

SEANKELLY

Witkovsky, Matthew S. "Dawoud Bey's Shadowy Landscapes Trace Paths Of The Underground Railroad." *Art in America*. December 10, 2019.

Art in America



*Someday you be walking down the road and
you hear something or see something going on.
So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up.
A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into
a rememory that belongs to somebody else.
Where I was before I came here, that place is real.*
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987

One can start a discussion about "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," [Dawoud Bey's](#) most recent series of photographs, by reviewing what they are not. The twenty-five pictures are not portraits, for example, the genre that Bey has mined and enriched for the past forty years, but unpeopled landscapes. They appear rural, and initially, idyllic. Bey, who began his career in Harlem and has pursued it in cities across the country, here brings his camera to the Ohio countryside, to fields, forests, and the shore of Lake Erie. The Cozad-Bates House in Cleveland is the sole named urban structure, and bushes and a giant shade tree appear to swarm it, leaving only a portion of the landmarked building visible.

As its title implies, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" pictures a penumbral world, another departure for Bey. The landscapes are rich but (or because) they are dim; it takes time for details to emerge, and the combination of dark printing and coated paper makes the scenes reflective and thus difficult to grasp in their entirety, an obscurity that deepens when the images are framed and glazed. This seems quite unlike the majority of Bey's

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

portraits, which display a monumental clarity of pose and, one could say, an ethical clarity as well. Finally, whereas the photographer has worked largely in color since the early 1990s, this series is black-and-white, and furthermore, printed in gelatin silver, a medium that he has not used in a quarter century.

These shifts or reversals render “Night,” which was commissioned for the 2018 Front International and the subject of a recent exhibition I curated at the Art Institute of Chicago, a new chapter in Bey’s career. Its apparent contrast with past projects serves, however, to clarify certain enduring preoccupations. For example, “Night” underscores the perennial importance of print format and other physical qualities in Bey’s photography: the large scale (44 by 55 inches) and dark printing of these images help the landscapes emphatically “take place.” The works make apparent that Bey, who counts among his friends artists as diverse as photographers from the humanist Kamoinge Workshop (a collective founded in Harlem in 1963) and conceptualist polymath David Hammons, has long operated as an inheritor of dual pictorial and phenomenological approaches to photography: classic American modernism converging with a conception of the photograph as an object that addresses the spectator and the space of display. In a related way, while Bey has long shared in the overwhelming preference of African and diasporic photographers for images of black subjects, in fact the *place* of those subjects, their bodily and metaphysical relation to being-at-home, is equally important and structures many of his series.



Dawoud Bey: Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky), from “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” 2017, gelatin silver print, 44 by 55 inches.

“Night” makes clear this abiding interest in subjecthood as a function of place. Bey has long structured his undertakings as conversations with sitters and communities, and this body of work, too, has its interlocutors. Those who moved through Cleveland in times of

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

slavery are summoned here, and the trace of their paths gives this work its complex presence—one that each viewer helps to enact. There is one kind of dialogue with those who stand before these darkened images in an exhibition space and another—a “rememory,” to use Toni Morrison’s word—with the many who have come and gone before.

Now is the moment to say what Dawoud Bey explicitly made “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” to address: the experience of the [Underground Railroad](#). Operative from colonial times through the Civil War, the Railroad, in Bey’s view, “is as much myth as reality. . . . My challenge has been to make this history, which has been described in words but remains unpictured, somehow tangible, and to visualize the landscape in a way that resonates in our moment.”¹ Bey wants to convey a sense of the United States as a land of fugitives, not only immigrants, and to show its geography scarred by displacement under pressure. To do so means not getting stuck on specific historical markers or even overplaying signs of pastness; the Cozad-Bates House, for example, is one of just two named Railroad sites in the series, and its use as a “station” for runaways is presented as probable conjecture even by caretakers of the house today.² In this effort Bey pays homage to Roy DeCarava, an influential New York photographer whom he encountered early in his career, and Langston Hughes, the celebrated Harlem Renaissance poet. DeCarava’s drive to show African Americans with nuance and complexity has long inspired Bey. Here he emulates DeCarava’s dusky tones, which the earlier photographer employed to call forth affective rather than factual realities and to make plain—as Bey does when talking about “Night”—that documentary veracity was not his interest. “I try to reach that point in the print where that thing [a personal connection to the subject] is at its maximum,” DeCarava once said. “I print emotionally.”³

A verse from Hughes, meanwhile, gives Bey his title: “Night coming tenderly / Black like me” are the final lines of a two-stanza lyric poem called “Dream Variations,” in which darkness, far from inducing fright, cloaks the self in a reassuring embrace. The first stanza reads:

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!

For African Americans, the dream of being at home in one’s land would be repeatedly “deferred,” as another, quite famous poem by Hughes proposed,⁴ with explosive consequences. In “Night,” Bey contrasts the hope of a black body wishing itself enveloped by a favorable nighttime landscape not just with a “white day” but with the potential terrors contained in that same nocturnal scenery. Terrors of the unknown: unfamiliar ground, uncertain direction, unseen forces in pursuit or waiting to ambush runaways and return them to enslavement.

