Bengal, Rebecca. “A Visit With Dawoud Bey in the Place of His Pictures.” *Vanity Fair*. April 21, 2021.

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A Girl with School Medals, Brooklyn, NY, 1988.COURTESY OF DAWOUD BEY AND MACK.

The apartment house on Cambridge Place in Clinton Hill is quintessentially Brooklyn, a stately foundation propping up faded pale brick, with curved bow windows and wrought iron detailing on its fence and front door, seemingly unchanged for years. Its wide stoop has a vantage onto a lively swath of Fulton Street, the destination and origin of much of its foot traffic. From 1978 to 1991, those coming and going included preteens striking a pose in overalls, bookish young boys, young MCs and track stars, little girls in Sunday dress, men and women headed to the cleaner, the barber, the bodega. During those

years the artist **Dawoud Bey** observed this steady flow of everyday Black beauty, occasionally pulling a face out of the crowd to make a picture with his Polaroid Type 55 camera. He photographed in close proximity, usually with very few background details, and printed large, in luminous black and white tones, so that one can look directly into the eyes of Bey's friends and neighbors. The pictures, **Hilton Als** has written, "conveyed the satisfaction of being seen, which is a form of brotherhood and love, too."

A Girl with a Knife Nosepin, Brooklyn, NY, 1990.

COURTESY OF DAWOUD BEY AND MACK.

A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 1988.

COURTESY OF DAWOUD BEY AND MACK.

On a recent afternoon, we met on those steps. Bey was in town from his longtime home in Chicago for the installation and opening of "Dawoud Bey: An American Project," his career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibition, which previously opened at SF MOMA in February 2020 before moving to the High Museum in Atlanta in November, spans a period when his photographs had an easier time travelling than their maker. After and amid months of grief and isolation, the communal gaze in his portraits resonates deeply but, more important, its eight distinct bodies of work, made over 46 years, also offer the opportunity to simultaneously slip through multiple eras of time. If the subjects on view—from Harlem street scenes to the shadow realm of the Underground Railroad—feel particularly prescient, clarifying, and challenging, it's because Bey has always been speaking to the current moment, imaginatively questioning the past and its place in our experience of the now.

Bey was perched on his old stoop, wearing a dark red corduroy blazer over a printed button-down shirt, jeans, and loafers—as innately stylish as the people in his pictures. We had pulled down our masks to talk. The sun was out, the air was moving, and Bey, who began wearing a hearing aid in grade school, is used to reading lips. We looked together through the just-published *Street Portraits*. “Initially it has to come from a real interest in the subject,” Bey said. “You can’t fake that. Richard Avedon said, All the photographs I make, they’re really portraits of me. And people said, That arrogant bastard!” He laughed. “But I believe it. If it’s not in you, there’s no real way to communicate that. They only look the way they do because it’s my photograph. In another picture, **Sunshine Bracey** might be smiling. I’m not interested in the exterior smile, that kind of public presentation we’ve come to expect. I was always interested in interiority.” A particular marvel of Bey’s work is that, even when it comes to his youngest subjects, his portraits vividly reveal this quality. “They were complex people, and there was a rich interiority that inhabited them.”

Martina and Rhonda, Chicago, IL, 1993.

In Clinton Hill in the 1980s, Bey had been thinking about Avedon's American West portraits, especially the way, made against spare backdrops, they depended greatly on gestural language. Bey wouldn't work in a studio until 1991, when he'd move away to enter the Yale MFA photography program as a 38-year-old artist and new father. But in Brooklyn, he had already worked through similar constraints. "Place a dude in front of a camera, and how do you make it nuanced?" he said. "And, of course, I'm wrapping all those histories and ideas around the idea of the Black subject. Avedon's in the studio with Marilyn Monroe and whoever. I'm out here in the street with these folks! But I had an acute awareness of that history and I wanted to have a conversation with that history."

