

# Dawoud Bey

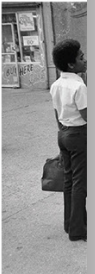
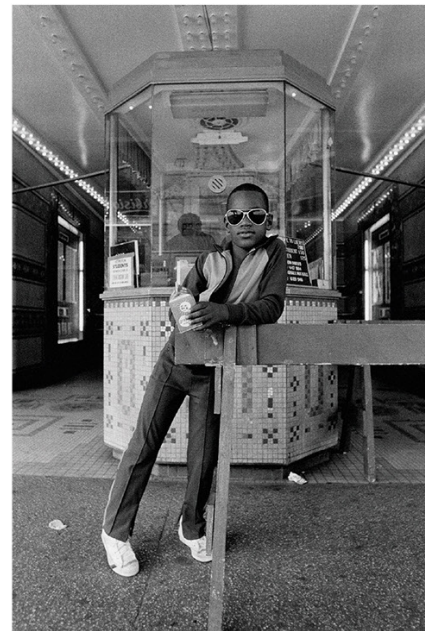
## on Photographing People and Communities

“If you’re serious about learning your art form, it’s important to learn about the history of the subject you want to speak to.”

THE PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP SERIES

## Dawoud Bey

## on Photographing People and Communities



**aperture**

# About Aperture's Photography Workshop Series

The Photography Workshop Series is an accessible resource that can be used to begin class discussions on the history and nature of photography, photographic techniques, the act of seeing, and the accomplished photographer who wrote each book.

The books are formatted in such a way that each chapter contains its own mini lesson or discussion, with bold headings or a quotation, and a brief elaboration or explanation below. The bolded headings can act as discussion topics, and can be easily rephrased as questions that you may pose to your class. The accompanying photographs can act as a slideshow for the lesson.

## About This Learning Guide

Aperture education staff have organized this learning guide thematically, highlighting salient topics from Dawoud Bey's text. Within each theme, relevant chapters, passages, and vocabulary are noted, along with guiding questions to accompany specific images.

## About Dawoud Bey

In the 1970s, Dawoud Bey quickly established himself as a master portraitist. Inspired by the controversy surrounding the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition about Harlem in 1969, Bey began taking photos in the neighborhood, working to dismantle stereotypes of the community. This work was shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. Since then, Bey has been working with and within various communities, developing a refined praxis of approaching communities and photographing them. Bey's recent project *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017) pivoted away from portraiture to document locations along the final stops on the Underground Railroad before the Canadian border.

Bey's work has been featured in major collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Bey's honors include MacArthur, United States Artists, Guggenheim, and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He is a professor of art and a former distinguished college artist at Columbia College Chicago. His monograph *Class Pictures* was published by Aperture in 2007.

# Transcending Difference

“Photographing people can easily intimidate them. I’m aware of that and consciously work to make sure it’s not a nerve-racking experience; I keep it very conversational.” (p. 35)

“You have to know enough to show up and see as deeply and clearly as you can once you’re there. You also have to be clear about why you’re there. Why are you in this community? How does your subjective viewpoint connect with the actual subject? What is it that you want to say about them? What is it that they might want to say about themselves? How can you bring those two things together in some way through your picture making?” (p. 25)

## Topics for Discussion

1. What kind of expression or emotion does the barber have in the top image?
2. What story comes to mind when looking at the image of the people on the street? What are they doing that makes you say that? How do these photos relate to themes about community?
3. What are some unusual details in these images? What makes them unusual?
4. What do you think Bey is trying to tell us about Harlem?

## Relevant Sections

“Transcending Difference” (pp. 23–25)

“Behind the Camera” (pp. 35–37)

“Once You Get There” (pp. 38–45)

## Vocabulary

Frame

Viewpoint

Subject



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1 (Page 36):** *Deas McNeil, the Barber, Harlem, 1976*

**Fig. 2 (Page 37):** *A Man and Two Women After a Church Service, Harlem, 1976*

# Composition and Equipment

“Just as the quality of the picture changes with each camera, the relationship between you and the subjects changes as well. With a 4-by-5, I can control the photos in a much more intentional way: ‘You need to stand here because I’m going to set the tripod here.’ There’s nothing spontaneous about it. Using a view camera on a tripod in the street lends an almost ceremonial atmosphere to the proceedings. It’s very large and requires a different level of participation from both subject and photographer. I had to slow down the way I was making photographs.” (p. 49)

## Topics for Discussion

1. What details do we see in these images? Why do you think the photographer focused on those things?
2. Composition is the arrangement of pictorial features within the edges of the picture frame. How is the subject arranged in each of these photographs? Why do you think Bey chose to photograph each of them this way?
3. How do the two images differ in composition?
4. How do these photos make you feel as a viewer? Does the composition of each photo make you feel differently? What do you see that makes you say that?

