

# restricting part iii

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# pieces of things

6

Things are not inert.

—IAN HODDER, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*

Mikhail Bakhtin assumes that the grotesque body (or what I have labeled the bodied naming-thing) is coded in particular ways. And this raises a nagging question associated with an accompanying dilemma: What happens when the social coding imposed on the bodied naming-thing serves to hamper its openness?

Taking further the significance of shit discussed in chapter 5, in part 3 I explore the nature of this dilemma—one that might be phrased in a manner reminiscent of David Marriott’s question: “What of those subjects whose rule of life is to endure life under the ownership of another and consequently are said to live as objects?”<sup>1</sup> Or, as Judith Butler announced, there are mechanisms, strategies, and practices by means of which some naming-things are collapsed or repressed into representing despised thing-things. Stated simply, there are ways in which, on the sociocultural and political level, some naming-things “become shit.”<sup>2</sup> Marriott might call this situation “corpsing.”<sup>3</sup> I would simply add that it involves not the interplay between naming-thing and thing-thing but rather the corruption of interplay through an effort to close off particular bodies coded as raced, gendered, and classed, for instance.

In other words, interplay between naming-thing and thing-thing is warped, as the former and the latter are misnamed through effort to constitute sociopolitical, cultural, and economic boundaries rehearsed as narratives of a biohistorical tenor. In these pages, I point out that naming-things and thing-things are named and positioned even prior to their involvement. That is to say, they are constructed and involved through a process of interpretation.

### Art as Protest, or What Does Art Do?

Art and life bleed into each other, and in certain intriguing ways the vehicle for this interplay is the naming-thing that does the work in the first instance. And for the artist explored in this chapter, there is also the naming-thing consumed in and by the art. The artist “thinks” this work but is also guided through it by the social realities that have shaped his relationship to other things. In this regard, art has a function that pushes beyond art for art’s sake, to a sense of art as fostering experience (understood as moments of interplay) that is “political and instrumental.”<sup>4</sup> This is another way of noting what many have referenced as the political function of art, and this function is sensitive to the details of the historical moment in which things and bodied naming-things interact.

For some time, thinkers and activists within African American communities have argued the importance of artistic expression for shifting sociopolitical perceptions of African American naming-things. In this regard, art is something of an aesthetically sophisticated “picket sign.” What sermons, lectures, and political protest of a physical kind could not accomplish—it has been argued by many advocates of racial equality—could be captured through the symbols and poetics of art in all its forms. Earlier slave narratives such as those produced by Frederick Douglass intend to position African American naming-things for full rights in part through their presentation as open—for example, the pain experienced by them and their right to full participation. Writers tackled the angst of black life as racialized naming-things rendered truncated and closed through racial violence.<sup>5</sup> Poets such as Countee Collen spoke the stuff of life encountered by embodied people of African descent, but he did not leave it with this; instead, he spoke of the supple nature of the blackened naming-thing. Musicians such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday sang the depth of black life in ways that pushed against the presumption that black naming-things are one-dimensional, and they did this by celebrating the degrading, to appeal once again to Bakhtin (or bluesy quality), of black naming-things. In this way they repositioned racialized naming-things

through a shift in how they occupy time and space as well as how they interact within that time and space.<sup>6</sup>

But in that the primary concern here is with the visual arts, I offer these examples simply as context before turning to the manner in which the blackened naming-thing projected outward, beyond itself, through visual art, speaks a depth denied within the flat and bounded circumstances of our race-biased social circumstances. The creative process captured by the arts and the involvement of racialized naming-things in the arts speak to a depth of relationship, one that signifies assumptions of inferiority through a poetic quality challenging the assumption of African Americans as naming-things constituted by a fixed, a reified, and an ontological limit. The key here is not necessarily the production of pleasure but rather the transformative potentiality of discomfort—the requirement to view and to reevaluate held assumptions concerning the meaning of certain naming-things. The key, the purpose, is multidimensional.

To what is art so conceived responding? What is the history, the cartography of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural markings of life for African American naming-things that informs how the visual arts are made and read? The answer is simple but does not entail a simplistic framing of collective life. Art, by racialized naming-things, speaks to the significance and value of a collective group whose history has been written to suggest something other than their value and relationality. Art is a rich rejection of dehumanization and other modalities of ontological violence. Furthermore, in a fundamental sense, it speaks to a collective identity, but one must exercise caution not to reify this shared history.

