

Dennis C. Dickerson

BLACK BRADDOCK AND ITS HISTORY

This portrait of an African American family in a deindustrialized steel town recounts the human cost attached to labor exploitation and racial discrimination. The images—which focus on the local community of Braddock, Pennsylvania—embody the history of the century-old steel business in Pittsburgh’s now defunct industrial region. Here, men and women, both steelworkers and their families, reaped neither material nor psychic rewards for their hard labor in hot foundries and furnaces. Closed facilities throughout western Pennsylvania resulted in residents who were deprived of gainful employment, treatment for damaged health due to occupational and environmental factors, and access to educational, religious, and leisure activities crucial to human flourishing. These conditions created an impoverished proletariat struggling to survive on a frayed social contract.

The once prosperous business district on Braddock’s Sixth Avenue stood near thriving churches, schools, a hospital, and a public library and in proximity to the towering smokestacks of the Edgar Thomson Steel Works of the United States Steel Corporation. Originally named Carnegie, after its legendary founder, Braddock’s vertically integrated industrial plant, while belching out dirt, soot, and multiple pollutants, provided seeming economic security to generations of black laborers after the start of the mills in 1872. As long as black men offered their bodies to the enormous physical rigors required of mill labor and their wives and children breathed the contaminated air filling Braddock skies, Edgar Thomson made it possible for laborers to buy homes, educate their youth, and plan for the future. A different scenario ensued a century later, in the 1970s. Increased competition from overseas competitors, technological advances in steelmaking, and decreased dependency on a mass pool of unskilled laborers eroded the contract between workers and their employers. The decline of the steel industry in Braddock left a moribund mill community with staggering displays of urban blight, damaged people, drug infestation, and a broken-down political and social infrastructure that once supplied cohesion among town residents. How did the black experience in Braddock and scores of other communities like it along the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio Rivers in western Pennsylvania frame the sad setting that LaToya Ruby Frazier has graphically depicted?

Blacks entered the area’s iron and steel industry in 1875 as strikebreakers at the Pittsburgh Screw and Bolt Company. Racial exclusion by the Sons of Vulcan, an organization of puddlers, and later the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, provided employment opportunities for black workers at other plants elsewhere in the region whenever the union went on strike. As word rapidly spread, especially in the South, African Americans, attracted by better wages, began to find jobs in diverse mill sites along the Three Rivers. At the start of the twentieth century there were

ninety black iron- and steelworkers living in the adjacent towns of Braddock, North Braddock, and Rankin. An employee at the Ninth Street Wire Mill in Braddock, for example, was one of these black laborers for whom western Pennsylvania was an economic Eden. After 1916 the push of depression and natural disasters in Southern agriculture and the pull of escalating employment demands in northern defense industries unleashed a massive migration of African Americans out of the South into manufacturing facilities in places like the Pittsburgh steel region. Mill towns, already heavily populated with European immigrants, experienced a surge of black Southerners settling into ramshackle residences and boarding houses and into dirty and dangerous work sites. The black population of Braddock was 421 (2 percent) in 1910, but rose to 735 (3.5 percent) in 1920 and to 2,224 (11.5 percent) in 1930. Nearly all the mill communities, including Pittsburgh, segregated black migrants into designated “colored areas.” In Duquesne, it was Castle Garden; in Johnstown, it was Rosedale; in Pittsburgh, it was the Hill District; and in Braddock, it was Port Perry. Moreover, 95 percent of Braddock’s 520 black families rented their residences, far more than the rate of 56 percent for the town’s foreign-born white inhabitants. In March 1925 black steelworkers at Braddock’s Edgar Thomson plant numbered 1,150, slightly more than their counterparts at the neighboring Carnegie facility in Homestead, and significantly more than the black laborers at company installations in nearby Pittsburgh, Duquesne, and Clairton.

This steady influx of blacks lasting from the World War I era into the 1920s created vibrant communities with churches, fraternal organizations, mill-sponsored athletics, and other voluntary groups. Steelworkers and their wives founded and populated, for example, the Corey Avenue African Methodist Episcopal Church, which had been started before the wartime migration. Some of Braddock’s North Carolina migrants, however, wishing to replicate their denominational affiliation, began their own Holliday Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. This social expansion both extended the town’s religious diversity and deepened the cohesion of Braddock’s black community. Lodges belonging to the Masons and the Elks and their affiliated female auxiliaries—the Order of the Eastern Star and the Daughter Elks—broadened the town’s social reach and spilled over into neighboring Rankin and North Braddock. Black military veterans in the tri-borough area founded two American Legion posts. Richard L. Ferguson Post #527 and Robert Smalls Post #511 were named for local black soldiers who had been killed in World War I. The two organizations merged their 120 members in 1947. Edgar Thomson officials, like their counterparts at other mills in Duquesne, Clairton, Homestead, and McKees Rocks, facilitated these social developments by hiring black welfare officers to supervise leisure activities for African American steelworkers and their families. In 1920, for example, the Braddock mill employed Robert Earl Johnson—a native of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and a cross runner at Morgan State College in Baltimore—as its social worker. Starting the Edgar Thomson Community Club for Men and Boys was only one of his many duties within Braddock’s black population. The development of this broad social infrastructure seemingly made the black population impregnable to external assaults.