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

True to its evocation of a dreamscape, “Night” figures nature as a space that is at once physical and mental, and never fully apparent to our senses—a terrain to be negotiated, and felt more than pictured. These photographs contradict the expectation of landscape as a view. Early images in the series do this by putting up obstacles to progress. A picket fence spans the foreground of #1, while a slender tree rises front and center in #2, and the same types of barriers—one horizontal and the other vertical—combine to fill the viewing plane in #5. Such hindrances to vision can simultaneously be aids to movement: one can guide oneself alongside a picket fence, or hide momentarily behind a tree. Later works in the series present brambles, ponds, and even a rolling field as picturesque hurdles.

Bey has explained that he had in mind the wary progress of a fugitive advancing cautiously, under cover of darkness, and approaching rumored safe houses with furtive movements.⁵ Period accounts of the Railroad tell additionally of bravery and wily confidence on the part of those fleeing slavery. Fugitives might travel in groups, occasionally in sizable numbers, and some successful freedom-seekers (e.g., Harriet Tubman) made multiple trips guiding others to safety. Many stories told by escapees to William Still, an abolitionist in Philadelphia, involve stratagems of physical or social fluidity that lessened or obviated the need for nighttime travel. Runaways were aided into barrels and boxes, then transported long distances by ship or carriage; men posed as women, women as men, and some light-complexioned individuals of both sexes pretended to be free citizens and even slaveholders.⁶ One way to make present that long and varied history of imaginative resistance, particularly in an exhibition, is to render it existential—asking the spectator to place himself or herself as protagonist in an endlessly recurring drama of migration.

While Bey names DeCarava and Hughes as sources of inspiration, the photographs also address the work of American modernist photographers, especially Alfred Stieglitz and his circle. Several references are as pointed as a riff. The spot of light on a single leaf near the center of #4 seems to evoke Stieglitz’s photographs from the early 1920s in Lake George, such as the iconic *Gable and Apples* (1922), while the heavenly fringe of cloud above the forest and house in #14 brings to mind Stieglitz’s series of cloud pictures, the “Equivalents,” of the same years. Bey’s opening image, subtitled *Picket Fence and Farmhouse*, distinctly recalls Paul Strand’s *White Fence, Port Kent, New York* (1916), and #13 recalls Edward Steichen’s *Pond—Moonlight* (1904).

These classroom classics are scarcely mentioned in photographers’ statements today, no doubt considered out of date or even retrograde, or simply irrelevant to present concerns. But Bey gives the measure of his own historical ambition with references to modernists who, like DeCarava, invested meaning in the very tones of their prints. Bey has stressed, for example, the labor involved in printing in gelatin silver at this size and with this level of attention to compositional minutiae, which he brings out or diminishes through the traditional darkroom techniques of burning, dodging, and masking: what Stieglitz called “local development.” Stieglitz equated artistry precisely with such mastery, and declared “knowledge of and feeling for the comprehensive and beautiful tonality of nature” essential to demonstrations of aesthetic skill.⁷ In 1922, Strand characterized Stieglitz as exemplary of expressive photography because of his control over “tonal and tactile values far more subtle than any which the human hand can

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

record.”⁸ Beyond coincident details, Bey’s new photographs put such sensitivity and control emphatically on display.

But for the American modernist photographers, landscape spelled refuge. From Lake George to Nova Scotia to Bucks County, views of nature and rural living conveyed an ideal of Walden-like solitude, a haven and a turn to self-reliance. The very lushness of print tones augmented a rhetoric according to which the supposedly empty land would, like the photograph, bear a rich yield only if properly overseen.

Casting the landscape as a potentially terrifying obstacle course, Bey replaces a sense of “supervision” with the partial knowledge of a body on the move. By printing large, he makes room for the viewer’s body, and by printing so darkly, he effectively renders the viewer’s knowledge partial as well. The works demand time. We must stand before them and wait until details become clearer, then change our position to overcome additional interruptions from reflections or glare.

The prints, moreover, do not reproduce well. All illustrations of the works (including in these pages) are made from image files that Bey lightened with dissemination in mind. The originals would be hard to decipher in print, and they are also difficult to transmit via smartphone—they come through as black rectangles. The nighttime passage may thus be grasped only in person; it cannot readily be “shared” or “liked” and the version made available to a broad audience is a deliberate compromise.

Such phenomenological concerns, latent in photography for much of the modernist era, came to the fore with artists working after Minimalism. Works made around 1970 by figures as disparate as Giovanni Anselmo, Valie Export, and Bruce Nauman, among many others, turned the photograph into a sculptural object whose presence implicated the spectatorial body. To give just one example, Anselmo’s *Entrare nell’opera* (Entering the Work, 1971) is a photo-canvas showing the artist running away from his camera—set on auto-release—and into a horizonless desert landscape that seems to subsume the viewer when the image is printed at large scale.

