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## Relocating Romare Bearden's *Berkeley*

Capturing Berkeley's colorful diversity

In 1972, the black artist and writer Romare Bearden traveled from his home in New York to spend ten days in the capital of counterculture—Berkeley, California. He visited on an official commission from the city of Berkeley to create a new artwork for its City Council Chambers. The result was the monumental work *Berkeley—The City and its People*, which hung for decades until the extensive seismic trouble that plagues City Hall forced its removal to a storage facility. Painted in bright colors, featuring a rainbow and a series of Berkeley's best-known sites, the complete mural is often read as a celebration of urban harmony. A detail of Bearden's composition remains visible in Berkeley through the city's logo, promoting Berkeley's civic commitment to multiculturalism and diversity on municipal property from trashcans to buildings.<sup>1</sup>

Composed of photographs montaged together and with colored papers across seven panels, it is Bearden's largest known work on paper.<sup>2</sup> It is also the first civic commission undertaken by the artist and one of the rare works Bearden created of a place with which he had no biographical connection. Nevertheless, *Berkeley—The City and Its People* envisions the city's tumultuous diversity in an irreducibly complex collage that was a product of its time, rather than the symbolic logo of harmony that is more familiar to city residents today.<sup>3</sup>

Berkeley has changed dramatically since Bearden's visit. The percentage of Berkeley's population identifying as black has dropped from almost 25 percent in 1970 to less than 10 percent in 2010. Perhaps this demographic shift, coupled with the full mural's removal from public view, has made it difficult to remember that Bearden's *Berkeley* originated in a moment of racially charged civic conflict.

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The 1971 local elections in Berkeley that lead to Bearden's commission followed more than two years of local battles, riots, and widespread conflict on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and across the city over Free Speech, the Vietnam War, Women's Rights, and Third World Liberation, the latter championed especially by the Black Panther Party, headquartered in nearby Oakland. Earlier that year a group known as the April Coalition united a mostly white constituency of antiwar radicals with the Berkeley Black Caucus through a single central issue: community control of the police. This demand linked minority communities whose members felt targeted by and underrepresented in the police force with students and other citizens involved in the counterculture and draft-resistance movements who had experienced bloody confrontations with the police and National Guard, particularly during protests over People's Park that began in 1969.

Two new black city council members D'Army Bailey and Ira Simmons—both civil rights lawyers from the South—took a radical stance for black self-determination. After taking his place on the City Council, Simmons joined the City's Civic Arts Commission, whose members called for redecorating the City Council Chambers. They wanted to replace a wide-angle photograph of the city from the Berkeley Hills and reproductions of portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln with “d'écór more relevant to all the citizens of present day Berkeley,” including a portrait of Frederick Douglass.<sup>4</sup>

At just the moment in the fall of 1971 when Berkeley's art commission was searching for an artist to capture the city's diversity, UCB's art museum was hosting an exhibition of Bearden's work. Organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art, *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual* focused on Bearden's early paintings (1940–1942) and his later collages (1964–1971), deliberately leaving aside the abstract paintings he made in the intervening years. The exhibition's curator, Carroll Greene, praised the ways Bearden represented rituals of life in black America to convey a shared human emotion, especially his use of collage “to express his particular cultural heritage in a universal art.”<sup>5</sup> The centerpiece of the exhibition was the mural-like painting *The Block*, a four-by-eighteen-foot collage of photographic enlargements with bright over-painting. The work was accompanied by a tape recording of actual Harlem street noises. The dense composition based on the street outside Bearden's

studio window in New York includes varied encounters of pedestrians on the sidewalk, created from collaged pieces of black-and-white photographs that run the horizontal length of the composition (children play, a person sleeps near a stoop, a funeral procession) and colored-paper storefronts (liquor store, funeral parlor, church, barbershop, grocery) stacked with apartments and interior domestic scenes that nearly fill the vertical expanse. A small crack of bright blue tops the composition, interrupted only by an otherworldly scene of spiritual Ascension on the left, rendered on a red ground. In *The Block* and in his collages more generally, Bearden collapsed the public and private spaces of African American life along with spiritual practices and encounters, suggesting the multiplicity of black experiences. Art historian Kobena Mercer argues Bearden's shift to the medium of collage allowed the artist to “disclose an understanding of African American identity as something that has itself been ‘collaged’ by the vicissitudes of modern history.” Mercer's thoughts echo author Ralph Ellison, who suggested in 1968 that Bearden's method used “sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals” that could also characterize African American history.<sup>6</sup>