Pride in such organizations, however laudable, remained dependent on the productivity and prosperity of local mills. Though wages were better in Braddock than what many migrants earned

as Southern farm laborers, Carnegie officials largely restricted blacks to the lowest rungs of plant employment. The onset of the Great Depression aggravated their tenuous economic status with layoffs and near privation stemming from steep cuts in steel production. Blacks in Braddock were hit hard, but thanks to various New Deal work relief projects, they suffered less than expected. Though blacks made up only 11 percent of the town’s male population, they benefited from 30 percent of the federally sponsored emergency jobs available to Braddock men. Nonetheless, two developments buoyed the hopes of Braddock’s black steelworkers and their families. The first was the start of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations that included black workers such as Charles W. Torrey, a 1917 migrant from Alabama and a Braddock steelworker who strongly endorsed black union recruitment. Torrey and others profited when the newly named United Steelworkers of America (USWA) delivered on contracts with improved wages and better policies on promotion and retention. The second development pertained to renewed prosperity brought about by increased World War II production and opportunities for black women to work in the mills. Additionally, the war revived black migration from the South, thus swelling Braddock’s black population through its continuation into the 1950s. In 1944 Braddock blacks at the Edgar Thomson Steel Works numbered 817 out of 5,316 employees. The town’s black social and economic fabric seemed stronger than ever.

Underneath the seeming health of black Braddock lay intractable and unaddressed issues in African American steel employment. The USWA worked hard to construct a veneer of racial inclusion and labor democracy within its ranks. Most USWA locals, for example, were intentional about running slates for local union offices that reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of their membership. Even international and district offices had full-time African American officials—Boyd Wilson, in the Pittsburgh headquarters since 1942, and M. Pete Jackson, who joined the staff of Braddock’s District 15 in 1949—to investigate the grievances of black workers. The International Civil Rights Department, founded in 1948, though populated with white officers, gestured support for the NAACP and Urban League. This democratic facade hid the pernicious practice of departmental seniority that the USWA negotiated into union contracts with management rather than plant-wide seniority that would benefit blacks. Most African American steelworkers had been frozen in lower-echelon unskilled and semiskilled departments, where their bodies faced debilitating decades of hard labor. Their seniority was operative for promotions mainly within these departments and seldom on a plant-wide basis where they could have access to better-paying jobs in less physically exacting positions.

The history of racial discrimination against black laborers throughout the industry’s multiple locations resulted in a 1974 court-mandated consent decree in which nine steel firms and the USWA admitted to biased policies and practices. Six of these companies operated plants in western Pennsylvania, including the United States Steel Corporation, which still owned Edgar Thomson Steel Works. The industry-wide settlement of \$31 million was paid to 34,449 black and Hispanic steelworkers and 5,559 female employees hired prior to 1968. The funds scarcely compensated workers for the lost wages and benefits that missed promotions would have generated. These laborers, though vindicated on principle, had won a Pyrrhic victory.

No remuneration could repair the damage that occupational health hazards visited upon workers who lost limbs, suffered respiratory ailments, and experienced general decline in physical stamina attributable to backbreaking tasks that took a toll on their bodies. Black women, though their mill labor lasted for a brief time, principally during World War II, were not immune to the contaminated environment that the Braddock mills produced. A host of chronic and eventually fatal diseases robbed them of robust health. Moreover, there were stresses stemming from male partners, who often were frustrated in their efforts to climb the mill's occupational ladder. Domestic discord, tension, and marital separations were the occasional and unhappy results. These interior components within the lives of black steelworkers and their families occurred against the backdrop of the physical deterioration of Braddock. As steel production declined, the economic foundations of the town's commercial district faltered and Braddock's black social infrastructure followed the same downward spiral.

LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographs capture the effects of this long history of Braddock's black steel experience and its contemporary impact. Though born over a century after the Edgar Thomson Steel Works was established, Frazier has put forth a family chronicle of both women and men who embody the physical marks of their town's interaction with its African American residents. They and others built and sustained the industry's workforce, wove the community's social fabric, and participated in the body politic that gave Braddock its municipal identity and integrity. How this history ravaged their bodies and created the physical ruins that now characterize Braddock's landscape is the inescapable testimony that emerges out of Frazier's images.

