpful tool for understanding the work made by artists—indeed, behind every artwork is the individual maker—it is clear that the criticism surrounding the work of black artists goes beyond mere biography and ventures into the dangerous realm of sociology, even ethnography. Seemingly, many critics writing about art in the modernist period wanted so badly for black artists to take up this burden of representation, to educate the masses about what true, authentic black experience looked like. In a radically rebellious move, however, many artists, including Bearden, sought to invalidate these critics and strove toward aesthetic forms that disallowed such readings and complicated notions of generalized identity or community-based reference in their work. As such, the problem for both Bearden and English lies in how it is difficult, or even impossible, to work identity into the universal.

English sets out to articulate how these black artists' modernist moves away from cultural particularity and toward formal particularity were hindered by parochial views of black art and artists and a critical favoritism of figural representation. Despite the efforts of modernist artists to complicate figural art, such as Bearden's partially abstracted fragmented bodies in his collages or Ed Clark's totally abstract color field paintings, English finds that African American art history<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Darby English, "Ralph Ellison's Romare Bearden," in *Romare Bearden, American Modernist*, ed. Ruth Fine and Jacqueline Francis (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2011), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Some examples of overdetermined accounts of racial relevancy in criticism borrowed from Darby English's list in *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*: Thomas McEvelley and Joe Overstreet with Thomas E. Piche, *Joe Overstreet: (Re)Call and Response*, exh. cat. (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1996); Ann Gibson, "Strange Fruit: Texture and Text in the Work of Joe Overstreet," *International Review of African-American Art* 13:3 (1996): 24-31; Geoffrey Jacques, "Quiet as It's Kept," in David Hammons, *Quiet as It's Kept* (Vienna: Galerie Christine König, 2002); Dawoud Bey, "The Ironies of Diversity, or the Dissappearing Black Artist," Artnet; and Kellie Jones, *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964-1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006).

“understands the black artist only as an apotheosis of racial personality—a personality constructed to be fundamentally incompatible with nonobjective art...”<sup>19</sup> Similar to Bearden’s argument in his 1946 essay, English argues that there is a critical disadvantage to working as a black artist who seeks to challenge the norms of representing the black subject as an *invariant reflection* of a generalized notion of black identity and experience. In fact, English further argues that historians and critics sometimes construct a racially-coded interpretation even when the work is intentionally engaging with more universal themes, such as in the case of Ed Clark, whose push-broom abstract paintings have been interpreted as a subliminal reference to janitorial work, usually performed by racial minorities at this time.<sup>20</sup>

While this particular failure to recognize Clark’s intentions or formal innovations might have been expected from a white critic, English also addresses that the relative alienation of black artists in the art world was coming from multiple angles, both from non-black historians and critics as well as from black artists who embraced a segregated, identitarian framework for creating art and separate standards for evaluating black art; he writes,

First, let us recognize that this isolation was elected and cultivated. While certainly a historical effect of exclusion from disciplinary mainstreams addled by prejudice and apathy, the edifice that Black Art and African American art history was elaborated through cultural practices; theory and ideology combined with real apparatuses of authority and power...Abstraction’s role (or lack of one) in African American art history tells how thoroughly the subdiscipline constitutes an ideology of representation.<sup>21</sup>

While acknowledging that the oppression of segregation and post-integration prejudice had much to do with the prevention of black artists from having a stake in the modernist art world, English

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<sup>19</sup> English, Darby. *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 24. For a discussion of an example of a contemporary artist engaging with the burden of representation placed upon the black figure, see also Huey Copeland, “‘Bye, Bye Black Girl:’ Lorna Simpson’s Figurative Retreat,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 62-77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

also argues that the isolated status of the black artist had been reappropriated for a black nationalist agenda that sought to break away from the mainstream art realm and create spaces for black artists, by black artists.

English grapples with black cultural nationalism's adoption of the same oversimplifications that are dealt out by white critics toward nonobjective or more experimental black modernists' work, the same limitations that Bearden had argued against in 1946 (such as, that all black artists must represent black identity, black issues, black thoughts, black suffering, and so on). English is wary of the consequences of such essentialist limitations, as they impede the innovations and upward mobility of black modernists:

Again and again, the realist imperative imposing itself sets abstraction at a distance, conjuring 'relevance' by bringing a black point of view to anything that might issue from black hands. By focusing on the black artist's activities, we come to realize that even when appreciating the scope of the struggle for public recognition at this historical juncture, recognizing this struggle's positive content is not enough; equally important is the flipside, recognizing what it rejects.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, English reframes the narrative on black modernists' use of abstraction by arguing that it contains a "resistant capacity," that to overwhelm the interpretations of this nonobjective work with biography and static notions of black identity would be to deny the significance of abstract artists' rejection of easily identified subject matter and their intentional claim to art as a universal practice.<sup>23</sup>

For a few years, as he transitioned his artistic practice from painting to collage, Bearden took a brief detour into creating nonobjective abstract painting. In these abstract works, such as *The Silent Valley of Sunrise* (Figure 4) which was painted in 1959, Bearden explored the possibilities of an artistic expression that leaves the figure behind. *The Silent Valley of Sunrise*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 118.

reflects an influence from the art of abstract expressionism with its manipulation of paint mixed with casein, which renders the paint translucent when laid on canvas in thin layers. At the heart of the painting, light blues and greens are layered creating an opalescent effect, while drips of white paint create speckles in unsystematic formations. At the borders, red-orange paint in large swathes interrupt the tranquility of the earth-toned core, the frenetic brushstrokes evident although still see-through as they are layered on top of the splashed and droplet-like central texture. This painting achieves a kind of organic effect that none of his previous or future work will ever attempt; he seems to draw inspiration from the surfaces of the natural environment rather than drawing from uniquely human and social representations.

*The Silent Valley of Sunrise*, along with his other painted abstract works, are evidently a stylistic deviation for Bearden. Some might find this short-lived abstract period of Bearden's career surprising, especially compared to his earlier figurative paintings and his substantial output of collage work beginning just a few years later (significantly, many of these abstract works included torn and layered papers in addition to paint), but also since they are under-theorized in art history. However, it is possible to argue some of this foray into nonfigurative work marks an important shift in how the artist was thinking about the relationship between the black subject and his artistic production. His writing demonstrates an awareness of black artists' critical limitations in the modernist art world and the double standard against which they were time and again asked to take up the burden of representation, while their white artist contemporaries were unreservedly exploring expressions outside of their own individualized identities and their unobstructed connection to a universal notion of humanity.<sup>24</sup> Many years after writing his 1946 essay, Bearden swiftly removes the figure from his paintings and begins to

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<sup>24</sup> Mercer, "Collage as Kunstwollen," 130-131.

create abstract work for a few years before returning to an abstracted figural representation in collage for the rest of his career. Why, in 1964, did the figure reappear?

If Bearden was concerned with the pressure for black artists to mirror their social position, why did he return to representation, albeit in a new, more fragmented form? If we consider Bearden's artistic career as a progression of stylistic expressions between which he shifts in attempting to resolve the "Negro Artist's Dilemma" he identified in 1946, perhaps we can begin to understand why he returned to figurative work in collage. For the first twenty or so years of his practice, Bearden made paintings in various expressionist styles, usually representing Black subjects. Over time, his figures became more and more abstracted, and then almost entirely, the figure disappeared. This may have reflected a timely interest in the literalness of material as well as abstraction's intentional move away from essentialist interpretations of Black subjectivity. In his abstractions, there was no representation, no relation to the self in terms of race or culture. Through abstraction, he could be profoundly general, in the sense of engaging with themes of universality.<sup>25</sup> However, Bearden's move back into figuration allowed him to engage with a form of expression that presupposed the critique of stereotypical imaginings of black subjecthood through the use of mass media images and documentary photography. Engaging with a transformative process of reconstruction and reconfiguration that worked to make an effective statement specifically negating essentialist discourse on black subjectivity, Bearden insisted upon the composite nature of humanity by melding the relationship between the everyday space of the city with the ordinary black subject. Where abstraction, because of prevailing discursive constructions of the work of black modernists' abstract work, wouldn't

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<sup>25</sup> Amy M. Mooney, "'Empty Shells and Hollow Forms': The High Politics of an African American Abstract Paradigm," in *Romare Bearden in the Modernist Tradition*, ed. Ellie Tweedy (New York: Romare Bearden Foundation, 2008), 52-53.

allow Bearden to have access to universal themes, he turned to the particularities of black identity and abstracted images from mass media and documentary photography, but only to the extent where faces and bodies were recognizable yet visibly disjointed. Thus, Bearden found in collage the compelling possibility of an embodied view of the complex interiority of the black subject. Novelist Ralph Ellison might call this move Bearden's way of "seeing past anachronistic, blankly affirmative 'race images' to a more speculative place," to create fragmented figures that make it "possible to insist that there are as many versions of racial blackness as there are views of it."<sup>26</sup> Ellison, too, recognizes in Bearden a desire to complicate black subjectivity and to advance the notion that art needs to make room for greater specificities.<sup>27</sup>

Bearden's 1946 essay "The Negro Artist's Dilemma" is not only directed toward the ideological bind perpetuated by cultural critics and art historians, but also to some of the artists in Bearden's own circle. Over twenty years after the essay's publication, in 1969, the Metropolitan Museum of Art held a symposium titled "The Black Artist in America," inviting artists such as Bearden, Tom Lloyd, Jacob Lawrence, Richard Hunt, and William T. Williams, among others, to participate in a panel discussion about the status of black American artists in their historical moment. The symposium, it should be noted, took place in January 1969, the same month of the opening of the controversial *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art;<sup>28</sup> the symposium was presumably organized to offset some of the

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<sup>26</sup> English, "Ellison's Romare Bearden," 20.

<sup>27</sup> See more of Ellison's writing on Bearden in Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 196-203.

<sup>28</sup> The *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, curated by Allon Schoener, has been criticized for presenting a voyeuristic, anthropological view of the Harlem neighborhood of New York City (located only a few blocks away from the Met), as well as for omitting art by African American artists in a show about a predominantly black neighborhood. The show was received with anger and disappointment; after the opening, Bearden among other artists formed the Black Emergency Coalition and demonstrated with a picket line in front of the museum. Holland Cotter, "What I Learned From a Disgraced Art Show on Harlem," *The New York Times*,

criticisms that the show was predicted to bring.<sup>29</sup> Bearden facilitates the discussion between his peers, but he remains more or less impartial so as to give voice to the other artists participating; however, much of the debate reflects back on Bearden's 1946 essay and reinforces his views against a racially distinct and separate category of Black Art. Much of the exchange surrounds the defense of a separate black artistic form by Tom Lloyd and rebuttals against such claims by the other artists. Lloyd emphasizes that there is a need for black artists to turn their attention to their own community, to create spaces for black art to be exhibited and to develop programs for black children to learn technical art skills from trained black artists.<sup>30</sup> William T. Williams challenges these notions of creating a separate sphere for black art to exist, independent from the mainstream art world to serve the needs of black artists and black communities at large. He also challenges Lloyd in his thinking that the black community should only be educated in art by black instructors. Further, he asks Lloyd how "black art" is formally different from "white art," and how a white viewer might see art in a different way than a black viewer. Lloyd's argument is that his work is black art because it is done by a black artist, and it is made with the intention of appealing to a black audience, and only black viewers would really have the capacity to fully understand his work.

Williams again pushes against Lloyd's thinking by questioning what a "uniquely black" form might look like, while Jacob Lawrence insists to Lloyd that his abstract electric lightworks do not contain any markers of racial identity, first because such markers do not really exist and second because his works are nonfigurative and nonobjective.<sup>31</sup> Richard Hunt further argues that

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August 19, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/arts/design/what-i-learned-from-a-disgraced-art-show-on-harlem.html>.

<sup>29</sup> D'Souza, *Whitewalling*, 138.

<sup>30</sup> Romare Bearden et al, "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (1969): 248.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-249, 251.

“whether your art is Black or not doesn’t make any difference. I think you needlessly confuse the issues by insisting that there’s something about living in a Black community that makes your art black. That’s just not true.”<sup>32</sup> Lawrence also argues for art being a universal human activity, not a different experience depending on racial identity by stating: “I think we must be very careful not to isolate ourselves, because many of the things we’re talking about not only pertain to the Negro artist but pertain to the artist generally. If they’re accomplished we will all benefit by them.”<sup>33</sup> While Bearden isn’t the one to critique Lloyd during this panel discussion, his artist contemporaries seem to align with Bearden’s position articulated by “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma.” In his 1946 essay, Bearden also expresses anxieties about the delimiting nature of these types of discursive constructions about black artists and art, implicating both the art critic and art historian but also the black artist who advocates for a racially segregated art world. Bearden’s position argues for the opposite effect of creating distinct spaces for black art to thrive; he argues for a push toward a future of art where art criticism is relatively less referential to the particularities of the racial identity of the artist: “The Negro artist must come to think of himself not primarily as a Negro artist, but as an artist. Only in this way will he acquire the stature which is the component of every good artist.”<sup>34</sup> In this way Bearden seeks to bring black artists into the more universally human category of the “artist;” he infers that black artists should be considered on the same plane as white artists, who are given the privileged position of not having to have a cultural marker tethered to their job title and are simply referred to as “artists” in most contexts.

