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RACE STORIES

Escaping to Freedom, in the Shadows of the Night

By Maurice Berger
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A new series by the photographer Dawoud Bey summons a time in African-American history when the journey to freedom was made largely under cover of night.



Picket fence and farmhouse Credit Dawoud Bey

In his poem “Dream Variations,” published in 1926, Langston Hughes yearned for a time when the African-American worker, exhausted by the daily grind of hard labor and discrimination, might be truly free. This liberation, he imagined, would be achieved not in the glare of daylight, but rather under the brooding, protective cover of night. Inverting a dominant literary conceit, blackness and not whiteness functioned as a metaphor for hope and transcendence — a “Night coming tenderly/Black like me,” as Mr. Hughes wrote, that abetted the struggle for racial equality and justice.

This metaphor is central to a new series by the photographer Dawoud Bey, “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” which draws on Mr. Hughes’s lyrical poem. The project, Mr. Bey’s contribution to the [Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art](#) (July 14 to Sept. 30), is site-specific. Installed in St. John’s Episcopal Church, a stop on the Underground Railroad known as Station Hope, it summons a time in African-American history when the journey to freedom was made largely through the shadows of the night.



Trees and farmhouse Credit Dawoud Bey



Cozad-Bates House Credit Dawoud Bey



Tree trunk, picket fence and house Credit Dawoud Bey

Today, little visual evidence remains of the Underground Railroad, an antebellum network of secret routes and safe houses, maintained by brave black and white “conductors,” which facilitated the escape of slaves to free states and Canada. For Mr. Bey, whose work has often focused on urban environments, the challenge was to create images that evoke the history of largely rural areas. While he photographed sites in Cleveland, he sometimes found the city’s urban character inconsistent with the historical past. His research led him to the more rustic town of Hudson, Ohio, 30 miles southeast of the city, with areas of landscape that are little changed from the years before the Civil War and where several Underground Railroad stations remain.

“I wanted the photographs to almost involuntarily pull you back to the experience of the landscape through which those fugitive black bodies were moving in the 19th century to escape slavery,” Mr. Bey said. “So I had to learn, for the first time, how to make photographs in that kind of space.”

The photographs of “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” are among Mr. Bey’s most sensual and layered. In their splendor and mystery, they transform fields, bodies of water and houses shrouded in darkness into symbols of hope: a pristine picket fence and farmhouse seen through the haze of night; a marsh glistening in twilight; a forest thick with small trees, a scene that is at

first claustrophobic then liberating when understood through the lens of history; and an image of Lake Erie, its expansive sky and horizon foreshadowing the independence that lies beyond.



Branches and woods. Credit Dawoud Bey



The marsh Credit Dawoud Bey



The site of John Brown's tannery Credit Dawoud Bey

The project continues Mr. Bey's exploration of history and its relationship and relevance to the present. In 2013, "[The Birmingham Project](#)" examined the implications, then and now, of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church by white supremacists in Birmingham, Ala., on Sept. 15, 1963, which killed four African-American girls and whose aftermath resulted in the deaths of two young men. "[Harlem Redux](#)," which the artist completed in 2016, took a nuanced look at the erasure of history and community through the rampant gentrification of a neighborhood long synonymous with black culture in the United States.

Mr. Bey was at first skeptical when the artistic director of the Front International, Michelle Grabner, suggested that he consider installing "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" in St. John's Episcopal Church. "I'm a white box artist who makes works about nonwhite box things," he recalled saying to her at the time. He had come to see exhibitions of his photographs as enlivening, engaging and challenging traditional art institutions through imagery typically overlooked by them.

But the historical significance of the site led to a change of heart. "St. John's was the final Underground Railroad station that fugitive slaves who had made their way to Cleveland would take refuge before making their way to Lake Erie and then on to freedom in Canada," Mr. Bey

said. “To have the work shown in a space that had once been inhabited by fugitive slaves was deeply meaningful.”



Forest with small tree Credit Dawoud Bey



Creek and trees Credit Dawoud Bey



Farmhouse and picket fence Credit Dawoud Bey

Mr. Bey, who was [named a MacArthur fellow last year](#), credits another important influence for “Night Coming Tenderly, Black”: Roy DeCarava. Mr. DeCarava, [who died in 2009 at 89](#), was one of the most influential photographers of his generation. His images, visually rich and evocative, pushed the aesthetic boundaries of photography. A founder of the Kamoinge Workshop, a collective formed in Harlem in 1963 to support the work of African-American artists ignored by mainstream institutions and media, Mr. DeCarava’s work often focused on black subjects.

Mr. Bey noted that Mr. DeCarava’s photographs were typically printed in a dark and rich tonal range. In this context, the photographic print served as a metaphor for the black subject and experience. “DeCarava used blackness as an affirmative value, as a kind of beautiful blackness through which his subjects both moved and emerged,” Mr. Bey said. “His work was formative to my own thinking early on, and these dark landscapes are a kind of material conversation with his work, using the darkness of the landscape, and the photographic print as an evocative space of blackness through which the unseen and imaginary black fugitive subject is moving.”

Ultimately, “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” envisions a historic struggle for freedom not in stark black and white or vivid color but in luminous shades of gray. Like the work of Mr. Hughes

and Mr. DeCarava, Mr. Bey's images refuse to represent the darkness of night as a space of intimidation.

"It is a tender one, through which one moves," he observes. "That is the space I imagined the fugitive black subjects moving through as they sought their own self-liberation, moving through the dark landscape of America and Ohio toward freedom under cover of a munificent and blessed blackness."



At Lake Erie Credit Dawoud Bey



Lake Erie and sky Credit Dawoud Bey

Race Stories is a continuing exploration of the relationship between race and photographic depictions of race by Maurice Berger. He is a research professor and chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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