Reflecting on the definition of “black” in “black popular culture,” Richard J. Powell notes that shared experience of “racial and cultural discrimination, segregation, recognition, and identification—should not be viewed as a litmus tests for blackness per se, since many peoples of African descent have experienced these to varying degrees.”<sup>7</sup> Looking at this not from the perspective of art historian, philosopher of art, or art critic, I push a particular dimension of this discussion, one that notes the significance of artistic thinking and the presentation of openness.<sup>8</sup> The artistic production of African American naming-things frames existential considerations through a visual re-presentation of worth and interplay celebrated—and presented in exhibits such as *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963–1983*.<sup>9</sup> Pulling together a variety of ontological and epistemological concerns is significant here. The “desire to visualize something racial and cultural,” notes Powell, “yet also conceptual and metaphysical, found the ideal subject in black religion.” It is only

the case in these pages that religion is pushed beyond the typical terrain of doctrines and creeds and instead is understood as a technology.<sup>10</sup> As Powell, among others, cautions, this is not to assume a “black aesthetic.” Such a singular or unified approach is not necessary in order to appreciate a shared range of concerns encountered due to blackness” and what it means within the grammar and vocabulary of life in the United States. The openness of blackened naming-things is not dependent on approval from white Americans. Hence, there is something about the artistic production of African Americans that suggests a stating of the known but denied—not a creation of ontological meaning, but rather a celebration of meaning as openness or Bakhtian degradation in such a way as to cause discomfort for those who have denied it.

Still, there is no intention here to assume through omission that only people of African descent must (or should) wrestle with the nature and meaning of interplay. No, this is a concern for “white” Americans as well, but the privilege of whiteness also entails a certain in/visibility that makes matters of thingliness curiosity as opposed to necessity. So here attention is given to the thingliness of “white” Americans. Yet this is done through attention to how whites relate to the visualization of blackened naming-things interacting and performing openness. This is not to reify the latter, to make the latter objects for speculation, but rather the opposite. This move is made to demonstrate the manner in which whiteness is dependent on blackness. In other words, the effort of whites to promote a narrative of distinction or difference based on clear boundaries requires the presence of blackness.

White bodied naming-things occupy time and space to a significant degree over against the manner in which blackened naming-things occupy time and space. In this regard, “right” occupation has significant socioeconomic, political, and cultural ramifications. In either case, subjectivity is pieced together. If naming-things, in fact, occupy numerous social spaces simultaneously, is not this to be expected? Perception of life, cartographies of what the experiences of life entail, would then need to be patched together from the stuff we can gather, from the elements of life we can arrange and hold long enough to note their significance. In a sense, then, artistic production—the visual arts in this instance—is a poetic rehearsal of the fact of ontological significance, which is colorful, vibrant, challenging, and compelling in its presentation. Done from within the very cultural worlds that question this ontological given, significance is much harder to hide and deny. Black naming-things once flattened are given depth through signifying their truncated presence.

## Changing Things

The presentation of self over against presentations by others marks the start of this ontological shift to the already and always openness of African Americans. Such a move was presented to the art world, in the case of Romare Bearden, through manipulation of scraps of things often used for another purpose. In this way, the purpose of “things” is recast, reshaped, and magnified. These things—scraps of paper, pieces of wood, letters, and so forth—have their thingliness transformed and used to mirror other and deeper realities.

What stories do things tell when arranged by this artist? And what is to be made of his stories when disconnected things are brought into relationship through application—through an intentional push to place them differently?

