

*A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater,  
from the series Harlem, U.S.A.*

1976, printed 2005

Dawoud Bey

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

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# Dawoud Bey

American, born 1953

## *A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater*, from the series *Harlem, U.S.A.* 1976, printed 2005

Carbon pigment print

6.5 x 9.5 in.

Restricted gift of Susan and Allison Davis; Photography Purchase, Charina Foundation and Barbara and Lawrence Spitz Funds; Ernest Kahn Endowment, 2008.200

*A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater* is an image of a site in Harlem where two explorations of identity intersect. The confident, fashionable, black, male youth in the photograph explores how he sees himself and how he wants to be seen by others. He looks directly toward the camera from behind dark aviator sunglasses. He sports a casually unzipped tracksuit jacket, and the sharp creases of his matching pants reach just below his ankles where they meet crisp white sneakers. These clothing choices correspond to urban fashions of the late 1970s and suggest that he is conscious of his body and what it projects to the world. Behind the camera was artist Dawoud Bey, whose particular compositional choices also suggest the continual exploration of identity. Instead of isolating the boy, Bey takes a wider shot that includes objects in his environment; he allows the movie theater to become the background and context for his subject. By capturing the entire figure of the youth, the artist includes the wooden barricade on which the boy leans. Bey, thus, highlights not only the subject's presence, but how he interacts with his environment. Finally, Bey pictures the youth frontally and at such an angle that the movie theater behind him forms a symmetrical background. The geometrically shaped ticket booth, long halls leading towards the doors, rows of bright lights, and recessed display windows impose a sense of order and control upon the subject. Each of these devices contributes to how the artist constructs the identity of this youth.

*A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater* is one of thirty photographs that constitute *Harlem, U.S.A.*, Bey's first significant body of work. In this series, he explores a multitude of approaches towards representing the identities of Harlem and its black residents. Bey began the series in 1975 and did not complete it until 1979. Traveling by train from his home in Queens, he spent much time learning about the individual people, groups, landmarks, and events that marked Harlem and bonded its residents to one another. During this time, he developed personal relationships with the people he saw and the places he frequented. Against the instantaneous nature of his medium, Bey took his time.

What issues did the artist weigh in the production and selection of these photographs? In his essay, "Do You See What I See: Representing the Black Subject," Bey offers some insight into his measured and careful approach to photography.

To make a photograph of someone is to create a particular kind of hierarchical relationship between photographer and subject. As the one who usually decides when the exposure is made, what is included or left out of the frame, and whether or not the subject's gaze is directed to or away from the camera amongst a host of other decisions this relationship usually privileges the photographer.

In Bey's mind, the conditions of portrait photography typically leave the photographer with the sole ability to define the subject's identity. Against the popular conception that photographs are free from personal bias and communicate truth, Bey asserts that the relationship between artist and subject cannot be a neutral meeting of equals and implies that the circumstances of production influence the visual product. Furthermore, according to Bey, "there is an implicit power relationship acted out in the process of photographing people, particularly those on the margins of society." This statement suggests that Bey was also conscious of the status of his subjects as racial minorities. These circumstances offer potential for the production of a reductive or disparaging likeness of individuals who already stand outside of **normative** identity, such as the socially, politically, and economically oppressed African American subjects on whom Bey trained his eye. Thus, Bey's dominant concerns in producing *Harlem, U.S.A.* involved capturing the status of his subjects and their relationship to the photographer.

Dawoud Bey's early writing captures his concern for how Americans viewed black identity. In a 1988 review of the work of early 20th century black photographer Richard Samuel Roberts, Bey claims that a book on Roberts' work was important for "one very simple reason: Roberts' photographs give the lie to the long held stereotype of black Americans as ignorant, foot-shuffling buffoons." This statement is a strong testimony to Bey's attention to how the American public sees African Americans. Growing up in 1950s and 1960s America in a middle class home in Queens, Bey would have received constant exposure to disparaging stereotypes of black identity, such as the mammy and Uncle Tom types proliferated by American broadcast media and popular culture. Characterizations such as lazy, shiftless, docile, and naïve were at the center of standard conceptions of Negro identity.