## Relevant Sections

“A More Formal Portrait” (pp. 46–47)

“Photographer and Subject” (pp. 48–51)

## Vocabulary

Composition  
Portrait  
Focal point  
Frame  
Close-up  
Subject



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1 (Page 48):** *A Girl with a Knife Nosepin, Brooklyn, 1990*

**Fig. 2 (Page 47):** *Fresh Coons and Wild Rabbits, Harlem, 1975*

# People in Front of the Camera

“I realized that a portrait results in one of two ways: the subjects either seek out or are invited in by the photographer. This may not be evident in the photographs, but how they came into being and who they’re made for has meaning.” (p. 18)

“I was struck by how the portraits convey a credible sense of identity as the person is isolated in the blank, white background. To me, this is what makes a photograph of a person, a portrait.” (p. 15)



## Topics for Discussion

1. Bey explains that a portrait is meant to convey a sense of identity. What do these images tell us about the subjects' identities?
2. What is the boy in the photo eating? Why do you think Bey decided to photograph him?
3. Consider how each photo came into being. How would the image of the boy with the popsicle change if it had been taken in a studio?
4. Look at how the family is arranged. Why do you think they are in these positions? Do you think they chose to be in these places or did the photographer place them there?
5. What are the people in the photos wearing? What does that tell us about them? What do you see that makes you say that?

## Relevant Sections

"People in Front of the Camera" (pp. 12–13)

"What Makes It Worthy" (pp. 14–19)

## Vocabulary

Portrait  
Point of view  
Prop  
Setting  
Composition  
Pose

**Fig. 1 (Page 13):** *A Boy Eating a Foxy Pop, Brooklyn, 1988*

**Fig. 2 (Page 19):** *James Van Der Zee, Garveyite Family, 1924*



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



# Intention

“There also has to be critical thought applied to that intention. One needs to critique one’s own motivation. Not all intentions can be justified. I’m not saying don’t make any photographs, but there has to be a moment when you step back and ask what does this photograph mean outside of what makes for an ‘interesting picture.’” (p. 23)

“Early on a Sunday morning I saw this young woman standing in the light across the street and I wanted to make a photograph. I crossed the street and, as soon as I asked if I could take her picture, she put her arms down and everything changed. She said, ‘Sure. What do you want me to do?’ While I was thinking about it, a light bulb went off in my head because I wanted her to do exactly what she was doing when I first saw her. So, it dawned on me to just ask her, ‘Why don’t you do what you were doing before I walked up?’ Directing the behavior of the person in front of the camera was a huge conceptual leap for me.” (p. 29)

## Topics for Discussion

### 1. *At a Tent Revival Meeting* (Fig. 1):

- What is going on in this image? What do you see?
- Where do you think this image was taken?
- If you were making images in your community, where would you start?

### 2. *A Woman Waiting in the Doorway* (Fig. 2):

- Describe the woman's gestures, stance, mood, and body language—what do these tell us about her?
- Read the passage on page 29 (quoted on the previous page) to students. Ask: Why do you think Bey chose to compose the image this way?
- Bey tells us that it's not the truth, but a photograph. How do we think about truth in photography?
- Consider where we see sunlight in this photo. What time of day do you think this was taken? What is Bey using light to emphasize? Why do you think he did this?

## Relevant Sections

"Transcending Difference" (pp. 22–25)

"Approaching Strangers" (pp. 26–29)

## Vocabulary

Intention

Movement

Lighting

Gesture

Direction

Truth



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1 (Page 25):** *At a Tent Revival Meeting*, Harlem, 1977

**Fig. 2 (Page 28):** *A Woman Waiting in the Doorway*, Harlem, 1976

# Space to Be Themselves

“If the pose comes from the subject, it will ring truer than anything I could direct.” (p. 52)

“The portraits have this informal quality because they’re made on the street, but there’s nothing casual about them. I direct people toward this appearance of informality so that you can believe what you see in the photograph is something true about them.” (p. 54)

## Topics for Discussion

1. What do you notice about how the subjects are posing? Do you think they chose these stances?
2. In both photos, we see two people together. How are their embraces different? What do these photos tell us about their relationships? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Describe the setting where these photographs are taken. What's happening in the background? What effect does this have on you as the viewer?
4. If you took a photo of a friend or family member at school or on your block, how would you stage them? What would the setting be?