“Night” revives such investigations while tying them to a fraught historical subject. Few photographic projects have combined phenomenological and historical concerns in this way. One that comes to mind is James Welling’s first mature series, “Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840–41) / Connecticut Landscapes” (1977–86). Welling is of the same generation as Bey, and the two artists came of age considering ways to relate Conceptual art and classic photography on the one hand, and personal and national histories on the other. Welling’s series consists of more than two hundred 4-by-5-inch contact prints that alternate between images of his great-grandmother’s journals and views taken in and around his parents’ former home in Connecticut. Welling came to the idea after admiring Strand’s works as well as photographs from the Civil War. He used a range of papers and print techniques to give his project the look of an early photographic scrapbook. Welling’s ancestors were involved in national politics before and during the Civil War. His crepuscular outdoor views and close-ups of pages covered in nearly illegible, spidery handwriting not only invoke acts of copying; they

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

seem to “reenact” instances of classic modernism simultaneously with scenes from a familial past that encompasses the most divisive episode in American history.⁹

In telling how he came to the “Night” Project, Bey speaks of his turn to historical subject matter with a series of double portraits he made in Birmingham, Alabama, on the fiftieth anniversary of the September 1963 bombing at the city’s 16th Street Baptist Church. A commemorative purpose animated “The Birmingham Project.” In each diptych, a subject who, in 2013, was the age of one of the children killed in the bombing or its immediate aftermath was paired with another as old as the victim would have been had he or she lived. The sitters posed (separately from one another) either in a second Birmingham church that had been bombed in the Civil Rights era or in the Birmingham Museum of Art: the debut venue for the series, and an institution that had been essentially off-limits to blacks in earlier times. While such decisions regarding sitters and spaces (as well as the choice to make sixteen diptychs in total, referencing the original church’s address) follow a memorial logic, they also endow the photographs with a fundamental sense of place. The constraints that structure this project serve to turn the diptychs into icons, physical manifestations that carry an inalienable presence and a sense of being-at-home in the city where they were made and first shown.

Similar qualities characterized Bey’s debut series, “Harlem, USA” (1975–78): twenty-five portraits taken on the streets of Harlem and first shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. To make these photographs, Bey, like Welling, returned to a family home; although born and raised in Queens, he traveled frequently as a child to Harlem, where his parents had formerly lived and where he still had relatives. For “Harlem, USA,” he photographed strangers whom he befriended—or who recognized him through his resemblance to his family members—as characters in a story about a place that, per the title, was at once local and invested with mythic, national significance. (Bey and Welling came to their respective ideas in the time of the United States bicentennial.)

The experience of fleeing across a corner of northern Ohio to escape slavery may likewise be understood as hyper-specific yet foundational to American identity. Bey certainly seems to see his two series as linked: not only do “Harlem” and “Night” each contain twenty-five pictures, but Hughes and DeCarava, to whom Bey pays homage in “Night,” were celebrated Harlem figures. Moreover, they consecrated their love for the neighborhood in a jointly authored book, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), that greatly influenced subsequent photographers, Bey included.

Flypaper is a photo-novella, meaning that DeCarava’s photographs function as helpmates to Hughes’s written plot. Bey incorporated a literary dimension differently in “Night,” by structuring the series as an epic narrative. There is an order to the wandering, which proceeds episodically from safe homes in town, through wild or intimidating country spots, to the roiling shoreline of Lake Erie. The final picture intimidates in its openness. Under a lowering sky, the traveler awaits daunting transport to a promised but unseeable farther shore. Such a journey and unresolved ending are mythic.

Considerations of myth return us to the writings of Toni Morrison, who made a career of opening American history to the metahistorical insights and experiences of African

Last Updated: 13 December 2019

SEANKELLY

Americans. Morrison's novels are situated in verifiable times and settings, yet the action moves between empirical and oneiric states. Far from authorial fancy, magical happenings, according to Morrison, derive from an inherited wisdom more credible than any documentary evidence. "My own use of enchantment," she remarked in 1986, "simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew. . . . The metaphors and the perceptions came out of that world."¹⁰

At the time of that statement Morrison was nearing publication of *Beloved* (1987), her best-known novel, set as "Night" is in Ohio, and in the years around the Civil War. The story was inspired by an 1856 newspaper story—already novelized in the period—concerning a fugitive named Margaret Garner, who at her capture murdered her daughter rather than see the girl she loved so dearly be forced back into slavery. Morrison, like Bey, was not interested in verifying historical accounts; rather, she wanted to say that any account lives only through a communal effort of memory. In her telling, the dead and the living merge to form the history of a place: "You have to . . . identify those who have preceded you—resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation—so that they are always there as the *confirmation* and the affirmation of the life . . . of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country."¹¹