Things matter in multiple, overlapping ways in his art. There is the naming-thing manipulating things in order to tell stories. These naming-things doing work say something about the structuring of life in a society marked by suspicion concerning openness and interplay. Added to this is the manner in which such art depicts the performative and plastic nature of identification—the manner in which things can be pressured and manipulated and “worn” so as to produce something other than their first and most visible intent.<sup>11</sup> There is something significant about the shaping and massaging of “things,” and Bearden speaks to this situation. His art is dimensionally visual, but this seeing does not render it fixed, rigid, or easily held. Through presentation of things, Bearden also points to absence, and through this fosters alternate possibilities of interplay. For some, this type of process points to a problem, but there is another perspective possible. What Powell notes when discussing “a homoerotic gaze on the black male body” through photography can be read for its larger relevance:

The black body as a photographed object of desire, while unquestionably nuanced, elicited what author Alice Walker pronounced in her novel *Meridian* (1976) as the ultimate sin: turning of real, thinking and feeling people into Art. Yet one could also argue that, at this moment of an expanded black consciousness [the 1970s], it was precisely this sense that blacks could be both objects of artistic contemplation and actors in their own aesthetic discernment, that made these works provocative and central to a revised art history of transgressive, radical black images.<sup>12</sup>

The metaphysical and existential content of this work, by means of a variety of styles, was meant to dislodge racialized naming-things and their conceptual counterpoints from the confinement of white supremacy and aesthetic

dominance spoken through it. Art, in this regard, was already and always engaged—either implicitly or explicitly—with the configuration of interplay marked up and/or out.

Designations and artistic styles changed to reflect the ebb and flow of perceived interaction within geographies of altered socioeconomic and political discourses and arrangements. In describing the presence of race, Michael Harris articulates an applicable sensibility. “Racial discourses, though they are discourses of power,” he writes, “ultimately rely on the visual in the sense that the visible body must be used by those in power to represent nonvisual realities that differentiate insiders from outsiders.”<sup>13</sup> By extension, Harris notes, “the individual physical body eventually symbolized in various ways one’s membership in a particular social body or body politic.”<sup>14</sup> If, as African American visual arts at least implies, visual representation can be used to reify and fix racialized naming-things, visual arts can be used to challenge and signify such constructions and thereby foster a new sense of openness. In a word, things are linked and manipulated through visual markers to alter cultural worlds, and such a shift is possible because rules of the social hierarchy are written, spoken, but also presented on and through things. The ways in which bodies occupy time and space says something about the merit and worth of particular things. The implicit and explicit manner in which this plays out can be captured in the language and moves of the visual arts. “Pictures and words,” notes Arthur Danto, “may be grossly distinguished in terms of how they represent their subjects, and they exemplify, again grossly, the two chief systems by which we represent the world.”<sup>15</sup>

What Danto argues in terms of Robert Irwin’s sense of art’s function as meant to “heighten awareness” is applicable in this context as well. “Not to heighten awareness of art as art,” writes Danto, “but of the dimensions and features of life that art raises to the highest powers of enhancement while remaining invisible directing the viewer’s sensibilities with a kind of aesthetic Hidden Hand.”<sup>16</sup> Yet for many, this use of the visual arts became the normative and required intent of the artist: African American art was a political act of reenvisioning ontological and existential meaning through the proclamation of openness. And this visual proclamation worked to adjust the perception of a particular context in that—as Hans Belting argues regarding particular types of images and I extend to visual images more broadly developed—images have contextual significance in that they speak to and from a particular cultural world, and “it is in this place that they exert their effect.”<sup>17</sup> Naming-things create art so as to speak to and about the world, and in so doing this art massages the manner in which viewers think of themselves,

others, and worlds in light of the artist's visual monologue. The work of naming-things can change minds and encourage modalities of behavior and perceptions of what all this means to a sense of being.

Art involves something made, a transposition and transformation of place and function. As Elizabeth Grosz says with respect to Australian art, "Art is created, always made, never found, even if it is made from what is found. This is its transformative effect—as it is made, so it makes."<sup>18</sup> It is not simply that art intensifies and makes more vibrant "life." No, the work of African American artists brings into question the very content and form of life and the bodies that map out "life." The certainty of the past and the comfort of the present as structured through the dominant narrative of the meaning of "American" life is challenged and exposed for the warped take on the real it really is.