It was Berkeley Art Museum director Peter Selz who recommended Bearden to the city's Civic Arts Commission. In the early 1970s, Selz had briefly formed a “Committee for Afro-American Art” composed of black artists living in Berkeley to advise the museum on acquisitions and exhibitions. The group consisted of three artists in their thirties: Raymond Saunders, then professor of art at California State University, Hayward; Russell T. Gordon, who taught in the UCB art department; and UCB master's student David Bradford. Selz also arranged a matching grant with the National Endowment for the Arts, which provided half of Bearden's \$16,000 City Hall commission fee. Along with Selz's committee, Bailey and Simmons backed the idea of commissioning a black artist to represent Berkeley. Promising a gallery in City Hall to show diverse local artists, the City Council voted unanimously to hire Bearden to represent Berkeley and its citizens.

However, even before Bearden's mural was installed the progressive coalition had fallen apart, largely along racial lines. Bailey and Simmons clashed repeatedly with others on the council, particularly over the rights of women and students, and Bailey became the subject of an unprecedented and ultimately successful recall election. It was during this



*The Block* by Romare Bearden. © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

“stormy” time that Bearden visited Berkeley, at the invitation of Bailey and Simmons.

Correspondence and local coverage of Bearden’s mural during the months between his visit in spring 1972 and the final work’s installation suggest divergent understandings of the artist’s intentions. In a letter to Bearden, councilmember Ira Simmons identified himself as both council delegate to the Civic Art Commission and a member of the Black Arts Committee. He praised the plan Bearden had sent, explaining “we as representatives of the Black community are thoroughly satisfied with your proposed sketch for the mural to be completed in the chambers of the Berkeley City Hall. We feel that you have adequately expressed Black people’s status and involvement in the Berkeley community.” However, Simmons warned, “Unfortunately, there is an element within the [Berkeley] community that would see fit to abridge this essential artist’s right, i.e. the right of freedom of expression. Many of these persons are motivated by racist and selfish interests.”<sup>7</sup> He enclosed an article from the *Berkeley Citizens United (BCU) Bulletin*, a conservative monthly newsletter, to support his point.

*Berkeley Citizens United* expressed concerns about Bearden’s mural that suggest just how radical Berkeley’s choice of the black artist seemed in 1972. The periodical covered Bearden twice in that year, once in June soon after the artist’s visit and again in September. Both articles noted that the communist newspaper *People’s Weekly World* had celebrated the commission, praising the social concern demonstrated in Bearden’s art. The first conservative account noted Bearden’s visits to minority communities during his tour, omitting his wide-ranging travels across the University and

in the affluent white neighborhoods of the Berkeley Hills, before announcing, “We shudder! Imagine the filth, the degradation of Telegraph Ave., immortalized in a mural that every person attending the City Council meetings would have to look at!”<sup>8</sup> The second article, the one Simmons likely sent to Bearden, speculated “We can’t condemn the mural until it is finished, but from the descriptions of Bearden’s ‘specially relevant’ works, we fear that we may get a collage of Black Panthers waving clenched fists, filthy tent hovels at People’s Park, street revolutionaries tearing down the fence [at People’s Park], drug addicts lying stoned on Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley Communists waving the Viet Cong flag, Berkeley barbarians rampaging through the streets, looting, smashing, burning.”<sup>9</sup> The newsletter argued artwork should instead express a pleasant and timeless image of the city. *Berkeley Citizens United* praised the large photograph of Berkeley in the city council meeting room, calling implicitly for a view that distanced those attending council meetings from the disparate lived realities of the urban sphere.

