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Wheeler, André. "Touring Harlem, Then and Now, with Dawoud Bey." *The New Yorker*. June 21, 2021.

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The photographer, who is the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum, revisits the neighborhood that provided the backdrop for his early images, and where the old jazz clubs and theatres have been turned into banks and high-rises.

The photographer Dawoud Bey, whose work is currently the subject of a tight and topical retrospective at the Whitney Museum, stood on a Harlem sidewalk the other day and peered into the window of a Wells Fargo branch. Pedestrians streamed around him in both directions. "This is the former location of Lenox Lounge," Bey said, referring to the blues-and-jazz club that showcased Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. He watched someone use an A.T.M. inside and frowned. "It was a major social and cultural center," he said. "But you would never know."

Bey, who was born and raised in New York, was in town from Louisiana, where he is shooting photographs that explore the legacy of plantations; the Sean Kelly Gallery, in Hudson Yards, will show the images in the fall. His day's itinerary included visits to personal monuments in a Harlem that is vastly different from the one he frequented as a struggling artist almost fifty years ago. "This is where all my formative experiences took place," he said. He wore a sky-blue blazer, a black button-down, and white jeans.

His second stop was St. John's Baptist Church, a red brick building on 152nd Street. "This is where my mom and dad met," he said, and took a seat on the steps. "After service, we'd go across the street and spend some time with the McMillans." He pointed to a nearby building and wove in and out of vivid narratives: his aunt Louise's membership in the parish's women's group; a dubious dry cleaner whose store may or may not still be around the corner; and a friend of his parents named Jimmy who used to work there.

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Dawoud Bey illustration by João Fazenda



"A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater," from 1976

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“Jimmy was always in the back,” Bey said with a laugh. “It didn’t take me long to realize that that’s where the real business was happening! The place was probably a numbers joint.”

As Bey reconstructed his memories, an older man wearing a plaid shirt and a flat cap exited the church. Bey asked him if he knew the McMillans.

The man said “Oh, yeah!” and introduced himself as the Reverend Dr. John L. Scott, a pastor at St. John’s. “I’ve been here forty-eight years now,” he said. Scott ran through the McMillan family tree, recounting their move to North Carolina twenty-five years ago, but then he got distracted by a teen-ager walking by in a shirt that said “A Bathing Ape.” “Hey, man!” Scott shouted. “What that shirt say?” Having snared the boy’s attention, Scott took the opportunity to spell out the benefits of organized religion. The boy gave a polite smile and walked away.

Next, an elderly woman named Delores Lee, who wore a hat adorned with rhinestones, walked up, and Scott urged Bey to share his memories of the McMillans. “Oh, yes, the McMillans,” Lee said, beaming. “They used to have the boys in one room and the girls in the other after Sunday school.”



A Man in a Bowler Hat,” from 1976.

“That was beautiful,” Bey said, setting off to his next stop. “It’s nice to know some of that history is still alive.” On West 132nd Street, between Powell and Douglass Boulevards, his gait took on a determined quality. He was trying to find a spot where he had photographed someone forty-five years ago, when he was twenty-three. “It was the first image I shot that I actually liked,” he said. On his iPhone, he pulled up the picture, which is titled “A Man in a Bowler Hat,” and he scrutinized the windows of brownstones along the street for a potential match. No luck.

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“I used to always try to be in Harlem on Sunday mornings,” he said, taking a breather on a stoop. “Because that’s when people were out. Church service always started around ten-forty-five, so I would try to be out here by ten o’clock.” He described how he’d had to overcome his shyness before he could ask the man in the bowler hat permission to take his photo. Then he took out his iPhone and posed for a photo of himself in front of an apartment building.

The last stop on the tour was the Loew’s Victoria Theatre, on 125th Street. Or, rather, what used to be the Loew’s Victoria. The site is now home to a twenty-eight-story tower containing apartments and a hotel, with room for arts and cultural spaces. In 1976, Bey shot an iconic photograph of a stylish young Black boy posed cockily in front of the theatre’s ornately tiled box office. The grand exterior is now mostly hidden behind a mess of construction tarps and scaffolding. Taking all this in, Bey charged across 125th Street, undeterred by the whoosh of traffic, to get a better view. He shook his head and peered at the neoclassical building front, flanked by Ionic columns, which anchored the new glass tower. “Well, at least they didn’t tear down the façade,” he said.