Born David Edward Smikle and raised in Jamaica, Queens, Bey started out as an aspiring drummer, studying with his neighbor, the jazz pioneer Milford Graves. Bey began making his first significant photographs in the early 1970s, around the time when he began using his chosen name. In Harlem, a neighborhood where his family maintained strong connections and the cultural territory of many of his core influences, he worked in the 35mm tradition of the great street photographers. He initially aimed for "'positive' pictures of the Black community," a notion he soon dismantled as counterproductive.

"There's a man standing there talking to his friends—but is that 'positive'? I quickly realized that didn't work," Bey told me." It wasn't *useful* to the complex thing of taking in the world and the people in it and shaping it into photographs." Instead, as if adding to a dialogue begun by his artistic predecessor Roy DeCarava, Bey's camera found a tender and complicated realism in the contemporary life of the neighborhood and its people. Bey's first major solo show took place at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 1979.] "Ultimately, Bey represents Harlem as a state of mind," the artist and historian **Deborah Willis** wrote in *Seeing Deeply*, a 2018 collection of his works.

Intellectually, the next phase of his work came from a nagging impulse. "One of the things that I intentionally wanted to do was make pictures on the block that I lived on," he said, nodding in the direction of Fulton Street. "I was always

packing my camera and going someplace else. I began to think about that." He pointed to a photograph of a bearded man with a wizened face—Peg, who set up a shoeshine stand on the corner. "He was like the neighborhood sage. He kind of *looks* like a sage," Bey said, recalling the group of older men who would congregate, hang out all day. He laughed. "And you know, this is the interesting thing: I don't know if I ever saw him actually shining anybody's shoes."

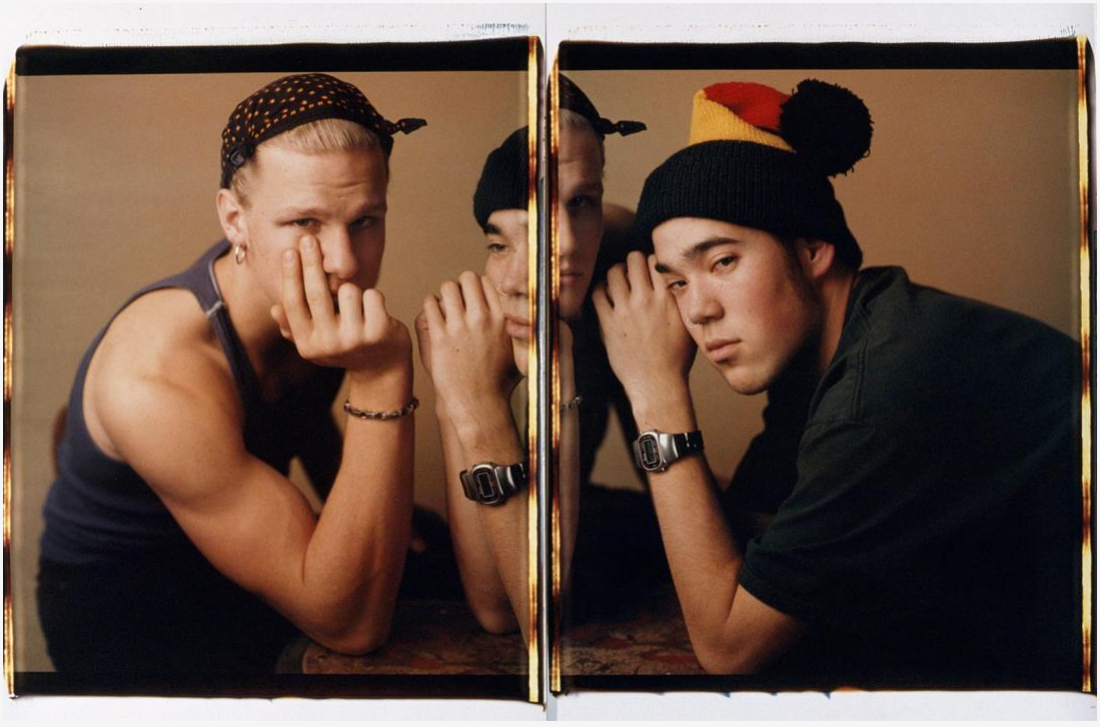
Sunshine Bracey and a Friend, Brooklyn, NY, 1990.