These ideologies, however, were not new. Photography's past visual conventions were seminal in constructing these ways of viewing the black body. Throughout the 19th century photographs of the black body reduced black identity to physical features and invested them with negative value. This took place, for example, in photography's employment in scientific and medical illustration. In 1850, Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz, interested in proving the theory of the separate creation of races, created a series of fifteen portraits of slaves from a plantation in South Carolina. His privileged position in academia set up an imbalanced relationship with his subjugated sitters who lived in bondage, and the visual conventions of his imagery further advanced his theories. By mandating that each slave appear without clothing, Agassiz placed emphasis on and perpetuated the notion that skin color is a biological sign of intrinsic difference, solidifying the connection between physical features and black identity. Half of the photographs illustrate the tenets of the pseudoscience of phrenology by placing additional emphasis on the shape of the head, where by the angle of the Negro skull was compared to that of an

ape and deemed to indicate inferiority. Through these photographs Agassiz visually asserted the notion one could locate blackness in physical features. While the 20th century brought new conventions in photography, the ideas produced by Agassiz's images remained in the minds of a public that continued to rely on them to justify a racially stratified society that viewed African Americans with any combination of apprehension, disdain, contempt, and anxiety. Such stereotypes were still an essential part of the American culture Bey experienced as a youth growing up in the 1960s.

Furthermore, throughout much of the 20th century, and with few exceptions, blacks continually lacked access to self-representation in mainstream media and had little agency to challenge visual stereotypes. The New York news media consisted of magazines, newspapers, and journals such as *Life*, *Time*, the *New York Times* and *Look* that frequently included photo-essays—photographic narratives—of local and national phenomena, including life in African American communities. African Americans, however, rarely produced these photographic narratives. For example, members of the Kamoinge workshop, an African American photography collective in New York City in the 1960s, frequently experienced the shortcomings of their field and lamented the limited number of jobs for African Americans. Moreover, popular depictions of Harlem that did circulate in contemporary print publications presented narrow notions of Harlem. Often, publication editors applied pre-conceived ideas—for example, that Harlem was a place of poverty, drugs, and violence—to any image they saw of the community. Without a presence in the media institutions that were showing Harlem to the world, its black residents lacked agency to change this pattern of representation.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, another mainstream, authoritative institution of representation and display also denied blacks agency in the representation of Harlem. The museum's 1969 exhibition, *Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*, curated by Allan Schoener, was an **ethnographic** representation of these neighborhoods that eschewed works of art by contemporary black artists who lived there. Instead, *Harlem on my Mind* featured ephemera and advertisements, articles and photographs from popular media, films, and videos with a live feed of a street intersection in Harlem. Moreover, the exhibition curator denied Harlem's residents opportunities to self-define by submitting material to the show. While Schoener assembled a five-member research staff, each of whom was black, no member of this group was from Harlem. Additionally, Schoener created a community advisory committee and connected with the Harlem Cultural Council but none of these groups were allowed to have a say in the exhibition planning. Dawoud Bey visited the exhibition at the age of sixteen, and it made an immense impression on him. Both critical of the show and excited by the subject matter, Bey remarked that *Harlem, U.S.A.* was a product of his desire to contribute to the long conversation about Harlem that existed in literature and the visual culture on display in



*Harlem on my Mind*. Bey wanted, however, “to make work that was different from the ways Harlem had been represented in photographs.”

Just six years later, the artist acted on this desire by exploring strategies of depicted black bodies that foreground black self-representation and agency. He accomplished this through *Harlem, U.S.A.* For example, *A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater* visually demonstrates the power that black Harlemites possessed to represent themselves. In this image the subject’s matching tracksuit and sunglasses not only communicate his acute fashion sense; they also suggest his concern for shaping how others see him. This deliberate self-styling was a part of the **politics of style** engendered by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. National in scope, the civil rights movement involved collective efforts that advanced rights for African Americans. Around the country, individuals and groups across the color line lobbied for legislation that would afford blacks equal treatment and rights in law and in commerce, as well as access to quality education and other social services. The ideology of **integration** in American society served as a foundation for this work. Central to the thinking of black rights was an active, continual redefinition of black identity. Younger, more outspoken African Americans, for instance adopted the term “black” as a proclamation of their own psychological reorientation. These evolving principles continued to inform black communities of the 1970s and the ideologies of black **enfranchisement**. Malcolm X, for example, called for collective self-definition, self-determination, and self-respect. Black Americans not only advocated for basic rights through sit-ins, marches, and boycotts, they also wore these ideas—styling the body was integral to the construction of black identity in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, for example, the Afro (also called the “natural”) and dreadlock hairstyles proliferated and represented enlightened consciousness. Fashion and hairstyles were extensions of new physical standards that accompanied the notion that “Black is Beautiful.” The clothing and accessories that the subject in this image wears, and his casual posture functioned within the ideologies of black beauty and black agency.