This notion of an unlabeled future was likely provoked in some way, for Bearden and his

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>34</sup> Bearden, “Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” 98.

contemporaries, by the prevalence of all-black group shows during this time.<sup>35</sup> Granted, many of these culturally specific shows were put on by both major museums and smaller galleries to align themselves with values of diversity and inclusion. In a 1934 essay written by Bearden called “The Negro Artist and Modern Art” Bearden discusses a west coast exhibition that paired the work of black artists with work by blind artists.<sup>36</sup> However progressive or inclusive this may have, on the surface, appeared to have been at the time, Bearden infers that the exhibition of the work of visually impaired artists and black artists was a damaging conflation for both parties because of prevailing racist and ableist prejudices. Other shows featuring all or predominantly black artists have since been critiqued for being more about sociological voyeurism than about creating a space to recognize a multiplicity of black voices and identities.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, all-black exhibitions were reappropriated and organized by artists such as Tom Lloyd and his cohort who saw the value in a distinctly black space to promote their work, encouraging a detached category of black art.<sup>38</sup> Although Bearden of course participated in all-black group shows, he ultimately argues against the need for intentionally separate cultural categories of art separate from the mainstream art world; he contends that “there are not ethnical characteristics that warrant such exhibitions,” and such segregation of black art from the rest of the art world

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<sup>35</sup> This notion of the “unlabeled” future comes from Kenneth Warren, who cites editors Mozell C. Hill and M. Carl Homan in the eleventh volume of *Phylon* in 1950 (which was “a major venue for the publication of literary, cultural, and historical scholarship on race). The editors ask this question (among others) to writers and critics: “Would you agree with those who feel that the Negro writer, the Negro as subject, and the Negro critic and scholar are moving toward an ‘unlabeled’ future in which they will be measured without regard to racial origin and conditioning?” Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 44-45.

<sup>36</sup> Romare Bearden. “The Negro Artist and Modern Art,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 90. Originally published in *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (December 1934).

<sup>37</sup> D’Souza, *Whitewalling*, 138.

<sup>38</sup> Toni Morrison argues that these artists aimed for their aesthetic to function as a “‘corrective’ to a ‘polluted’ American mainstream” and cultural nationalist critics and curators “encouraged and judged [artists] by the nation-building uses to which their work could be put.” Toni Morrison, “Abrupt Stops and Unexpected Liquidity: The Aesthetics of Romare Bearden,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 179. Transcribed from presentation at Columbia University Symposium on Romare Bearden, October 16, 2004.

“tend[s] to hamper the Negro painters by fostering dual standards.”<sup>39</sup> These double standards, in Bearden’s perspective, suppress and hide from public view the historical and ongoing dialogues between black artists and other non-black modernist artists as well as with the broader history of art. Thus, Bearden’s ideal of being untethered to the label of race comes from a desire not to abandon his own identity or community, but to be considered on the same critical plane as non-black modernists and to make an impact on the history of art that is not solely based on his racial identity.<sup>40</sup> Mercer further elaborates why he thinks Bearden took up this argument:

[Bearden’s] unease with the policy of segregated exhibitions was not only indicative of the qualified optimism of the immediate post-World War II period, with regards to the incipient integration of minority artists within the New York art world, but also a clear indication of a critically cosmopolitan outlook, which rejected the inward-looking emphasis of ethnic separatism.<sup>41</sup>

According to Mercer, Bearden’s standpoint reflects a modernist optimism that will come to characterize much of his collage work starting in the mid-1960s. To expand on that point, I argue that instead of an “inward-looking emphasis of ethnic separatism,” Bearden looked both inward to the self as human and also outward toward the particulars of black identification to develop a more complex language for understanding subjectivity.

## **b. Antecedents to Bearden’s Thinking**

To understand where Bearden’s written and artistic work is coming from, it is essential to identify the kind of historical thinking that Bearden was both working against and which helped him produce such a radically optimistic modernist stance that contrasted against the alienated identitarianism of the black cultural nationalism taken up by some of his peers. To position Bearden’s written and visual work within a historical lineage of philosophy about African and

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<sup>39</sup> Bearden, “Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” 97.

<sup>40</sup> Referring back to Buick’s critique of discourse on race. Buick, *Child of the Fire*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Mercer, “Collage as Kunstwollen,” 130.

African American black cultural production necessitates a look back to the views of French philosophers Léopold Senghor, politician and co-founder of the Négritude movement, Aimé Césaire, surrealist poet, politician, and the other founder of Négritude, and Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist and cultural critic. The modernist cultural nationalist movement-making pre-1960 and the subsequent Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s drew major influence from Négritude, a movement developed by Senghor and Césaire intended to critique the colonial power under which people throughout the African diaspora were living, as well as a framework that encouraged the full embrace of traditional African cultural values in all aspects of life, especially in cultural production such as literature and the visual arts. Senghor defines Négritude as “the awareness by a particular social group or people of its own situation in the world. And the expression of it by means of the concrete image.”<sup>42</sup> Senghor’s stance, from the position of Négritude, is oppositional to the exploitation of French colonialism and promotes a kind of reclamation of (or, at least, drawing influence from) a pre-colonial African culture. Senghor’s philosophy prioritizes an embrace of culture, placing it at the forefront of a struggle for liberation from colonial powers.

Black individuals living in colonized parts of Africa and elsewhere throughout the diaspora, Senghor argues, had been alienated from their authentic selves and stripped of their right to freedom of cultural expression. Senghor launches this critique of the stifling of African culture under colonialism:

it is evident that there can be no unfolding of the personality of a people without freedom of development and there can be no freedom without freedoms. There can be no freedom in the *alienation* of self from self which constitutes the colonial condition. There can be no freedom in the stifling of one’s being. There can be no independence in dependency. It is all this that justifies the struggle against colonialism.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational, 1976), 97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Emphasis in original.

In his view, the consequences of colonial power upon indigenous people not only lie in exploitation, theft, and degradation, but most importantly it resulted in an alienation of a people from their own true selves, and for him that self lies in their original, local indigenous cultures. The assimilation forced upon indigenous people removed the “self from the self,” resulting in an unfreedom that disallows authentic cultural expression. As such, Senghor argues, “there can be no political liberation without cultural liberation.”<sup>44</sup> These liberations are not mutually exclusive; rather, the liberation of African culture, the ability for African individuals to disalienate themselves from themselves and to have the freedom to express themselves authentically, should, in Senghor’s view, lead to the political liberation of African people from the subjugation of colonial power.<sup>45</sup> To do the work of decolonization, psychological disalienation, and cultural liberation, Senghor calls upon writers and artists to serve at the forefront. He presupposes a new humanism inspired by the values of a pre-colonial African culture, one that is untouched by European influences. He argues that in art, there is nothing for African culture to learn from European culture; rather, European culture has much to learn from African culture, and already has appropriated African artistic styles for itself by the Primitivists.

Senghor sees literary creatives and visual artists as cultural leaders, and as such, he argues that they should take up the cause of addressing government leaders about the irremediable damage that assimilation has caused for indigenous cultures. They are given the task, by Senghor, to reckon with colonial power and to decide for the entirety of their culture which values and traditions from their original culture should be advanced into their modern culture, and to figure out how to reactivate these customs in such a way that will bring to their

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 84.

culture a liberated and authentic artistic expression. It is important to Senghor that art is indivisible from one's racial identity, geographical location, and that it has a consideration of the past histories of one's culture. Moreover, Senghor posits African culture as having a particularly unique balance and vivacity to which other cultures, such as European culture, do not come as naturally. In his most significant arguments about the relationship of culture and art in the history and production of African art, he argues:

The spirit of African civilization animates, consciously or unconsciously, the best Negro artists and writers of to-day, both in Africa and America. Insofar as they are aware of African culture and draw inspiration from it, they rise to international status. Insofar as they turn their backs on Mother Africa, they degenerate and are without interest. This is not to say that Negro artists and writers to-day must turn their backs on reality and refuse to interpret the social realities of their situation, of their race, nation, and class. On the contrary, we have seen that the spirit of African civilization finds its incarnation in the most everyday reality. But always transcending it in order to give expression to the meaning of the world.<sup>46</sup>

For Senghor, the most successful cultural production from Africa is deeply rooted in a consideration of one's own culture. To be successful, Senghor argues, one must draw from their ancestral culture and put that influence into the work they are making. If they refuse to do so, their work will remain in the realm of the personal or the anecdotal, and ultimately fail to succeed. This, I argue, leads to a kind of self-consciousness of the artist; the artist, in Senghor's formula, is acutely aware that he or she is not only representing his or her own personal expression, but that it will also come to stand in for the entirety of their culture. Likewise, it is Senghor's belief that all art is social comes through in his notion that it is up to the artist to mirror the realities of their people, to make statements relating to their situation to aid in the struggle toward cultural liberation, which will ultimately lead to political liberation. Thus, the modern artist of African descent, whether a citizen of the continent of Africa or part of the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 76.

widespread diaspora, should call back to their ancestral roots to formulate the most authentic cultural production possible, to achieve the fullest realization of human possibility.

Senghor's primary concern is to turn to culture, a move that secures his place within liberalism and fits in with what post-1960s art history stands for, which is a push for cultural particularisms, an emphasis on difference, and the notion that the appreciation of differences will lead to liberation from the domination of colonial systems of power and structural oppression. Senghor approaches the world as it is; his rationale for decolonization lies in the disalienation of a people from their own culture, the desire to give freedom of expression to all disenfranchised cultures, especially African culture.

Aimé Césaire's social activist writing was very much connected to the Négritude movement, the name of which he coined in his *Notebook on a Return to the Native Land*. Césaire describes his views on how the Négritude movement should be defined as well as the colonial condition it was born out of as:

a concrete rather than abstract coming to consciousness...the atmosphere in which we lived, an atmosphere of assimilation in which Negro people were ashamed of themselves—has great importance. We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex...we must have a *concrete consciousness* of what we are...that we are black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value.<sup>47</sup>

This concrete coming-to-consciousness involved a process of decolonization of the psyche, as Césaire saw it. He argues the colonial conditions under which indigenous groups lived were not only exploitative and materially and economically dispossessive, but in the forced assimilation of cultural traditions and values, they were also psychologically dehumanized to the point of a loss of self along with overwhelming feelings of inferiority.

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<sup>47</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 91. Emphasis is mine.

Through the movement of Négritude, Césaire affirms: “we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this history was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world.”<sup>48</sup> Césaire’s ideal result would be a replacement of that inferiority complex with a freedom of personal and cultural expression that allows for feelings of belonging and an embrace of individuality and community. For Césaire, it was necessary for the process of decolonization that there be implementations of new definitions of blackness and black subjectivity, a process that would occur over time and take on various forms.<sup>49</sup> By bolstering African culture, traditions, and values, Césaire sought to redefine black subjectivity in a more “authentic” way, which is to say, both negating fallacious representations by colonial powers and embracing a pre-colonial African cultural representation that drew upon the past but was suited for a modern black subject.

American philosopher Cynthia Nielsen argues that “Given Négritude’s many expressions, one must stress the movement’s plurality, diversity, and particular inflections.”<sup>50</sup> Césaire’s particular expression of Négritude often took the form of surrealist poetry. Césaire was a major proponent and practitioner of black surrealism, which he describes as “a weapon that exploded the French language. It shook up absolutely everything. This was very important because the traditional forms—burdensome, overused forms—were crushing me...Surrealism interested me to the extent that it was a liberating factor.”<sup>51</sup> Césaire’s prose-length poem in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* engages with revolutionary and surrealist themes, and through the use of metaphor, repetition, and poetic rhythm, he constructs a narrative about black individuals

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>49</sup> Cynthia R. Nielsen, “Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement: How Strategic Essentialism Subverts Manichean Binaries,” *Callaloo* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 342.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>51</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 83.

wearing masks to assimilate themselves into European culture, suppressing their true black culture in favor of passing as elite French scholars.<sup>52</sup> For Césaire, surrealist poetry allowed for a summoning of unconscious forces, a call to African values and ideals of a pre-colonial memory.<sup>53</sup> Surrealism's various international movements all functioned under similar ideological bases, typically the release of potential for creative expression from the unconscious mind; Césaire's use of surrealism for uncovering the unconscious of the indigenous colonized subject fit in well, but involved more structural critique than other forms of surrealism. Césaire's uncovering of the unconscious involved a push for the return to authentic African values; he sought to access the cultural ways from "before," retrieving indigenous African cultures that had become colonized and assimilated into relative obscurity. As a result, this return would assist in a redefinition of the black subject and a reclamation of positive identification with African heritage.

