

This Land Is Your Land

David Company interviews **LaToya Ruby Frazier**, winner of the International Center of Photography's 2015 Infinity Award for her first book, *The Notion of Family*

Over the past decade, US photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier has developed a powerful body of work detailing the economic devastation wrought upon her hometown of Braddock, a suburb of Pittsburgh. In 2014, Frazier published *The Notion of Family* and was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in recognition of her work.

DAVID COMPANYY

Let's begin in Braddock, which is both your place of birth and frequent subject. Your formation as an artist and your coming to terms with the fate of Braddock are entwined. How did this happen?

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

Growing up during the 1980s in a shrinking steel-mill town – under Reagan-era policies of trickle-down economics, government deregulation, outsourcing and environmental pollution – made me keenly aware of my family's plight in an industrial landscape. My inability to articulate in words the harmful and painful effects the environment placed on my family made me turn to visual art as an outlet. I started

out drawing and painting my grandmother and her stepfather where we all lived together, in an area by the Monongahela River known as 'the bottom', then turned to photography once I entered college at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania.

DC *I sense in your work the rich legacy of experimental documentary photography: Walker Evans and James Agee's Let Us now Praise Famous Men (1941), Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes' The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955), Gordon Parks's image-text pieces for Life magazine in the 1950s and '60s, and the work of post-conceptualists such as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and Carrie Mae Weems. It's a reflexive mix of visual reporting, writing and performance.*

LRF Absolutely right. These are the artists who were mentors and influences. In fact, I had the first edition of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* in my studio while laying out the photographs and writings for *The Notion of Family*. My text often switches between my grandmother's voice and that of my mother – both are investigative, anecdotal, lyrical. At times, the text functions as

an image and the photograph becomes the visual language that creates tension. Weaving around throughout the book, each is a character in itself.

DC *Your work often depends on the nuanced interrelation of parts.*

LRF Currently, I am reading Parks's *The Making of an Argument* to fully understand how his photographs, which always underscore humanity and dignity, took on different meanings depending on how they were edited, cropped and used in storylines by *Life* magazine. If I were a journalist, I would not be able to edit and frame my photographs. I look for a narrative or context that will amplify the voices of the marginalized who have so many important stories to tell about the United States,



U.P.M.C. Global Corporation,
2011, silver gelatin print
mounted on archival museum
cardboard, 50 x 40 cm

capitalism, working-class life and the current issues we face under Rust Belt renewal.

DC *The art world still seems anxious about the documentary potential of photographs. It likes artful deconstruction of the claims to truth-telling, but it can't really handle the more complex mix of fact and wish, revelation and enactment.*

Documentary gets dismissed as naive realism only to be replaced by real nihilism. Spending time with The Notion of Family, I felt you were catching the door of documentary just as it was slamming, sticking your foot out to keep it open.

LRF I believe in the value of documentary photography especially at this moment, as we watch the mass media manipulate issues around gentrification, poverty, police brutality and corporate violence against our ecosystem. Through government commissions and financed local business interests, the industrial past of Braddock was documented and contextualized by Evans, Lewis Hine and W. Eugene Smith. Currently, Braddock is being rebranded through local newspapers, social media, Hollywood and corporate advertisements by firms such as Levi's. The new neo-liberal narrative for the 'creative class' omits the conditions of the working class and refuses the perspective and creativity of a subject like myself. Bertolt Brecht stated it best in 1931: 'Photography in the hands of the bourgeoisie has become a terrible weapon against the truth.' I am obliged to document and counter this reality and, ultimately, to re-imagine and rewrite it myself.

DC *Brecht understood that realism must be supple and keep on its toes. In his 1938 essay 'Popularity and Realism', he wrote: 'With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to "tried" rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master [...] Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions.'*

LRF I am interested in the scepticism about photography shared by 20th-century theorists like Walter Benjamin, Brecht and Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer felt that photographs obscured truth and fought contemplation. Benjamin was concerned that the photographic world masked the complexity of the human world. Yet, despite their harsh criticism, they also felt that photography could liberate a new way of seeing and a radical consciousness. *The Notion of Family* responds to that call to suspend the passive aestheticism that turns abject poverty into an object of enjoyment.

Evans has been a great influence on my practice: he established the autonomy to shoot, edit, write and design his

own pages. His consciously resistant journalism at *Fortune*, countering the values and conventions of the mainstream, reminds me of the Frankfurt School belief that artists should not play a subordinate role to the culture industry.

