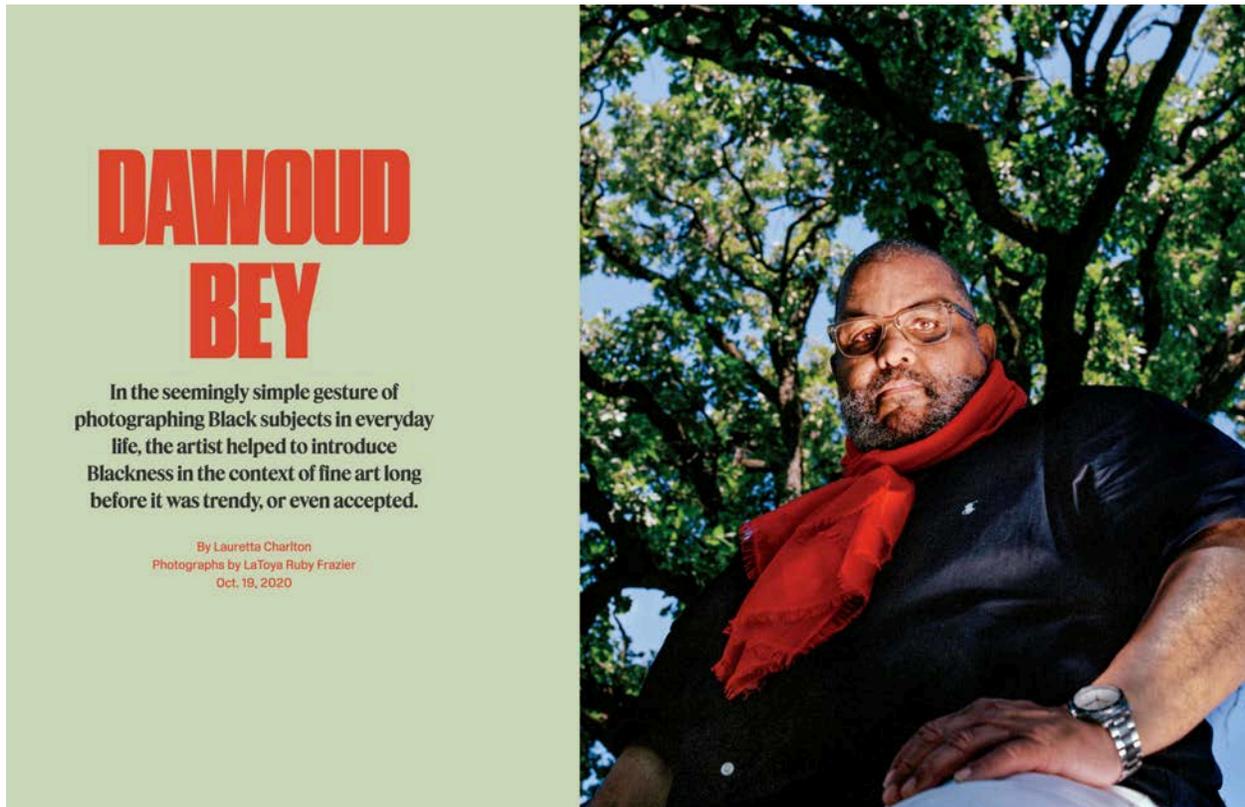


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T The Greats



THE PHOTOGRAPHER DAWOUD BEY was feeling restless, sequestered in his apartment with his books and cameras and music. It was March, the Covid-19 pandemic had arrived in the United States and museum shows were being canceled, not to mention flights, shoots, weddings, interviews and everything else. Sitting in his home office in Chicago's Hyde Park — "the Obamas' neighborhood," he told me — where he also keeps a studio, Bey confessed that he was not used to being so still. The vintage cameras that lined the bookshelf behind him spoke to his need to be on the go, in search of a hidden treasure or a story to tell. Instead, we were fumbling through niceties over FaceTime, trying to decide when to stop talking about the pandemic and start talking about his work.