In Césaire's positing, both white narratives and black narratives would be toppled; the fallacious colonizer's definition of blackness must be revised, but, additionally, the colonized's own self-definition would need to be advanced and black individuals would have to reconsider their own internalized contempt for their connection to African heritage. About this, Nielsen elucidates,

Césaire was adamant that blacks must create their own subjectivities and narratives wherein blackness, as well as African history, is defined not as the weak or negative pole of the alleged white superior, but by way of an aesthetic amenable to and shaped by a distinctively African inflection and way of being. Stated otherwise, black history must be told by the black bard, reinterpreted poetically to reflect its beauty, worth, and ongoing relevance.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Nielsen, "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement," 345.

<sup>53</sup> Aimé Césaire, "My Joyful Acceptance of Surrealism," in *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 298.

<sup>54</sup> Nielsen, "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement," 345.

Césaire's aim to establish a black identity that positively represented black subjectivity was interlinked with his desire for socioeconomic moves toward equality. In insisting upon a recontextualized subjectivity that put the black African subject on the same humanistic plane as the white European subject, he also expressed his desire for the political liberation of African people from colonial subjugation. To have positive cultural identifications associated with his own race of people, Césaire might argue, would be to say that their freedom expanded beyond just cultural freedom of expression but political freedom as well.

For this cultural liberation to occur, in Césaire's framework, African actors should play the major roles in doing the work of redefining black subjectivity, especially African artists and writers who could imagine and create new ideas of African identity in written and visual work. Like Senghor, Césaire emphasized and advocated for an engagement with traditional African values; to do so would involve a looking to the pre-colonial past to inform the current moment as well as the future.<sup>55</sup> However, Nielsen argues that this was not meant to be interpreted literally:

..this Césairean return is not a call to a romanticized, infallible Africa that must somehow be recreated in the present. Rather, it is a call to rediscover African values—values emphasizing a communal existence and a sharing of goods with one another rather than individualistic, consumer, and capitalistic sociopolitical and economic structures. Thus, Césaire encouraged a return to Africa's past with the aim of a non-repetitive translation into contemporary society of those sociopolitical principles, cultural values, and ancestral practices lacking in Western "enlightened civilization."<sup>56</sup>

Césaire advocated for the imagining of a society and social structure outside of Western colonial power altogether, not necessarily a literal return to the customs and cultures of a pre-colonial past. Using surrealism as a method to imagine a liberated, disalienated, authentic black identity, Césaire calls upon cultural particularities to differentiate an African identity from its formerly

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

colonially dominated position.<sup>57</sup> Césaire, alongside Senghor and other proponents of the Négritude movement ultimately sought to imbue pride in their fellow people, to encourage a sense of community based on cultural similarities and community bonding. To continue contributing to culture at large, they might argue, they must first in themselves imbue a pride in the culture of the African race and create amongst themselves a national culture that is shared and celebrated.

While Frantz Fanon's philosophical teachings are not so far off from what Senghor and Césaire preached before him, he is known for expressing significant criticisms of the movement for Négritude. A differentiation that can be made between Senghor and Césaire is that Senghor tended to critique the reality of the conditions of the world at it was, and Césaire analyzed the underlying conditions or unconsciousness that existed within people. Both thinkers worked with a futurist envisioning for the freedom of future generations. Césaire was a mentor to Fanon for several years, and as a result many of Fanon's philosophical ideas are drawn from his education with Césaire. Fanon's most celebrated texts, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* both launch various critiques of colonialism and formulate new possibilities for establishing positive identification with a distinctively African culture. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon critiques the colonial world in which the humanity of black people is questioned and debated, and he controversially posits that the destiny of black men is to assimilate into whiteness for survival. Fanon positions blackness as alienated from universality—or rather a corrupt, ideological form of universality, one in which the white man is the ultimate universal subject against which all non-white, non-male identities are measured. Within the utter dehumanization of black individuals in colonized Africa and throughout the diaspora, Fanon sees

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<sup>57</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 85.

opportunity for an upheaval that goes beyond cultural liberation, insisting upon political freedoms and a need for the “liberation of the man of color from himself.”<sup>58</sup>

Fanon’s particular critique of Senghor’s and Césaire’s shared emphasis on culture is that it is more of a performance of common cultural identity than it is a real genuine relationship between all people of African heritage. Fanon identifies a dilemma: “White men consider themselves superior to black men... Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?”<sup>59</sup> Fanon seems unconvinced that white men will discontinue their dehumanization of black men at the first sight of their cultural expression. In fact, in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, he writes, “No colonial system draws its justification from the fact that the territories it dominates are culturally non-existent. You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading little-known cultural treasures under its eyes.”<sup>60</sup> This is quite a significant critique of Senghor and Césaire’s postulations of cultural liberation. Fanon argues that it is not on the basis of culture (or potential lack thereof) that colonial powers have dominated Africans and black people across the diaspora, but on the basis of imperialist greed of power that functions to disregard, and subsequently erase through assimilation, the cultural particularities of the people it dominates. In fact, he sees a colonized group’s insistence on their own unique culture as somewhat unattainable, as ultimately they are informed by the language and traditions of the colonial presence in their country.<sup>61</sup>

Fanon’s philosophy advocates for liberation beyond the scope of Négritude. He argues that cultural liberation is not enough to attain actionable political power, but that other realities

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<sup>58</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 179-180.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

must be addressed as well: “it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic; subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the *epidermalization*—of this inferiority.”<sup>62</sup> Fanon suggests that disalienation requires an upheaval against the economic and political institutions that keep black people in a disenfranchised social position without opportunity for mobility. Fanon further expounds upon this *epidermalization* in perhaps his most well-known contribution to post-colonial theory: “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Fanon explains the externalization of prejudice that is worn by the racialized others of Africa and the diaspora. Fanon’s focus on an embodied relationship to the colonization gives rise to his notion of the “myth of the Negro.”<sup>64</sup> This myth is contributed to from multiple angles: from the powers of domination that seek to suppress the formation of a uniquely black culture, that create fallacious representations to subjugate and stereotype; but also, from black cultural philosophers and creatives, too, in that a desire for a pre-colonial culture of the past obstructs progress in the moment and imaginings for the future.<sup>65</sup> This myth, perpetuated both in contempt and with good intention, effectively blocks the process of disalienation. However, out of this myth that is born from such embodiment, Fanon suggests an alternate mode of cultural expression:

I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I. Out of the necessities of my struggle I had chosen the method of regression, but that fact remained that it was an

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<sup>62</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10-11. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

unfamiliar weapon; here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational. Up to the neck in irrational. And now my voice vibrates!<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, in Fanon's traumatized but self-liberated mode of expression that is rooted in the irrational (since rationality is clearly not in the workings of racial prejudice) he finds value in a personal expression that doesn't have to be tethered to or relegated to making definitive cultural statements. Against the irrationality of white supremacist anti-blackness he posits a form of expression that explodes beyond the boundaries set for black cultural production.<sup>67</sup>

Fanon's work contributes important ideas to notions of the role of culture in art history. Not only does he theorize on the psychological effects of colonial dehumanization, but also he suggests a liberation that goes beyond Négritude's desires for liberation with an embrace of African values and culture. I argue that Frantz Fanon and artist Romare Bearden similarly occupy a transitional space between a pre- and post-1960s way of thinking about culture. Fanon posits some suggestions about creative production that can apply to the way in which Bearden navigated through the largely segregated and exclusionary art world of his historical moment. One of Fanon's major critiques of Négritude's emphasis on embracing cultural particularities as the mode to attain political power is that "the cultural problem as it sometimes exists in colonized countries runs the risk of giving rise to serious ambiguities. The lack of culture of the Negroes, as proclaimed by colonialism...ought logically to lead to the exaltation of cultural manifestations which are not simply national but continental, and extremely racial."<sup>68</sup> Négritude provides productive critiques of the colonial condition, and is generative in that it fosters appreciation of an African culture that prevails and thrives despite the threat of colonial erasure.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>68</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 175.

However, where it can become destructive is in fostering the notion that a singular, communal culture can be created that is relatable to all people of African descent.

Essentializing notions of “black experience” existing in Fanon’s time and locality can be found still haunting black artists and writers in Bearden’s moment in the United States. In a global context of white supremacy, such essentialization undermines solidarity, as no definitive conclusion can be drawn to identify what black experience is. Bearden’s essay “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma” outlines much of what Fanon argues about black cultural production. The way Fanon sees it, “the native artist who wishes at whatever cost to create a national work of art shuts himself up in a stereotyped reproduction of details.” In other words, Fanon sees that an attachment to culture as *priority* only results in a generalization. In his understanding, national “culture” is only a reproduction of stereotyped definitions, and by saying this he wants to emphasize here that there is no right way to represent one’s own culture, and there shouldn’t be expectations that any artist would be able to make that objective definition of what their culture is or looks like. As such, the myth of the Negro can be transmuted into the myth of black art in that because of racial prejudice and historical subjugation, black artists are asked to reflect the realities of their people in such a way that limits their freedom of expression. These pressures leave black artists susceptible to assimilation into a form of expression that isn’t reflective of freedom. Further, Fanon argues:

The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the cast-offs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all...But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 181.

Art, for Fanon, is at its best when it deals with the realities of the present, not a mythologized view of the past. Fanon, as well as Bearden, advocated for a more realistic representation of the black subject, but also emphasized the importance of the artist's autonomy. For Bearden and for Fanon, the fullest realization of a kind of universal expression lies in this transitional space between the "old" and "new" art histories, where cultural difference is acknowledged and appreciated, but the universal themes of struggle shared by a common humanity are just as important to convey.

### **c. Embracing the Past, Pointing to the Future**

With a historical awareness of the past but a forward-looking optimism for the future, Bearden embraces an aesthetic form in collage that seeks to recontextualize black subjectivity in such a way that reveals its own constructedness from jagged fragments, but ultimately results in a unified and complete whole. Bearden recognizes that the separatist framework found in Senghor's and Césaire framework of Négritude has only become a micro-society of the old guard he and his artist contemporaries were trying to leave behind, only replicating the white patriarchy of the mainstream and falling into the same habits. Mercer concurs:

As to confirm the view that those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it, such tendencies on the part of the Black Arts Movement would seem to confirm...that the politics of black essentialism merely repeated the exclusionary logic of Eurocentrism by inverting it into Afrocentrism. By virtue of retaining the binary code of either/or reasoning, any notion of cross-cultural syncretism or hybridity was repudiated as 'other' to an essentialist conception of African American cultural identity.<sup>70</sup>

Bearden tries to transform the black subject in such a way that brings them into the mainstream without fetishizing or tokenizing them but rather insisting on an interior complexity that is always in negotiation with racial or cultural languages and labels.

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<sup>70</sup> Mercer, "Collage as Kunstwollen," 141.

However, unlike Mercer, my argument forgoes hybridity and cosmopolitanism in favor of positioning Bearden between the ideological poles in the discourse surrounding Black art of the universal and the particular, taking seriously the ways he takes up a position between the two aesthetic camps of abstraction and figurative representation.<sup>71</sup> Where Mercer's notion of hybridity is more about constructedness and a view from the outside, I argue that Bearden is occupied with concerns about the interior life of his subjects, a self that is disjointed on the exterior but suggests an individual sense of interiority. Bearden's collage attempts to lay claim to the universality to which black subjects had been denied access in the past by a white supremacist culture that privileged white male artists. Bearden continued the old project of the abolitionists of the nineteenth century to bring the particular black subject into the realm of the universal human subject.

Bearden sought not to make broad, sweeping statements about structures of oppression that have perpetuated racial prejudice throughout history, nor did he seek to portray a concrete definition of black identity or to describe black experience as a whole. Through the medium of collage, Bearden manipulated existing representations of black subjectivity by appropriating images from popular media, deconstructing the stereotyped reproductions of his culture into fragments, and reconstructing them into dynamic images that create a new and unfamiliar complexity for his viewer to grapple with. To do this, he looked both to the past and to the future in his aesthetic formulation of the black subject.<sup>72</sup> Bearden used common, everyday materials, moving away from more traditional forms of art and moving toward the realism of the

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<sup>71</sup> Mercer, "Bearden's Critical Modernism," 13.

<sup>72</sup> Art historian Mary Campbell nicely articulates that "What makes Bearden's art particularly difficult to grasp...is that even as his art points to the future, it also wholeheartedly embraces the past." Mary Schmidt Campbell, "History and the Art of Romare Bearden," in *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden 1940-1987*, ed. Mary Schmidt Campbell and Sharon F. Patton (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), 9.

photographic image only to disrupt that realism with the cut of a pair of scissors. Using documentary photographs from the Civil Rights movement of workers in the rural south, as well as ethnographic images of African masks, Bearden constructs his figures and environments as the composite amalgamation of all of these various facets of social life and visual culture. He takes up the teachings of collage artists from the past, such as his former teacher and Dada artist George Grosz, but he made Dada his own by putting a modernist spin on it. His collages do not have the all-over graphic poster-like quality of the Dada artists, but rather he creates perspectival depth in his works, mimicking real spaces such as the city street. His compositions are not fully abstract, as was a popular visual mode of the 1960s, but his figures are also not at all naturalistic; they are altered, they have undergone a metamorphosis that has compromised the original photographic image's integrity that brings forth a new, more thoroughly considered subject that is meant to convey a complex selfhood.