### Bearden's Collages

Romare Bearden (1911–1988) shifted the position, and hence meaning, of racialized naming-things by challenging dominant aesthetic standards and consideration that surround if not engulf them. He spoke a new "word" about the nature and meaning of black naming-things by shifting the presentation of discourse—new aesthetics, new stylistic consideration, and new ontological, epistemological, and existential insights. This was an artistic shift riddled with potential consequences that move against the intended reification of blackened naming-things. There is the racialized naming-thing of the artist that represents and presents the meanings of racialization and truncation signified. This complicates matters: Which body is signified, and does the embodied artist's presence say something that is not countered by the presence of the art? Is the artist an extension of the "sign" or the deconstruction of the "sign"?<sup>19</sup>

Abstract Expressionism ended in the 1960s, and Pop Art emerged as a means by which to blur the line between art and the ordinary. During that same period, Bearden began an alternate creative process by piecing together scraps to create collages portraying different dimensions of African American experience.<sup>20</sup> Bearden had spent a good number of years working in light of the premises of Abstract Expressionism, but this changed.<sup>21</sup> It was not simply the end of Abstract Expressionism as such, but rather his need to respond to issues of identity in a way that required forceful reconstruction of contextualized meaning. Having spent time employed as a social worker, Bearden had a sense of "real" life—its complexities, its thickness, and the way in

which it informs, shapes, and presents naming-things. Hence, collages mark Bearden's wrestling with identity and interplay—the reenvisioning of meaning in light of the sociohistorical framing of experience encountered and known by African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps something of the layered nature of human life—the occupation of numerous social spaces simultaneously—is portrayed through the collage process informing work such as *Projections*, collage-styled presentations of moments of interaction called black life that were first exhibited in 1964.

The manner in which African Americans entail a blending of cultural worlds to foster identities that sustain and enliven is presented artistically through the layering process of the collage, whereby pieces of things are brought together to form frameworks of meaning and relationship.<sup>23</sup> For Bearden, the construction of identity had to involve attention to memory, but memory funneled through contemporary structures and frameworks of experience. Such was of concern to Bearden as he shifted away from his earlier stylistic commitments. He gave ample attention to the role of the artist in the construction of new ontological and existential possibilities for African Americans during and after the civil rights struggle.<sup>24</sup> History mattered to Bearden, and history—its tone and texture—had to be represented. Yet this history had to involve the layered nature of human experience, the intersections and connections between the individual's encounter with the world and the larger framing of life of which those more focused encounters are a significant part.

The pieces pulled together to produce an imperfect image of life lived contain in their roughness something of the “earthy” nature of life, the inconsistencies and “fits and starts” that constitute movement through the world. Bearden's social work, his time in the military, and his movement through the South and the North only fed this approach to understanding life. These personal experiences were something of a bridge to the macro-realities of African American life; they feed, in particular ways, lucidity and sensitivity to the moments that mark out existence. There is something chaotic about life so conceived, and then art might be said to involve, as Bearden notes, the artist attempting to “organize chaos.”<sup>25</sup>

Bearden recognized the ability to define, name, and present the bodied naming-thing through the manipulation of things—flattened out in order to interrogate what pieces brought together tell us about the nature and meaning of life. I have in mind the collage series produced in the 1960s by means of which Bearden depicted personalities and religious-spiritual figures and scenes through the manipulation of images and words intended for

another purpose. His collage work demonstrated the layers of meaning that constitute our perception of life and living. In both cases, the socially imposed structuring of blackness through the body is rethought, pushing against the assumption that such blackened bodies hold no great worth or value—and say nothing to and about life meaning in substantive ways. This restructuring away from restriction “paints” blackened naming-things as “signs” of great importance and worth. The complexities of life are forged in light of “things” and experiences arranged and rearranged—so as to be used to construct new possibilities.

American imagination involves a certain spin on the substance of African American cultural life, a type of simplification of African American experience so as to think it less significant than that of white Americans. However, Bearden builds African American cultural life anew, out of various pieces of experience, and in this retelling or remaking Bearden challenges poetically truncated depictions of African American life by showing the stuff of which it is made and by encouraging viewers to recognize the layered and complex nature of cultural systems constructed by African Americans.