COURTESY OF DAWOUD BEY AND MACK.

Peg and his polisher and brushes are long gone from the corner, but former neighbors spill in and out of the apartment building. "Is that who I think it is under that mask?" Bey said to a woman gingerly carrying out her recycling. One parcel tumbled from her grasp as she noticed him. "Dawoud, is that you?!" This turned out to be **Lolita**, Bey's vibrant and charismatic former landlady, who, moments earlier, he had compared to Alice B. Toklas, for her salon-like relationship to the artists who rented from her, many drawn there by

the proximity to Pratt Institute. “We had it going *on,*” Lolita affirmed from the opposite step. “This building *rocked.*” It was through his friends, artist **Marilyn Nance** and filmmaker **Al Santana,** that Bey heard of a vacant apartment, with a starting rent of $175.

A block away now there are murals in honor of Biggie Smalls, born on St. James Place, which was recently rechristened Christopher “Notorious B.I.G.” Wallace Way. Bey never photographed him. “Biggie was always in hardcore mode when he was in the streets,” he said. Kids from Junior M.A.F.I.A., a group of rappers mentored by Wallace, shared an apartment down the block; they were younger and more approachable. “I could talk to them,” Bey said. “They were just hanging around Biggie, trying to get some of that reflective whatever-it-was they thought he had coming off of him.” He asked Lolita if she knew what had become of the teenage girl depicted on the back of *Street Portraits,* her track medals pinned to her shirt. “I always hoped that would become the shape of her life.”



Hilary and Taro, Chicago, IL, 1992.

Lolita looked through other pictures. “Ooh! That’s Bracey,” she said. “Ooh! That’s a good one too.” She and Bey enumerated some of the intervening changes in Brooklyn: Condos have replaced the Board of Education in downtown Brooklyn, for instance. “Used to be,” he began, “when you said 110 Livingston, you meant—” and Lolita quickly finished, “—the Board of Ed!”

Even Bey’s mention of the Board of Education felt tethered to his work. It calls to mind his project *Harlem Redux,* a provocative depiction of the neighborhood in the midst of gentrification. It also reflects the way he has steadily pursued his own artistic growth while simultaneously seeking out meaningful teaching and art-making projects with museums and institutions. Through this way of working, he began to nudge the portrait into a collaborative space, with the formal, large-scale color photographs in his *Class Pictures* series (1992–2007). This questioning the shape of a young person’s life would point him, eventually, to Birmingham, Alabama.

Bey’s upbringing in Queens was middle-class and socially conscious. In 1964—a year after four girls were killed in the white supremacist bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, his parents went to see James Baldwin lecture at Calvary Baptist Church in Jamaica. They came home with a copy of *The Movement* by Lorraine Hansberry and the SNCC, illustrated with photographs. Bey, then 11, absorbed the picture of 12-year-old **Sarah Jean Collins,** severely wounded in the attack that killed her sister Addie Mae, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson. Decades later Bey would bolt upright in bed one night, suddenly seized by the memory of the photograph.

In the early 2000s, while still making *Class Pictures,* Bey began to make exploratory visits to Birmingham, where he learned from local archives that two Black boys, Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson, had also been killed in racial violence that day. “I didn’t even know about the boys, but the four girls had such a mythic presence. I wanted to make it palpable.” He made portraits of local girls and boys who were the same ages as the six children had been when they were killed, yet to Bey they still did not fully convey precisely what had haunted him. “I realized I was trying to visualize ‘the past’ and the past of

their lives without figuring out the other important piece of it, which was *what* it was and *who* it was they never got to become because of that moment." He made photographs of adults who had lived through the terror and paired their portraits with those of the children, side by side. In these diptychs, what becomes visible is time, both a gulf between the two and a connection—survived time, lived time, stolen time, the future time in the lives of the younger generation.