“We all live in a mask. We all have a hundred different identities. Sometimes a mask can be a truer indication of a person than his true face.”<sup>73</sup> These are Bearden's words, and they seem to exemplify the artist's collage methodology. Bearden's use of the mask implies something beneath to be revealed. *Pittsburgh Memory* (Figure 5), another of Bearden's 1964 collages, is a double portrait of two figures, visible from the shoulders up. These two patchwork portraits, appearing more like masks than actual faces, appear in front of a disjointed urban background. Their faces make up most of the composition and their eyes are directed at the viewer, breaking the fourth wall and interacting with whomever is looking back at them. We as viewers are forced to meet both of their gazes and to examine their jagged edges. The figure on the left is made up

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<sup>73</sup> Robert G. O'Meally, “‘Pressing on Life Until it Gave Back Something in Kinship:’ An Introductory Essay,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 13. O'Meally is citing the Calvin Tomkins Papers, MoMA archives, date not specified.

of pieces of black and white and sepia-toned photographs of various heads and faces of black men. Each individual part has been sourced from different photographs: the dimpled chin, rough with stubbled beard hairs; the eyes, one brown eye surrounded by dark skin and a furrowed brow and the other, a lighter colored iris with a lighter skin tone; an angular paper with a third, almost inconspicuous eye streaks across the forehead; an upside-down ear; a bisected head with two different hairlines. This figure seems to be more confrontational than the figure on the right, but not aggressive. Perhaps he is scrutinizing us as we scrutinize him. The figure on the right is just as fragmented as the one on the left, though he is also equipped with a newsboy cap and a hand on which he seems to rest his chin. Too angular to appear naturalistic, some fragments of his face seem to be cut from a picture of an African mask. This figure appears to be more contemplative than the leftmost figure, standing back and allowing his friend to square up to the viewer. Behind the figures, nebulous forms with textures of urban architecture are haphazardly placed, not resolving themselves into the form of a comprehensible apartment building like they do in *The Dove*. The figures and environment are made up of incongruous proportions and varying visual textures, thus unifying figure and environment in their common disjointedness.

Bearden's collage *Pittsburgh Memory* allows for the exploration of the role of the mask in modernism. His construction of faces in his collages result in mask-like coverings more than realistic faces. Bearden utilizes these mask-like effects on his figures to convey the unidealized exterior and complex interiority of his black subjects. Although Bearden embraces in his work ordinary people taking up commonplace space in everyday situations, the mask-faced figures are meant to convey notions of a subjectivity more complex than what can be seen from the outside, reflecting his historical moment and critiquing essentializing definitions of black experience made by mass-media and a history of an internalized and externalized culture of anti-black

racism in American society. For Bearden's figures, the mask is there with them, not instead of them. The mask is something that prompts the viewer to look closer, to remove the mask and to see what is behind it. For Bearden, what is behind the mask of these fragmented exteriors is a complex inner life, individuality and multiplicity lived in entirely unique ways by each different figure. Newly imagined to be unrestricted by the public world, Bearden's mask alludes to the private interiors of these figures, which are meant to stand for finding a common ground in universal humanity, reducing the importance of our different culturally and politically loaded exterior embodiments. Social theorist Avery Gordon provides a framework to think through this type of interiority, which aligns with Bearden's collage methodology:

even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims, or, on the other hand, superhuman agents...complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning.<sup>74</sup>

Such is the type of complex interiority that Bearden is trying to convey in his collaged figures. Through these collages, Bearden seeks to insist on a complex black subjectivity within his figures that negates essentialist prejudices and dismantles the black American homogeneity in their layeredness, and in the quality of being removed from one context and recontextualized into another.

Bearden embraced the ordinary subject in the everyday environment because in this realm he saw the possibility of giving rise to a black subjectivity that emphasized complex interior life and selfhood and showed black subjects as constructed of the fragments of the world. He embraced the modernist value of subjective interiority by showing, through his multifaceted fragmented figures, the composite nature of subjectivity in his black subjects, suggesting a

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<sup>74</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.

multiplicity that stereotyped representations of black subjects critically lacked. His collage involved a process of negation of both structures of power that perpetuated a dominant homogenous and non-dynamic view of black subjectivity, and a racially separatist agenda that sought to sever the ties of black cultural production from the modernist art world. Conversely, Bearden's collage proposed a dynamic, non-objectifying vision of black subjecthood, recognizing difference and multiplicity without falling into fetishisms or pedestalization.<sup>75</sup> Through the process of deriving images from various sources and piecing them together into a single body, he refutes the discursive constructions of African American art history that put pressure on black artists to define black culture and instead presents the alternative: that each of his figures are made up of preexisting representations of black people—of how others see them—but through the process of collage, by cutting and forming new bodies, Bearden removed them from their original context and gave them new life. By positioning these figures in the everyday space of the city street, Bearden posits this complex black subjectivity as a human reality, not as a sociological statistic, giving rise to their common humanity with all other modern subjects. Bearden's collage restores universality to its proper meaning by insisting that the particularities of black lives be woven unto the fragmented, sutured wholes that characterize so much modern art. Making art, for Bearden, is a universal human activity, so for him, there is a need for greater particularity against generalized identity in visual culture as a whole, because otherwise marginalized identities are at risk of becoming too abstract.

There is little doubt that collage artists after Bearden's time have drawn much inspiration from his distinctly modernist treatment of the medium. He opened the possibilities of a method of artmaking that embraced materials that did not originate from his studio but rather from the

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<sup>75</sup> Daniel Matlin, "Harlem Without Walls: Romare Bearden's Realism," *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 199.

visual culture of the world around him in the 1960s, of common media sources and documentary photography, transforming images' original intentions into new contexts, thus prodding at the very notion of fixed definitions of culture or humanity. In Section IV, Bearden's collage work will be compared with a contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu's collage to understand how collage has been reinterpreted in a more contemporaneous context and to evaluate how Bearden's modernist embrace of the interior and the particular has or has not been renegotiated to fit into the context of the present.

### III. OBSCURING THE SELF: WANGECHI MUTU'S POSTMODERN COLLAGE

#### a. Wangechi Mutu's Unearthly Fusions

Floating through a distant and unfamiliar universe, we pass through fields of shimmering disco ball moons, tentacular black holes, and clones of Jupiter's colorful sulfurous moon Io. Entering the hazy pink atmosphere, we approach two extrasolar planets, one jellyfish-shaped planet with periwinkle Seussian palm trees and trailing tentacles and another covered in swaying white grass. Upon this stellar mass an ethereal humanoid being crouches over her prey, the beheaded remains of a pale pink snake. The heel of her stiletto is still piercing into its neck as we approach to witness the tail end of her hunt. In her hand, she holds the still-writhing body of the snake, which coils and stretches all the way into the jungle of the nearby planet. The grisly wound of the snake spurts blood, which splatters dark red against its own pale body. The humanoid creature meets our gaze; her expression is ambivalent despite her proximity to the gruesome corpse of the snake. The figure's oversized eyes are piercing, but the corners of her lipstick-donned lips are downturned; her massive forehead and pigtails give her a juvenile appearance despite her seductively posed body. Her stance exposes her whole body to the viewer—she supports herself with her right arm and knee while her left leg spreads open into a kind of primal squatting position of domination over her still-slithering prey. The figure's body is mottled with splotches in gradient greys and oranges; it's hard to tell whether it is speckled skin or a tight-fitting patterned bodysuit. She exudes power and dominates the scene, but at the same time she is now alone, isolated on this desolate planet after having slain the only other sign of life nearby.

This diptych, titled *Yo Mama* and created by artist Wangechi Mutu, depicts an alien figure in an otherworldly, celestial environment (Figure 6). Mutu's contemporary collage

practice draws source material from glossy high-fashion advertisements, documentary photography from ethnographic journals, antique medical textbook diagrams, male-targeted motorcycle and hunting publications, and pornographic magazines, from which she cuts and pastes images alongside colorful ink applied to slick Mylar film and other craft materials like glitter, mica flakes, tape, and textured paper. To construct her collages, Mutu often engages with themes from science fiction, filling her ethereal worlds with hybrid human-machine goddess creatures or monsters built out of morbid fusions of stereotype and pathological conditions. Mutu renders her collaged figures as hypervisible, as vulnerable objects of sexual and aesthetic desire, but oftentimes they are simultaneously aggressively confrontational. Unlike many collage artists before her, including Romare Bearden, Mutu does not utilize the jagged-edge effect of collage but rather smooths out the forms so that they fit together harmoniously, resulting in a humanoid body upon which disparate elements become symbiotic. Some elements that appear to be obviously misplaced (Mutu often employs motorcycle parts as replacements for limbs) but other components are sutured carefully to the body, as if they were naturally occurring or surgically attached. Collage theorist Brandon Taylor has described this kind of collage process in this way: “Much of what we understand by collage speaks to the chaos and profusion of the world. Collage can construct contradictions, but also reveal them. Its assault on outlines and boundaries can dissolve identities as well as forge new ones.”<sup>76</sup> Mutu’s work certainly illustrates Taylor’s view of how collage constructs and reveals paradoxes in visual culture; Mutu critiques socially constructed roles of gender and race through her amalgamations of desire and disgust. About such contradictions between two opposing forces, such as putting together female sexual desire and degrading stereotype, or putting tribal imagery in a futuristic landscape, Mutu has explained:

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<sup>76</sup> Brandon Taylor, “The Cutting Edge,” in *The Ends of Collage*, ed. Yuval Etgar (London: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2017), 159.

I take these two images and I shove them together, because they are both as loud and pathetic and misguided as the other. My idea with the two images was to create a conversation that would never occur, but actually to me is very related. That one exaggerated representation of us is the same as the other exaggeration and that the two can live together formally in this art is my way of relating them and giving them a final resting place.<sup>77</sup>

Mutu brings together various fallacious representations not only to emphasize how senseless and degrading they are, but also in some way she seeks to empower the figure who is the embodied site of these contradictions: The figure in *Yo Mama* is at once violent and alluring, ambivalent and available, alien and native. She indicates that the relationship between two opposing forces leads to death, a postmodern model of relationships learned from the culture of commodity and spectacle, not from human social life, where relationship usually leads to expansion. Her figures are highly constructed to reveal and subvert how stereotype is socially constructed and internalized.<sup>78</sup>

#### **b. Existing Critical Frameworks: Hybridity, Antihumanism, and Afrofuturism**

Mutu has been celebrated by the art world since the beginning of her career in the late 1990s, and her work has been shown around the world in many solo and group shows, including recent works displayed at the 2019 Whitney Biennial and a commission of four bronze sculptures (*The New Ones, will free Us*) for display in the façade niches of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a historically significant achievement to be sure. The current critical landscape of scholarship on Mutu's collage work, however, is somewhat limited, because while there are many essays in exhibition catalogues and various articles about her work, few have constructed in-depth analyses and interpretations of her collage work. Considering this, I argue that the existing

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<sup>77</sup> Angela Stief, "Images of Triumph and Transgression," in *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image?*, ed. Gerald Matt (Nürnberg: Verlag Für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2005), 15.

<sup>78</sup> David Moos, "The Ark Collection: Disjunctive Continuity," in *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization?*, ed. David Moos (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010), 11.

critical landscape of writing on Mutu's collage is insufficiently critical, and that an analysis of both the existing scholarship as well as a way of thinking through her work in new, critical ways is necessary. Most often, critics celebrate her work under the pretext of the politics of representation, often supposing that her collaged figures all pertain to her personal biography and thus are black women, or that they are even self-portraiture; These critics ascribe blackness and/or African-ness even to figures that on paper appear racially ambiguous or are hybridized beyond the point of being of the human species. To these readings, Mutu retorts,

The subject is not always a black female. Viewers often find it impossible to separate me from my subjects. I think this presumption frequently occurs when the viewer or writer is not black. I have rarely heard a European white artist asked if the Caucasian-looking characters or figures in their work are a projection of themselves. In my works I tend to depict a very hybrid, inter-species, ethnically and historically mangled creature. But the core, the impetus of the work comes from the soul of fearless black womanhood in its various incarnations and complexities, bold and benevolent, bruised, beautiful, whatever it might be.<sup>79</sup>

Here, Mutu is critical of non-black writers who can't seem to separate the artist from her work particularly because she is a black woman and especially because she is a Kenyan-born African immigrant. Mutu argues that her figures are intentionally ambiguous, complex beings that negate easy categorization. Being too quick to ascribe racial identity or assume self-referentiality disallows some more broadly reaching themes that Mutu intentionally imbues into her work, like critiques of consumerism, grapplings with the relationship of female sexuality and the pornographic image, and considerations of interiority. Mutu does cite the *spirit* of black womanhood as an intended invocation (rather than the external markers of black womanhood) which opens up space for the interpretation of her figures as containing an inner spirit despite her external injury as the precarious, wounded site which shows us the awful things of the world, a

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<sup>79</sup> Gerald Matt, "Wangechi Mutu in Conversation with Gerald Matt," in *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image?*, ed. Gerald Matt (Nürnberg: Verlag Für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2005), 37.

