**The Question of Answerability in Dawoud Bey’s *Night Coming Tenderly, Black***

**and *The Birmingham Project***

BY

ISABELLE MARTIN

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THESIS

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Defense Committee:

Blake Stimson, Advisor

Lucy K. Mensah, Museum and Exhibition Studies

 S. Elise Archias

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**SUMMARY**

 This thesis examines two photographic series by the Chicago-based artist Dawoud Bey, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017) and *The Birmingham Project* (2012). The series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* portrays the portion of the Underground Railroad that routed through Ohio, in rich, tonal landscape photographs. Absent of subjects, the expansive photographs invite the viewer to immerse themselves in the dark landscapes. This immersion into the photographs is predicated on a feeling of empathy with the absent fugitive slave, which is interpreted as a retreat into interiority and a disavowal of critical thought and political action. In contrast, the photographs of *The Birmingham Project*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, present portraits of Birmingham residents paired into diptychs, establishing a balance between individuality and collectivity and foregrounding the issues of accountability and justice. In their refusal of disavowal and their evocation of the feeling of sobriety, these photographs are thus predicated upon rational thought and incitement to action. Through a comparison of the two projects, I explore the ways in which our roles as art viewers are deeply intertwined with our responsibilities as political actors.