The data in this essay derives from Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

Laura Wexler

A NOTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

no·tion [noh-shuh n]:

A belief or opinion.

A mental image or representation; an idea or conception.

A fanciful impulse; a whim.

A vague idea; impression.

An idea, concept, or opinion.

Sixteenth century: from Latin *notio* “a becoming acquainted (with),” “examination (of),” from *noscere* “to know.”

fam·i·ly [ˈfɑm(ə)lē]:

A group consisting of parents and children living together in a household.

A group of people related to one another by blood or marriage.

The children of a person or couple.

A person or people related to one and so to be treated with a special loyalty or intimacy.

Late Middle English: from Latin *familia* “household servants, household, family,” from *famulus* “servant.”

The Notion of Family is a highly unusual family album—a public account of the private life of a working-class African American family made by a daughter with a camera, from within, instead of by a sociologist with a camera, from without. LaToya Ruby Frazier began documenting her family when she was sixteen years old. The intimacy and grace of the images is palpable. One might therefore easily be tempted to concentrate chiefly on the portrait of the family that emerges in this engrossing work.

But the daughter has at the same time linked the private, domestic, steeply gendered, and multilayered world inside her home to the collective public history of her town, county, state, and nation. Parsing all kinds of divisions, she has refused to retreat into the circumscribed spaces where girlhood is supposed to abide and womanhood stands guard. Instead, transfixed by evidence of the exploitation of generations of African American steelworkers and their families, like her own, she has anatomized the contemporary social life of Braddock, Pennsylvania, with surgical precision. Incredulous at the depredations of the natural environment that have made the city (in both a literal and a metaphorical sense) and virtually every member of her

family—including herself—ill, she has registered both exhaustion and the shared will to survive. Juxtaposing the resourcefulness and loyalty of working people, the richness of place and memory, and the historic propulsion of the American dream to the waste of a dumb and brutal rush for global economic supremacy in the twenty-first century, she has crafted a powerful and well-researched exegesis on genocide and greed. And exuberant with the discovery of the analytical and expressive power of photography, she has plumbed the connections between her place in the family and its place in the world. Both parts of the analysis are crucial, in what Frazier describes as her “conceptual documentary art.” Pushing back against so much devaluation, the daughter gets something very basic sorted out: “a descendent of Scottish, African, Braddonian, Blue-collar Steel workers, I embrace my heritage.” Her sure-footedness with the camera is her salvation as well as our own path to greater comprehension.

The title she has chosen for this book—*The Notion of Family*—reiterates that stance. It puts the inquiry ahead (but never instead) of the imagery. A notion is an idea, stubborn or fragile, and for Frazier it is the concept of a family that holds it together. Every picture makes visible a belief about that mode of social cohesion. The family is sometimes a sustaining and sometimes a punitive institution, but it is always constitutive. The images manifest trust in the family as an organizing principle, especially in the numerous double portraits of mother and daughter that record what each sees and believes of the other. In fact, Frazier credits her mother and grandmother as collaborators on the project, which is a notion of photography as well as of family.

The pictures extend that notion of photography, quite literally enlarging conventional ideas of both photography *and* family. This is not a simple nuclear family; when Frazier was a small child, her mother sent her to live at Grandma Ruby’s house, for safety. Frazier’s grandmother had a doll collection that filled the home, and LaToya became another doll baby among them. “Toy” was even the nickname that Grandma Ruby called her. Exploring this relationship, Frazier collaborated with her grandmother on a striking image of them sitting on the living room floor amid the dolls [page 59]. She recalls how, at least while she was a little girl, she was protected so long as pigtails and blue ribbons sufficed to keep her looking like a little treasure. The photograph depicts a grown LaToya, in contrast to her memory of the scene, but also willing to cede control of the scene to her grandmother and trust that it would be good for them to go back to that important place in order to make its sameness and difference visible. This is a mode of documentary that is unique in its emphasis on coproduction and for its ability to challenge the most normative ideas of family photographs.