Bey, who is 66, is part of a tradition of Black photographers who have elevated the Black subject in contemporary art beyond pure documentation or tedious clichés. He has expanded upon the legacies of James Van Der Zee and Roy DeCarava, whose images of Harlem challenged preconceived notions of being Black in segregated

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America, as well as the legacy of Gordon Parks, who cataloged the daily lives of Black Americans during the civil rights era. They were artists who, like Bey, could distill an entire era in a single frame, and make small, human moments feel historic in and of themselves. Bey got his start as a street photographer, mostly shooting the people he encountered in and around Harlem and Brooklyn, N.Y. He is still best known for his magnificent portraiture work, in which his subjects seem almost preternaturally at ease. Take, for example, the young lovers from "A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY" (1990). They gaze into Bey's lens with such perfect comfort, it's as if Bey's camera has turned the viewer into an old friend.



Dawoud Bey's "A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY" (1990). © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

More recently, he has produced large-scale gelatin silver prints of moody nocturnal landscapes, in which people are notably absent. Atmospheric and haunting, these newer works were shot during the day but printed to look as though they were captured at night. They're strangely unknowable scenes, rendered in stark black and white: the porch of a house, obstructed by shrubs; a small creek running through a forest, the outline of a home just visible on the distant horizon; the choppy waters of Lake Erie. The photographs look as if they were taken by a trespassing interloper — the camera often

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seems to be peeking out from behind a tree, or through the cracks of a picket fence — and there is something sinister, even foreboding, about them, their mysteries stubbornly refusing to reveal themselves.

The pictures, it turns out, are all of locations in Ohio along one of the final legs of the Underground Railroad, and taken together, they imagine the perspective of an enslaved African on their way to freedom. Bey said that the enormous size of the images is meant to pull the viewer inextricably, perhaps involuntarily, into the past, into a landscape that swallows you up and disorients you. Looking at the images, viewing the landscape as a fugitive enslaved person might, the lens becomes the eyes and the body. You can almost hear the sound of branches and leaves rustling underfoot, forcing you to observe the woods a little more carefully as you make your way toward Lake Erie, photographed by Bey as a vast, inviting expanse leading to Canada, toward freedom. The images in the series, called “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” amount to a kind of portraiture that depicts the past as very much a part of our present. They are among the most psychologically complex and emotional works of Bey’s career, impressive for an artist who has spent the last half century humanizing and complicating the notion of the Black figure. In these new works, as in his portraiture, Bey is grappling with a fundamental question of his career: How do Black people enter a narrative of American life from which they have been continuously erased?



Bey's "Untitled #15 (Forest with Small Trees)" (2017) from the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black." © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

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IN MAY, AFTER Bey and I began our series of conversations over FaceTime, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers, one of whom was filmed kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, igniting some of the most wide-reaching civil rights protests of the last 50 years. As part of a demographic vulnerable to the coronavirus, Bey did not join the demonstrations, and he didn't document the resistance actions that took place because, as he put it, that's not the kind of photographer he is. His work is about the subtle gesture, like the figure in "A Young Woman Waiting for the Bus, Syracuse" (1985), who stands beneath a "No Loitering" sign at a bus station, her face awash in a ray of light, her expression so confident it feels as if she hung the sun herself so that Bey could get a better look at her. But the current reckoning with systemic racism and the continuing violence against Black people in America has amplified the power of Bey's work, which forces the viewer to confront the weight and significance of history as a means of understanding the present moment. We did not arrive where we are now by accident, and Bey's career and his recent work in particular have been a sustained battle against what he calls "the fundamental dehumanization of Black bodies."