“hybrid, inter-species, ethnically and historically mangled creature.” This view is corroborated in an interview with the artist Deborah Willis, where Mutu states:

The black female body has been violated and revered in very specific ways by the outsider—Europeans, especially. The issues that pertain to race: pathologizing the black mind, exoticizing and fearing the black body, objectifying the body as a specimen, or a sexual machine, or a work animal, or relating the black body to non-human species as a way to justify cruelty...All these are practices that are placed excessively upon the black female body.<sup>80</sup>

Through the medium of collage, Mutu seeks to reveal the excesses placed upon the body of the women she constructs. Her collaged figures are monstrous, but Mutu still constructs them to be alluring, giving them the long, thin bodies of fashion models, and she applies captivating color and textural variation in her Mylar and ink additions. They become hypervisible—the viewer is compelled not to look away, at first because the figure draws you in with her beauty, and then in the same way that you can’t look away from the shocking sight of a car accident on the side of the highway. Canadian scholar Rinaldo Walcott theorizes this effect of Mutu’s work by arguing that they recall the

all-too-familiar history of black bodies made to disappear from the category of the Human—or black bodies made so hyper-visible as to be monstrously non-Human...The science used to mark the African/black body as non-human is a science of spectacle, which lends itself to being resignified in narratives and images that refuse the subordinating intentions of its practice.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, Mutu’s monstrous yet seductive creatures function to critique the alienating effects of her source material, images constructed for consumption that as a result reduce subjectivities to perpetuate and reproduce damaging stereotypes. In harnessing the power of these images, Mutu seeks to make a new spectacle (or to reproduce old myths in new ways) out

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<sup>80</sup> Deborah Willis, “Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis,” *Bomb Magazine* (September 9, 2013), accessed February 23, 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/wangechi-mutu/>.

<sup>81</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, “Repeating Histories, Black Bodies and Forensic Forms,” in *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization?*, ed. David Moos (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010), 38.

of the socially constructed views of black women to expose a more grotesque imagining of what those damaging representations actually might look like if reflected onto one composite body. Mutu subjects her figures to perverse crossbreeding experiments, mashing together high fashion with pornography, nature with machine, idealized with grotesque, spectacle with spectacle.<sup>82</sup> The process of transfiguration allows these collage works to function on multiple levels, challenging canonical representations of women of color while simultaneously building fantastical, racially ambiguous, dynamic creatures out of images originally intended to debase or delimit. But, at the same time that they are fantastical externally, it's not clear whether these figures reference any selfhood or if they are purely a constructed and reinforced exterior.

Since hybridity is such a significant and recurrent theme in Mutu's work, it is necessary to acknowledge the interspecies-oriented cyborg theory often ascribed to her work that originates with feminist theorist Donna Haraway and has been further theorized upon by others in critical debates about antihumanism.<sup>83</sup> Haraway's seminal 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" defines a cyborg as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."<sup>84</sup> So far, this definition is entirely paralleled by Mutu's figures, who are an amalgamation of human and non-human parts, made up of various images from the world that influence our social lives and relationships to each other, and in the sum of all of that are unreal and fictitious creatures. Haraway deploys her feminist cyborg theory as a critique of a version of consciousness-raising

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<sup>82</sup> Moos, "Disjunctive Continuity," 16.

<sup>83</sup> According to Lissette Olivares, the term "cyborg" was first coined in 1960 by two doctors who used the term to posit an evolved human form which, with the help of mechanical prosthetics, would hybridize man and machine. However, Olivares notes, "their text exemplifies a scientific framework that glorifies technological advancement but which fails to consider extended political impacts." Lissette Olivares, "Cyborg Consciousness in the Art of Wangechi Mutu," *Literal Magazine* (April 19, 2012), accessed February 23, 2020, <http://literalmagazine.com/cyborg-consciousness-in-the-art-of-wangechi-mutu/>.

<sup>84</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149.

feminism that she regards as ineffective, or at the very least, insufficient. In her manifesto, she writes that women's movements around the world had been collectively constructing a myth of a distinctly female experience of the social world, which she argues is "a fiction and a fact of the most crucial, political kind."<sup>85</sup> She goes on to argue that "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices."<sup>86</sup> As such, feminisms based on collective female experience are invalidated according to this account by virtue of Haraway's assertion that gender is a constructed myth.

Though also a constructed myth, the cyborg stands in as oppositional to the binarism of socially constructed roles of gender, race, class, and so on.<sup>87</sup> The cyborg, as Haraway sees it, is unfixed, it is both flesh and metal, it is always hybrid and never binary. Journalist Hari Kunzru argues that Haraway's cyborg "trashes the oppositions between nature and culture, self and world," which ultimately explodes the gendered binaries of those same terms, which affirms that those categories of gender are constructed rather than biologically innate.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, the cyborg calls into question all dichotomies, those "between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized."<sup>89</sup> The cyborg points to the constructedness of each of these categories because of the possibility of a hybridity between two seemingly disparate things. In other terms, Haraway is arguing for a non-essentialist understanding of categories such as race, gender, and class, articulating that no person is purely one singular thing, but we are all cyborgs in the sense that

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>87</sup> Olivares, "Cyborg Consciousness."

<sup>88</sup> Hari Kunzru, "You Are Cyborg," *Wired* (February 1, 1997), accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/1997/02/fharaway/>.

<sup>89</sup> Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

we are multiple and complex and complicated. But what Haraway's postmodern theory seems to lack is a notion of unity that takes into account the work that is required to bring two disparate elements or qualities into a relationship. Looking back at Mutu's collage, the parts that fit seamlessly together show that the artist has done the work of putting contradicting elements together, but does Haraway's prophecy of unity materialize in any of Mutu's figures?

As a kind of case study on hybridity, Haraway brings into discussion the intersectional identity of women of color, an identity which she argues is a "postmodernist identity," one that is constructed out of "otherness, difference, and specificity," whose obverse is the Western white male, who is socially and politically not particular but universal (it should be mentioned that this notion is constructed by postmodernist theory and that the modern subject has understood themselves to be particular since the 19<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>90</sup> She argues that the cyborg complicates the category of "woman of color" as it problematizes both the binary categories of gender and race. Haraway doesn't really make clear whether she sees women of color as the ultimate hybrid subject, but she does say in more of a roundabout way that "the cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self," which is to say, given the paradigms of binary systems of identity, the cyborg helps articulate how normalized forms of understanding subjectivity articulate categories like race, gender, sexuality, and so on. This is to say that the cyborg, while perhaps suggested by Haraway as a kind of recontextualized composite of identities, it may be the case that those with racialized and gendered identities appear as cyborgs to those "normalized" sectors of society (those who fit the category of the white cisgender male).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 155..

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 163. In the following comparison of Mutu's and Bearden's collage work, I suggest that this is part of what makes Bearden's collage postmodern.

Important to Haraway is cyborg theory's potential for a cyborg to join and identify with two seemingly disparate things at once because it embodies that same duality which through parochial, social-constructed thinking is seen as conflicting rather than complimentary. She writes,

A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of partial identities and contradictory standpoints...The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many headed monsters. Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling.<sup>92</sup>

Here, Haraway seems to suggest that the hybridity of the cyborg is what gets us closer to a more unified form of universal humanity, one in which people—all with ranging differences and similarities—find common ground thus creating unities that were previously unimaginable. While much scholarship on Mutu's collage work uses the framework of Haraway's cyborg manifesto to explain the hybridity of Mutu's interspecies figures, few scholars make really concrete connections between a specific Mutu figure and this definition of the cyborg as this multifarious being. Where Haraway's hybridity is thought to be a positive thing, several (but not all) of Mutu's figures seem to be negatively affected and damaged by their hybridity, which turns them into beasts.

Looking to Mutu's collage *The Last Grower* one does not see the empowering and revolutionary hybridity of Haraway, but rather we see all of the things piled onto this figure weighing heavily on her wounded body (Figure 7). In this collage, a many-limbed cyborg creature leans forward to plant a flower into the soil. This diptych's two panels are asymmetrical, the left panel cut shorter than the right panel, paralleling the truncation of the severed limb of the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 154.

hybrid figure. The subject is overburdened with a myriad of images; the figure's head is almost unintelligibly packed with disparate elements: large, glossy purple lips cut from a makeup advertisement; the mouth of a growling tiger for an eye; various strings of beads standing in for eyebrows and ears; and a snake, a bird, an African sculpture, and pointed green leaves sticking out of the back of the head, followed by red splatters, mimicking the eruption of brain matter caused by a bullet shot through the head. The figure's injuries do not end here; following the body down through her back, this cyborg dons a stylish plaid scarf, which trivially covers part of a system of veins, which is untethered to flesh or organs but somehow connects the head and arms to the lower half of the body. Some repulsive form that can only really be described as "guts" spills out of the lower trunk of the figure, alluding to the figure's further injury of disembowelment. As the subject bends forward, we can see one of the front limbs ripping weeds out of the grass as it reaches over a mud- (or blood-) splattered white dove, while another holds a germinated red carnation in the palm of her hand, preparing to plant it into the ground. The third front limb is a collection of motorcycle gears and exhaust pipes, from which watercolor-painted pollutant fumes are emitted. Her legs are made up of more captivating and grotesque textures, resembling diseased skin or animal print. The left leg carries the masculine machinery of a flame-painted motorcycle along with colorful African beaded trim, alongside draped fabrics of leopard skin and glittering gold. The back leg has been severed under the joint, actively bleeding from a grisly wound, the muscle and tissue beneath her patterned skin exposed and dripping with blood. The macabre figure stands upon a nondescript and barren landscape, as she holds in her hand a flower that represents the only hope for new life in this desolate and decaying environment.

*The Last Grower* is by every definition a hybrid body, but unlike Haraway's positively advanced cyborg, Mutu's cyborg here is composed of all of the excesses of human consumption and their requisite abuse of nature, as her bloodied mechanical limbs reach out to the earth to make one last attempt at preserving natural life. Where Haraway's cyborg claims to blur the line between nature and culture, Mutu's cyborg represents the harmful impact on nature that the postmodern human system of consumption and waste brings. Where Haraway's hybrid creature seeks to render obsolete the distinction between genders, Mutu's hybrid creature embodies symbols of masculinity and femininity, which mutilate her but also make her more alluring. Overall, Mutu's cyborg in *The Last Grower* is made up of contradictions, not unities (like Haraway's proposed cyborg). Through Mutu's graphic invocation of violence, of "shoving together" contradictory discourses together, she is distinctly separating her figures from Haraway's optimistic composite body. In this way, Mutu seems to invalidate readings of Haraway's hybridity theory in many of her figures, as they are less about progressive moves toward repudiating damaging binarisms and more about revealing the injurious paradoxes created by stereotype and a culture of exploitative production and consumption of capital. In her manifesto, Haraway admits that "the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism."<sup>93</sup> Mutu's cyborg can be read as a reflection of the consequences of the inevitable appropriation of the cyborg as military weapon or salable product, which the cyborg renders inevitable, as the celebration of difference for difference's sake is a poignant strategy of the global capitalist market. Through her collaged figures, Mutu considers how humanity's increased merging with global, open information systems brought about by technology, as well as the globalization of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 151.

capital and the collateral visual culture of images and advertisements that function to peddle that capital to the public has had a significant impact on how we see ourselves and others.<sup>94</sup>

Concurrent to but critically distinct from cyborg theory is antihumanist theory, which could also open up interesting arguments for Mutu's postmodern hybrid figures. Art historian Blake Stimson thoughtfully describes antihumanism's outlook on the postmodern subject:

The rich interior specificity of self, given form by the intertwined activity of sustained reflection and public exchange with others about that reflection that was the core dream of the Enlightenment, has been reduced to a mechanical mirror image or 'subject position' to the lesser, delimited reality of a plotted coordinate in a discursively constructed world.<sup>95</sup>

First, Stimson describes the kind of relationship that modernism engages in, but which Haraway's cyborg theory does not, engaging with notions of full-blown exteriority and the constructed world of the postmodern. The subject here is described as a combination of discursive categories rather than a particular relationship between interior and exterior, or, in other words, between the self and culture. Art historian Eve Meltzer similarly explains the antihumanist subject as "a disembodied, disaffected subject—or at least, as Fanon and Wilding would have it, only injuriously affected: the subject who is abducted and then 'produced' by an ideological world that is always in place and already awaiting..."<sup>96</sup> Both descriptions can be critically considered against one of Mutu's highly-externalized collaged figures, and I would argue that to see Mutu's figure through this framework, as "produced by the ideological world," is productive.