With the *Harlem, U.S.A.* series, Bey also portrayed a plurality of narratives that highlight the diversity and complexity of its residents’ lives. Unlike the contemporary casual dress of the young male in *A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater*, the women pictured in another image in the series, *Harlem, NY*, all wear more formal dress that recalls the ideals of social propriety of a past era. *Harlem, NY* is a closely cropped image that presents three adjacent black females at a parade. Each wears an assortment of jewelry combined with a hat and purse. When compared with *A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater* these images suggest generational shifts that took place in Harlem in the 1970s as well as the co-existence of contrasting social norms. The facial expressions and body language juxtaposed within the frame of *Harlem, NY* further explores divergences within

black identity. Each woman displays a different response to the festivities going on around her. From left to right, one presents anxious curiosity, another exudes a listless and indifferent spirit, and the third’s large smile suggests glee. Just as this image displays three different responses to an event, responses to political and social circumstances of the 1970s were also diverse. Beginning in 1965, black nationalism gained greater force and formed the primary ideology of the Black Power movement. Marked publicly by individuals such as Stokely Carmichael and groups such as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the ideology of black power was a belief in the viability of an independent black nation. While black liberation movements often seem monolithic, each movement had local manifestations in cities and states around the country, and conflicting strands of African American nationalism existed simultaneously. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, for example, challenged the notion that nonviolence was the only viable path to progressive change. Other blacks continued to advocate for the repatriation of African Americans to Africa while others struggled to create independent social and educational units in American society. Moreover, within black liberation movements, men and women frequently held different roles. These efforts also intersected with the explosion of national initiatives, such as the women’s liberation movement, to liberate oppressed and marginalized peoples. Against this backdrop *Harlem, NY* visually recalls the differing ways in which blacks daily responded to the circumstances of life.

A third image from the series, *A Man at the Corner of Lennox Avenue & 125th Street*, further counteracts reductive approaches to picturing black identity by simultaneously displaying two contrasting ways of seeing Harlem. This juxtaposition highlights the importance of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed in Bey’s series. On the left of the image, a man wearing a suit concentrates intensely on something outside of the pictorial space and seems lost in thought, projecting a representation of Harlemites as introspective and recalling the ability of a photograph to suggest an individual’s psychological makeup. On the right, however, two posters on a metal pole advertise the popular vocal group the Isley Brothers, nationally renowned for their funk, pop, and soul music. The group became popular in the 1950s and remained top-selling until the 1990s with songs like “Twist and Shout” and “For the Love of You,” which fed an ever-evolving urban and dance culture. Songs by groups like the all-black Isley Brothers came to signify, in popular culture, part of an authentic black American experience. These associations supported a stereotypical view of black identity that linked African Americans and entertainment and suggest the way many viewers might see the male in this image. Yet, the male subject of this image seems not to notice the large posters directly behind him and, facing away from these objects, possesses an ambiguous relationship with this element. Like *Harlem, NY*, this composition suggests popular views of Harlem might not match the opinions of those who lived there. Furthermore, it indicates that a comprehension of Harlem through these images might be contingent upon the identity of viewers and their own

personal experiences.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries blacks struggled to gain access to institutions of display and the ability to represent themselves. While 19th-century photographs located black identity within physical attributes, 20th-century photographs that appeared in the popular press over-determined the meaning of photographs of African Americans. Dawoud Bey understood these challenges as a young artist and pursued a sustained exploration of Harlem over a three-year period. Of his process the artist stated that he “started off wanting to make a positive image of Harlem” but quickly realized that this was an inadequate approach. Rather than looking for ways to validate what he already thought, the artist responded to what Harlem presented. Through different visual and theoretical strategies, Bey underscored the diversity and ambiguity of Harlemites, while also representing those who were already consciously constructing their own identities. With *Harlem, U.S.A.* Bey created images that expand the narratives of Harlem and black identity by offering multiple ways of viewing its people and places.