*The Prevalence of Ritual: The Baptism*, part of the *Projections* series of 1964, takes the practice of Christian baptism so important to African American Christians and pushes beyond dull depictions by including pieces in the collage that speak to an African past (i.e., images resembling African ritual masks). In so doing, it ties this water ritual to a richness of cultural life that extends beyond the confinements of North American slavery. There is a church structure in the background, but it is of minor concern as it surrenders to the vitality, the energy, of bodies in the act of ritualization. The people, the bodied naming-things, involved in the ritual are highlighted and placed in the foreground so that the viewer is forced to see and recognize them. In this way, the tendency within the larger society for the invisibility of African Americans is controlled and negated through a layered presence that constitutes bodies demanding consideration. Pieces of images, pieces of life so to speak, might be said to represent the manner in which the violence of the United States pulled black lives apart and did violence to them that was meant to render them unrecognizable as fully formed, embodied bodies of merit. Through the collages, Bearden chronicles the manner in which African Americans have pulled these pieces together and constructed worlds of meaning. The cuts and tears necessary to produce these bodies are graphic, not hidden in the art, and something about these marks, these lines, speaks to the marking of black bodies during the period of slavery and ongoing structured discrimination—the markings of discrimination the civil rights

movement sought to address. Think of these collage images, the sharp edges and rips pronounced in light of the scars on black bodies imprinted by means of a whip or other devices marking a trail of suffering, or the hardships imprinted on black bodies by the harsh realities of Jim and Jane Crow. The viewer has to focus, to train the eyes to seek the pieces and to see that the pieces constitute a greater (but imperfect) arrangement forming naming-things active and vibrant. As numerous scholars have noted, that these collages reflect the times is no accident when one considers the fact that civil rights leaders asked Bearden and others to give some thought to how artists might contribute to the struggle for justice. The conversations generated *Spiral*, a group of artists committed to art with public meaning, so to speak. The objective, as Gail Gelburd notes, was to “find a way to fulfill their social responsibility without turning their art into mere propaganda, to be a part of their times without relinquishing their commitment to aesthetics.”<sup>26</sup> As Bearden shifted away from Abstract Expressionism, thing-things pushed their way forward; constructed of pieces of “things” each with its own stories that merge into a structure of grouped vibrancy, these composite and interacting things dominate and demand attention—requiring consideration. These were bodies unlike his earlier bodies painted and drawn.

Beginning during the turmoil of the civil rights efforts of the 1960s, the collage process would remain Bearden’s mode of presentation. The piecing together would alter over time and not necessarily contain the same sharp edges and the jerking intensity, but the layering of realities remained vital.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the softening had something to do with the sociopolitical shifts and cultural nuances of different decades—shifting performances of interplay? The presentation of the bodied thingliness of African American life had to be expressed, but with a different energy and emphasis. Bearden’s collage work exposes the inner workings of bodies to the extent that these bodies, as he presents them, are composed of pieces pulled together. In this process there is the whole—the composite—but the viewer also sees the bits and pieces that compose this whole. All this suggests the nature of interplay—various things penetrating, layered, interacting.

Through the layering of substances that constitute the collage style there emerges a situation thick and vibrant with complex meaning. Parts are somewhat exaggerated, extended, and their distinctions pronounced, but all this adds to the visual depiction of embodiment that gives cultural-historical weight and importance, and that gives a certain degree of significance to naming-things as open. Full, layered, representation wins out for Bearden, and he uses it to discuss the nature and meaning of life for African Americans

and by extension what it means for African Americans to be naming-things interacting with and through the world. Naming-things show their complexity; they are made visible, their “inners” exposed, so to speak. The complexities often hidden in other circumstances are highlighted and brought to the fore. This artistic move was not a full departure from earlier sensibilities; rather, Bearden came to understand that concern with universals required equal attention to the local and the specific. For him, this meant a solid, graphic, and vibrant turn to his experience—including the damaging effect of economic hardship and white supremacy fueled by structured discrimination that marked his North Carolina homeland, as well as the turmoil of world wars, the Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance, and the organized struggle for civil rights—and that of the larger collective of African Americans.<sup>28</sup>