When Bearden’s mural was finally unveiled, BCU never published a reaction to it, suggesting they found the final mural less distasteful than they had expected. Turning to examine *Berkeley—The City and Its People*, we can see that, rather than foreground the contemporary sites and symbols of dissent registered in Black Power, counterculture, and Third World liberation as BCU worried, Bearden represented Berkeley to its citizens by layering representations of people and landmarks, past and present, in photography, paint and colored papers. Bearden’s sprawling composition was intended to be viewed from a distance. Hanging on the

chamber wall above and behind the city councilmembers, it presented a chaotic vision of the city's diversity with the disjunctive medium of collage. With crisply cut, flatly layered photographs and colored fields (rather than items torn or folded, for example), the black-and-white ground of the photograph creates equivalences between persons and groups. For example, Ohlone Native Americans and early white settlers on bottom right suggest an early moment of intercultural contact, while just above them across center from right to left we find university graduates and football players whose identity is obscured by their turned backs. These groups are followed by a study circle of five collaged students, including the features of a white woman and man, a black man, and another two men of indeterminate ethnicity, and a white man. Next to this group, the heads of a racially diverse group of mostly female activists with open shouting mouths are interspersed with arms and hands raised in the various versions of a peace sign. Finally, masked and costumed participants in a Lunar New Year parade, give way to local religious leaders (including Buddhist and Catholic) and everyday citizens. As these examples demonstrate, Bearden's composition alternates between constructing scenes that highlight the cooperation of individuals of various ethnic groups and denying easy or fixed identification in racial terms. Bursts of local color, such as red in the rose on far left, across faces in the center, and in flat shapes of graduation caps and stoles on the right, lead the eye back through the mural linking disparate places and individuals.

Like the indexical aerial photograph of Berkeley it replaced, Bearden's mural depicts the city from the hills out toward the bay evading the visual mastery of a bird's eye view and taking a more abstract relationship to geography and history. For example, the bay in the upper third includes a freighter, a sixteenth-century galleon flying a Spanish flag with a pasted white paper wake, a nineteenth-century brig topped by an American flag, and a cluster of recreational sailboats on the far right. These historical moments are punctuated by boldly colored designs: abstracted doves, a rainbow with a setting sun, and esoteric symbols including the half eye and circular design in center. Would viewers have understood or recognized all of Bearden's references? The lower two-thirds of the composition have a density that transforms the university town of Berkeley into a densely packed locale like Bearden's native Harlem, pictured in *The Block*. Identifying places and faces in the tumult might

make those attending council meetings feel like experts on their community, while not recognizing others or seeing architecture and individuals newly constellated could encourage citizens to consider their involvement in the wider reaches of Berkeley. In the ruptures and odd collisions, they might see difference and varied viewpoints as constitutive of their community rather than threatening its harmony.

Berkeley residents remarked on the play between the "symbolic" and the "particular" facilitated by Bearden's use of photography and collage. As one period newspaper reported "Photographs of real people are used to typify students, workers, teachers, and citizens. But the blown-up photographs of these real people have features from other faces collaged to them, so that individual noses and eyes find themselves on other faces."<sup>10</sup> Presenting a layered composition with specific geographic anchors, Bearden's collage nonetheless performed the destabilizing work of collage on both individual and group identity.

Bearden's mural for the city could be read—or misread—in varied ways. One newspaper noted the figure at the bottom center of the composition, a black woman holding a young boy, "probably alludes to the black poor in Berkeley, but her image is one of strength and determination, not sullenness or hopelessness."<sup>11</sup> Nothing about the woman's image indicates class. She is collaged behind a photograph of the Niehaus Villa, an opulent Victorian landmark in southwestern Berkeley built in 1889 by a wealthy Prussian immigrant mill owner and located in the 1970s in a portion of the city predominately housing African American residents. The roofline of the home obstructs part of the woman's cheek, but frames the direct stare of her eyes, a geographic and formal link suggestive of a layered, nuanced, and potentially ruptured relationships of past and present, race and place, class and power. Rather than the raised black fist, Vietcong flag, or any of the other symbols conservatives including Berkeley Citizens United had feared, Bearden's mural remained open to varied understandings of the community's "strength."