DC *Like Evans, you play word and image against each other. Do you write while you photograph, or do the words come later?*

LRF It took 12 years to create *The Notion of Family*. I wrote on and off for six of them. The texts come from audio recordings, interviews, research and personal writings from myself, my grandmother, mother and community residents. My book is a contribution to the long legacy of men who wrote their own narratives to address the history of Braddock. Andrew Carnegie's 1889 dedication speech of The Free Library in Braddock was a cry for his love of the town and an attempt to find peace between businessmen and working men. Thomas Bell's novel *Out of this Furnace* tells how, from the 1880s to the 1920s, three generations of his Slovak family dealt with immigration, industrialism and trade unions. Tony Buba's film *Struggles in Steel: A Story of African-American Steelworkers* (1996) documents black men and women recounting years of social and economic discrimination in the steel mills. Lastly, Dennis C. Dickerson's 1986 book *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* shows how African Americans were a part of the steel industry from the beginning. Excerpts from this can be found at the end of my book, along with Dickerson's essay 'Black Braddock and its History'.

Coincidentally, Bell, Buba and Dickerson were all steelworkers before they produced their writings and films. Following in their large footsteps as a granddaughter of steelworkers, I felt I needed to produce a photo-history book about three generations of women, between 1925 and 2014, which dealt with segregation, deindustrialization, environmental racism, healthcare inequity and gentrification.

DC *Braddock is a very real place but it's become a symbol for writers and image-makers. Recently, the photographer Mark Neville was shooting in Braddock and in Pittsburgh's wealthy neighbourhood, Sewickley. Hollywood also got a little interested with the movie Out of the Furnace (2013). Then, there's Jean-Loïc Portron's 2014 documentary Braddock America. Is there a risk that Braddock has begun to be generalized - even fetishized - as an emblem of post-industrial America, rather like Detroit has become a magnet for so many documentarists and writers wanting a shortcut to some 'new America'.*

LRF Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted: 'Few people have the toughness of mind to judge critically and to discern the true from the false, the fact from the fiction. Our minds are constantly being invaded by legions

of half-truths, prejudices and false facts.' There are many parallel realities and narratives being told. The media and culture industries take advantage of this, pitting one group against another. I prefer documentaries to Hollywood films. I helped Portron and Gabriella Kessler by informing them about African-American families and residents that remained voiceless and invisible to mainstream media. They interviewed the Bunn family, enabling them to testify to the current discrimination in Braddock. I grew up with the Bunn family. I had been photographing the same intersection at Ninth and Talbot for years, archiving the environmental racism and aggressive dispossession the Bunn family is facing because they refuse to move out of the last remaining home on a lot that has been re-zoned for light industry. The Bunn family owns their home through years of military service and from working in the steel mills.