In *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, Mutu has constructed a bust portrait of a woman out of various photographic images superimposed over a medical diagram (Figure 8).

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<sup>94</sup> Olivares, "Cyborg Consciousness."

<sup>95</sup> Blake Stimson, *Citizen Warhol* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014), 7.

<sup>96</sup> Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.

The figure's face has three eyes, two of which are adorned with differing shades of blue eye shadow, the third strategically spliced from a black and white photo. Each eye looks in a different direction, moving autonomously from the others; two stare off into space while one meets our gaze. On her temple, between the eyes, there is a scientific illustration of a woman's vagina being opened up by a speculum, exposing the cervix, which creates the semblance of another eye or could represent an invasive lobotomy procedure being carried out without anesthesia, as suggested by the opened mouth which can be imagined to be producing a guttural scream. The back of the woman's head has short black hair and her chin and jaw are a cut fragment of a black woman's shoulder and breast. Her mouth is agape, which emphasizes her long tongue and cherry red lips. Her neck is made up of layered packing tape, providing a flat visual contrast against the photographic images and illustrated page. The work's title is typewritten to the top of the work, alluding that Mutu has constructed a monstrous amalgamation that embodies the medical diagram for this particular sexual malady, to be included in a reference book of diseases of the female reproductive system. Mutu combines pornography, fashion, and medical illustration to create the image of a woman presented as a diseased embodiment of these variously procured elements. By placing the illustration of the medical instrument exposing the female genitals next to the exposed breast of a pornography model, next to other facial features clearly drawn from fashion editorials, Mutu implies an inherent critique of the misogyny of her source material. Each element is interrogated in relation to the others, as they are drawn from sources that pathologize, aestheticize, commodify, and/or sexualize the female body. Mutu takes hold of these variously degrading and objectifying representations of women and creates a strange, unusually explicit beast. She aligns the sexual desire of the pornographic image with a scientific portrayal of genitalia, exposed and vulnerable while

undergoing the procedure of the cervical exam. This portrait is at once grotesque and captivating. The image reveals Mutu's process of construction: she intends to confuse us with conflicting emotions, with both desire and disgust, pulling us in with the fashionably attractive elements and shocking us as we look closer into the less desirable parts.

Mutu makes obvious to us how the female body is the site of production and negation of cultural chaos, as the weight of society has often weighed heavily upon the singular black female body as a site of sentimentalism. With her figures, Mutu externalizes the otherwise psychological effects of those ideological pressures. In the example of *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, instead of constructing a subject to allude to her complex interior life, she complicates the subject's exterior with elements that carry social, political, and economic weight in our present-day society. Disputing Donna Haraway's politically progressive and internally complex hybrid cyborg, Melzer argues that through antihumanist thought "we more often than not think of the subject as a mere *effect* of preexisting systems and conceive of identity categories as based on structural notions of difference." Rather than fearless recombination, it is the reduction of subjectivity to structural identity categories in the first place which, Meltzer argues, has "struck the fatal blow at the essentialist model of universal origins."<sup>97</sup>

Stimson advances these claims when he argues, "More and more, we have come to experience ourselves as socially situated identities rather than as historically enabled subjects; more and more, we have felt the release from having to carry the weight of the world in the name of the old project of enlightenment."<sup>98</sup> Mutu's collage *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix* can be aligned with these arguments in the way that she has given up the complex interiority of the modern subject in favor of building up a complex exterior, covered in the iconography of a

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 13. Emphasis in original.

<sup>98</sup> Stimson, *Citizen Warhol*, 8.

visual culture that is desirable but alienating. The passive hybrid head-reproductive system of the woman is being mechanically spread open, only to reveal that the interior is diseased and ulcerous, reflecting the physical injury in the dehumanizing replacement of interiority by psychological injury. In the end, Meltzer argues for the productive, knowledge-producing and resistance-creating potential of antihumanist thought: “that identity—being based on difference rather than sameness—is in many ways structured like a language, and knowing this has helped to expose and resist the politics of a hegemonic culture.”<sup>99</sup> But is it sufficient enough just to know? Mutu certainly understands the highly-coded language of postmodern society and seeks to translate that knowledge into image by revealing how an antihumanist subject might look, but is mirroring or replication enough of a critique to take responsibility for these conditions?

Within the critical landscape of writing about Mutu’s art, another major theme is recurrent: Afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack, considered one of the leading scholars of Afrofuturism, defines the theoretical framework as

an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation...Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.<sup>100</sup>

Looking to history, those who practice the critical framework of Afrofuturism make connections between the subject of the interstellar alien and the black slave, abducted from his homeland and taken elsewhere to be exploited for labor.<sup>101</sup> Mark Dery, another scholar writing about the conceptual framework of Afrofuturism considers this parallel in this way: “[African Americans]

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<sup>99</sup> Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved*, 201.

<sup>100</sup> Ytasha L. Womack. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 9.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassible force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies...”<sup>102</sup> Looking to the future, Afrofuturism seeks to create space for black representation in all aspects of science fiction: literature, film, television, and art. This is an imaginative space, one that creates opportunities for thinking beyond the restraint of cultural and societal construct. Mutu’s work is understandably aligned with this framework because of her use of celestial environments and alien-hybrid creatures. Afrofuturism is often cited in reference to Mutu’s work as an interpretation of a desire for space travel to the degree of escaping to a new planet, colonized by black people from throughout the African diaspora, and to start a new society that isn’t built on slavery, racism, and exploitation.<sup>103</sup>

Mutu herself has spoken on the influence of Afrofuturism in her work. In a 2003 interview, curator Lauri Firstenberg asked Mutu about her take on the visual and cultural conceptual framework of Afrofuturism. Mutu responded that Afrofuturism had indeed become widely popular around this time, and she retorts that “maybe it’s because the idea of ‘Africa and the future’ is seen as an oxymoron.”<sup>104</sup> Further, she admits that the anxiety of alienation and displacement are “implied” in her works, but she doesn’t say much more to necessarily identify herself as an Afrofuturist. To illustrate why I think her work can be seen both ways (as working through the framework of Afrofuturism, or perhaps a consideration that her work makes statements beyond Afrofuturism’s scope), I look not to Mutu’s many figural collages but to a rare nonrepresentational work, *Untitled (Tumor)* (Figure 9). In this work, Mutu constructs an

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<sup>102</sup> Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel A. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Bennett, “Afrofuturism,” *Computer* 4, no. 49 (2016): 92-93.

<sup>104</sup> Lauri Firstenberg and Wangechi Mutu, “Perverse Anthropology: The Photomontage of Wangechi Mutu, A Conversation with Lauri Firstenberg,” in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), 142.

organic globular form, the surface covered in grey and blue abstract strings of dots and concentric stains, and from its edges various linear forms resembling twigs, tentacles, and grass erupt, and also cut-and-pasted women's legs. These legs are recognizable from her other works; considering the angles at which they are bent and the strappy heels many of them are wearing, these are the legs of pornographic models. The title suggests that this strange form is a tumor, but it also reads visually as a planet or the view of a cell body through a microscope. Regardless, the form evokes the shape of something beyond human comprehension, either a mass of tissue created by accumulations of abnormal cells, an interior look at the microscopic functions of the human body, or a celestial mass on which extraterrestrial life forms thrive.

On one hand, viewing Mutu's collage work, such as *Untitled (Tumor)*, through an Afrofuturist lens, one can posit that Mutu has constructed a viable planet for black space travelers to find refuge and create new and more equitable futures. It could very well contain the mystical powers desired by Afrofuturists to create a new utopic society under new tenets. Other works, such as the above-discussed *Yo Mama* can also be posited as the new constructed Afrofuturist alien who lives in space. But on the other hand, Mutu's collage can also be seen as negating some of the Afrofuturist framework's most essential doctrines. If Afrofuturism is about escaping this world's dehumanizing and oppressive societal practices of racism, exploitative capitalism, and political inequity, Mutu's figures and her tumor/planet show such escape to be impossible. *Untitled (Tumor)* shows us how our visual culture's attachment to spectacle will follow us regardless of how much we try to distance ourselves from this earth. Mutu's figures replicate the injurious stereotype and exploitation of women's bodies, and her planet is the breeding ground for it to thrive as a micro-society of what they are attempting to leave behind. In other words, Mutu's collages might point out how Afrofuturism gives rise to the desire for

fugitivity, but that in reality any newly formed society would likely bring with them and replicate the same problems of their earthly society. In her “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” artist Martine Syms offers some critiques and some productive alternatives to the mainstream strain of Afrofuturism:

The Mundane Afrofuturists recognize that:

We did not originate in the cosmos.

The connection between the Middle Passage and space travel is tenuous at best... Magic interstellar travel and/or the wondrous communication grid can lead to an illusion of outer space and cyberspace as egalitarian.

This dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice and that cyberspace was prefigured upon a ‘master/slave relationship.

While we are often Othered, we are not aliens.

Though our ancestors were mutilated, we are not mutants.

Post-black is a misnomer. Post-colonialism is too.

The most likely future is one in which we only have ourselves and this planet...

We also recognize:

...The imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?

...The relief of recognizing our authority. We will root our narratives in a critique of normative, white validation. Since ‘fact’ and ‘science’ have been used throughout history to serve white supremacy, we will focus on an emotionally true, vernacular reality.

The understanding that our ‘twoness’ is inherently contemporary, even futuristic...

The opportunity to make sense of the nonsense that regularly—and sometimes violently—accents black life...

The sense that the rituals and inconsistencies of daily life are compelling, dynamic, and utterly strange...<sup>105</sup>

These are some of the frameworks (cyborg/hybridity theory, antihumanism, and Afrofuturism) through which much of Mutu’s collage work in art historical and critical scholarship has been examined. Other more editorial writing on Mutu’s collaged figures that

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<sup>105</sup> Martine Syms, “The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” *Rhizome* (December 17, 2013), accessed February 23, 2020, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/>. This passage only represents a fragment of the full manifesto, which goes on to celebrate other kinds of alternatives to fugitivity and escapism in favor of collective action, community-building, and self-love.

seems to ignore postmodern and antihumanist theory of contemporary art is often overwhelmed with the fantastical aspects of her work and looks the possibility of more subtle themes. Trevor Schoonmaker describes Mutu's collage in this way:

Unburdened by the weight of conventional modes of representation, Mutu's dreamscapes help her challenge and blow apart stereotypes and misconceptions to raise fundamental questions about gender, race, power, and survival...Her maximalist aesthetic does not seek to define the world but rather explode its delimiting classifications and representations and reconfigure them to emphasize humankind's inherent complexity and interconnectedness.<sup>106</sup>

My reading of Mutu's collage is different. I'm not convinced that her collages explode stereotype in the way Schoonmaker seems to think they do; rather, to me they seem to replicate myths (albeit in a more alluring way). Mutu's collage feels incredibly overburdened by the weight of conventional modes of representation, something that connects her critique to Fanon's critique of Négritude above. I think Mutu definitely shows us, in an externalized way, how the amalgamation of such stereotypes weighs heavily on those most affected by social constructions of racial and gendered identity. But *showing* us doesn't go much further than merely replicating how these damaging constructions are impactful to the psyche. I also think Schoonmaker's claim that Mutu points out our inherent interconnectedness feels like a bit of a reach. I think that instead, she is showing how the relationships of differing injurious discursive constructions applied to those with gendered and raced identities are all interconnected under the hood of systems of power who perpetuate institutional racism and sexism and promote exploitative capitalist practices to continue to keep putting these groups in a vulnerable, precarious position. However, I do agree that her work raises questions about the contradictions she constructs within her collages, between the various power dynamics of race, gender, and class—she makes us

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<sup>106</sup> Trevor Schoonmaker, "A Fantastic Journey," in *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker (Durham: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2013), 21, Exhibition Catalogue.

conscious of the intersections of those dynamics in real life.

### c. Reproducing Myths, Deconstructing Myths

So far, in my account as well as the accounts of other scholars, Mutu's work seems to be all about launching critiques about fallacious or exploitative representation. Going forth, I'd like to suggest some new frameworks through which to view Mutu's collages. The following will include discussions about finding pleasure amidst the grotesque in Mutu's collages as well as deconstructing the myth of strong black womanhood through her work. All of this is to ask these questions: in her contemporary language, what does Mutu abandon in her figures? What is she saying about a lack of subjectivity given to the (black) female body in her historical moment, namely, the early 2000s-2010s? Are her figures really abandoning interiority in favor of the composite exterior of postmodernity, or can we find in her collage signs of an interior life, even if that interiority is deeply different from what is going on on the outside?

