

LaToya Ruby Frazier's Notion of Family



LaToya Ruby Frazier from "The Notion of Family" (Aperture, 2014)

LaToya Ruby Frazier was perusing a recently published photo book about her hometown, Braddock, Pa., when she realized something was missing: any trace of the African-American residents who had contributed much to the town and who were now its majority population.

Once a bustling steel town in the Pittsburgh suburbs along the banks of the Monongahela River, Braddock has declined over the past half-century, a result of mill closings, chronic unemployment, toxic waste, redlining and white flight. Recent efforts at gentrification have further marginalized the town's African-American residents. And Braddock's lone hospital and largest employer closed in 2010, its owner, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, relocating to a more affluent suburb.

"This continued omission, erasure, invisibility and silence surrounding African-American sacrifices to Braddock and the American grand narrative," Ms. Frazier said, motivated her to explore the town's history, and present-day reality, through the visual narrative of her family. Five years later, she has produced an epochal book — "The Notion of Family" (Aperture) — about the largely forgotten Rust Belt town.

Ms. Frazier, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was inspired by Gordon Parks's idea of using the camera as a "weapon" of choice against racism, intolerance and poverty. She does not pretend to speak for African-Americans or even Braddock's black community in this project. Instead, she typically photographs herself and her mother and grandmother, three generations of women whose "lives parallel the rise and fall of the steel mill industry," and who endured despite "thirty years of disinvestment and abandonment by local, state and federal governments."

By representing the substandard living conditions, hardships and withering effects of the pollution-borne illness that have beset the three women — as well as their struggles to survive — Ms. Frazier makes visible the human cost of political indifference and neglect.

"We need longer sustained stories that reflect and tell us where the prejudices and blind spots are and continue to be in this culture and society," Ms. Frazier said. "This is a race and class issue that is affecting everyone. It is not a black problem, it is an American problem, it is a global problem. Braddock is everywhere."

Her book conveys the magnitude of the problem through desolate and haunting images: Ms. Frazier in her grandmother's or step-great-grandfather's pajamas, lingering like an apparition in the rooms of the latter's dilapidated and abandoned home; Braddock's dramatic skyline, shrouded by a haze of noxious pollutants; boarded-up facades of grocery stores and other local businesses; bleak portraits of Grandma Ruby, a towering presence in Ms. Frazier's life, dying from pancreatic cancer.



Ms. Frazier's mother LaToya Ruby Frazier from "The Notion of Family" (Aperture, 2014) in a Braddock Hospital bed. 2002.

Ms. Frazier reimagines the tradition of social documentary photography by approaching a community not as a curious or concerned outsider but as a vulnerable insider. But like other trailblazing works about poverty in America — James Agee and Walker Evans's "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," for example, or Mr. Parks's "Moments Without Proper Names" — "The Notion of Family" is both a cautionary tale and a force for educating the public and motivating reform.

As "The Notion of Family" affirms, it is principally family, both immediate and extended, that holds the key to survival in Braddock, nurturing each other as the world around them crumbles. Ms. Frazier collaborates with her mother, for example, in the book's most poignant and affirmative images. In these emotionally intense portraits, the women pose together or photograph each other, employing the camera as a potent vehicle of self-expression and self-possession.

The title of Ms. Frazier's book recalls "The Family of Man," an exhibition organized by the photographer Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. The show documented life in 68 countries through more than 500 images taken by an international team of photographers.

"The Family of Man" played down cultural and national differences in favor of Cold War platitudes about the "essential oneness of mankind throughout the world." But it also echoed a sentiment shaped by the New Deal, and espoused by nearly every president from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter: that the survival of humanity was dependent on how well we respected and took care of each other.

"The Notion of Family" testifies to the ominous consequences of rejecting this idea. The ascendance of neoconservatism in the 1980s ushered in an era of brazen self-interest, one that defined the notion of family as more a matter of blood than social responsibility. Braddock's decline was exacerbated during Reagan-era policies favoring trickle-down economics, union busting and diminution of social welfare programs, which foreshadowed the ever-widening gap between rich and poor Americans.

Ms. Frazier's wistful words and images, despite their focus on close relatives, speak to the value and necessity of altruistic notions of family, exemplified by the community of activists who fought to save Braddock Hospital and who continue to advocate for a better quality of life for the town's residents.

In the end, Ms. Frazier, who suffers from lupus and who lives part time in Pittsburgh to care for her mother, refuses to succumb to pessimism. The struggle for her is continuing and embodied by her work. But it is also sustained by a hopefulness informed by her endurance.

"I used my camera to fight for my survival," Ms. Frazier said. "It provided me with an education and with funds to provide food and shelter for my family. Without my camera I would not have been able to resist the systematic oppression and racism my family continues to face in Braddock, Pittsburgh and in this country."