# Glossary

**enfranchisement:** Having freedom, citizenship, and political rights or privileges.

**ethnographic:** Related to the scientific description of nations or races of people, including their customs, habits, and points of difference.

**Harlem:** A neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan. Since the 1920s it has been a major African American residential, cultural, and business center. Originally a Dutch village founded in 1658, it is named after the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands. Harlem was annexed to New York City in 1873. Black residents began to arrive in large numbers in 1904 and this rapidly accelerated as a result of the Great Migration.

**integration:** In American history this refers to the moments when African Americans, previously discriminated against on racial or grounds, were brought into equal membership in society. In many formerly segregated, or non-integrated, spaces such as buses and restaurants, this meant that African Americans were accorded a status equal to that of other citizens. In spaces where African Americans had been denied admittance, like some hotels and schools, they gained access.

**normative:** Constituting a norm or a standard; in this context it refers to the ideal position in American culture, in terms of race, class, and gender, as white, middle-class, and male.

**politics of style:** The use of clothing and hairstyles to convey political meaning; used during the 1970s to actively express the ideas of the Black Power movement.

# Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

## Visual Images as Informational Sources

*Common Core State Standards: R.1, R.3, R.9*

By analyzing or “reading” images through observation, description, inference, comparison, and synthesis, students engage and practice the same critical skills identified in the Common Core Reading Standards for complex, informational texts.

When first seen in 1979 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the images in Dawoud Bey’s *Harlem U.S.A.* series presented a different view of Harlem from that seen in the news media. Bey’s images reminded viewers that Harlem was a diverse neighborhood that reflected the multi-faceted, complex identity of African American culture in the 1970s. A comparison of various images from Bey’s series will help students better understand this identity. As an extension activity—comparing the perspective of Bey’s images with that of images from the news media, as well as with written accounts of Harlem from the time—will serve to further deepen students’ understanding of Harlem in the 1970s and of how to synthesize multiple perspectives.

1. Observe, describe, and infer: Begin by looking at one image from the *Harlem, U.S.A.* series, such as *Two Young Men*. Ask students to look and write down or share as a group everything they notice in the image. Be sure they talk about the setting of the image as well as the poses, expressions, clothing, and action of the figures. Then ask them to infer what the artist wants us to understand about these young men. Reminder for students: details are important, and all inferences must be supported by the details observed in an image or read in a text. (Note: additional images from the *Harlem, U.S.A.* series can be found at [www.artic.edu/aic/collections](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections) or in the exhibition catalog *Dawoud Bey: Harlem, U.S.A.* by Matthew S. Witkovsky.)
2. Compare: Introduce another image from *Harlem, U.S.A.*, such as *An Outdoor Vendor*. Ask students to compare this image to the first one they viewed. Have them move through the comparison by categories such as setting, pose, expression, clothing, action, etc. Then ask students to once again infer what the artists wants us to understand—this time about Harlem, where the people in both of these images lived. Reminder for students: comparing two or more images, as with texts, can build knowledge of a topic.
3. Extension: Look for images of Harlem from the news media in the 1970s as well as newspaper or magazine articles that are reading-level appropriate for your students. Have students compare these new images and articles with the views of Harlem by Dawoud Bey. Ask them what different points of view about Harlem they find in the news images

and stories. Ask them to think about why these different points of view existed at the same time. Answers can be shared in discussion or in writing. (Note: images of and articles about Harlem from the news media in the 1970s can be found in the *New York Times* digital archives at your local or school library.)

## Shaping Images, Shaping Ideas

*Common Core State Standards: R.4, R.9, W.1, W.8*

Artists often conduct research and create plans for their artworks. In the process, they make many decisions about what to portray and how to make it. As he set out to create his images of Harlem, Dawoud Bey looked at many photographs taken by other artists and visited the neighborhood frequently, walking up and down the streets, visiting shops, and meeting people. By becoming artists themselves and researching and making portraits of their school or community, students can better understand how the decisions artists make help to shape their art.

