

Translating Pictures into Words: The Influence of Romare Bearden on August Wilson

By Andrea Allinger

“What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence.”

~ August Wilson on Romare Bearden’s Art (Fishman 134)

The artist Romare Bearden and the playwright August Wilson represent two different walks of life. Acquainted with the likes of Duke Ellington and Eleanor Roosevelt and born into a household of two college-educated parents in culturally rich Harlem, Bearden’s childhood gave him more advantages than did that of August Wilson, a product of an absentee father who dropped out of high school to become an autodidact writer. Bearden graduated from New York University in 1935 with a degree in education, and remained a fixture in the booming intellectual outlet of the metropolis worked from his studio atop of Harlem’s infamous Apollo Theatre—a local hot spot for jazz and the blues.

Bearden used his art to speak, while Wilson used his words to paint a picture. Both strove to unite the black community despite the common struggles of poverty and oppression, and guide them as a whole to the recognition of their African roots. Although the two men never met, Wilson’s work was inspired and enriched by what he took from Bearden’s collages, namely *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* and *The Piano Lesson*. In Bearden, Wilson found his “artistic mentor and sought. . . to make [his] plays the equal of [Bearden’s] canvasses” (Fishman[1] 134). Wilson drew his characters from the colorful and lively collages and paintings Bearden created, conjuring a story from viewing a single piece of art.

Upon viewing Bearden’s art for the first time, Wilson was changed forever. He explains, “what for me had been so difficult, Bearden made seem so simple, so easy. What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, exalted its presence . . . My response was visceral” (Fishman 134). Wilson wrote two plays directly inspired by Bearden’s paintings, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*. Their common ancestry made for a likeness in their work and expressing the African traditions and cultures of the past and the present peoples. Bearden’s inspiration came directly from African culture: “[i]t would not be an exaggeration to say that Romare Bearden was obsessed with the notion of vernacular, African American-based origins of knowledge, efficacy, and metaphysical dominion” (Powell 14). Wilson’s cycle of plays aims at delineating an oral history of the journey of Africans brought to America thus merging them into what we know today as African Americans.

Wilson first discovered Romare Bearden’s painting/collage *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* in *National Geographic* magazine. The central figure in the work, dark and looming, spoke to Wilson. He explains, “*Mill Hand* was a painting of a boardinghouse scene with four figures: an abject man with a coat and a hat sitting at a table, another man reaching for his lunch

bucket, and a woman who was leaving the house, and a child with a glass of milk. I began to wonder who was this defeated man sitting at the table?" (Herrington 79). Wilson was in the process of writing a poem about a newly-freed slave trying to reconnect with his family when he first saw the painting; this man was combined with the central figure in *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket* to become Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Originally titled *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*, the play was renamed so that it could be set a decade earlier than the painting, in 1911, to include the historical figure Joe Turney. Turney was the brother of the Tennessee governor who would lure black men to the illegal activity of gamble and, then capture and punish them by a forced indentured servitude on his plantation (80). Joe Turney's name was changed to Joe Turner based on a blues song about the same character, and in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* he captured Loomis when he was evangelizing. After seven years on Turner's plantation, Loomis reunites with his daughter, Zonia, and begins his quest for his estranged wife and ultimately his human identity. The scars of the Loomis's past present themselves as ubiquitous as Wilson takes the reader on the painful journey down the road of rediscovery that so many blacks had to travel.

Several revisions after the first draft, Wilson focused on the conjur man, Bynum, as an "African retention" in order to "incorporate the older African traditions into contemporary lives" (81). The African tradition of conjurer peoples, although not pictured in "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket," was centralized in Bearden's work namely in his series of "Conjur Woman" works throughout the early 1960s and late 1970s. Bearden wrote of his depiction of the conjur woman, that she "can change reality, but for the rest of us, it is too late. The World is without her kind of mystery now. . .the conjur woman's mutable powers [are] no longer a significant feature of life" (Powell 22). The African culture was slowly dying; people were forgetting their roots and where they came from. The conjur was a thing of the past, something that Bearden was attempting to recreate in the minds of those who viewed his collection.