Before the pandemic, Bey had been shooting former slave plantations in Louisiana, a kind of sequel to his Underground Railroad pictures. On a visit to Chicago in August, he showed me some of the proofs while we sat six feet apart in a gallery. Like many of his images, these will be printed in black and white and at an enormous scale, giving them a monumentalism that is hard to look away from. "The basis of the current relationship of Black people to America and the relationship around race, around violence to the Black body, it's all foundational to the relationship that begins here," he said, pointing to one of the images, a photograph of the Evergreen Plantation, about an hour outside New Orleans, its antebellum architecture — including its slave quarters — meticulously preserved. Today, much of this history has been paved over, but for Bey, these works that take as their subject matter some of the darkest moments of American history are not a portal into an antiquated past but a reminder of how close that past remains to us. "What underlines and underpins all of this are these places, and what these places are and what they were and what they represent in our collective history," he said. "You can either tie an enslaved person to a tree and whip them until they pass out or you can put your knee on their neck and wait until they die."

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Bey's "A Young Woman Waiting for the Bus, Syracuse" (1985). © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

As I looked at these unfinished images of old plantations, I noted their skillful composition and was captivated by their monochromatic simplicity. I could almost smell the moss hanging from the trees and the broken wood of the quarters. The fact that the images are beautiful despite the horrors they allude to is a contradiction that makes Bey's genius clear.

However easy it is to forget, the past is never dead. It may already be easy to forget that it's only been in the last five or so years that the gatekeepers of the art world have begun regularly exhibiting and promoting Black artists. Between 2016 and 2017, the number of solo exhibitions focused on the work of Black artists in major museums jumped more than 60 percent, according to data compiled by Artnet News. This change was also reflected — dramatically — in the secondary market; last year, a work by the 30-year-old painter Tschabalala Self sold at auction for nearly half a million dollars. (Bey sold his first work to a museum, the Museum of Modern Art, when he was 38 years old. The price was just under \$1,000, and he brokered the deal himself. Some of his work now sells in the mid-five figures.) Galleries and museums may be finally trying to form a more inclusive vision of art history, but Bey has been working since long before Sotheby's was affirming its support for Black Lives Matter on Instagram. He has spent over four decades collaborating with students, museums and communities across the country, using his practice to ask critical questions about art and access. As he put it to me: "What is the museum as an institution? What are their responsibilities to the communities that they serve and the broader communities that they are a part of?" This

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year, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art collaborated on a full retrospective of his work, "Dawoud Bey: An American Project," which will open at the High Museum in Atlanta in November and at the Whitney next year. It's one of the largest surveys of a living Black photographer in American history.



Bey's "Timothy Huffman and Ira Sims" (2012), from "The Birmingham Project." For this series, the artist paid tribute to the victims of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. The people in the diptychs, all from Birmingham, Ala., are either the same age as the victims or the age they would have been had they survived. © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

BEY, WHO WAS born David Edward Smikle in Queens, N.Y., in 1953, has lived in Chicago since 1998. He moved there with his then wife, Candida Alvarez, for a teaching position at Columbia College Chicago (they have a grown son, who works in the music industry). He's broad-shouldered, just under six feet, with a salt-and-pepper beard, which he strokes as he talks. One person I talked to said that when he walks, he appears to be floating, gliding deliberately and steadily through the world. He can be intense, particularly when talking about his decision to make art that examines African-American history. "You weren't brought here to be anybody's friend," he told me at one point, referencing the trans-Atlantic slave trade's place in this history. "We never were." But he also chuckles between sentences and is quick to smile. When he was very young, he started to lose his hearing in a manner consistent with nerve damage and has worn a hearing aid since the third grade. "Before that, my teachers would tell my mother, 'Your son daydreams a lot,'" he said with a laugh. "You can say I see a lot more than I hear, that's for sure."

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Bey's parents met in Harlem before moving to Jamaica, Queens, hoping to give their two sons (Bey is the youngest) the kind of suburban lifestyle that many Black families in America were denied because of segregation and white flight. His father was a microwave engineer and his mother was a homemaker. They had a backyard and a library with an encyclopedia of American poetry. The family was solidly middle-class, which confused his white teachers, who struggled to make sense of Black students with resources.