To address the question of suffering versus pleasure in Mutu's figures, it might be productive to first explain how Mutu's collaged figures engage in a suspension of desire. Though visually alluring, almost all of Mutu's collages contain some elements of the grotesque, monstrous, or macabre. American studies scholar Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's theory of black grotesquerie helps us to unpack this dichotomy. According to Abdur-Rahman, the aesthetics of black grotesquerie, based on Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's 1965 concept of the grotesque body,<sup>107</sup> has been described in this way:

As an expressive practice, black grotesquerie infuses the materiality of the black body with the textuality of the art object. Rather than merely signifying excess, dread, or decay, black grotesquerie delineates an aesthetic practice of contortion, exaggeration, substitution, inversion, corruption...this aesthetic mode explores disturbed form more than it does disturbing content.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

<sup>108</sup> Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "Black Grotesquerie," *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 683,

To look at the disturbing parts of Mutu's collage—especially in those works that more explicitly manifest pain and affliction like *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix* and *The Last Grower*—through the lens of black grotesquerie, is to understand her embrace of destruction, her understanding of the precarity of black social life, and to witness an attempt to represent embodied trauma (or perhaps to construct a postmodern defense mechanism against further trauma).<sup>109</sup> Abdur-Rahman goes on to cite Mutu's collage as a paradigmatic example of black grotesquerie, describing her figures as “Victims of a murderous modernity, [these] cyborgian para/sub/humans conjure the countless labors and horrors to which captive and colonized female blacks have been subject.”<sup>110</sup> In this view, the black female body is the traumatized, commodified product in the context of global capitalism. I agree with many of Abdur-Rahman's arguments here; she makes really thoughtful and careful distinctions between mere injury and generational trauma. However, I argue that the analysis of black grotesquerie considers only the undesirable parts and thus critically undermines the role of pleasure in Mutu's collages.

Pleasure plays an important role in Mutu's collage works, whether it be visual pleasure, sexual pleasure, deathly pleasure, or the pleasures of consumption. Take, for example, Mutu's 2002 collage *Riding Death in My Sleep* (Figure 10). The figure's body is seductive and mysterious; her gaze pierces yours. She has the body, and perhaps the pose, of a fashion model, and her bodily ornamentation such as the leopard print bikini with matching wrist cuffs and feathered, knee-high stiletto boots corroborate this desirable representation of the female body. About the significance and influence of these kinds of fashionable bodies, art critic Antwaun

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Project MUSE. See also Papenburg, Bettina. “Grotesque Sensations: Carnivalising the Sensorium in the Art of Wangechi Mutu.” In *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, 158-172. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 689.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 690.

Sargent has reported that “The fashion image is a totem...These images have supplied the mainstream consciousness with both positive and negative representations of beauty and the body, exerting influence on our collective tastes and understandings of identity.”<sup>111</sup> Sargent pushes this analysis of the fashion image further into critique:

Fashion images are aspirational: people feel affirmed or alienated by the likenesses that stare back at them. For those who have not met the narrowly defined notions of gender, class, and beauty seen in the images, it can feel like a personal failure; a feeling of dislocation and invisibility have often met these viewers, subtly communicating that their bodies, hair, and skin were not desirous.<sup>112</sup>

Standards against which individuals compare themselves to others, such as beauty standards promoted by makeup advertisements or body standards promoted by images of models in designer clothing advertisements lead not only to feelings of inferiority on a monetary/class basis, but also to feelings of alienation and invisibility when one does not see themselves represented in those types of images. These images are more often than not digitally manipulated, doctored to the point that not even the model pictured fits the standard promoted by the image. Part of the role that the global capitalist market plays in fashion magazines is producing the feeling that something about one’s own body needs to be changed in order for a psychological change to occur, i.e., one must become skinnier to be happy, or one must purchase expensive clothing to feel confident. Irregardless of the fact that fashion images are often alienating and engender feelings of self-consciousness, they are undeniably pleasurable to look at. The otherworldly being in *Riding Death in My Sleep*, though she is crouched above a thick layer of fungus and is surrounded by bizarre, compound animals, such as the flying elephant-

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<sup>111</sup> Antwaun Sargent, “The New Black Vanguard,” in *The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion*, ed. Antwaun Sargent (New York: Aperture, 2019), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 10.

bird-tadpole that brushes past her head and the scorpion-cockroach, lizard crawling up her shoulder, is an alluring image. She has the tall, thin body of a supermodel, and she even appropriates the contorted, editorial pose of a fashion advertisement.

Mutu also often incorporates pornographic imagery into her work, both explicitly, such as in the above mentioned *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix* and in her 2006 *Ark Collection*, which combines pages from pornographic magazines with documentary photograph from ethnographic journals such as *National Geographic*, but also in more subtle ways. The figure in *Riding Death in My Sleep* not only suggests a fashionable body but also a sexualized body. While pornography in Mutu's work is often interpreted as a critique of the negative stereotypes brought on by the violation of racialized pornography, the work of feminist scholar Jennifer Nash might allow for a different kind of reading. Nash's book *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* asks what productive discourse could potentially come out of reading black women's participation in pornography as pleasurable. Pornography has always been the object of much debate, especially among feminist scholars and activists, and Nash addresses both the for and against positions toward pornography, whereas "antipornography feminism convincingly argues that female subjects' experiences of pleasure are mediated by patriarchy and its intersection with other structures of domination" and "shows that hierarchy often wears the guise of pleasure," while

Pro-pornography feminists insist that there is a long American tradition of using law to promote sexual puritanism, and argue that state regulation of pornography will hurt sexual minorities and reify sexual hierarchies, continuing the tradition of value, and indeed sacralizing, some forms of sex and denigrating, even outlawing, others."<sup>113</sup> Nash argues for a normalization of pornography that brings it out of the unspoken realm and sees it "not as an aberration, but as a ubiquitous part of public life that insistently makes visible that which is supposed to be 'out of view.'"<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Jennifer C. Nash. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 13-14.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Through this view, does it become possible to glean a kind of sexualized pleasure from Mutu's collaged bodies?

The central figure in Mutu's *Riding Death in My Sleep* straddles a mushroom covered planet, dominating over small groups of tiny phalluses in a strong, empowered squatting pose. Her legs are spread open so it's not a far reach to read it as unambiguously sexual. Her pose, coupled with her direct gaze, almost poses a challenge to the viewer. The humanoid alien creature's sexuality produces pleasure for the viewer and doesn't detract from but rather empowers the figure. This collage is perhaps the most pointed example where Mutu's sense of the interior life of her figures comes through, because the ability to experience pleasure (the multiple experiences that Nash might suggest: "pleasures in looking, pleasures in being looked at, pleasures in performing racial fictions, pleasures in upending racial fictions"<sup>115</sup>) indicates a particular sexual subjectivity at the very least. The rider in *Riding Death in My Sleep* could be postured for pleasure or defense. Perhaps, in the way that male birds have brightly colored feathers to attract mates, this figure's orange and neon green blotch-covered skin is meant to attract us, to draw us in. Or, like the vividly neon poisonous dart frogs in the Amazon Rainforest, her skin warns approaching predators to stay away.

Beyond aspects of grotesquerie and pleasure in Mutu's collage works, the artist engages with elements of myth in the way she constructs the body. Her collage work is most often acclaimed for launching critiques about stereotype; images of tribal African women are pushed against fashion images directed toward American consumers and images of racialized pornography, and the conjunction of these images is meant to show the absurdities of the dehumanizing standards expected of women, especially black women. Social scientist Tamara

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 3.

Beaubouef-Lafontant's 2009 study titled *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, seen against Mutu's collage, reveals a kind of myth that is less easily signified by cut and pasted image but, I argue, is undoubtedly present within her work.<sup>116</sup> As Beaubouef-Lafontant defines it, the problem perpetuated by the myth of strong black womanhood is as follows:

Because the idea of strength *appears* to honestly reflect Black women's extensive work and family demands, as well as their accomplishments under far from favorable social conditions, the concept *seems* to provide a simple and in fact honorable recognition of their lives. However, appearances are often deceiving, and much of the acclaim that the concept of strength provides for Black women is undermined by what I argue is its real function: to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women's experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger.<sup>117</sup>

What I find so important in this description is Beaubouef-Lafontant's assertion that the concept of strength is a subjugation disguised as praise. Her study underpins much of the historical understanding of black women heroes throughout history, citing the likes of Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman as the tokens of strong black womanhood, pedestalized for their achievements despite the conditions working against them.<sup>118</sup> Strength as a mode of self-preservation suggests an internal conflict of subjectivity, it

leaves her without a set of irreconcilable oppositions out of which she must live her life: She cannot be both strong and have needs of her own; she cannot share what is going on 'deep down inside' and retain the esteem of those around her; and she cannot take care of others and expect reciprocation. Such is the dilemma of strength—to choose appearances and remain unknown to other people, or to choose truth and risk being disregarded by them.<sup>119</sup>

As such, the myth of strength appears to be a way of obscuring one's own vulnerabilities, not revealing to the world one's own authentic inner self but rather projecting an image of the self as

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<sup>116</sup> Mutu affirms this in an above-mentioned quote: "the core, the impetus of the work comes from the soul of fearless black womanhood in its various incarnations and complexities, bold and benevolent, bruised, beautiful, whatever it might be." Matt, "Mutu in Conversation," 37.

<sup>117</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

armored in an attempt to safeguard oneself from the harsh (especially for black women) and psychologically damaging scrutiny of the social world.

While feelings of strength don't come through in some of Mutu's collages (like *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, which seems to convey only suffering), others like *Yo Mama* and *Riding Death in My Sleep* do present the viewer with a seemingly strong, empowered female humanoid figure. Both figures convey physical strength in their squatting positions, but also in their direct gaze toward the viewer. But, importantly, both figures in these collages are alone, isolated on otherworldly planets. This is where a stronger sense of subjectivity comes into play, for me, because although the figures are *projecting* an external image of strength and power, they are alone in their worlds, expected to be self-sufficient and accountable for their own survival in the harsh, mystifying environments. A more extreme example, perhaps, would be the figure in *The Last Grower*, although she is visibly and severely injured, appears to persevere through the task of planting a seed in the hopes of new growth.

This framework, I argue, is Mutu's way of critiquing the pacification of black female subjectivity through the trope of the strong black woman. In this interpretation, the inner psyche is either protected by a resilient and elegant exterior body, or the injury of inner life is actually reflected in the bleeding wounds on the body (importantly, the figure does not discontinue her work despite her injuries). In this way, I suggest that while Mutu does a good job of showing us the defense mechanisms of the postmodern, her methods reveal a connection that reaches back to modernism's want for a revealed inner subjectivity. In the following section, guarded interiority of Mutu's collage will be compared with the modernist collage of Romare Bearden, which embraces wholeheartedly black subjectivity and an emphasis on rich interiority.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: INTERROGATING INTERIORITY IN THE WORKS OF ROMARE BEARDEN AND WANGECHI MUTU**

Placing the collage works of Romare Bearden and Wangechi Mutu in conversation with one another reveals the ways that collage has become a productive medium for artists to recontextualize representations and make statements about subjectivity. This comparison also reveals how two black artists have negotiated the medium of collage on their own terms in two historically distinct periods. Bearden, working in the context of the 1960s, worked against existing representations to convey the multiplicity of black subjectivity in the realm of everyday life. He challenged the mainstream art world's prejudices and willful ignorance of cultural production by black artists and insisted upon a form that celebrated particularity as a requisite of unification within his collages depicting community. Working in the 2000s and 2010s, Mutu presumes a complicated constructed black female subject but offers excess and ornament to reveal how much suffering is caused by cultural constraints, and sometimes empowers those subjects despite the challenges worn on their surfaces. In the global context of capitalism and white supremacy and the failure of the project of democracy, Mutu's collage shows us the aftermath of modernism in her sutured and alienated humanoid creatures.

While a comparison of the general ethos of these two artists' works is clearly an important aspect to this dialectical discussion, a comparison of form is also essential. Returning to Bearden's 1964 collage *The Dove* and Mutu's 2003 collage diptych *Yo Mama*, many formal differences become immediately obvious. Their chosen color palettes differ vastly; Bearden's collage is much more muted in tone, reflecting his usage of materials, which were predominantly

grayscale images cut from newspapers and sepia-toned photographs.<sup>120</sup> Varying tones of gray and brown dominate the picture, which is punctuated only by the red and reddish-brown color of the brick façades of the block of apartment buildings. Mutu's bubblegum pink representation of some distant realm in outer space couldn't be more different from Bearden's ordinary world. The tight-fitting orange and gray jumpsuit that Mutu's figure wears is covered in spots, some defined and others cloudier. Elements placed within Mutu's collage are much more clearly defined than those of the Bearden collage—one can make out each individual orbiting disco ball, whereas the viewer must look closely at *The Dove* to map out which disproportionate hand or limb belongs to which figure. This effect has partially to do with each artist's method of cutting: Mutu's cut is precise, so that when an element is added to the body it fits in seamlessly. Bearden's is less systematic; often he will cut right down the middle of a face so that the other half can be occupied by a mismatched image that results in a form that points out its own constructedness. An important similarity in form occurs in the way that both collages are in a landscape orientation and presented in a way that leads the viewer's eyes across the picture so that they can be read like a kind of narrative that shows us these artists' experiences of the world. Although the stories couldn't be more different, this formal similarity perhaps suggests that both artists sought to tell stories as the viewer absorbs the worlds they have constructed.