There is a visual “double-talk,” so to speak, in that there are pieces within this series drawn from other projects, other artistic traditions, and they are put to a different work.<sup>29</sup> The energy of African American life—its sharp and ragged edges—speaks to the manner in which this despised but gifted community has had to rip away pieces of itself in order to construct signs of and spaces for identity. While Bearden at times used a photostat process to downplay the roughness of the cuts and layering (as in life people might try to decrease “difference” so as to highlight their sameness with social standards), the effect was never complete.<sup>30</sup> The edges, the roughness of the tears and cuts, were always present. These collage images were not produced on an easel as one might imagine paintings positioned; rather, they were made flat on a table.<sup>31</sup>

Each piece perhaps is unrecognizable alone, but together they shape and offer contour to the mechanics of African American being and meaning. *Conjur Woman*, also from *Projections*, speaks to the African American engagement with the rest of the environment—relationship to and manipulation of plant life so as to foster new possibilities of life. Animals, plants, and humans interact, expressing an overlap of engagement and relationship that transforms all involved. In this, Bearden highlights the thickness of African American experience, its layered connotations, and its ability to speak to the nature and meaning of life within the larger U.S. urban and rural contexts as well as life on the microlevel. The conjur woman depends on the plants and the animals present, and the animals and plants are impacted by the conjur woman’s careful engagement.

What serves to hold these various geographies of meaning together is the configured naming-things occupying and manipulating time and space.

“Bearden and his peers,” writes Leslie King-Hammond, “sought to create aesthetic voices that would give visual meaning and presence to ordinary people—living ordinary lives, in ordinary environments—in an extraordinary era of modernist invention.”<sup>32</sup> Bearden presents the poetic quality of African American experience within various social realms, and in this way he exposes the vitality of embodied black life over against what are often truncated and reified assumptions concerning what it means to be black and alive—shifting through time and space.

Of course, there are the most readily apparent and easily recognized markers of this quest for meaning. Think in terms of conjure, baptism, and other elements of African-based traditional practices and Christianity that have for an extended period marked the landscape of African American metaphysical concern. Still there are more, less easily registered modalities of interplay presented through these collages. Bearden maps out the soul—or genius of African American engagement with the world. These collages make a statement concerning meaning that is important to note: meaning is not found whole but is constructed in an imperfect manner by consciously selecting bits and pieces of experience and pulling them together for what they can say about larger systems of concerns. What is more, this process of intentionally constructing involves also a process of destruction, a privileging of certain experiences (or moments of interplay) and the ignoring of others, as Bearden selects particular pieces of images from *Life* magazine and others for inclusion and dismisses others. And once selected, the images must be dismantled—their initial intended meaning ripped apart—in order for them to point to something beyond themselves. Or as Ralph Ellison notes when describing Bearden’s *Projections* series, “The work of the arts is a matter of destroying moribund images of reality and creating the new.” What is more, “it is of the true artist’s nature and mode of action to dominate all the world and time through technique and vision.” This is tied to a task, an objective which is “to bring a new visual order into the world, and through [the artist’s] art he seeks to reset society’s clock by imposing upon it his own method of defining the times.”<sup>33</sup>

*Fish Fry* (1967) presents activity that is not spectacular or extraordinary but still speaks to the depth of human meaning expressed through embodied activities. Cooking together and sharing food and conversation or preparing for the day as the sun signals a new beginning, or sitting over coffee, when presented by Bearden, speak in different ways to a shared concern for connection, for relationship, and for a way to interrogate experience. Within the

ordinary activities of communal existence, Bearden distills through his collages the depth of meaning of vibrant vision that marks embodied life.

*Interplay.*

The distinctions between these various forms of life are evident, while they also merge with and depend on both the presence and absence of “others.” Presence and absence overlap and point in the direction of the other. The local points in the direction of larger commonalities, and shared markers of ritual life also push back to local activities and concerns. There is fluidity here that is epistemological and existential in nature. Or as Gail Gelburd notes when reflecting on Bearden’s collages, “Our perception of space is then psychological as well as visual, and we are reminded that no perspective, myth, ritual, or memory is ever fixed.”<sup>34</sup> It is not simply the explicit religious themes such as *Of the Blues: Carolina Shout* (1974) that speak to Bearden’s layered depiction of interplay as embodied and vibrant. The scenes of mundane activities and celebration speak to the significance of embodied bodies encountering others as the outline of history, the content of experience, and the sign of identity formation.