While LaToya learned to use a camera, Grandma Ruby seems to have placed her trust in the arduous honor of black female silence. From the granddaughter’s point of view, Grandma Ruby is a powerful domestic Madonna, much like Julia Margaret Cameron’s gauzy Victorian figures or Dorothea Lange’s dusty Depression-era *Migrant Mother*. There are many differences among these three photographers, not least that Cameron was the white, upper-class wife of a British colonial planter and Lange was a white, successful portrait photographer before she became an employee of the U.S. government, while Frazier is a young, black, working-class American

artist. More than a century of history also separates the span of their lives. Yet Frazier’s visual quotations, including her use of bedspreads and curtains as backgrounds and costumes, reveal that Cameron’s exploration of emanations of the “divine mother figure” in her own household is one important model and foil for Frazier. So too, Frazier’s portrait of Grandma Ruby cradling dolls in her arms [page 26] can be considered a revisionist reading of Lange’s iconic image of Florence Owens Thompson with her children.

Again, this is a kind of interpretive partnership that needs more exploration and acknowledgment because it delivers new truths. If Grandma Ruby was disillusioned, Gramps continued to believe in the American social contract even after working in the steel mill destroyed the strength of his body. He stuck to the script, voted Republican, and was able to draw his pension as promised. He was able perhaps to repress the fact that the bulk of the physical care he needed was provided by his stepdaughter and family, as Frazier’s images show. In any event, he died before the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center closed the hospital in Braddock, severing the last vestige of the fiction of care. But for Frazier, the answers provided by such examples of denial seem no longer possible. In one of the most stunningly raw self-portraits of the series, Frazier nakedly shares her desire “to move beyond boundaries” with us, her viewers. The complexity and power of her gaze holds our own with such steady intelligence that her faith in this kind of exposure is, indeed, repaid. She has, as she says, “found my face.”¹

American social documentary tradition as it is currently narrated tends to minimize both the active participation of its subjects and the collaboration of multiple practitioners who see across lines of race and class. Frazier has observed that she always wanted to know “what the [Farm Security Administration] photographs would have been like if the family members had photographed themselves in the Great Depression and not the photographers that didn’t really want to be there.”² That is to say, what if Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange had not been the government’s traveling experts on poverty, but instead had been returning home again and again to photograph. In Frazier’s portraits we have one revolutionary possibility for representing family life. It does not result simply from giving a camera to “the other” to “shoot back.” Rather, it is a rupture in the accepted social geometry of what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the “partition of the sensible,” in reimagining what is able to be seen.³

What most roots Frazier’s camera work, I am arguing, is that—and how—she places her family photographs in conversation with the history of photography. Frazier has justly, generously, and joyously inserted into American documentary her analysis of the history that has produced Braddock as it is today, with its streets and houses, its shame, its fury, and its pride. This is a tremendously exciting intervention. Hers is a voice and a witness we have been missing. There are great works of photographic art about class in the United States—for example the images of nineteenth-century New York tenement life made by Jacob Riis and his staff, the FSA archive that has both inspired and irritated Frazier, and the photographs that Lewis Hine took of Pittsburgh—but never from so deeply inside of that reality, from within its family life, as Frazier is trying to convey. It is a meaningful transgression that she is both a woman and a photographer, that she

is such a skilled photographer, that she is a witness to the years of the crack epidemic and the drug war in her industrial town, that she has learned how to name and to show what it means to be a survivor of deindustrialization, globalization, toxification, and gentrification, and that she is taking such care with the story, making video and voice recordings in addition to her prints and installations, as well as occasional performances about the photographs or the Levi Strauss Company's predatory relation to the history of her hometown.⁴

This "slow documentary" practice keeps its eye on what writer Rob Nixon has called the "slow violence" of contemporary environmental predation.⁵ It can be difficult to find reliable witnesses of such engorged arenas of aggression and complicity. It takes a long commitment to build the file. But even as a child, Frazier was watching. "Impacted by the Cosby effect," she remembers, "society looked away in contempt while the Reagan administration sent its troops, cops, and K-9s to raid my home and classroom." As Frazier has begun to develop her own unique voice, she has paid tribute to other photographers she discovered along the way. In addition to Julia Margaret Cameron and Dorothea Lange, she often mentions: Diane Arbus, Richard Billingham, Harry Callahan, Elinor Carucci, Larry Clark, Roy DeCarava, Doug DuBois, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Nan Goldin, Emmet Gowin, Teenie Harris, Kathe Kowalski, Helen Levitt, Jerome Liebling, Sally Mann, Mary Ellen Mark, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Nicholas Nixon, Gordon Parks, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Cindy Sherman, Larry Sultan, Carrie Mae Weems, Francesca Woodman, the FSA, the Photo League, and others, as well as filmmakers Ingmar Bergman, Tony Buba, Charles Burnett, Albert and David Maysles, Michael Moore, and Frederick Wiseman. From them as well as from her own experience, Frazier has learned, as she puts it, how to "make" rather than "take" photographs, a "very key and pivotal" difference that made her "really slow down and think about it, looking in and out at the same time" and pay much closer attention to what the photographs were saying to the viewer. "All of a sudden," she recalls, "I had to take full charge of what I was saying, knowing when I got [home] . . . that was the image I needed to make."⁶

