

THEORY + PRACTICE ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/THEORY-PRACTICE/](https://bombmagazine.org/series/theory-practice/))

Making Interiority Visible: Dawoud Bey Interviewed

A new series of photographs tracks the Underground Railroad.

APRIL 5, 2019



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey5.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, *A Woman Waiting in the Doorway*, Harlem, NY, 1976. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Daiter Gallery. From the series *Harlem, U.S.A.* © Dawoud Bey.

Theory + Practice is a series supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation.

Dawoud Bey's photography has evolved in terms of style, subject, and method across a distinguished, decades-long career. His earliest series, such as *Harlem, U.S.A.* (1975–79) and *Street Portraits* (1988–90), evince the everyday nuances of African American public life with a gentle *vérité* touch. *Class Pictures* (1992–2007) captures the gawky tenderness of adolescence with portraits of high school students paired alongside short, self-reflective texts written by the images' subjects. *The Birmingham Project* (2012) takes the guarded vulnerability of Bey's portraiture in a more historically minded direction, memorializing the child victims of the September 15, 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, 16th Street Baptist Church bombing with disarming side-by-side images of a child and an adult, both living in the present-day community. *Harlem Redux* (2014–16) revisits the eponymous New York City neighborhood to focus on its gentrifying built environment rather than its individual inhabitants, a notable emphasis for a photographer celebrated for his portraiture.

Bey's latest series, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2018), [on view](https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9038/dawoud-bey-night-coming-tenderly-black) (<https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9038/dawoud-bey-night-coming-tenderly-black>) at the Art Institute of Chicago, constitutes an even bigger departure from portraiture, while still reflecting the artist's abiding thematic and conceptual concerns. Taking its title from the closing lines of Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Variations," the gelatin silver print series consists of imaginative reconstructions of the Underground Railroad, shot from the perspective of fugitive slaves. The tinted and unpeopled landscapes—layered with foliage, branches, bodies of water, fences, and farmhouses, all of which suggest both the possibility of cover and the threat of discovery—have the hushed tension of a sky darkened by storm clouds. Because few traces of the Underground Railroad exist, Bey's reimaginings of it confront the aesthetic conundrum of how to represent that which can't be represented in a documentary way. Like all of Bey's work, the landscapes manifest a keen critical intelligence softened by the ache of an equally keen heart.

—Louis Bury

Louis Bury

You're best known for your portraits, but your two most recent series, *Harlem, Redux* and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, represent the human body in indirect ways. Where did this shift come from?

Dawoud Bey

My work revolves around two things: an engagement with human subjects, and situating those subjects within a social space and narrative. I want to convey a sense of the subjects' interiorities, particularly for people—such as black people and young people—whom the larger society does not always consider to have rich and complex inner lives. I also want to situate those subjects in relation to narratives about the spaces they inhabit, opening a conversation about how those spaces have been represented historically.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey-new2.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, *Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot*, Harlem, NY, 2016. Archival pigment print mounted to dibond. From the series *Harlem Redux*. Courtesy of the artist, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery. © Dawoud Bey.

LB

The emphasis you place on environment is interesting, given that portraiture is a genre ordinarily thought to be all about the human subject.

DB

Harlem Redux was my first work in which the human subject became less prominent, but the series's increased focus on environment was a response to the disruptive changes taking place around those subjects. Gentrification and global capital are transforming the physical and social landscape of the largely black and brown community that has long resided in Harlem. It is now a community that has both subsidized Section 8 housing and ten-million-dollar condominium apartments—sometimes on the same block. I wanted to visualize that tension and transformation—to visualize the erasure of cultural and geographical memory—as *it was taking place*.

LB

How did that experience manifest in *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*?