Of concern in the 1960s, collage work is not blackness per se but rather the arena of ontology that gives shape and meaning to blackness as a cover for certain naming-things. There is complexity to Bearden’s depictions of life within African American contexts, and in certain ways the collage process itself speaks to this complexity and depth of meaning. However, it is also expressed through the range of activities presented by Bearden that mark out the richness of relationship and the world not fully captured by opposition to whiteness—scope of experience, depth of meaning, lucidity—expressed with a fluidity of form and visualized movement within these captured moments.<sup>35</sup>

These cut and ripped pieces call to the viewer, but in such a way as to signal their presence—but their presence in relationship to other pieces that form something of a whole. Robert G. O’Meally captures this process using musical metaphor: Bearden constructs through a blues and jazz aesthetic—improvisation.<sup>36</sup> Another way to put this, one centered within a concern for religion, is that Bearden’s collages point to the microexperiences that blend to form a more unified sense of meaning—but as a sense of complex meaning that is always part of the incomplete and fractured nature of life: Complexity. While scholars such as O’Meally see Bearden as a jazz or blues figure, one could just as easily perceive him as a conjurer—one who pulls from the familiar to produce a particular type of work. One might be familiar with the use

of roots, herbs, and other plants by traditional conjurers, but doesn't Bearden use "things"—the scraps of paper from magazines—which, at their core, are drawn from those same woods and other environments? Using these captured and manipulated elements, he pushes viewers to confront the commonalities of human experience as they also observe the spaces of activity marking out African American experiences within time and space. The imperfection is itself transformative. Elements of the collages are proportionate, and each element demands a certain level of attention in part determined by size. Yet, isn't it the case with experiences that some are more graphic, "larger" so to speak, and therefore more prominent and more prone to demand attention?

Pieces are important here in that they point to the value of our images of life, while also pointing out that these images are incomplete. When layered, when joined, they tell us something more and point to the significance of presence. Bearden pulls and pushes history in an effort to expose its content, contours, depth, and aesthetic qualities—the interplay of various things that constitutes experience.<sup>37</sup> Bearden's collages in the *Projections* series visualize the process of exploration, interrogation, analysis, and mapping. In terms of identity, of being and meaning, the conjur woman, for instance, represents the blending of traditions, the harnessing of worlds—African, European, and North American—to stabilize African American being through a study of the construction of bodies. The collage structuring of things creates a type of epistemological dissonance that brings into question assumptions concerning what a blackened naming-thing constitutes and how it is constituted. The exaggerated features and limbs signify the stereotypical depiction of African Americans as having no aesthetic value in that their features, such as lips and noses, are too large, too broad—too unlike that of European Americans. In a word, stereotypically depicted black bodies do not survive the normative gaze, as Cornel West names European features understood as signifying totalizing standards of beauty, worth, and intelligence.<sup>38</sup> Ralph Ellison captures what is taking place through the layering of materials: "Bearden knows that the true complexity of the slum dweller and the Tenant farmer requires a release from the prison of our media-dulled perception and a reassembling in forms which would convey something of the depth and wonder of the Negro American's stubborn humanity."<sup>39</sup> All this metaphysical work is present in the collages produced.

The features of these bodies are extended, enlarged, often out of proportion. These bodies are active; they have depth manifest as they engage the story of the collage and the viewer. What Bearden offers, then, is a study in anthropology as ontological mosaic. This series, the collage series, was a

work of memory, an effort to capture the tone and texture of life familiar to Bearden growing up, and that marked out the form and content of life for many African Americans in the North and the South. It humanized, so to speak, those who—like the conjur woman—protected the integrity of embodied life. Collages, like pictures with a poetic quality, forced a rethinking of embodied bodies through the reconstruction of bodies by means of other materials. These collages speak to how bodies occupy time and space in ways that manipulate the unseen and produce the unintended. In other words, contends Gelburd, “the metaphors and the myths that he visualized are not merely a description of the scene but a mirror of life’s experiences.”<sup>40</sup> So much of what constitutes these collages involves an experiment with what naming-things do by means of their porousness—how they occupy space and how they produce meaning through ritual, celebration, and everyday activities in the company of others.<sup>41</sup>