Frazier's relation to the history of documentary, however, is not uncritical; it is enveloping and eager, but it is also fierce. It conveys a radical analysis. It makes a demand. It asks: "What has happened here?" In many ways the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is at the core of the Frazier family album as envisioned by this daughter, just as it was the hospital, not the segregated Carnegie Library, that housed the community center as envisioned by blacks in Braddock. So the question is, what kind of community has a hospital as its only restaurant and meeting place? And the answer is, the kind of community that capital makes of America, where families such as Frazier's, once rendered precarious, continued to be viewed as dispensable by the powers that be. This vivid insight is more than a little disquieting. The hospital is as much or more a fixture in this album and this family than the school, the factory, the library, the market, the taxi stand, the pawnshop, or any other social institution, and its

loss is malignant. The conversation about American domesticity in which these photographs are engaged is absolutely critical at this moment of U.S. history, as is the specific perspective they bring to that discussion. There is a pile of writing—urgent books and articles—making the same arguments about the politics of despoliation that Frazier voices in another register: Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010); Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Radical Practicality of Reparations" (*Atlantic*, 2014); Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* (2007); Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011); Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body* (1998); and Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) come to mind. Frazier's artistic statement burnishes the conversation. It extends it; it concretizes it; it complicates it; it redistributes it across the sensory field so that we find it echoes in the very air we breathe. To use photographs as "the Human Document to keep the present and the future in touch with the past"⁷ was the definition of the documentary ambition devised by Lewis Hine, himself a photographer of industrial Pittsburgh nearly a hundred years ago. This is a rather cryptic statement of a generation past, but *The Notion of Family* is a dazzling example of a new force of mind and eye that has relocated this drive in our now.

Notes

1 LaToya Ruby Frazier, Lecture as part of the Photographers Lecture Series, International Center of Photography, New York, February 3, 2010.

2 Ibid.

3 "A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared 'common' [un commun partagé] and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined through the sensible. This latter form of distribution, in turn, itself presupposes a partition between what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard from the inaudible." Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event*, 5, no. 3 (2001), np.

4 See Levi's ad campaign, "Go Forth for Braddock, PA," <http://vimeo.com/40491476>.

5 Nixon writes: "By slow violence, I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales." This last sentence resonates strongly with Frazier's documentary practice, not only in subject matter but also the diverse temporalities of both still and moving images. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

6 Frazier, Lecture.

7 Lewis Hine, quoted in Hine, *America and Lewis Hine: Photographs, 1904–1940* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1977), p. 136.

LaToya Ruby Frazier and Dawoud Bey

A CONVERSATION

Dawoud Bey: What was the beginning for you, the realization that using the camera and making pictures could be your voice in the world? How early on in your engagement with photography did you begin to sort that out, to realize you wanted to make a particular kind of work?

LaToya Ruby Frazier: I always made contour line drawings, watercolor paintings, and pastel drawings of my grandmother Ruby, my step-great-grandfather, Gramps, and myself. I started to get a clue of my love for photography when I used a disposable camera to take pictures of all the kids that rode my bus senior year at Woodland Hills High School. I didn't quite understand the significance of that particular moment. I just knew I wanted pictures of them because we survived through high school.

Things began to further crystallize for me at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 1999; I changed my major at the encouragement of an instructor, Mark Kirsch, and declared a dual major in photography and graphic design with a minor in speech communication. Between 2000 and 2002 I had two very intense years with Kathe Kowalski, who became my first photographic mentor. She brought in photography books, history of photography books, and theoretical photography books with an emphasis on documentary, in particular James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [1941] and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* [1980]. In her own photographic practice Kathe devoted herself to documenting families living in rural poverty surrounding Erie, Pennsylvania; women in prison, where she often held writing and photography workshops; and the isolation and illness of her mother, Rose. Kathe believed in the power of photographs with text. All her works contain eloquent handwritten narratives that underscore concern for women's rights and positions in art history and society.

Kathe instilled in me the value and commitment to honor the lives of under-recognized individuals in our society. It was Kathe who first believed that my portraits of my mother and grandmother had merit and value. Ashamed of what my earliest portraits of my mother suggested, I hid the contact sheets and negatives. Kathe suspected I was not putting my best work forward and one day pulled me aside in her office to show me three particular books that gave me inspiration, hope, and more troubling social frameworks to think about. I began looking closely and carefully at Larry Clark's *Tulsa* [1971], Eugene Richards's *Cocaine True*, *Cocaine Blue* [1994], and Andrea Kirsh's book on Carrie Mae Weems (1993). I knew I did not want to make stereotypical images of the drugs, violence, and poverty my family faced; but, I also believed my reality needed to be unabashedly confronted.