"Girls, Ornaments and Vacant Lot" (2016), from a series of photographs called "Harlem Redux." Bey has been photographing Harlem since the mid-70s. His more recent images of the neighborhood are a record of the combined effects of development and gentrification. © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

For many years, Bey has traced his origin story as an artist back to the moment in 1968 when his godmother gave him his first camera, an Argus C3 35-mm Rangefinder that had belonged to his godfather. The couple didn't have children of their own, and Bey believes that his godfather, who had recently died, was a hobbyist. "I will not say I was excited" to receive it, he said, "but I had enough presence of mind to say thank you." Soon, though, he became obsessed with learning how to use it. He bought photography

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In 1969, when Bey was 15 years old, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its controversial exhibition “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968.” Black artists had been lining up outside the Met to protest the show, which did not include painting or sculpture — thus not only overlooking the work of members of Harlem’s artistic community but also the traditional mediums one would expect to find at a museum in those days. It was instead anchored by documentary photography, including photomurals printed on floor-to-ceiling pillars throughout the galleries. (The Times art critic Holland Cotter has described the show as a “science-museum display.”) Bey went to see the demonstrations, but on the day he showed up, there were none, and so he went inside. Until then, his idea of a museum was limited to “historical paintings of European aristocracy, or whatever you might expect,” he said. But that day, he saw museumgoers staring at images of ordinary Black people.

Although he was taken by James Van Der Zee’s formal portraiture, “Harlem on My Mind” was not an aesthetic experience for Bey. What struck him instead was the simple fact that the subjects were Black and that they were being exhibited in a place that was, for all intents and purposes, designed to exclude Black people. His visit taught him to think of museums not just as places in which to look at art but institutions to be challenged and provoked. “You didn’t have to pay and go and look and leave,” he said. “You could speak back to the museum.” It was then that Bey realized that he, too, had something to say.



“Two Girls From a Marching Band” (1990), from the artist’s “Street Portraits” series. © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

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A few years later, in the mid-70s, while he was still living in Queens, he began photographing Harlem. This was a time when “Black people were trying to redefine themselves,” said Bey, and to build communities in which their culture could be taught and celebrated. It was around this time that he changed his name from David Smikle to Dawoud Bey, inspired by many artists at the time (such as the poet Amiri Baraka, previously known as LeRoi Jones) who were reclaiming African names as a gesture of agency. “Dawoud” is Arabic for David, and “Bey” is in honor of James Hawthorne Bey, a jazz percussionist whom Bey sought out to learn traditional West African drumming. (Bey, an accomplished percussionist himself, considers John Coltrane to be among his greatest influences.)

His efforts led to his triumphant first exhibition, “Harlem, U.S.A.,” at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979, 10 years after “Harlem on My Mind.” The 25 black-and-white photographs included simple scenes of Black life in America — from tent revivals and parades to bake sales, barbershops, street corners and church services — but the everydayness was captured in remarkable detail. A man in an apron stands in the kitchen of a barbecue restaurant, his face welcoming and proud. A woman leans on a door frame holding a baby in the sun, both wearing the same alert expressions. “Harlem, U.S.A.” argued that Black people could not be reduced to simple binaries — the victorious and the dispossessed, the victims and the survivors, the good and the bad — but are the subject of serious, attentive artistic inquiry, vast and interesting and complex and profound.



A shot of the artist's hands. Bey's career, and his recent work in particular, has been a sustained battle against what he calls "the fundamental dehumanization of Black bodies." LaToya Ruby Frazier

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BY THE 1980S, the art world had changed a great deal since “Harlem on My Mind.” It was bigger, more expensive and commanded an ever larger space within American culture. Wall Street investors had made contemporary art — even photography, which for much of the 20th century had been considered a lesser medium to painting — into a competitive economy, driving up prices for artists like [Julian Schnabel](#) and [Eric Fischl](#). Black artists, however, remained largely excluded from the market. Bey had moved to Brooklyn and was continuing to establish himself as a street photographer of the highest caliber, even though he was still mostly ignored by the popular galleries of the day. “You couldn’t be an artist living in New York and not know about it,” he said of the run on the art market at the time. “But that was not the part of the art world that I was living in.”

