



PIECES OF A MAN

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF JAMEL SHABAZZ: 1980 - 2015

FOREWORD BY PAUL M. FARBER

REFLECTING FORWARD: JAMEL SHABAZZ AND HISTORICAL TIME

From the opening photographs of his landmark first book, *Back in the Days* (2001), Jamel Shabazz establishes a useful code for audiences to read his body of work. In the pair of portraits printed back-to-back on the first two pages of the book, as recto and verso, two different quartets of young African American men look directly at Shabazz's camera, extending carefully held yet loosely coordinated poses.

These two images comprise an echo, evoking resonance in repetition. They also stand out with singular, exuberant expressions of distinction.

These types of tableaux, street encounters encapsulated in self-aware poses and documented for later generations, are an esteemed trademark of Shabazz's work. He has photographed tens of thousands of encounters like this since 1975, starting from his native Brooklyn and extending outward. The introductory images from *Back in the Days* are related in this case, but their adjacent placement within the book is not merely a formal construction. Rather, the two groups are contrasted by age and seasonal circumstance, members of the second ensemble, reproduced in color in the book, appear to be several years younger and are dressed in summer clothing. Yet in both images each subject takes a distinctly individual stance while maintaining a close proximity to his peers. From the outset, Shabazz invites

close consideration and comparison of his subjects as a generative act.

The men dress in precise ensembles, most with crowning accouterments and gestures—including tipped, checkered, ascot hats; adorned, black, Gazelle-style eye-glass frames; staggered rings; and two-finger peace signs extended to the sky. Shabazz draws us closer to the subtitles of his subjects as a means of inviting speculation on each man's unique qualities and the expressive differences of their lives, as well as on the differences between each image in a pair. Among the most urgent distinctions suggested through Shabazz's pairing is the fact that time stands between them. History is rendered in terms more granular than a standard victor's tale and more focused than one of happenstance; it lives in the deliberate documentation of one's peers, surroundings, and roads traveled.

Shabazz published these images in his first book to wide acclaim, generated and shared anew from his own extensive archive of his days as a neighborhood photographer, more than twenty years after he originally made them. This feat is even more impressive given how well his images now function as a symbol of the conceptual timeframe of "back in the days," a phrase he helped popularize through his work. The term indicates a commonly understood sense of time in which the past is summoned to

inform the present. The doubled images in his inaugural book also inform the types of images he continues to bring forward in each of his subsequent books. Knowledge about the past is embedded within every individual photograph and is fully unveiled through its placement in a context or sequence. Shabazz culls images from his archive to chronicle pivotal moments in urban culture and to seek deeper and more meaningful perspectives on often-neglected subject matter and frames of history. As a visual artist Shabazz uses time, in effect, as his medium.

Shabazz's concern for historical time is informed by his background: his upbringing, looking at civil rights and Vietnam-era photojournalism, his years serving in the armed forces while stationed in West Germany in the 1970s, his twenty-year career as a correctional officer on Rikers Island, and his later work as a youth educator and celebrated lecturer. Over the course of his career, Shabazz has developed a creative suite of tools particularly primed for dismantling conventional notions of telling time, valuing history, and seeking connection across urban spaces. This includes conversations with his subjects that ultimately enrich his images, thoughtful sequencing and persuasive framing, purposeful repetitions and staggered motifs, and the remarkable act of retrieval from his archive decades later, leading to preservation in repurposed public forms. Shabazz once remarked that he sees his camera as a compass. One can also imagine it as a pocket watch or calendar, a container for time, amenable to adjustment and reimagination.

From the onset of his publishing career, Shabazz has highlighted the masterful dignity of his subjects by imagining their longevity and simultaneously recognizing their fragility. Standing among the most gifted practitioners of his craft, he operates as an emphatic storyteller, engaging with his subjects in the collaborative project of shaping statements that extend beyond the frame of the photograph. He primarily engages African American and Latino communities, with a particular focus on sites of multiracial, transnational interaction. Shabazz has told audiences that he loves photographing groups because he can gather subjects in batches and thus reach more people at once. This strategy is pragmatically wise and also invites viewers who may encounter his books to participate, too, in his methodology, as they configure into and multiply the numbers reached through these encounters. The power of his photographs can be measured through these exchanges built into their creation and circulation. His images—from the moment they are captured through their redeployment from his archive years later—approach something akin to what Susanne C. Knittel terms the "historical uncanny;" they are, in effect, dynamic ruminations on the passage of time.¹

Shabazz is active in the process of animating history. He is a sponge for historical information and methods, having developed an early interest in reading photo-essays in magazines and watching television documentaries. Throughout his life he has explored time through its constructed forms of measurement, ghostly haunts, and the layered convergences of each historical image when placed into the context of one of his photobooks'

After taking the photograph, I would always make it a point to say to them these simple words, 'Everything you do today will reflect upon your future.'

thematic spines. later. As writer Terrance Jennings recalls, "Jamel Shabazz once told me that history only remembers those who implement their ideas and not those who only think of doing."²

Even a glimpse at his published titles—*Back in the Days* (2001), *Last Sunday in June* (2003), *A Time Before Crack* (2005), *Seconds of My Life* (2007), and *Represent* (2012)—reads as an extended meditation on time, positioned against the more conventional, linear, progress-oriented American narrative that eclipses deeper stories of struggle and survival. Shabazz consistently reflects and redirects the organization of historical thought in expansive yet practical terms. He approaches history as if to conjure Ralph Ellison's notion that time moves "not like an arrow, but a boomerang."³