One day Kathe gave an assignment to bring in a photograph that contained Barthes' description of a "studium" and a "punctum." I brought in Gordon Parks's photograph of Ella Watson, *American*

Gothic [1942]. For me the “studium” was a dignified black woman; the “punctum” was her subordinate janitorial low-wage position and invisibility in our society. It was this understanding that made me aware of how I could speak through a photograph.

What disrupted my joy in this understanding was noticing other images students brought in for the assignment. I was pricked and wounded by two other images: one of a teenage boy lynched in a tree with little white boys underneath him smiling at the camera and grown white men pointing in approval; the other of a white woman looking off camera in despair with three of her children, two of whom hide their faces from the camera. I would learn that day that the first image came from a postcard in the book *Without Sanctuary* [2000] and the other image was an icon known as *Migrant Mother*.

The fact that my peers did not have the same gut reaction I did when I saw the lynching photograph taught me that images have different meanings depending on your race, class, and gender. The fact that none of us knew the name of the woman pictured in *Migrant Mother*, yet we knew Dorothea Lange’s name as the photographer, made me question the importance of who has the power to author subjectivity. I began making portraits with my mother and grandmother by asking myself this question: if Florence Owens Thompson—the woman in *Migrant Mother*—made self-portraits of herself and her family’s condition, what would her images look like? I started out by constantly asking myself if there was any difference between a corporate- or government-sponsored image and a personally documented one. I set out imagining my mother and I were regaining the authorship and agency Thompson lost the moment Lange clicked the shutter. Roy Stryker removed Lange’s contextualizing field notes from the presentation of the image, and proliferated it as an American icon.

DB: I think it’s interesting that you mention the lynching photograph as being among those that were formative to your awareness that photographs had been used in ways that were quite disturbing and deeply problematic. My own earliest memory of paying attention to photographs deeply came from a book called The Movement [1964], which contained one particularly horrific image of a black man being burnt while white adults and children looked nonchalantly into the camera. I was eleven when I saw that photograph, and it—among others in the book—changed everything for me even though I didn’t start making pictures until much later.

For you, coming of age in the 1990s gave you a whole breadth of art practice and history that you could draw from and possibly align your own emerging practice with—everything from documentary work to conceptual practice. And you also had the lingering framing device of postmodernism, and its project of radically deconstructing the photographic image and meaning. The history of the medium, as it had been constructed and thought about, was being seriously contested. That moment of postmodernist critique showed that how we viewed documentary work was in fact deeply flawed. Your work seems to draw upon both of those histories and strategies, the documentary belief in a set of ideas about the subject and the social world, and the postmodern notion that these systems of meanings and ideas are in fact received ones, not intrinsic to any notion of “the truth.” Your continued use of the rather

conventionally sized black-and-white silver print and film seems to reach back to a certain moment in photography’s history as well. There seems to be something almost incongruent about those choices given the moment that you came to making photographs and what the emerging or dominant discourse was since the mid- to late 1980s. Given the now presumed chinks in the armor of documentary practice and the sometimes ironically distanced and cerebral stance that much of postmodern work posited, how did you begin to find your way to a particular kind of thinking about and making photographs?

LRF: There are three major factors that guided me in how I decided to initiate my approach to my subject, concept, and the form it would all take.

The first: the guidance and examples set before by great mentors and teachers such as Kathe Kowalski, and also Doug DuBois and Carrie Mae Weems at Syracuse University. Kathe set an example of how to address personal documentary work that spoke to dislocation and fragmentation in the domestic settings. Doug taught me the difference between making and taking photographs when addressing the abject, aging, and loss. Carrie Mae taught me how to speak back and address my place in history. In all their work, photograph, text, and memory are equally important. Their approaches merge multiple narratives; the narrative represented via the visual language of the photograph itself, and the actual texts each has written or spoken.

The second factor is everything I have learned from particular key moments in the history of photography, moments that each speak to the social and economic crises depicted in my work: the Pittsburgh Survey [1907–8], the Farm Security Administration [1935–44], and the Pictures Generation [1974–84], among others.

I believe that visual, documented evidence has the ability to counter myths, omissions, and distortions. Lewis Hine, who took part in the Pittsburgh Survey as a photographer, saw himself as a sociologist using the camera as a tool for social reform. This is a growing constant thought in my practice. In the current redevelopment of rust-belt towns like Braddock, Pennsylvania, the oversight and erasure of the most vulnerable residents’ realities is an issue that is inherently a part of my work. I don’t know if my photographs will force policy makers to change legislation in ways to support marginalized citizens, but I do know it is vital for me to shed light on these injustices.