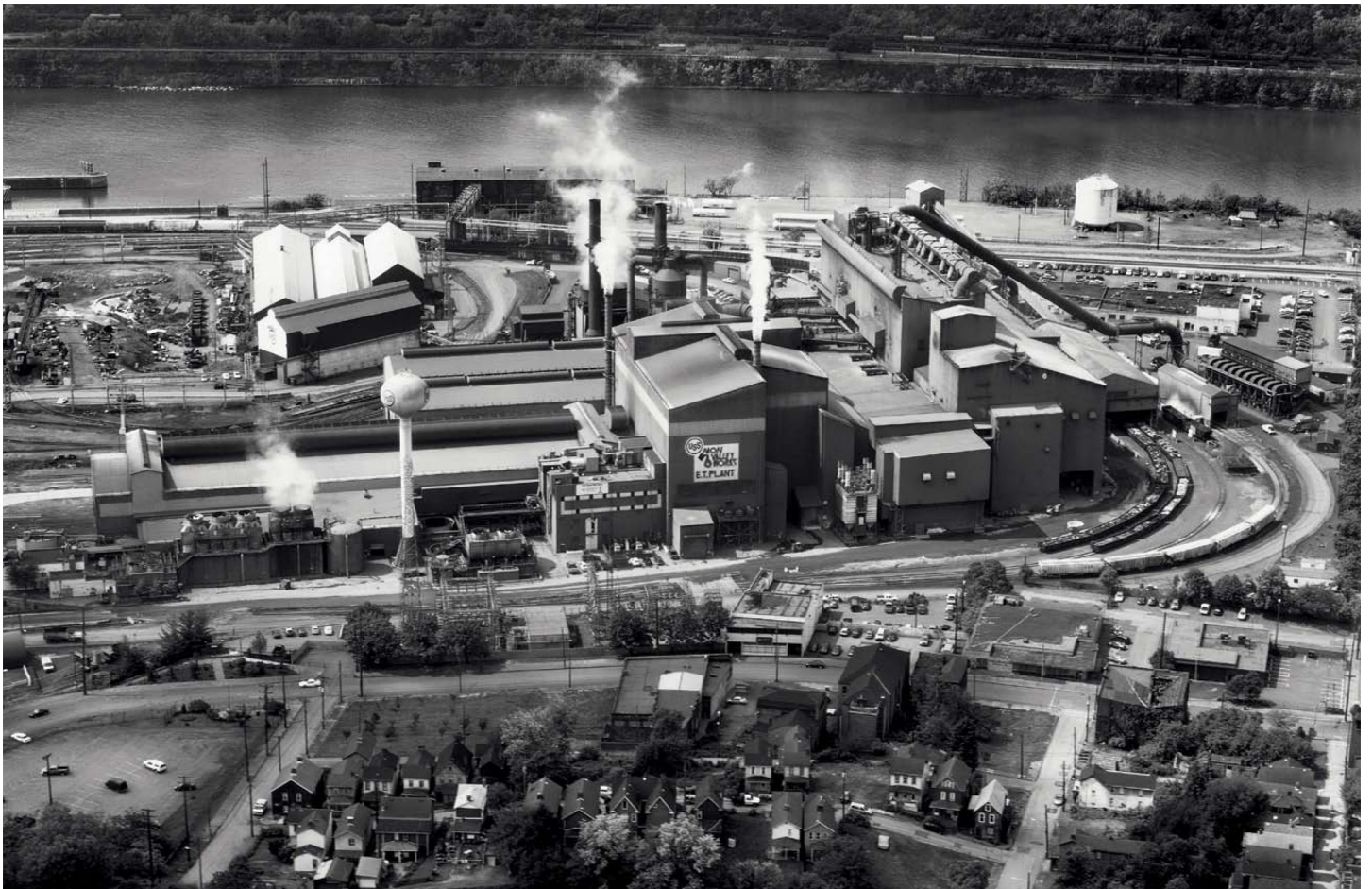
Out of the Furnace (2013) is a Hollywood movie about two brothers, a steelworker (Christian Bale) and an Iraq War veteran (Casey Affleck). The first scene in which they appear together is at Ninth and Talbot, in front of the Bunn family's house. A shallow depth of field renders the house an impressionist painting, concealing the surrounding environmental ruin. A viewer would never know that Braddock is predominantly African-American with residents fighting for social and economic opportunity to be included in the revitalization of the town. Through whitewashing, cultural appropriation and media exploitation, African Americans are being written out of the redevelopment of Braddock.

DC *The mainstream media has a habit of recognizing social difficulty and then distorting its presentation. It's ideology at its purest: the merely symbolic resolution of real contradiction.*

LRF It's imperative we tell our own stories, so we can control the framework, context and narrative. In the words of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall: 'Racism never has been put in a critical context by the media [...] When it comes to fighting racism, the media are part of the problem, they perpetuate myths and stereotypes about black people; they lie by omission, distortion and selection, they give racists inflated importance and respectability.' ♣

David Company is a writer based in London, UK. His latest book is The Open Road: Photography and the American Road Trip (Aperture, 2014). He is curating the exhibition 'A Handful of Dust', which opens at Le Bal, Paris, France, on 15 October 2015.

LaToya Ruby Frazier's work has been widely exhibited internationally. In April 2015, she received an Infinity Award from the International Center for Photography, New York, USA, for her first book, The Notion of Family (Aperture, 2014).



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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

Previous pages
*United States Steel Mon Valley
Works Edgar Thomson Plant,*
2013, silver gelatin print, mounted
on archival museum cardboard,
1.2 × 1.5 m

1

Mom and Mr. Yerby's Hands,
2005, silver gelatin print,
mounted on archival museum
cardboard, 50 × 40 cm

2

Self Portrait (March 10 am),
2009, silver gelatin print, mounted
on archival museum
cardboard, 50 × 40 cm

3

Grandma Ruby and Me, 2005,
silver gelatin print,
mounted on archival museum
cardboard, 40 × 50 cm

Courtesy

All images the artist
and Michel Rein, Brussels
and Paris



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