1. Look closely at a few of the images from *Harlem, U.S.A.* and ask students to describe the community of Harlem that they see in the pictures. Tell students that the artist conducted research about the neighborhood, studied how others had depicted it, and then made decisions about how he wanted to portray Harlem.
2. Explain to students that they are going to create a portrait of the school or community in two parts: as it was in the past and as it is now. As Dawoud Bey did with *Harlem, U.S.A.*, they are going to need to do some research and planning in order to create this portrait.
3. Start with the present. Ask students to describe their school or community today. Ask them to come up with descriptive words and to give examples or evidence of why they chose those words. Ask them to consider different aspects about their school or community—what details make it diverse? This can be about anything—different grade levels in the school; different languages spoken in the community; or different types of buildings or shops in the neighborhood. What would they like other people to know about their school or community?
4. Next, have students use the library and the Internet to research their school or community in the past. Before starting their research, they should identify a few questions to guide their work, such as: What did the community or school look like? What jobs did people have? Who lived, worked, or went to school there? What diversity existed? Are there parts of the community that are the same now

as in the past? What is different? In their research, students should try to locate at least three different types of sources of information, including images and text, and then summarize the information they find from each source.

- 5 Finally, have students create their portraits. Through drawing, collage, or photography, students should create two images: one that portrays the community or school in the past and one that depicts the present. They should write a statement that explains the choices they made in each image and how their choices were informed by their research and planning.
6. Create an exhibition in your classroom of the portraits and have a “gallery walk,” in which students share their portraits with each other (or other students, teachers, and parents).

### Reading Comprehension—Life in Harlem

*Common Core State Standards: R.9, R.10, W.1*

While Dawoud Bey and other artists attempted to capture the essence of Harlem in pictures, past and contemporary authors such as poet Langston Hughes and journalist C. Gerald Fraser created written portraits of the neighborhood. Hughes and Fraser wrote about the same place, but they used different approaches to project different conceptions of the people, streets, and experience of Harlem. Have students read the following two texts. By examining both texts side by side, students can further understand how words and an author’s writing style can work in similar ways to the details and style of visual images to convey meaning and point of view. This activity utilizes Common Core State Standards’ anchor skills in reading and is suggested as a follow-up to an exploration of selected images from the *Harlem, U.S.A.* series.

Be sure to have students provide details from the text to support their answers.

- What is the central idea of each text? What seems to be most important to each author? What perspective about life in Harlem does each author convey?
- Describe the feelings you experienced when reading each text. Discuss the voice or tone used in each text. How does this contribute to the meaning you inferred about each text?
- When considered together, what impression of life in Harlem do these texts create?

Extension Activity: Ask students to look at all of the images in Dawoud Bey’s *Harlem, U.S.A.* exhibition catalog (Wikovsky and Rhodes-Pitt, see bibliography) and select the one(s) that best connect to each reading. Have them write about and defend their selection.

### Reading One

DeCarava, Roy and Langston Hughes. 1955. *In The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, pp. 15-17. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press.

All the young ones nowadays is just crazy about cars. And no wonder, because the streets is just full of cars. In Harlem lots of roomers have got cars bigger than the room they live in. But ain’t nobody in our family got a car. I wonder how come? But my oldest daughter, Mae, Chick’s mother says they’re gonna get a car. And Chicksaw, which is my most up-and-coming grandchild, declares soon as he gets married, he’s gonna get one too, so he won’t have to ride the bus to work. He always goes to work dressed up. Chick’s as different from Rodney as day from night. Could dress his self when he was three years old. Gets up early in time to take the bus all the way downtown to work, don’t like subways. But Rodney don’t hardly get to work at all no kind of way, says daylight hurts his eyes. Never will be integrated with neither white nor colored, nor work, just won’t.”\*

### Reading Two

C. Gerald Fraser, “Harlem: Where to Go and What to See,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1976, p. 60.

Between Lenox and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard—one block west—on 138th Street is the Abyssinian Baptist Church, still described as Adam Powell’s church. Founded, elsewhere, in 1809, the church grew to become the nation’s largest Protestant congregation. Like St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal Church nearby on West 134th Street, Abyssinian conducted many social programs.

On Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, incidentally, at 138th street, are two of Harlem’s most famous bar-restaurants, the Red Rooster and Jock’s. Their proximity to the Abyssinian Church meant that those two places participated in the political life of Harlem.

Also off the boulevard, on 138th Street, is the famous Striver’s Row, some 80 elegant homes designed by Stanford White. This block, described as the stronghold of the Negro upper class, “has escaped the urban blight that rusted so much of the community.”