## Relevant Sections

“Space to Be Themselves” (pp. 52–57)

“A More Extended Statement” (pp. 58–61)

## Vocabulary

Space  
Background  
Mood  
Frame  
Formal vs. informal



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1 (Pages 56–57):** *A Couple at a Main Street Bus Stop, Rochester, New York, 1989*

**Fig. 2 (Page 53):** *A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, 1990*

# Where Art Is Made

“I had been making formal portraits in the environment of the street since I started, but I wanted to see what happened if I removed subjects from their environment. I wanted to make work that was less socially determined, to unmoor subjects from the social space of the background and situate them in the neutral space of the studio, where the narrative of the picture rested solely on their appearance.” (p. 62)

“When I started making photographs in the Polaroid studio, Rembrandt was my point of reference—his heightened sense of the physical and psychological, the warm background, the monumental subject, and dramatic lighting. I wanted to bring those classic devices to contemporary subjects, my subjects.” (p. 64)

## Topics for Discussion

1. How are these photographs different from the portraits made on the street? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Show students a photo of a Rembrandt portrait (such as *Saskia with a Red Flower*, 1641, or *Portrait of an Old Man in Red*, c. 1652–54). What elements in these paintings stick out to you? Why do you think they were painted in this way?
3. Read Bey's quote about Rembrandt (on the previous page) to students. Ask: What elements of Rembrandt's painting(s) do you see in these portraits?
4. Why do you think Bey made these images in color, when most of his past work was in black and white?
5. Look at the frames around these photos. What effect do these have on the images?

## Relevant Sections

"Believing in Something" (pp. 68–73)

"Where the Work Leads" (pp. 74–77)

"Where Art Is Made" (pp. 78–79)

## Vocabulary

Lighting

Reference

Studio

Narrative

Color photography

**Fig. 1 (Page 74):** *Alva*, New York, 1992

**Fig. 2 (Page 68):** *Trajal*, New York, 1991



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



# A Simple Setup

“I chose a setup with one main light diffused through a soft box and another light on the backdrop, for which I chose a shade of brown, figuring it would work well with the range of people I was planning to photograph that first day. I didn’t want the lighting to overpower the person and become too theatrical, or the background to be too distracting. I wanted to create a warm quiet space. I still use this basic setup for nearly all of my portrait work, inside or outside the studio: a single strobe, an umbrella or a soft box, and a view camera. I add a backdrop and an additional light in a studio setting.” (p. 66)

## Topics for Discussion

1. What is going on in this photograph? Who do you think these subjects are? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Imagine Bey had used more lights and/or a more active background. What do you think would have changed about the photo? Would our understanding of the subjects change? Why do you think that is?
3. Why do you think Bey chose to pair these two images together? Look at one photo by itself and then the other. What do we learn from looking at the individual images versus the pair?