The same ideas were used by Wilson in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* with the significant role of the conjurer Bynum. Serving as Loomis's spiritual guide, Bynum brings Loomis through the journey to find his song, the African identity that Joe Turner tried to take from him. Bynum tells Loomis about his song, "[c]ouldn't sing it them seven years 'cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it" (Wilson 73). Throughout the play, Bynum searches for his Shiny Man who "gave him his connection to a larger continuum in which he found his song, the play's metaphor for self-definition and life's purpose" (Herrington 81). He aids the other characters in their quest to find their identity and recover their African roots. The African conjurer reconnects the displaced blacks to where they came from.

Not only did Wilson interpret Bearden's art for inspiration, he also used the artist's life experiences for material. He studied the life of Bearden along with his art, and created the boardinghouse in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to mirror the sketches Bearden made of his maternal grandmother's house. Wilson's character Reuben was a representation of Bearden as a boy, who befriended a sickly boy named Eugene who owned pigeons. Reuben tells Zonia about the pigeons of his deceased friend Eugene who made him promise to release them after his death (Herrington 22-3). Wilson developed the skill Bearden possessed to "collect images that are individually significant within African-American culture and to increase their resonance through

the juxtaposition of one with another.” Many factors in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* represent different aspects of African culture, but the melding of them together is what forms the living, breathing script. The storytelling of African culture is significant in all of Wilson’s plays, but pairing this with the conjurer, belief in the supernatural, communal and family ties, and the quest for redemption of the bonds of slavery solidifies the magnitude of the theme and creates continuity.

An essential piece of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was the African Juba, the praising of the Christian God by postslavery blacks. Wilson’s stage directions for the performance of such were “meticulous,” instructing that “[t]he Juba is reminiscent of the ring shots of African slaves. . . It should be as African as possible” (Elam 2). All of the Christian characters take part in the Juba, which enrages Loomis as he enters the scene. The Juba represents the merging of African and American cultures; Christianity finds its place in black culture. Loomis shocks the audience with a majestic vision of the historic site of the Middle Passage, a gargantuan grave of would-be slaves who jumped off of slave ships carrying them to their bondage, and their bones rising above their watery graves. This vision “captures the dichotomy of those perilous journeys aboard slave ships that marked both death and new life, that ensured the profound disconnection from, as well as endurance of, the spirit of Africa, that initiated the complex gestation and difficult birth of African Americans.” This illustration unifies the black community in the play, signifying their similar ancestry and roots and their quest to find their identities. Loomis continually struggles with the difficulties bondage created for his psyche, but Bynum coaxes Loomis into imparting to him the entire vision and the results yield Loomis’s desire to walk amongst the bones in the Middle Passage, to reconnect with the past (3).

Wilson and Bearden successfully delineated the connection between the past and the present and merging of the two. Bearden’s collage *The Piano Lesson* was inspiration for his 1990 play, *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson told a friend in the art gallery, “This is my next play” (Fishman 144.) The next day, he was enacting speeches for the characters to be inspired by the painting (Shafer 13). In the play, Wilson illustrates the current generation struggling to hold on to their ancestry. He exposes the audience to a “New World African griot” in the Berneice and her brother Boy Willie, who tell the history of the piano (Elam 12). Carved with the faces of their ancestors in slavery, the piano represents a tangible piece of history that the family quarrels over. Bearden’s collage depicts a figure playing the piano with a woman standing above her, teaching her how to play. In Wilson’s play, Berneice teaches her daughter, Maretha, how to play the piano while standing above her and keeping a distance from the instrument and what it represents. Berneice separates herself from the painful past represented in the carved faces in the piano, of her father and grandmother, traded like livestock for the musical instrument.