Don Sledge and Moses Austin, Birmingham, AL, from *The Birmingham Project*, 2012.

At the Whitney, the Birmingham Project is shown separately from the rest of the retrospective, in an enclosed first-floor gallery that has the feel of a small sanctuary, the photographs like chapel windows. In the dual channel video *9.15.63,* scored to music by Bey's son, **Ramon Alvarez-Smikle,** one camera pans over the brushes and chairs of an empty barbershop and drawings by little kids, while the other grazes gently through trees, rooftops,

and, finally, the steeple and stained glass windows of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

“That was a conceptual breakthrough for me,” Bey said. “That’s when I decided to continue history-based work. All the issues that have to do with that history are still being played out now, and they have their basis in that formative relationship with enslaved Africans being brought over here—not to be fully participating social citizens but to be used as enslaved labor and drive the economy. They were expendable, very much in the way that Black people in certain circumstances continue to be expendable.” He spoke from his stoop three days after the police killing of Duante Wright in Minnesota, during the third week in the trial of **Derek Chauvin.**

“George Floyd was viewed as expendable,” Bey continued emphatically. “That Minneapolis officer had no more regard for George Floyd’s life than a slavedriver would have had in 1750. It is a complete disregard and a dehumanization of Black life that begins with the institution of slavery and the site itself, which is the plantation. I thought I needed to go to those places to bear witness, but also to construct a representation of what it means.”

The last room of the exhibition contains nine photographs from the first series of his current three-part project. *Night Coming Tenderly, Black,* was made in Ohio, showing the landscape of purported stops along the Underground Railroad from the vantage of an unseen fugitive at night.“ When I started thinking about the blackness of the subject in a photograph moving through the blackness of space, that’s Roy De Carava in a very singular way,” Bey said. He consciously applied the way DeCarava radically portrayed Black skin in gloriously darkened tones to his unpeopled landscapes; Bey photographed them during the day and printed them dark. “It was meant to be a materially beautiful space.” The title, from Langston Hughes’ poem “Dream Variations,” merged intrinsically: “While night comes on gently, Dark like me—That is my dream!”

Untitled #17 (Forest), from *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017.

Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I), from *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017.

Bey intends the pictures to envelop. Stand before them and, slowly, your eyes will adjust, looking below trees, along fences, remaining alert to present dangers, whether the white farmhouse in the distance is menace or friend. Look longer, and another world of tones and details emerge, reveling in the obscure and the sense of being hidden, the forests and yards and the vast great lake and the night itself forming a protective cloak and an alternate world—a dream.

The landscapes are mostly oblique, resonant with evocative, timeless details: the curve of a picket fence, the cover of a tree. At the same time there are anachronistic interruptions—what appears to be an air conditioner in one window, for instance, as if to remind the viewer that the past lives on. In the grammar of time, “past-present” is the natural state of Bey’s pictures, a term he uses himself. “I reinscribe the past in the space of the photograph,” he said.

Next month, he will return to Louisiana to resume the last phase of the series that was disrupted by the pandemic, photographing across four plantations and creating a multi-channel video. The work will premiere this fall at Sean Kelly in New York and at Prospect in New Orleans. These pictures require a different treatment, Bey said, “to allow the viewer to believe as if they are physically inhabiting these spaces in time, to see and feel every detail, materially, viscerally.”

The final stop for this series inevitably draws him to the origins of enslaved Africans in America: Virginia. As always, he will be guided by research, but not encumbered by it. “I think about a writer like Toni Morrison, who wrote epic fiction that is based on real history but it’s not a mere retelling of it,” Bey said. “It’s using that history to create something that’s rooted in it, amplifying it through this rigorous kind of reimagining, and being adept enough at the craft to shape it into something credible. So that people believe it. And not just believe in it, but are moved by it.”

One day in 2019, when *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* was first shown at the Art Institute of Chicago, Bey walked into the gallery with a friend, and two visitors looked away from the photographs in startled confusion. “They said,

‘But *you made* these,’” he recalled. “They were so deep in the liminal space between past and present, exactly where I wanted them to be.”