\*Note to teachers: Historically, the use of vernacular speech has been an important tool for African Americans’ resistance to oppression and their resulting revisions of history. The work of Langston Hughes is part of this tradition. For more information, look to the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. (see bibliography).



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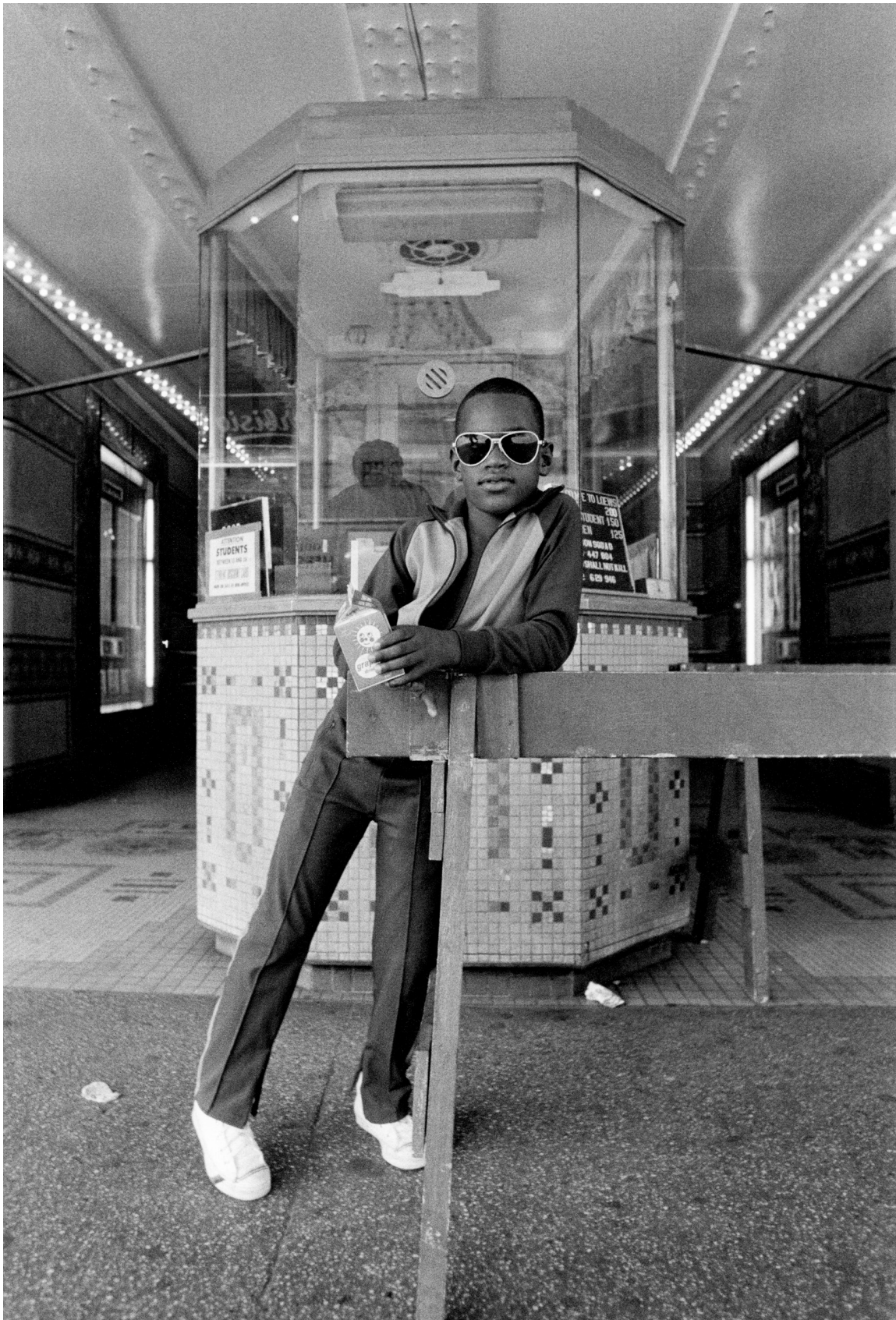
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*A Man on the Corner of Lenox Avenue & 125th Street*

c. 1976, printed by 1979

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*Harlem, NY*  
1978, printed 2010  
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