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CLOSE-UP: THE NIGHT SHIFT

Ciarán Finlayson on Dawoud Bey's *Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown's Tannery)*, 2017



Dawoud Bey, Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown's Tannery), 2017, gelatin silver print, 44 x 55". From the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017.

SET BACK ON THE FAR SIDE OF A FIELD, in an overgrown backyard, a modest farmhouse is bisected by the silhouette of a tree. Just out of reach of its branches, billowing clouds overtake a pocket of sunshine. This pastoral scene appears in a contemporary black-and-white image

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that depicts John Brown's tannery in Hudson, Ohio, from the imagined vantage of fugitive slaves who might have sheltered with the abolitionist while he lived there from 1824 to 1826. John Brown Jr. recalls being five years of age when the house was visited by the first black people he had ever met—"dark panting refugees who flitted by in the night," as W. E. B. Du Bois recounts it—sent to his father by a sympathetic neighbor:¹

Mother gave the poor creatures some supper; but they thought themselves pursued and were uneasy. Presently father heard the trampling of horses crossing a bridge on one of the main roads, half a mile off; so he took his guests out the back door and down into the swamp near the brook to hide, giving them arms to defend themselves, but returning to the house to await the event. It proved a false alarm; the horse-men were people of the neighborhood going to Hudson village. Father then went out into the dark wood,—for it was night,—and had some difficulty in finding his fugitives; finally he was guided to the spot by the sound of the man's heart throbbing for fear of capture. He brought them into the house again, sheltered them a while, and sent them on their way.²

The building in this photograph, being largely reconstructed, is not historically authentic, but looking from across the menacingly open field at the safe house, softly lit and matter-of-factly framed by photographer Dawoud Bey, one still shudders.

Less a celebration of the generalized escape that both "saved slavery and killed it," Bey's series is a study in the subtleties of determinate negation.

This image is one of twenty-five comprising Bey's series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017, which both documents and imagines sites of the Underground Railroad in Cleveland and across northeastern Ohio. Marshes, porches, branches, and fences are prominently featured. A few of his subjects, such as the tannery, are formally recognized as historic, while the rest are anonymous stretches of open country, crowded forests, and houses captured either in furtive close-up or from a distance. The photographs look as though they were taken at night but in fact were all shot during the day, then printed in a gray scale so deep and nuanced that their subjects are difficult to see. The inscrutable darkness of these scenes is optically challenging—the artist's homage

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to the photos of Roy DeCarava—but also calls to mind recent paintings by Chris Ofili and Kerry James Marshall in which dark figures are rendered on similarly dark backgrounds, compelling the viewer to move around the works to catch the light in just the right way to make out their contents. Requiring this physical mode of apprehending, Bey’s richly saturated images perform as sculpture. In the words of the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, we “cannot locate a single viewpoint from which to view the work, such as a painting provides, for a thousand points of view are not sufficient.”³



Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #19 (Creek and Trees)*, 2017, gelatin silver print, 44 × 55". From the series “*Night Coming Tenderly, Black*,” 2017.

Bey complicates the locations by straightforwardly presenting their unspectacular elements—shrubs, creeks, fences, and farmhouses—as seen from behind trees, around corners, and within thickets, infusing his images with a touch of the sinister. That the urgency of such near brushes with racial violence is so muted as to appear bucolic is a testament to his work’s ingenuity. Per “*Dream Variations*,” the somnolent Langston Hughes poem from which the series draws its title,

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Bey recasts escape not only as something dreamlike, but also as an invitation along the lines of Aimé Césaire's refrain "*marronnon-les*" in his 1955 rejoinder to the aesthetic conservatism sweeping the French Communist Party: "Let's maroon on them / as in times past we marooned on our slave drivers."⁴ Art historian Kellie Jones has characterized Bey's huge, many-paneled studio portraits of the 1990s as capturing his subjects' "acts of maroonage."⁵ In this series, the acts are literal but the images restrained, not imposing or fragmented as they are in the portraits. If themes such as escape, refusal, and becoming can be said to be represented at the level of form at all, they manifest only in the resolute everydayness of the objects captured in photos such as *Untitled #16 (Branches with Thorns)* and *Untitled #19 (Creek and Trees)* as extensions of his general project, the "representation of black normalcy."⁶



Dawoud Bey, *Mr. Moore's Bar-B-Que, Harlem, NY, 1976*, gelatin silver print, 8 × 11 7/8". From the series "Harlem, U.S.A.," 1975–79.

"Night Coming Tenderly, Black" marks Bey's second turn to historical issues. For his first, a portrait series from 2012 called "The Birmingham Project," he photographed children, eleven, thirteen, fourteen, and sixteen years old (their ages corresponding to those of the four girls and two boys killed in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist

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Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and a related shooting), alongside adults the age the victims would have been had they lived. A related two-channel video work, *9.15.63*, 2013, presents slow panning shots across interiors and exteriors of Birmingham's diners, barbershops, and schools and along its wide residential streets, just catching treetops and roofs on a breezy Sunday drive to the scene of the attack.