Another significant similitude between Bearden's and Mutu's collaged figures is the notion of disguise. Bearden's figures are constructed as jagged and hard-edged; photographs of faces get stitched together with incongruous portions of other faces, creating the effect of an abstracted mask. With Bearden, we don't see a singular human figure but one that has been

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<sup>120</sup> Here, I am referring only to the collages mentioned in this paper; outside of his Harlem-based collages, Bearden is very experimental with his color palettes, using bright colored papers or layering colored paint or ink onto monochrome photographs.

multiplied and combined within itself. Mutu's work looks back through art history to the collage of Bearden in the way that she camouflages and disguises her figures. In an interview, Mutu explains this influence:

I've always been interested in artists who work with transformation, masks, and disguise...Camouflage and mutation are big themes in my work, but the idea I'm most enamored with is the notion that transformation can help us transcend our predicament...I identify most with Bearden, his work strikes me as the least reactionary...here was this medium, photography, that was being used to define and document reality, to encapsulate truth and time, and Bearden used it to disrupt its own integrity and create visually stunning narratives of black lives and dreams.<sup>121</sup>

Mutu's appreciation for Bearden's method suggests that she perhaps saw in his work the possibility of using collage as a mode of critiquing existing representations and transforming them into her own.

Both artists confront different kinds of stereotype; Bearden saw how black artists were discursively limited in art history books and exhibition reviews, and also saw how mass media reflected similar limitations, so he made art so that he could offer new perspectives of black subjects. Mutu similarly looks to mass media—which, compared to what was available to Bearden in the 1960s, had expanded hugely into thousands of different kinds of specialty publications and glossy magazines—and she “mine[s] stereotypes for their weak foundations and produce[s] figures that are distillations of [her] own issues, beliefs, perceptions, and personal stereotypes.”<sup>122</sup> Mutu admits to abandoning the desire to positively reconstruct a figure out of the damaging and dehumanizing stereotypes visible in the media in favor of launching critiques, a key difference in hers and Bearden's projects.

What Mutu doesn't abandon, I argue, is the sense of interiority, although it is undeniably camouflaged and obscured behind layers and layers of exterior. Mutu's constructions perhaps

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<sup>121</sup> Firstenberg and Mutu, “Perverse Anthropology,” 140.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 143.

function as a protection from further damage, producing a new vision of coherence out of pieces and parts that are alienating. Where Bearden's mask exists *with* his figures, not as a replacement of them, the disguise of Mutu's figures are an inseparable part of their exterior self. As such, the main similarity in the conversation between Bearden's and Mutu's art is that they both show the self as disjointed, as fragmented by the world, albeit they choose different ways of representing that trauma.

Considering the role of unity in the collage works of Bearden and Mutu, it appears that these artists work oppositely, which reveals something about the historical moments they are working in. Unity is essential to a Bearden collage; not only does his work formally create a sense of unity in its grouping together of figures and environment onto the same flat plane, but actual, community-based unification is also a major underpinning concept of his work. He was concerned with negating essentialist frameworks through which a generalized sense of black identity was promoted to the point that art made by black artists was relegated to a singular, reductive category in art historical texts and art criticism. Bearden hoped that by proving the impossibility of representing black identity that his work could expose those delimiting categories. He sought to lift his art to the status of the mainstream art world, which did not historically point only to markers of identity or culture when discussing or writing about the work of non-black artists. This is not to say that Mutu is not concerned with the troubling theme of pigeonholing black artists in art criticism and history, but by her contemporary moment, she has been widely celebrated by the mainstream art world from very early in her career. Her work contains unity in terms of her seamless construction of elements onto the bodies of her figures, but thematically her work deals more with isolation, alienation, and critique. We rarely see multiple figures in a Mutu collage, and even when we do, the figures are less unified and more so

connected by a hierarchical relationship.<sup>123</sup> Both Bearden's and Mutu's figures are particular, but only Bearden really makes the attempt to access a kind of universal humanity in his pictures by creating visual unity among his figures; Mutu abandons the universal in favor of critique. Or, if it is universal, it is the universality of a kind of market subject. At the same time, Bearden might be more postmodern than we think, as his mask-faced figures are made up of composite identities just like Mutu's are.

This comparison considers the historical shift between the values of Bearden's moment to the abandonment of those values in Mutu's. Where Bearden found in collage the compelling possibility of an embodied view of the complex interiority of the black subject, Mutu forgoes complex subjecthood to emphasize a guarded, even wounded figure that has lost hold of the self. Where Bearden seeks to deconstruct European and American history's racial imagination about blackness, Mutu leans into those imaginings to the point of a caricaturized fantasy. Where Bearden's mask accompanies the figure and suggests a self behind it, Mutu's constructed figures have been built up to the point that their disguise has become an embodied reality of the self; in other words, the exterior overpowers the interior.

As Bearden and Mutu show us, there is no one right way to represent identity; the fixed image is not powerful enough to encapsulate the human soul. The problem this comparison attempts to answer: is Mutu's version of the world really an improvement over Bearden's version? When you imagine new worlds and new futures, what do you see? Do you see Bearden's world where disjointed selves make up a unified whole within a community? Or, do you see Mutu's unfamiliar landscape where constructed selves attempt an escape from the binds of earth only to exist in a state of precarious, harsh isolation? Bearden understood that trauma

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<sup>123</sup> Here, I am thinking of Mutu's 2005 collage *Misguided Little Unforgiveable Hierarchies*.

and suffering are universal, but that the complexities of cultural trauma are experienced in a particular and individual way. Mutu codes trauma in a consumerist language we all have learned to understand. Mutu destines her figures to work out their trauma alone, alienated from the world, suggesting the defended status of the self in our contemporary moment. Do either forms really encourage us to think of ourselves as more than traumatized and powerless? Consider this suggestion provided by bell hooks:

*our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting...there is an effort to remember that is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality. Fragments of memory which are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a 'new take' on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation.*<sup>124</sup>

As a concluding attempt to think through critical differences between Bearden and Mutu's collage, I will contrast hooks's notion of a "different mode of articulation" with Mutu's above-quoted "notion that transformation can help us transcend our predicament." What hooks urges lines up with Bearden's practice of representing memory through form that gives a "new take" or a new context in order to avoid flattening and essentializing subjective experiences. Bearden (and hooks's) kind of articulation suggests a new way of communicating, a process that for Bearden involves creating a new form from preexisting images. As articulated above, Mutu's collage, rather than suggesting a new form, grabs hold of transformation and camouflage to reproduce (but also deconstruct) myths that cause suffering; thus, her figures perform the trauma of being the embodied site of old forms that haven't yet been rearticulated. As such, the critical distinction between Bearden's art-as-form and Mutu's art-as-critique lies in what the work of art mobilizes its viewers to do: do we emulate Bearden's unity, sought and found in the stuff and

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<sup>124</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 1, no. 36 (1989): 17. Emphasis in original.

struggles of ordinary social life, or should we adopt Mutu's critical stance as the only common ground for solidarity amidst the alienating forces that divide us? Perhaps the most productive position we can take up is one that is transitional, taking suggestions from both Bearden's and Mutu's lessons: finding grounds for unity, allowing room for particularities, critiquing structures of power and mobilizing our communities towards movements that work to dismantle them. If we can come to understand ourselves as having the power to reach into the past for ways artists like Bearden hoped to advance the way the world looked at his subjects, maybe we can then begin to work through and undo the harmful social constructions that weigh so heavily on those that Mutu's figures refer to. In other words, perhaps an embrace of Bearden's modernist dialectic can help us deal with the contemporary trauma represented by Mutu by producing a basis for unity.

## FIGURES



Figure 1: Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, 1964  
Cut-and-pasted printed paper, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on cardboard  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY



Figure 2: Romare Bearden, *The Dove* (detail), 1964



Figure 3: Romare Bearden, *The Dove* (detail), 1964



Figure 4: Romare Bearden, *The Silent Valley of Sunrise*, 1959  
Oil and casein on canvas  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY



Figure 5: Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, 1964  
Mixed media collage of papers and graphite on cardboard  
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR



Figure 6: Wangechi Mutu, *Yo Mama*, 2003  
Ink, mica flakes, acrylic, pressure-sensitive film,  
cut-and-pasted printed paper, and painted paper on paper  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY



Figure 7: Wangechi Mutu, *The Last Grower*, 2015  
Two panel collage on linoleum  
Victoria Miro Gallery, London, UK

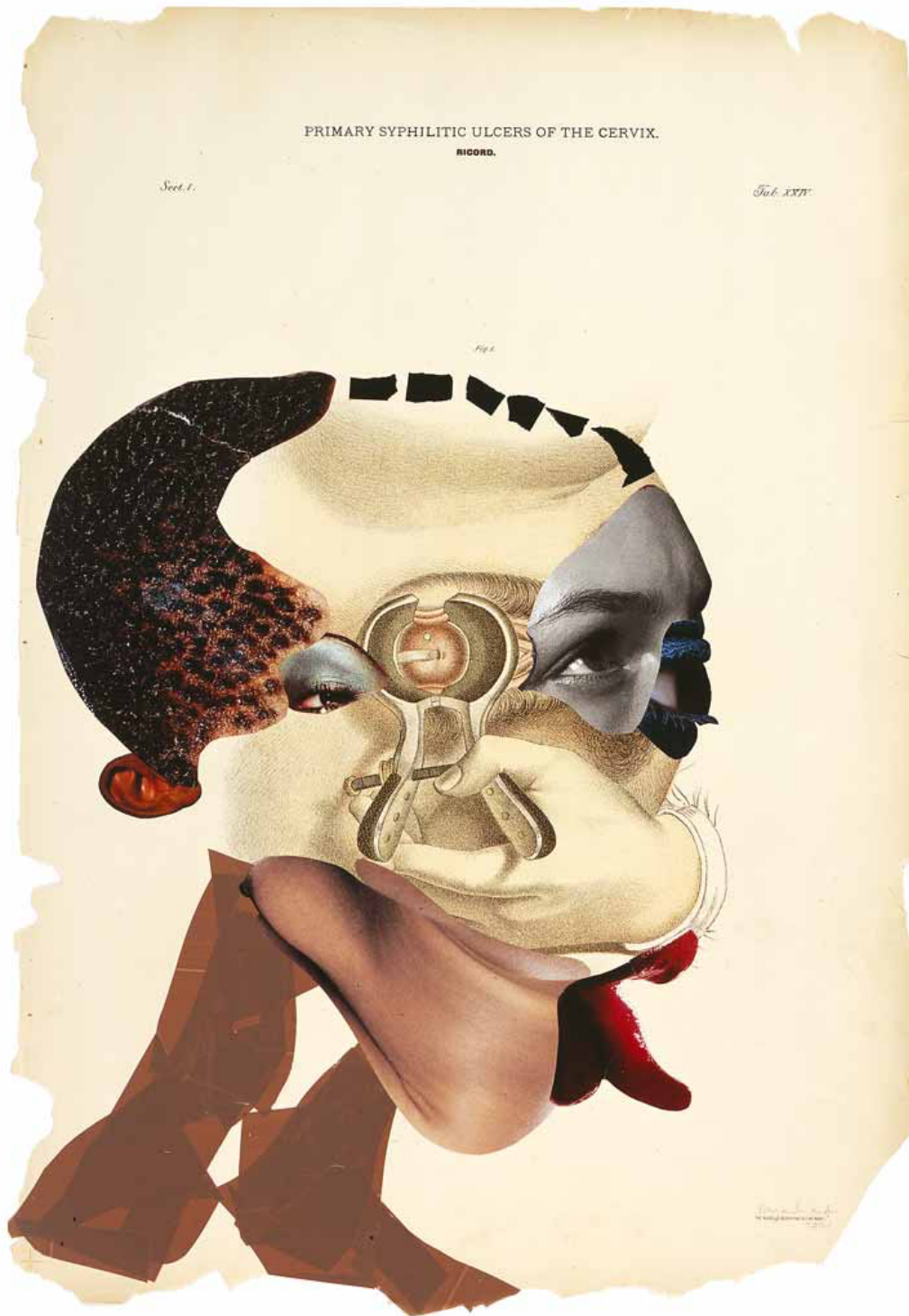


Figure 8: Wangechi Mutu, *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, 2005  
 Collage on found medical illustration paper  
 Saatchi Gallery, London, UK



Figure 9: Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled (Tumor)*, 2006  
Ink, acrylic, mixed media, printed paper and contact paper collage on mylar  
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA



Figure 10: Wangechi Mutu, *Riding Death in My Sleep*, 2002  
Ink and collage on paper  
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY

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