The FSA, of course, got me to think about the overlapping paradigms of author versus commissioner and photographer versus subject. The Pictures Generation helped me to understand that as artists in our time we must critically engage and respond to censorship in mass media, to manipulation, and to mind control. The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal incited some of that generation’s responses. What agitates me as an artist is the War on Drugs, United States Steel Corporation, environmental degradation, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s abandonment of the community, along with its discriminatory tactics toward elderly and underemployed working-class people.

The third factor is related to an issue that Martha Rosler raises in her seminal essay “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)” [1981]. She states:

The documentary of the present . . . a shiver-provoking . . . appreciation of alien vitality or a fragmented vision of psychological alienation in city and town, coexists with the germ of another documentary—a financially unloved but growing body of documentary works committed to the exposure of specific abuses by people's jobs, by the financier's growing hegemony over the cities, by racism, sexism, and class oppression, works about militancy, about self-organization, or works meant to support them. Perhaps a radical documentary can be brought into existence. But the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary.

I believe that Rosler's scrutiny of documentary photography comes from a place of urgency and the belief that documentary photography is still important today. In 2009 I went to the Braddock Carnegie Library, the first Andrew Carnegie library, built in 1888. I purchased the book *Images of America: Braddock, Allegheny County* [2008]. I took the book to my studio, excited to learn through images about the many men and women that migrated from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Russia, Italy, England, Sweden, Finland, Norway, the American South, and Africa. By the time I turned to the last page I realized that all the African Americans who had contributed to this great history were excluded. This continued omission, erasure, invisibility, and silence surrounding African American sacrifices to Braddock and the American grand narrative is why I've chosen to work with a twentieth-century documentary aesthetic. It's also the reason why it is necessary to tell the story of three generations of women whose lives parallel the rise and fall of the steel mill industry—and to tell how we survived the subsequent thirty years of disinvestment and abandonment by local, state, and federal governments.

DB: Your work for me clearly embodies a simultaneous respect for what might be called "the tradition" of photographic practice that is firmly rooted in a belief in the photographic object as the container for an evocative formal and material set of engagements. These engagements are predicated as much on the full and knowing use—and respect for—the specific medium as much as they require deploying those devices to visualize and talk about a particular subject. Are you using those conventions to upend them or are you deeply invested in a certain kind and quality of object making as well?

LRF: I believe in and am deeply invested in how formal qualities of light, shadow, and texture appear within the subject of my prints. I use these qualities to convey mood, feeling, and emotion in addition to the content itself. There is also a subtle balance of surrealism and realism in each image I am looking for; a portal or slippage between what is rendered real and not real; the reality of what is physically in front of my camera versus the darkness in the atmosphere that surrounds me. As a youth I could not articulate my poverty, but I could feel the sickness and death surrounding me. For me it was a spiritual matter that each time I froze a frame from my reality it was one step closer to removing what I can only describe as an intangible slow deterioration of my family.

I choose to make work that expresses how I feel, about the environment and class that surrounds me. These expressions can take the shape of portraits, still lifes, landscapes, or abstractions, but, at

the end of the day I am devoted to making pictures about the world in which I come from and live. When Cornell Capa founded the International Center of Photography it was meant to be a center for "Concerned Photography." The key word to grasp here is *concerned*. Capa was a humanitarian who was concerned about keeping humanitarian documentary photography in the public eye.

DB: I've long believed that the work we do must be imperative, that it must matter in a real way. Given that much of documentary work has been predicated on an often disenfranchised or marginalized subject being visualized for a more privileged viewer—whether in the FSA photographs, which were meant to enact legislation, or Lewis Hine's child labor photographs, which were meant to enact child labor laws—what are your hopes for how your work might function for the viewer? How do you intend that your photographs will work on and for the viewer?

LRF: This question you ask is so crucial to my approach to how and why I collaborated with my mother. One of my goals is to disrupt the privileged point of view that only educated and elite practitioners can create work about the poor or disenfranchised. Theoretical discourse is empty rhetoric unless it is applied to daily life in a language that anyone can understand. For example, the portraits *Huxtables, Mom, and Me* [page 64] and *Momme (Shadow)* [pages 76–77] were shot by my mother, not me. She is fully aware of capturing our relationship as mother/daughter and photographer/sitter. We've always discussed our portraits together. Once she told me that the 11-by-14-inch self-portrait print she held in her hand was not her, it was only an idea or glimpse of who she was in the past. My mother did not have to read Roland Barthes to understand death in a photograph. In a lot of ways *The Notion of Family* was made for me and my mother, initially we were the audience.