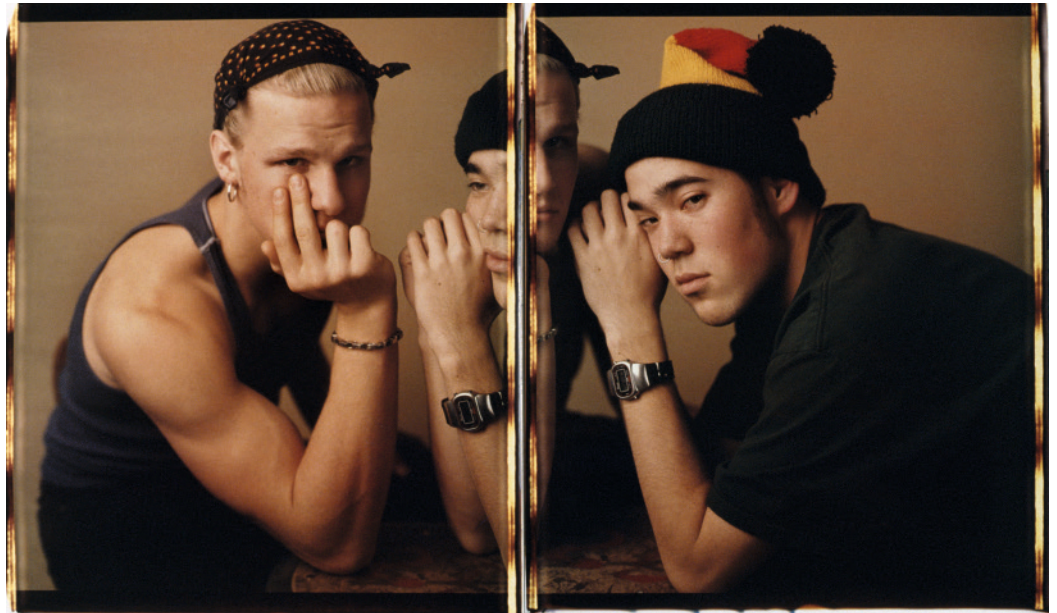
## Relevant Sections

“A Simple Setup” (pp. 66–67)

“Where Art Is Made” (pp. 78–79)

## Vocabulary

Setup  
Lighting  
Soft box  
Strobe  
View camera  
Backdrop



**Image (Page 79):** *Hillary and Taro, Chicago, 1992*

# Pairing Text and Photos

“Text does not make a photograph more interesting; it’s either an interesting photograph or it’s not.” (p. 93)

“The editing and selection process for this project was difficult because I had to deal not only with the quality of the photograph, but also with the quality and weight of the text. Sometimes the visual representation was stronger and had more nuance and drama than the text. Occasionally, the weight of the story was not quite matched by the photograph, and I edited those out. I believe the photograph has to have its own intrinsic level of interest as a visual object. For me, the initial editing process always begins with the photographs.” (p. 93)

## Topics for Discussion

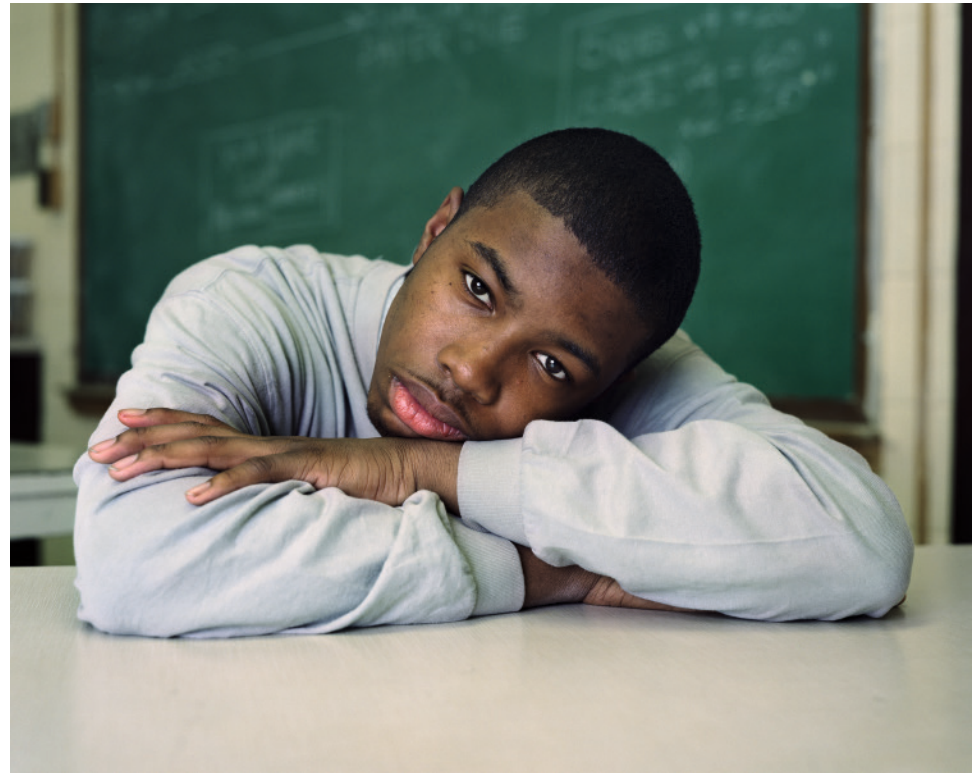
1. Have students view Kenneth's portrait before reading the accompanying text. Ask students to describe what his text might be about based on the image. Then ask:
  - What sorts of things do you think Kenneth spoke to Bey about? What about his portrait made you anticipate this?
  - Do you think Bey portrayed Kenneth in a way that speaks to his text?
2. How does your reaction to the text differ from your initial reaction to the image?
3. How do captions and text inform the way we view Bey's photographs?
4. How are the portraits taken in the school different from those taken in the studio or on the street?
5. Describe the details in the image that made you anticipate a certain narrative within the text.