DB

When I started *Harlem Redux* in 2014, it felt like the most difficult thing I'd ever attempted. I initially thought about the urban landscape in terms of genre, that is, as a certain kind of photograph that followed prescribed formal rules—that *looked* a certain way—rather than a highly subjective response to a particular set of circumstances. It was a mystery to me in terms of figuring out where the picture starts and stops, how to take in, through the lens, some piece of the physical world that was not the human subject. In some ways, that's the fundamental challenge of photography: figuring out the world in the frame's rectangular shape. The challenge of *Harlem Redux* prepared me to take on *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, because I could now use the camera to shape narratives of space and place in ways I hadn't previously. Similarly, *The Birmingham Project*—my first project in which history was both the subject and the conceptual framework—also prepared me for *Night*, in that it got me thinking about how the past might be made visible and resonant.

LB

What challenges did *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* present in terms of representing something—the Underground Railroad—that was largely out of sight at the time of its existence and that left behind few recognizable traces?

DB

Night and *Birmingham* are related in that they both take on the challenge of making history palpable, even though it has receded into an often mythically retold past. The difference, of course, is that when it comes to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, we know exactly where the horrific event occurred (the church still exists to this day) and the ages of the young people who were killed. With *Night*, the challenge of making history visible was different, because the exact movement of fugitive slaves across the American landscape had—for reasons of their very survival—to remain secret. This mystery allowed me the conceptual space to reimagine what that movement might have been, how it might have looked and felt.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey3.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, #19 (*Creek and Trees*), 2017. Gelatin silver print mounted to dibond. From the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey.

LB

To what extent are your reimaginings of the Underground Railroad based on historical record?

DB

Most of the actual “stations” where fugitive slaves took temporary refuge are unknown, though a handful of what are believed to be such houses remain in Cleveland. There are also station houses that have been identified in Hudson, OH, and given landmark designation. While I photographed some of these houses, I focused more on their surrounding landscapes, because those landscapes would have had to be traversed in order to reach the houses. I made sure to include bodies of water, such as creeks, in the images, because one strategy that fugitive slaves used to avoid being tracked was to enter a body of water and walk a ways in it so that their scent would be lost.

LB

Night's interplay between absence and presence is striking and profound.

DB

It was important to me that the fugitive slaves moving through this terrain possess a sense of presence, even though their actual bodies aren't depicted. The experience is visualized and imagined through their eyes; so while their black bodies may be literally absent from the images, their presence still informs the work in a visceral way.

LB

How do you understand the relation of blackness—as both a concept and a color—to absence and presence?

DB

The thought of these fugitive black bodies moving through a dark landscape put me in mind of Roy DeCarava's photographs, which are a touchstone for *Night*. I decided to adopt DeCarava's material strategy for the narrative I wanted to tell, which is why I returned to making silver gelatin prints for the first time in over twenty years. The silver halides embedded in the emulsion of the paper produce a greater sense of depth in the otherwise flat photographic object. It gives the images a dark, material richness. *Night* is an homage to DeCarava, to his visualization of the black body moving in and out of the shadows of a black-and-white print.

LB

What about the influence of Langston Hughes, to whose work the series's title alludes?

DB

I felt that the last lines of Hughes's poem "Dream Variation"—"Night coming tenderly / Black like me"—also conveyed a notion of blackness as a space through which black subjects moved. For Hughes, it's a space of possibility, not something to be feared. I used that line as the title because I wanted to situate the work in a lineage of black expressive culture and extend Hughes's idea of night as a tender embrace.

LB

What are your thoughts about the landscape genre? In the United States, historically it's a genre bound up with histories of conquest and myths of whiteness.

DB

Perhaps because it wasn't an area in which I envisioned myself working, I was never deeply interested in landscape as an idea the way I was with portraiture (though I wouldn't call myself a portraitist). But it helps to be familiar with any genre's formal and narrative histories. Nineteenth-century survey photographs of the supposedly unpopulated American West, for example, reinforced the idea that the land was ripe for development, even though there was a Native population living there that was seldom, if ever, included in those representations. Those photographs functioned as the visual corollary to the idea of manifest destiny.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey4.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, *Mgbechi*, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, 2005. Chromogenic print mounted to plexi. Courtesy of the artist. From the series *Class Pictures*. © Dawoud Bey.