This complex layering of potential meanings extends to the portion of the mural that became Berkeley's logo, a section that Bearden described as the "four races of mankind and blueprint for a better world."<sup>12</sup> The city's logo was created in the 1980s in order to "reflect the sexual and racial diversity" of the city in an easily reproducible image.<sup>13</sup>



This illustration is based on the ideas of French doctor François Bernier (1625–1688), suggesting that human beings can be separated into four major groups.

Simplifying the design by eliminating the blueprint, the logo creates a static image that recalls early “science” that divided humanity into four essential races, usually hierarchized from white to black.<sup>14</sup> However, the logo also has formal links with Soviet propaganda for international workers and 1960s decolonialization movements, for example the poster of Viktor Koretsky, which Bearden may or may not have seen directly.<sup>15</sup> These images circulated in Eastern Europe, Cuba, and Africa, as well as in the United States among the communist, socialist, and Third World movements that were present in New York (where Bearden likely encountered them) and in the Bay Area during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The layered profiles in Bearden’s mural offer multiple readings of race relations, but his inclusion of the blueprint suggest an ongoing process. This vision of the hard work of achieving equitable diversity has been effaced in the city’s static logo.

A 1972 letter from the Arts Commission to Bearden celebrated his sketch for its “apparent contradiction.” The work, they remarked, achieved “a very happy feeling . . . in spite of the strife which it indicates and which is so much a part of Berkeley.” This optimistic tone in the face of conflict

could have a “unifying influence” by helping all who attend city meetings “feel that it is worthwhile being a Berkeley citizen in spite of or because of this strife.”<sup>16</sup> This letter makes clear that, despite the rainbow-colored harmony of Bearden’s mural visible at first glance, Berkeley was historically marked by dissent and civic chaos. By the time the work was installed in Berkeley’s City Hall, Bailey, who had been instrumental in bringing Bearden to Berkeley, had been recalled from office. Although the National Bar Association among others opposed the special recall election in August 1973, the vote forced Bailey (and two years later Simmons) out of Berkeley politics.<sup>17</sup> In retrospect, the aesthetics of Bearden’s collage were uniquely suited to represent the breaks, ruptures, and hopeful strife of the profoundly contested landscape of the city.

Bearden ignored the one suggestion offered by the Arts Commission. They urged the artist to reduce the number of local sites in the mural to achieve the “simple forcefulness” that characterized his images of Harlem. They suggested that he might have misunderstood his commission to require that “so many of Berkeley’s features need to be incorporated.” Bearden persisted with including sites and

many types of people from across the city, rather than reducing his image to focus on the city's black neighborhood, on a single street as in *The Block*, or one unified scene. Rather than see the chaotic composition as a series of clichés about a California city inventoried by a New York artist to satisfy locals, Bearden's disregard of the suggestion to simplify underscores the intriguing, productive ways *Berkeley* differs from his prior work. Bearden's characteristic depictions of African American experience that stirred universal emotion gives way in *Berkeley* to an even messier picture of an entire diverse city, rendered with the ruptures and breaks of collage. The complicated history of Bearden's commission and the complexity of the monumental image itself points to the ways the collage refuses to be a symbol of unity. *Berkeley—The City and Its People* creates a moving portrayal of urban diversity precisely by accommodating breaks, ruptures, difference, and disagreement, layering references to the ongoing (and sometimes dissonant) efforts of many individuals and groups across the city's space and history to live with each other.

In 2016, with longtime residents having been pushed out by rising rents and housing prices, is the multilayered Berkeley (and Bay Area) that Bearden represented gone? Locked away today in climate-controlled art storage, Bearden's 1973 mural may indeed be a time capsule of a long-gone historic moment. If so, the artwork serves as a tool, something of a blueprint, for a better future in California. As we struggle with complex issues of gentrification and urban displacement across the Bay Area, Bearden's vision belongs in City Hall as a backdrop for government action. Bearden created *Berkeley* not in a perfect period of unity and equality between blacks and whites in the city, but in a fractious and fleeting moment. In addition to the dramatic decline in the percentage of black Berkeleyans between 1970 and 2010, statistics show the percentage of city's population identifying as white also dropped since 1970, with the increasing presence of census categories of Asian, Hispanic, Latino, and those belonging to two or more races—a trend mirrored across California.<sup>18</sup> Bearden's mural may not represent this shift or our present moment, but it refracts them to suggest how we might live together now.