She must ultimately conquer her fear, play the piano and call forth the power of her ancestor’s spirits to save Boy Willie from the hold of the ghost of slavery. Both “Wilson and Bearden searched for and found the ritualistic roots that reward their work with universal application” (Fishman 133-4). The playing of the piano and eradicating of the supernatural presence of a ghost represented the African belief in the supernatural, as the painting depicts the ritual of passing down knowledge and stories in the music of the piano. The collage *The Piano Lesson* is a melding of materials, a collage of various papers with paint, ink and graphite on a

fiberboard medium, such as Wilson's play was a melding of the old and new generations, the ideals that were pertinent to both merging to create a peaceful continuity (Fine 136). The rise of the African culture is embodied in the works of Wilson and Bearden, both men seeming to "simultaneously [capture] the energy of the African American experience and release it back into the world, art that speaks clearly to African Americans and is heard clearly by all audiences" (Fishman 133). Although Bearden and Wilson remained strangers until their death, they were united in their common interest of expressing through their artistic medium the journey of the African American throughout the past decade. Oral tradition plays a massive role in Wilson's plays, "with characters repeatedly speaking their history as they and we consider its meanings with their current circumstances" (Elam 12). Bearden filled the gaps of Wilson's characters, albeit unknowingly and before many of the characters were written on Wilson's page, by creating a visual history of African rituals and culture. He "used a variety of found objects, creating a relationship among them as they were assembled" much like the way Wilson's characters intertwine and become a codependent community (Herrington 23).

Bearden was one of Wilson's creative mentors, although the men never met. Wilson writes, "I never had the privilege of meeting Romare Bearden. Once I stood outside 357 Canal Street in silent homage, daring myself to knock on his door. I am sorry I didn't, for I have never looked back from the moment when I first encountered his art" (Fishman 147). Wilson had attempted to arrange for a limousine to pick up Bearden so he could attend a performance of *Fences*. Bearden refused, intending to take a bus full of senior citizens but later decided to cancel the trip. Bearden was later scheduled to attend the opening of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, but died two weeks before the scheduled opening. Bearden died before Wilson wrote the second play in which he drew inspiration from the artist, *The Piano Lesson*. The fact that the two men were never acquainted makes the message of their art even more powerful and universal (148). It was as if "Wilson and Bearden pulled images from a shared pool" of African traditions and oral history, illustrating richly the culture's triumphs and tragedies in their respective art forms. Both men were prideful in creating a lens into the black culture and being true to the roots. Bearden believed that "many African American artists were simply working in a European idiom rather than expressing their own personal experiences" (Macklin 6-7). His art represents completely the African experience, by combining "African masks with African-American faces cut out from modern magazines" (Herrington 23). Wilson admired and mirrored the ideals Bearden delineated in his collages into complexly revealing plays about the personal interactions of blacks decade by decade.

Undoubtedly, August Wilson's plays would not be so deeply entrenched with culture and diversity if he had never viewed Romare Bearden's unique and revealing art. The collages Bearden created were a meshing of African and American cultures, and presented a visualization of the birth of the present-day African American culture. Wilson drew inspiration from the visually rich collages of Bearden, creating back stories and dialogue for the characters in *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket* and *The Piano Lesson*. His creativity opened the world of an oppressed and downtrodden postslavery black America, giving voices and stories to the characters Bearden created in his collages. Wilson develops the tragedies into triumphs while realistically applying failures and poverty to their living situations. The African traditions are authentically depicted in Wilson's plays because of the colorful collages Bearden created.

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[1] Joan Fishman is now Joan Herrington.

Editor's note: Andrea wrote this paper several years as student ago and lost track of the works cited page. In an effort to prepare it for publication, we resurrected the works cited in its entirety. Unfortunately, we were not able to locate the primary documents for two of the sources that appear in this paper (last names "Powell" and "Fine"). Due to time constraints—and considering all of the work that we put into this project—we elected to publish the paper without confirming those two verified sources. If any reader can lead us to the proper source, please contact Dr. Downing at [downing\[at\]kutztown.edu](mailto:downing[at]kutztown.edu).