LB

How do you understand portraiture's relationship to conceptions of blackness?

DB

I don't think of the black subject in relation to discourses of "the other." I think that making work in response to such discourses leads to a kind of double consciousness, as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon described it, whereby one looks at oneself as if through the eyes of another and then makes work to refute that. My portraits of the black subject don't explain or justify anyone or anything; instead, they affirm the presence of the people in them, presuming their right to exist as they are. I think about portraiture in terms of how to make interiority visible. That interiority, in its full complexity, is not always ascribed to black or even young people. Both subjects are often depicted in ways that have more to do with sociology and social pathology than with conveying a rich humanity, which is the thing that makes us all more alike than unlike. My work is also

intended to affirm those subjects' place in the world, to provide a presence on the wall in spaces where things considered worth our collective attention get hung. You could probably say that I'm a humanist.

LB

Your reluctance to reinforce double consciousness is interesting with regard to the second-person point of view from which *Night's* images have been shot.

DB

The camera's placement in relation to the nominal subject always signifies something. That informed the vantage point from which I made the photographs. Rather than looking *at* the subject, I wanted to convey the feeling of the unseen subject looking out onto space, to envision how it might have looked to those fugitive slaves. It was meant to create a liminal experience that situates the viewer somewhere between past and present.

LB

Did contemporary political concerns about migration factor into *Night*?

DB

The hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of people, globally, fleeing persecution and other life-threatening circumstances today is certainly a subtext. But it wasn't central to the work, which is focused on the continued telling of African American history. It does serve as a reminder that the historical era of US slavery continues to be deeply relevant to the present.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey1.jpg)

Dawoud Bey in his studio, 2024. Photo by Jonathan Michael Castillo. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What's the role of historical memory in your work?

DB

History has figured into my work from the time of my very first project, *Harlem, U.S.A.*, in the 1970s. Though I didn't live in Harlem, my parents met there; the project was a way to reconnect with a community in which I had historical and familial roots. So history has always been present in my work, but the difference is that its incorporation has been more intentional in recent years.

LB

What's your process for working with human subjects and communities?

DB

Since 1993, pretty much all of my projects have been done in conjunction with community institutions, usually museums. The institution is my point of entry into the community and also the place from which I can create access for the community. I am always aware that, for the most part, I am an outsider in the places that I make my work. So establishing a level of trust is essential. That usually means that there is a period during which I am present in the community but not making photographs. That period can last for a few days or, in the case of the Birmingham work, a few years—years spent hanging out in local barbershops, luncheonettes, social gatherings, churches—to allow people to feel comfortable with my presence in their social space. I need to legitimate my presence there before I can begin the process of making anything.

LB

That's a fascinating process. How much information about a given project do you convey to your subjects?

DB

It's important that the people I photograph understand the work's context, whether in relation to a particular historical moment in *The Birmingham Project* or in relation to young people's capacity for self-definition in *Class Pictures*. I always tell people why I am making the work, because part of its meaning is shaped by my intentions.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey6.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, *A Young Man on a Bike*, Washington, DC, 1989. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Daiter Gallery. From the series *Street Portraits*. © Dawoud Bey.

LB

What about the actual process of photographing?

DB

Once my subjects have given consent, I try to minimize the artificiality of the situation—things such as strobe light, umbrella, tripod, camera, etc.—so that both of us can feel comfortable. At that point, it's a matter of shaping their gestural behavior to the rectangular space of the photograph. I don't talk much, preferring instead to direct the quality of their engagement with the lens. I think of it like directing a performance in which the subject performs himself or herself. I try to guide them toward a more heightened, sustained, and focused performance of themselves.

LB

How has this process changed in your work that focuses on representing the environment rather than individual human subjects?