Bearden's *Berkeley* envisions how the California city is built from and on shifting histories of encounter and settlement by many groups with different backgrounds, interests,

and beliefs. The nonnarrative mural implies history is not always a story of progress, but its contours may help us to see possibilities for the present and suggest a path to more equity and inclusion in the future. The ability of our eyes to make meaning from the collage's cuts and juxtapositions point to ways we might also make meaning from the irreducible differences among us, as individuals and as groups. Looking closely at *Berkeley—The City and Its People*, through the rainbow and doves, Bearden forces us to recognize that the promise of equity and diversity comes with friction and difficulty as it forces us to make sense of the world anew. Ultimately, Bearden's mural resonates in the present by suggest that it is only through this ongoing work of assembling the incongruent that we will devise a blueprint to a better urban future together. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> When Berkeley briefly introduced a new logo in the early 1990s, the city employee newsletter reported that the Bearden-inspired one remained in circulation because it was “distinctly Berkeley with all its diversity.” Michael Caplan and Norma Hennessey, *Berkeley Matters*, 9 July 1993, Berkeley History Room clipping files, Berkeley Public Library.
- <sup>2</sup> Correspondence and primary source materials indicate this visit occurred in 1972, a year earlier than the date given in Rocío Aranda-Alvarado and Sarah Kennel with Carmenita Higginbotham, “Romare Bearden: A Chronology,” in Ruth Fine, *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington: National Gallery of Art in association with Harry H. Abrams, New York, 2003), 231.
- <sup>3</sup> “D’Army Bailey: ‘If You’re in a Minority, You Have to Be Rough,’ *The Daily Californian*, 23 July 1973.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Shere, “Berkeley Unveils Portrait of a City and Its People,” *Oakland Tribune*, 13 Jan 1974, 26EN. Others coverage of the mural includes Thomas Albright, “Berkeley’s Life Style: Impressive New Mural,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 January 1974, 40; and Mary Ellen Perry, “On the Art Scene,” *San Francisco Post*, 4 May 1972, 4. For suggestion of Douglas, see Berkeley City Council Meeting Minutes, 13 January 1972, 3. All minutes available at <http://www.cityofberkeley.info/recordsonline>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Advance Fact Sheet: Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual,” The Museum of Modern Art, Press Release, 10 February 1971. Available at: [www.moma.org/learn/resources/press\\_archives/1970s/1971](http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/press_archives/1970s/1971).
- <sup>6</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen,” *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Kobena Mercer, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 125.





City of Berkeley logo.

<sup>7</sup> Ira T. Simmons [on behalf of the Black Arts Committee] to Romare Bearden, 3 October 1972, Romare Bearden papers, 1937–1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>8</sup> “An Unorthodox Mural for Berkeley Council Chambers,” *Berkeley Citizen United Bulletin* 8: no. 6, June 1972, 6.

<sup>9</sup> “Berkeley Mural,” *Berkeley Citizen United Bulletin* 8, no. 8, September 1972, 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Shere, “Berkeley Unveils . . .,” 26EN.

<sup>11</sup> Shere, “Berkeley Unveils . . .,” 26EN.

<sup>12</sup> Bearden’s description of the mural is available at <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/city-logo/>.

<sup>13</sup> Berkeley City Council Meeting Minutes, 14 October 1980, 7.

<sup>14</sup> This illustration is based on the ideas of French doctor François Bernier (1625–1688), who argued that human beings could be separated into four major groups, becoming one of the first to argue for making racial distinctions on physical characteristics. Augustine Fouillée, *Le Tour De La France Par Deux Enfants* (Paris, 1900 [first edition 1877]), 188.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Anneka Lennsen for this suggestion.

<sup>16</sup> William Clifford, President, Civic Art Commission, and Ira Simmons to Bearden, 17 October 1972, Romare Bearden papers, 1937–1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey left the city for his hometown of Memphis where he eventually founded the National Civil Rights Museum.

<sup>18</sup> Census data available at <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/>.