In retrospect, though, it’s possible to see that Bey was part of a more vital and interesting strand of contemporary art, one that he was integral in documenting. Some of his most iconic photographs are from these years, when Bey routinely captured his friend, the conceptual artist [David Hammons](#), whose work at the time, like Bey’s, was rooted in urban life. Hammons would later become known as a famous recluse, but you wouldn’t know it from looking at Bey’s definitive portraits of him: There he is in 1981’s “[Pissed Off](#),” urinating on a public sculpture by [Richard Serra](#) — an enormous steel monolith that seemed to symbolize nothing less than the more popular and boring art world made up predominantly of white men — and in another frame, talking to a police officer at the scene. Two years later, Bey was there with his camera to shoot Hammons standing on an East Village sidewalk in the aftermath of a blizzard, trying to sell snowballs, another wry statement on the growing commercialism of contemporary art. Then there is Bey’s series of pictures taken at [Just Above Midtown \(JAM\)](#), which was founded in 1974 on 57th Street by a single Black mother named [Linda Goode Bryant](#) and which quickly became the predominant gallery and meeting place for artists of color in New York. In one of these photos, the dancer and choreographer [Bill T. Jones](#) (shirtless, with his arms crossed and eyes closed), the video artist [Philip Mallory Jones](#) and Hammons stand against one of the gallery’s white walls. The man who is famous for avoiding cameras is staring straight into the lens.

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"A Woman Waiting in the Doorway" (1976), from Bey's first series, "Harlem, U.S.A." The series was first exhibited in 1979 at the Studio Museum in Harlem and helped launch Bey's career. © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

The Studio Museum in Harlem, where Bey got his start, became the center of this alternative New York City art world. It, alongside galleries like JAM and Exit Art, and organizations like the Kamoinge Workshop and Where We At, gave Black artists a place to challenge the homogeneity of the status quo. It was at the Studio Museum in Harlem where Bey met the painter Kerry James Marshall, who had a residency there in 1985 and at whose wedding Bey would later serve as best man. The two met through a mutual friend, the photographer Carrie Mae Weems, who had been one of Bey's students at a class he taught at the museum.

If Bey is a natural teacher, it is in part because he is a perpetual student, always trying to learn more and improve his craft. It was partly this desire that made him apply to graduate school in his late 30s, after more than a decade as a working artist. In 1991, the same year he sold his first photograph to MoMA, he was one of the first African-American students to attend Yale's M.F.A. photography program. At Yale, Bey moved his work off the streets and into the studio and began using a 20-by-24-inch Polaroid. His portraits of his classmates, colleagues and friends from this period — from the author Rebecca Walker to the artists Lorna Simpson and Whitfield Lovell to the curator Robert Storr — became increasingly formal, sharing the quiet command of a 17th-century old masters painting.

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The school, as an institution — which, like the museum, was something to speak back to — has remained a staple of Bey’s art. For a 2007 series called “Class Pictures,” he compiled dozens of portraits of students he’d photographed at schools across the country, and then exhibited the work at the local museums in the cities where he shot, putting these institutions and the students in communication with one another. His “Class Pictures” are intimate character studies executed with almost forensic detail, and yet there is once again a remarkable level of empathy between artist and subject. He manages to capture all the complicated feelings of being young — the angst, the weight of enormous expectations, the hope for the future — with a single look.



Bey’s “Three Men and the Lenox Lounge” (2014). © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

BEY STILL TEACHES at Columbia College, a small private school in Chicago’s South Loop neighborhood. He said that his interactions with students in the classroom help him stay current. (“I don’t want no old people in my band,” he told me, paraphrasing Miles Davis.) Indeed, Bey the artist and Bey the teacher seem almost inseparable. In any given conversation, he’ll offer reading suggestions, as if constantly referring to the syllabus that informs his own work. At one point, he asked if I’d read 1964’s “The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality,” with text by Lorraine Hansberry, best known as the author of 1959’s “A Raisin in the Sun.”