Shabazz's work exists in the realm of socially engaged photography, in which time fundamentally shapes its practices and its relationship to history. All photographers are fundamentally practitioners of time to some extent. The same can be said of their workings with registers of light and spatial relations, but time and its unwieldy, inadvertent manifestations, are both the method and mold through which photographers must impart their visions. The great photographer Henri Cartier-

Bresson famously coined the phrase the "decisive moment" to describe his deliberative method of capturing the most striking instant in a constantly changing world: first you "wait and wait, and then finally you push the button." He notes, "Photography must seize upon this moment and hold the immobile equilibrium of it."⁴

The intensity of the decisive moment pushes historical thought to the brink, the nanosecond of ultimate recognition. But even for those who champion and seek it out, others have expanded the concept. This includes valuing the photographic subject's own ability to transform the ways they are characterized historically within photography's systems of representation. Noted photography historian Deborah Willis extends this through her study of the pose within African American image practices. Willis argues for the pose as a "participatory self-representation" that works against forces of racial objectification and oppression toward new expressions of urgency and beauty, including those that unfold over time through ensembles of images.⁵

In this regard Shabazz works as an informed and compassionate documentarian through decisive moments and extended poses that both distill and choreograph movement across photographic

frames. He calibrates each component of his practice to grapple with the possibilities and limits of photographic representation. Shabazz functions as an intermediary across generations, public divides, and epochs. He recalibrates historical time, the stories and frameworks commonly used to narrate the nation's past, as a reference point in responding to gaps in public knowledge and recognition.

Evidence of Shabazz's historical nuance is embedded within his projects' infrastructures. Alongside the aspirational quality of his endeavors, Shabazz is deeply concerned with critical forms of memory, memorial, and monumentality—concerns that often exist on the margins of textbook histories. For example, each of his books feature memorial collages of fallen members of his native Brooklyn. Offering the keys to fully decode his images, Shabazz accompanies the images with dedications, artist statements, and interviews. Likewise, on the final page of *Seconds of My Life*, he includes a claim check from Kelly's Film Express in the World Trade Center, a store where he often processed film in one-hour rush orders to be able to show them to his subjects blocks away. Shabazz was a first responder on 9/11, both as a correctional officer and a documentarian. He includes the claim check without commentary as an explicit gesture of loss, an artifact of a past photographic practice and the tragic day he witnessed. Shabazz seeks through all of his projects to transform history, not by ignoring its wounds but by treating them through forms of what he refers to in his public talks as "visual medicine."

Among those pictured in Shabazz's images include multigenerational artists, community leaders, queer activists, soldiers, peaceniks, and students, among others who are represented as historically significant individuals. Urban spaces also draw his focus at times, as, for example, when the promenade or street corridor emerges as the focal point of an image.

Whether photographing a person or place, Shabazz treats his subjects with respect and imbues his portraits with dignity and gravitas. Across all of his work Shabazz pays close attention to commemorative dates and gatherings as points of exchange, including nods to musical playlists as a means of connecting multiple levels of perception, and incorporates newspaper headlines and street signage as historical markers to contextualize his images.

Shabazz draws on his personal background and in turn produces images that serve as invaluable fodder for twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians of the American experience. Scholars and critics often historicize him as the chief documentarian of hip-hop culture and style, which is a well-deserved and compelling description. Across Shabazz's books and archival holdings is essential visual evidence of phenomena that are deeply woven into the years of his career, spanning from the mid-1970s to the present: Shabazz's hip-hop scope includes essential views on the age of mass incarceration, the catastrophic outcomes of the war on drugs, the far-reaching domestic effects of the

war on terror, the emergence of grassroots and multiracial LGBT rights coalitions, critical practices that speak out against and seek to ameliorate the uneven effects of redevelopment and gentrification, and, more recently, the integral points of identification and dissent that emerged during the years of the Obama presidency. Hip hop culture, through Shabazz's lens, is at once a vital social movement and a transformative historical imprint.

Like his photographic influences—James Van Der Zee, Gordon Parks, and Leonard Freed, among others—Shabazz shares the ability to extend his perception of historical time across registers: from the moment he captures his images to their sequencing in monographs through the process of sorting and presenting work out of his archive to make an argument that pushes the status quo. His practice of naming his influences and riffing on their iconic images is a sincere form of intellectual and artistic respect. Shabazz carries the mantle of his received tradition even as he adapts to shift with changes in the art form. In turn, the uses of his photographs are far reaching as well—from album covers to fashion campaigns and, most powerfully, as they take their place in museum collections such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. With extensive global audiences and interlocutors for his work, he also regularly connects with his admirers on social media and on trips abroad, sometimes reconnecting with the subjects of his photography from earlier decades. In these ways Shabazz's work, while deeply concerned with the passage

and organization of time, has crossed multiple borders and thus achieved a rare form of timelessness. Shabazz's career continues to evolve as a long arc. His immense archive gains new layers of meaning through each project as he continues to document the mechanisms and movements of history. He continually produces new possibilities for historical reflection, awareness, and action. The pieces of his lifelong artistic practice cohere across time through long-established modes of connection, from encounter to encounter, image to image, and project to project. In short, through his use of photography, Shabazz shapes history.

ENDNOTES

1 Notes

Scholar Susanne C. Knittel defines "historical uncanny" as "a concept, which describes the vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was familiar has become strange." She adds a site or image of memory "may be said to be uncanny when it unexpectedly extends into the present, forcing a person or group to reevaluate their understanding of who they are and where they come from." Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 9–10.

2 Terrance Jennings, "Bearing Witness," in Jamel Shabazz, *A Time Before Crack* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2005), 27.

3 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1947) 6.

4 Henri Cartier-Bresson, "The Decisive Moment," in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 385.

5 Deborah Willis, *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present* (New York: W. M. Norton, 1999), xvii.