Since his breakthrough 1979 exhibition "Harlem, U.S.A.," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Bey has almost exclusively photographed people, except during a brief period in the early '80s when he swore off the human figure to expand his range of techniques and "to get at the formal underpinnings of two-dimensional pictorial form using the urban environment and light."⁷ For "Harlem Redux," his 2014–16 series that revisited the neighborhood, images of people took a back seat to architectural images. Whereas the earlier series anonymized well-known Harlem locations and emphasized the iconicity of the neighborhood's residents,⁸ the later works brought into sharp focus the details of their recently reconstructed, now-disenchanted environment. Individuals are presented as types, on MacBooks at a patisserie or standing in line at Red Rooster. Instead of faces, we see "character masks," as Marx would say, "personifications of economic relations."⁹ The video work *9.15.63* links the two series; here, also, Bey deploys documentary techniques to perform historical inquiry,



sensitively handling the lives of people without depicting them. Like "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," *9.15.63* presents the past only through the careful framing of the present.

Dawoud Bey, Three Women at a Parade, Harlem, NY, 1978, gelatin silver print, 8 1/8 x 11 7/8" From the series "Harlem, U.S.A.," 1975-79.

Initially, "Night" seems to be related to Lorna Simpson's early historical fictions such as *Corridor*, 2003, or Isaac Julien's and John Akomfrah's recent experimental biopics (*Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, and *Precarity*, 2017, respectively), in which anachronistic props and settings are used to puncture otherwise meticulous reconstructions of the period—

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unsubtle reminders that issues from nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century black history persist. Bey's series also seems of a piece with Willie Doherty's photographs of innocuous fields in Northern Ireland that were previously the sites of sectarian violence, and with Sammy Baloji's "Mémoire," 2006, photomontages combining work sites in present-day Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with archival photos of degraded Congolese miners under Belgian rule. If those pieces weave together then and now so that the former haunts the latter, Bey's, by contrast, offers the living present as a nonindexical image of the past. The problems that emerge from this complex double coding, which gives rise to the work's unsettling tenderness, are removed from the familiar art-critical terrain of national memory on the one hand and ontology on the other and are assigned to us as historical tasks.



Still from Dawoud Bey's *9.15.63*, 2013, HD video, color, sounds, 11 minutes 25 seconds.

Bey's "historical turn" is also a turn to nature.¹⁰ That landscape photography constitutes the bulk of "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" is one of its remarkable conceptual successes. Both nature and history define and express themselves only in relation to each other; both are also somewhat fictitious. In *Untitled #3 (Cozad-Bates House)*, downtown Cleveland is made to appear rural so that the city plays the country. As is the case with *Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown's Tannery)*, the historic sites are enchanted not by the actual historicity of the objects but through their arrangement in the series. Bey's intentions are fully realized in the final four pictures—the only photos that form a narrative sequence—wherein the camera creeps out from behind barren, ivy-entwined trees in the rear yard of a farmhouse and toward the open expanse of Lake Erie, the other side of which was beyond the jurisdiction of American slavers.

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Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, 2017, gelatin silver print, 44 × 55". From the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017.

Two planes of foreboding gray fill the top and bottom of the last image, *Lake Erie and Sky*. There is no "dark and raging sea,"¹¹ as Kant would have it, but in refusing to depict any visible shoreline or means of crossing this oceanic body of water, the photo cannot avoid representing the "dynamically sublime."¹² Lush and naturalistic, the concluding image, its meaning conditioned by the narrative whole, confirms Bey's move away from portraiture as a turn toward the social. The vista's natural beauty runs aground on the geopolitics of the border, so the arresting, art-historical scene of human confrontation with nature becomes an image of freedom in the negative. Depicting gray skies and dark waters as seen from the shore, after the sinister picket fences and sheltering woods, the work folds the happy ending of our unseen protagonist's *petit marronage* into a longer process of social revolution, in which the Underground Railroad was a step toward organization, the forming of "a great black phalanx that worked and schemed and paid and finally fought for the freedom of black men in America."¹³ Less a celebration of the generalized escape that both "saved slavery and

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killed it,” Bey’s series is a study in the subtleties of determinate negation.¹⁴ Its denunciation of the administered world is spoken in the plain speech of John Brown: “Slavery is wrong, kill it.”¹⁵

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NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1909), 84.
2. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 84.
3. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion’s Creative Dream*, ed. and trans. Jason Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 41.
4. Aimé Césaire, “Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet (*Elements of an Ars Poetica*),” in *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 885.
5. Kellie Jones, “Dawoud Bey: Portraits in the Theater of Desire,” in *Dawoud Bey: Portraits 1975–1995*, ed. Rob Dewey, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995), 51.
6. Dawoud Bey, “Interview,” by Carrie Mae Weems in *Class Pictures: Photographs by Dawoud Bey* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2007), 152.
7. Dawoud Bey, “An Interview with Dawoud Bey,” by Jock Reynolds in *Dawoud Bey: Portraits 1975–1995*, 105.
8. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, “Keeping Time,” in *Dawoud Bey: Harlem, U.S.A.*, ed. Matthew S. Witkovsky, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 16.
9. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), 1:179. Translation modified.

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10. Steven Nelson, "Dawoud Bey's Historical Turn," in *Dawoud Bey: Two American Projects*, ed. Corey Keller and Elisabeth Sherman, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 14–21.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 139.
12. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 143–148.
13. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 82.
14. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 82.
15. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 340.