I had never heard of the book, which is a long-out-of-print compendium of images from the civil rights movement, including work by the photographers Danny Lyon and Don Hogan Charles, the latter the first Black photographer hired by The New York Times,

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framed by Hansberry's meditations on race in America. In it, Bey told me, there is a photograph by Frank Dandridge, a Black freelancer for Life magazine in the '60s, that has been a touchstone for the artist throughout his life: a black-and-white image of Sarah Jean Collins lying in a hospital bed after the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963, in which members of the Ku Klux Klan dynamited the African-American congregation. She was the sister of Addie Mae Collins, one of the four Black children murdered at the church that day. In the picture, both of her eyes are bandaged shut with bright white gauze, but she seems to be staring directly at the camera. She was 12 years old in the picture, nearly the same age Bey was when he first saw it.

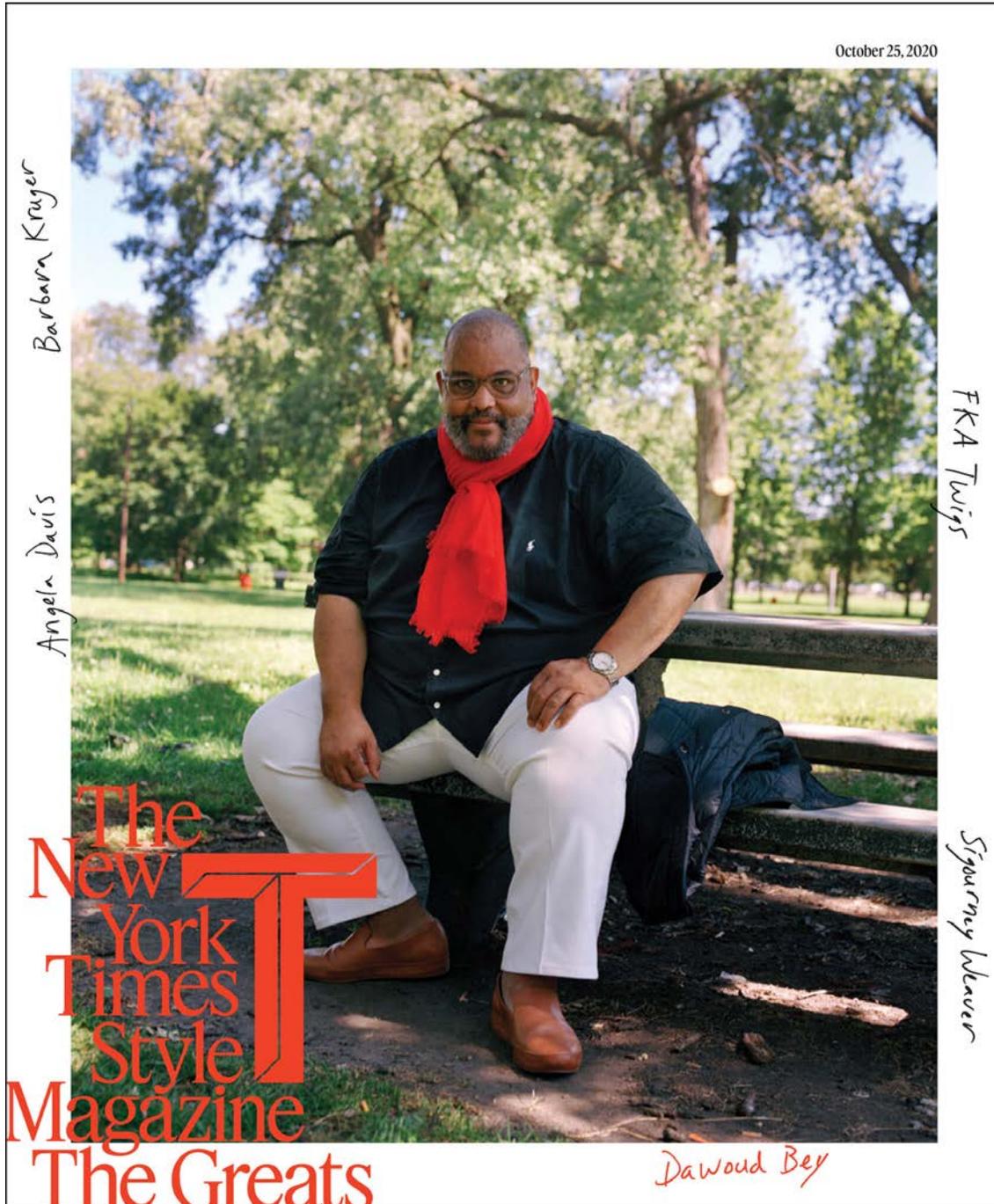
'Harlem, U.S.A.' argued that Black people could not be reduced to simple binaries — the victorious and the dispossessed, the victims and the survivors, the good and the bad — but are the subject of serious, attentive artistic inquiry, vast and interesting and complex and profound.