## Relevant Sections

- "Translating Across Dimensions" (pp. 84–87)
- "What Lies Beyond" (pp. 88–91)
- "Leading with the Pictures" (pp. 92–93)
- "A Catalyst for Conversation" (pp. 94–95)

## Vocabulary

- Caption
- Dimension
- Text
- Setting
- Portrait



"If it wasn't for school, I don't know where I'd be. One of my friends just died recently, shot in the back of the head. He was walking down the street, him and a couple of friends of his. He was going back to meet his father 'cause his father was coming to pick him up. And then everybody started running; he was the only one who got hit by the bullet. At first I really couldn't believe it, 'cause, like, in the neighborhood we stay in, his whole family used to live around there, and he was like one of the main people that I actually spent time with. We used to go to the beach together, play basketball. He was a nice kid; all the adults in the neighborhood thought he was nice. It just makes me feel sad, you know, I wish I could have my friend back. That's why I try to keep my mind focused on other, positive stuff, such as school, making sure I do all my homework, so I can get the best grades I can get. I want to start my own record label, probably, and like open different types of stores and invest in . . . like, neighborhoods I've lived in and everything, have new buildings built so there'll be less homeless, get people up off the streets." —Kenneth

**Image (Page 91):** *Kenneth, Kenwood Academy, Chicago, 2003*

## Topics for Discussion

1. Before showing Odalys's image, have students read the accompanying text. Ask them to describe what the image might look like based on what they read. Then ask:

- What elements from the text do you see in the photograph? What did you think you would see but do not?
- Which clues to appearance did we read in the text?
- How does the text inform the image?

2. How does your reaction to the text differ from your initial reaction to the image?

3. How do captions and text inform the way we view Bey's photographs?

4. How are the portraits taken in the school different from those taken in the studio or on the street?

5. Describe the details in the text that made you anticipate certain details in the image.

## Relevant Sections

"Translating Across Dimensions" (pp. 84–87)

"What Lies Beyond" (pp. 88–91)

"Leading with the Pictures" (pp. 92–93)

"A Catalyst for Conversation" (pp. 94–95)

## Vocabulary

Caption

Dimension

Text

Setting

Portrait



"I like to play with my baby. It's real fun to play with her, and I hope this baby comes out, you know, healthy, and I hope that I can get out of school and study. I want to be a professional doctor 'cause that's what I want to do. I hope everybody remembers me, because I just started in this school and everybody knows me, 'the little pregnant girl,' so, I hope they remember me." —Odalys

**Image (Page 92):** *Odalys, Chadsey High School, Detroit, 2003*

# What Community Means

“Photography is how I make my thinking visible and present in the world. There are people, issues, and history that I care about. Part of the motivation for the work is to bring the things that I need to see into the world with the understanding that if it is important enough to me, it will have meaning for someone else as well.” (p. 119)

“How do you bring what happened fifty years ago into the present in a palpable way?  
How do you collapse the past and the present?” (p. 108)



## Before You Start

Give students a brief overview of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Reference Bey's desire to make a project in Birmingham (p. 105).

## Historical overview and educational video:

[history.com/topics/1960s/birmingham-church-bombing](https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/birmingham-church-bombing)

## Topics for Discussion

1. What's going on in these photographs? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. What effect does it have on us to see someone who is eleven years old next to someone who is in their sixties?
3. Again, look at each individual portrait and then the pair. Considering Bey's historical reference, what does the effect of the portraits being side by side have on the viewer?
4. Look at the backgrounds in each image. Why do you think Bey chose to make them match up almost exactly? How do you think he did this?
5. The older folks in the photos may remember the bombing. What effect do you think it has on them to participate in this project? In what ways can photography and art bring healing to a community?
6. Bey once again returned to black and white for this project. Why do you think he chose to do this rather than shooting in color?