DB

With the work that I am doing now, the process is very different. It requires seeing pieces of the relevant landscape and making work that shapes that place into a larger narrative. Working this way has enabled me to see things in the unpopulated environment that I never previously noticed, because they were not what I was interested in. It's like I've learned another language.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dawoud-Bey7.jpg)

Dawoud Bey, *Mary Parker and Caela Cowan*, Birmingham, AL, 2012. Archival pigment prints mounted to dibond. From the series *The Birmingham Project*. Courtesy of the artist, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery. © Dawoud Bey.

LB

What is your research process and how does it inform the finished work?

DB

For both *Birmingham* and *Night*, the research process was pretty extensive. To feel grounded in a subject or place, I try to steep myself in it as much as possible. It helps me figure out why I'm there and gives my being there a knowledge foundation.

For *Birmingham*, that meant spending time in the archives of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which in turn led me to the information about the two boys who had also been killed that Sunday morning, outside the church. Finding out about those two boys helped me realize the project's conceit; it also made it more resonant because those boys' murders are usually omitted from accounts of that morning in 1963.

For *Night*, my research began online, looking for locations of Underground Railroad-related sites. I then looked the sites up on Google Street View, to get a better visual sense of them, before doing further research at the Research Library of the Western Reserve Historical Society. This research involved everything from reading fugitive slave narratives to reading a range of other materials related to that moment, as well as driving around and making site visits to the places I was thinking about photographing.

LB

Has your research pointed the way toward future working directions?

DB

Yes, the next step in my history project involves New Orleans, particularly Louisiana's 1811 slave rebellion. I've begun the research for this project, including a visit to the Historic New Orleans Collection. In all these projects, the research grounds the artistic work, but the actual making has to acknowledge the research and then transcend it through creative imagination. In this way, artistic research can ground the understanding of history, which—as we know it—is often more mythic than factual.

LB

In 2020, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art will exhibit a major retrospective of your photography. One quality that cuts across your work is a poignant, almost poetic, tenderness. Your human subjects—even your landscapes—often present a guarded exterior, softened by a sense of vulnerability. How do you understand the interplay of head and heart in your work?

DB

I have to be deeply invested in the things I make work about. And people know if you really care about them, even if the engagement is brief. They have to trust you. And you can't fake that. But the resultant work has to succeed on its own terms, which is a different thing entirely. The challenge is shaping that investment and interest into something that resonates as a two-dimensional photographic object. And *that* is what I think about as I am looking through the viewfinder: how to amplify what I am seeing and make something that adds to the ongoing history of photographic objects of a certain kind. Whether it's a person or a landscape, all the feeling in the world doesn't tell you how to make something. For that, you have to bring intelligence and skill.

[Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black](https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9038/dawoud-bey-night-coming-tenderly-black) (<https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9038/dawoud-bey-night-coming-tenderly-black>) *is on view at the Art Institute of Chicago until April 14.*

Support BOMB's mission to deliver the artist's voice.

DONATE (/DONATE)

SUBSCRIBE (/SUBSCRIBE)

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive) and Assistant Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He writes regularly about visual art for *Hyperallergic*, and his creative and critical work has been published in *Bookforum*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Boston Review*, and *The Believer*.

MORE [Photography \(https://bombmagazine.org/topics/photography/\)](https://bombmagazine.org/topics/photography/)
 [Portraiture \(https://bombmagazine.org/topics/portraiture/\)](https://bombmagazine.org/topics/portraiture/)
 [African American Culture \(https://bombmagazine.org/topics/african-american-culture/\)](https://bombmagazine.org/topics/african-american-culture/)
 [Underground Railroad \(https://bombmagazine.org/topics/underground-railroad/\)](https://bombmagazine.org/topics/underground-railroad/)

Sign up for our newsletter and get an email every week.

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement \(/user-agreement\)](#) and [Privacy Policy \(/privacy\)](#) & [Cookie Statement \(.\)](#).