In 2005, his memory of the photo came rushing back to him, and he felt compelled to better understand its history. He spent several years traveling to Birmingham, getting to know the community and doing research. He learned that in the violent aftermath of the bombing, two more Black children were killed that day — Virgil Ware, a 13-year-old boy, was shot as he rode his bicycle down the street, and Johnny Robinson, 16, was shot in the back by a white police officer. He was struck by the difference between the history that we are taught about the bombing and history as it actually happened. "It's not four little girls," he said. "It's someone's daughter. It's someone's sister. It's four girls and two boys and, and, and, and, and, and."

As the 50th anniversary of the bombing approached, Bey decided to photograph young people in the community who were the same ages as the six children who were murdered that day, as well as adults who were the ages that the six children would have been had they not been killed. He later paired the images as diptychs for a series called "The Birmingham Project." All of Bey's photographs explore memory in some way, but the actual subject of these portraits seems to be less about the people sitting for them and more about what we choose to remember and why, and how this informs the

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historical record. As in Bey's other work, there is the familiar intimacy between camera and subject, but in place of his usual warmth is an almost unbearable sense of absence and loss. It's as if somewhere in the blank space between the two separate portraits in each diptych are the spirits of the children who died in 1963 and everything else — every opportunity, every potential — that vanished with them.



One of five covers for T's 2020 Greats issue. Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier

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IT MAKES SENSE that someone with such a keen interest in the past would eventually return to where he started, and Bey did so in 2014, with a 30-image series titled "Harlem Redux." It was, he said, some of the most difficult work he has ever produced. For two decades, rents have been rising in the neighborhood and longtime Black residents have been displaced by an influx of development. To reflect this change, Bey removed the human element from the photographs, introducing a new visual language to his work. If his first photos of Harlem were all about the presence of Black people, what resonates in these photographs are the absences. The series depicts construction sites, fences, locks and closed doors. There are images of scented oils, hats and scarves for sale by street vendors who are nowhere to be found, bulldozed earth ready to be covered by concrete and glass. "It's this idea of being in a place but also trying to visualize and conceptualize the memory of a place simultaneously," he said. "The place it is and the place it was."

Instead of his signature black and white, these images are in vivid color, capturing the now: the influx of global capital and the shifting demographics that transformed the storied Black neighborhood that helped Bey launch his career. And yet while few Black people are actually shown in "Harlem Redux," the photographs remind you that they're there nonetheless.

This is perhaps most true in the extraordinary "Three Men and the Lenox Lounge, 2015." In it, three white men in business casual attire walk past the remains of Lenox Lounge, the legendary jazz club that opened in 1939 and included among its patrons James Baldwin, Billie Holiday and Malcolm X (it finally closed in 2012, after the rent increased). The bar is shuttered, brown paper covering its front window, and its sign has been removed, leaving only the ghostly outline of the name above the door. The men are caught midstride, seemingly unaware of Bey's camera, but also of everything else: the bar itself, and not just its physical presence, but its history, and all the reasons its emptiness is such a loss.