## Relevant Sections

- "The World After" (pp. 104–5)
- "The Past in the Present" (pp. 106–11)
- "It Could Have Been Her" (pp. 112–15)
- "The Idea in Front of You" (pp. 116–19)
- "What Community Means" (pp. 96–103)

## Vocabulary

Historical reference  
Black-and-white photography  
Community  
Background  
Symmetry



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1 (Pages 114–15):** Mary Parker and Caela Cowan, Birmingham, Alabama, 2012

**Fig. 2 (Page 117):** Fred Stewart II and Tyler Collins, Birmingham, Alabama, 2012

# Key Vocabulary

**Backdrop:** anything that can be used to enhance the look of the photograph, filling in the background (often paper or fabric of a solid color). (p. 66)

**Background:** the ground or surface lying at the back of or behind the subject(s) of the photograph, which occupy the foreground. (pp. 26, 52, 109)

**Black-and-white photography:** reproduced or displayed in different shades of grey, as opposed to in color. (p. 111)

**Caption:** the title below an illustration. (p. 90)

**Close-up:** any photograph taken at short range; also, photography in which the camera is placed very close to the subject; a detailed or intimate view or examination. (p. 29)

**Color photography:** the state or quality of being in a color other than a shade of grey (or brown, or any single color); the reproduction of colors in a book, magazine, etc.; the reproduction and display of colored photographic, television, and digital images. (p. 64)

**Community:** a body of people viewed collectively; a body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. (pp. 12, 25, 97, 113)

**Composition:** arrangement of pictorial features within the edges of the picture frame. (pp. 18, 49, 110)

**Dimension:** measurable or spatial extent of any kind. (p. 87)

**Direction:** instructing how to proceed or act; authoritative guidance, instruction. (pp. 26, 69)

**Focal point:** a point at which a number of different elements converge; a center of interest, attention, or activity. (p. 46)

**Formal:** rigorously observant forms; precise; prim in attire; ceremonious. (p. 46)

**Frame:** the use of elements in a scene to create or give structure to an image. (pp. 26, 49, 54)

**Gesture:** a movement expressive of thought or feeling. (pp. 26, 52–59)

**Historical reference:** relation or regard to a thing or person; a mention of or allusion to a person or thing that occurred in the past. (p. 108)

**Informal:** characterized by absence of formality or ceremony; casual, relaxed. (pp. 54–55)

**Intention:** the way in which anything is to be understood; meaning, significance, import. (pp. 23, 106)

**Lighting:** the incidence of light upon features, the disposition of light in a picture. (pp. 66, 69, 87)

**Mood:** that quality of a work of art or literature which evokes or recalls a certain emotion or state of mind. (pp. 55, 58)

**Movement:** the action or process of moving; change of position or posture; passage from place to place, or from one situation to another. (p. 29)

**Narrative:** an account of series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing connections between them; a narration, a story, an account. (pp. 72, 106)

**Point of view:** a critical position in the course of affairs; a decisive moment or juncture. (p. 18)

**Portrait:** a drawing, painting, or photograph of a person, often mounted and framed for display. (pp. 12, 46, 88)

**Pose:** an attitude of the body (or a part of the body), a posture; one deliberately adopted and sustained by a person in order to be drawn, painted, or photographed. (p. 18)

**Prop:** an accessory. (p. 18)

**Reference:** relation or regard to a thing or person; a mention of or allusion to a person or thing. (pp. 69, 85)

**Setting:** the time, place, and circumstances in which something occurs or develops. (pp. 16, 66, 78–79, 87)

**Setup:** the way in which something is organized, arranged, or constituted; an organization, arrangement, system, or situation. (p. 66)

**Soft box:** a piece of lighting equipment, typically consisting of a cloth-covered frame, used to diffuse the light from a flash, floodlight, etc. (pp. 66, 87)

**Space:** physical extent or area. (p. 52)

**Strobe:** an electronic flash for a camera. (pp. 66, 87)

**Studio:** the workroom of an artist, sculptor, photographer, etc. (pp. 16, 70, 78–79)

**Subject:** something that is the focus of activity or object of attention. (pp. 23, 36)

**Symmetry:** exact correspondence in size and position of opposite parts; equable distribution of parts about a dividing line or center. (pp. 109–110)

**Text:** the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by the words in their order; the very words, phrases, and sentences as written. (p. 90)

**Truth:** the quality or character of being true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; steadfast allegiance, faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy. (p. 29)

**View camera:** a camera in which the lens forms an image on a ground-glass screen or film that is mounted directly behind it, and which typically consists of a mount for the lens and another for the screen or film and a flexible bellows connecting the two, which allows the adjustment of their relative positions. (p. 46)

**Viewpoint:** a mental position or attitude from which a subject or question is considered; a point of view. (pp. 25, 38)

Source: Oxford English Dictionary Online

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### Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities

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