As the work has grown over the years, I have tried to edit and frame it in ways so that viewers can imagine themselves a part of it. We all come from families and communities that are affected by local economies and industry. Themes like the body and landscape, familial and communal history, and private and public space are all universal. When viewers look into my photographs and texts I want them to feel deeply touched in a way that transcends race, class, and gender, if only for one moment.

My expectation for how this work should function is best described in James Baldwin's 1962 essay "The Creative Process," when he declares: "The state of birth, suffering, love, and death, are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge."

This book is more than an art book or a book of photographs. It is a history book that lends itself to art history; the history of photography; American history; American studies; women, gender, and sexuality studies; comparative literature studies; health studies; social and economic studies; labor studies; race relation studies; and more. It is my testimony and fight for social justice.

LaToya Ruby Frazier (born in Braddock, Pennsylvania, 1982) received her BFA in applied media arts from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (2004) and her MFA in art photography from Syracuse University (2007). She also studied in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (2010–11) and was the Guna S. Mundheim Fellow in the Visual Arts at the American Academy in Berlin (2013–14).

In 2014, Frazier accepted a position as assistant professor of photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has previously held academic and curatorial positions at Yale University School of Art, Rutgers University, and Syracuse University. Frazier lectures prolifically at academic and cultural institutions such as the International Center of Photography, New York; Columbia University School of the Arts, New York; Parsons The New School for Design, New York; Pratt Institute, Brooklyn; Cooper Union, New York; Tisch School of the Arts, New York University; School of Visual Arts, New York; Dahlem Humanities Center, Freie Universität Berlin; Hamburger Bahnhof, Germany; and Tate Modern, London, among others.

Frazier's work is exhibited widely in the U.S. and internationally, with notable solo exhibitions at Brooklyn Museum; Seattle Art Museum; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Her work has also been featured in the following group shows: *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* (2009), New Museum, New York; *Greater New York* (2010), MoMA PS1, New York; *Gertrude's/LOT*, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (2011); *Empire State*, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (2013); and *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2013), among many others.

Her work has been exhibited in the following biennials: 54th Venice Biennale (2011); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2012); *Recycling Memory: Recapturing the Lost City*, IX Nicaraguan Visual Arts Biennial, Managua, Nicaragua (2014); *Mom, Am I barbarian?*, 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); and *Inhabiting the World*, Busan Biennale, South Korea (2014).

Frazier is the recipient of many awards, including a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2014); the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize, Seattle Art Museum (2013); a Theo Westenberger Grant, Creative Capital Foundation (2012); the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award (2011); and an Art Matters Foundation Grant (2010).

Her work can be found in public and private art collections, including at Brooklyn Museum; Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh; Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris; JPMorgan Chase Art Collection; Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Pomeranz Collection, Vienna; Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Zabudowicz Collection, London, among others.

While her work has been featured in several art publications and press outlets, *The Notion of Family* is the first monograph of Frazier's work. Frazier is represented by Galerie Michel Rein Paris/Brussels.

Dawoud Bey (interview) began his career as a photographer in 1975 with a series of photographs titled Harlem, USA, which was later exhibited in his first one-person exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. He has since had numerous exhibitions worldwide. His publications include *Class Pictures: Photographs by Dawoud Bey* (Aperture, 2007), *Harlem, USA* (2012), and *Dawoud Bey: Picturing People* (2013). He has received numerous fellowships over the course of his career, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Bey has a master of fine arts degree from Yale University School of Art, and is currently Professor of Art and a Distinguished College Artist at Columbia College Chicago, where he has taught since 1998.

Dennis C. Dickerson (essay) is James M. Lawson, Jr. Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, Nashville. Previously, he taught at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he was Stanfield Professor of History. He earned his BA from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania; an MA and PhD from Washington University in St. Louis; and an MDiv from Vanderbilt University. His books include *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980* (1986), *Militant Mediator: Whitney M. Young, Jr.* (1998), and *African American Preachers and Politics: The Careys of Chicago* (2010). In spring 2014, he was the Siemens Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, working on a book titled *A Brother in the Spirit of Gandhi: William Stuart Nelson and the Religious Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*.

Laura Wexler (essay) is Professor of American Studies and Professor and former chair of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. She is founder and director of the Photographic Memory Workshop at Yale. She holds her MA, MPhil, and PhD degrees from Columbia University in English and comparative literature. Her many essays and books include the award-winning *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (2000), and "A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (2012). Currently, she is Principle Investigator of the Photogrammar Project, which has received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a digital map of the more than 170,000 photographs in the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information archives.