

A Conversation Between Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier and Rujeko Hockley, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum

Rujeko Hockley: Let's start with the basics: What kind of camera do you use? How did you get started as a photographer? Who or what was important to your development?

LaToya Ruby Frazier: I shoot with various medium format cameras, using medium format black-and-white film. I received my B.F.A. from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2004. While I was there, Kathe Kowalski, a purist of traditional black-and-white photography, became my mentor. She was the person who encouraged me to make the work with my mother and grandmother. I remember Kathe pulled me into her office one day and showed me Carrie Mae Weems's photographs in order to explain that my work had value. I had been hiding my negatives from her and refusing to show them in class; I couldn't see any value in showing people images of my family. It was Kathe who introduced me to bell hooks, black feminist author, activist, and cultural theorist, and Kathe who instilled in me the value of and commitment to honoring the lives of under-recognized individuals. She devoted her own practice to documenting her mother, women in prison, and underserved families in rural areas. Her unexpected death in 2006 was a devastating loss, but her impact on my work and life has become the revelation that keeps pushing me to work harder every day.

At Syracuse (M.F.A., 2007), I was lucky enough to study with Carrie Mae Weems and Doug DuBois. Carrie taught a course called Social Studies 101 and Community Art Practice, which was very important for me. Through many conversations with her, my photographic insight developed toward investigating issues of class, capitalism, and the postmodern condition. Doug's work, which focuses on his family, was very inspiring, and he himself has been an important mentor.

Hockley: In addition to the wonderful and inspiring mentors you've had, you seem to be engaging with a lot of social and cultural theorists. Can you talk about some of these influences, and how you see their ideas entering your work?

Frazier: Absolutely. I mentioned bell hooks already, and I would also add black feminist author and intellectual Michele Wallace, whose book *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* has been a big influence, particularly in her discussion of the structural "silencing" of women of color within society. Another important influence is Mike Davis, Marxist historian and urban theorist. His book *Planet of Slums* was critical to my thinking on the creation of slums in connection with manufacturing and its subsequent disinvestment, deregulation, etc. I'm also very interested in geographer and social theorist David Harvey, who suggests that the reality of American cities today is widespread polarization, homelessness, fragmentation, and marginalization. I have seen and lived this reality; it informs all of my work. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall has also been influential, particularly in terms of questions of identity formation. Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I have all been shaped by external forces: on the micro level, we are three women from an abandoned community, but on the macro level, I see us as symbolic of state oppression and neglect. This has shaped us systemically, enforcing limitations on our economic, social, and political gain, which affect not only who/what we can be in our own homes and community, but also our self-perceptions. Through the process of making images together of one another, we wrestle with these character/identity shifts.

Hockley: Along similar lines, what artists or artistic movements have been important to you?

Frazier: There is so much to think about here, but at the core, my photographs and practice are informed by a few key artists, movements, and/or projects. In no particular order, these are: Realism, especially as practiced by 19th-century documentary photographers and social reformers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine; the

Pittsburgh Survey, an early 20th-century sociological survey of urban conditions in Pittsburgh; the Farm Security Administration photographers who worked during the Great Depression, especially Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks; the New Topographics photographers, who looked at the “man-altered” landscape, particularly Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Nicholas Nixon; anti-aesthetics in photography, in particular the use of text by artists like Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula; the Pictures Generation, artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Laurie Simmons, who appropriate images from mass media, etc.; the self-representation of artists like Frida Kahlo, Claude Cahun, and Francesca Woodman; and artists who photograph their families, like Sally Mann, Mitch Epstein, and Larry Sultan. When I think of my artistic family lineage, all of these artists and movements come into play; all of this together equals LaToya Ruby Frazier.

Hockley: I love this idea of an artistic family lineage; it sheds so much light on your work and practice. With that in mind, let's move on to our current exhibition. Your title, *A Haunted Capital*, is compelling. It is poetic, and seems to allude to both the abandonment of Braddock and the lingering, unexamined effects of capitalism on people and places. What does it mean to you?

Frazier: My initial thoughts about this title came about while I was reading *Planet of Slums*. I was thinking about how slums are created and maintained, and the connections between those spaces and the slide from industrialization, to deindustrialization, to globalization, to economic decline. Davis highlights the inequality and poverty that followed in the wake of plant closures and deindustrialization in parts of the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s; I immediately connected that to the collapse of Braddock's steel industry in the 1970s and the devastation and displacement visited upon steel workers and their families after the mills closed. In the international context, Davis describes apartment blocks, neighborhoods, even whole cities falling into slum conditions—which is exactly what happened to Braddock. Because of all this, we are seen as a ghost town by outsiders, as a place that needs to be “reclaimed,” revitalized, or

redeveloped. After being ignored and exploited, now we are being erased. But it's not that easy: we are not a ghost town. We are still here; we are still alive. This is all a part of the title.

Hockley: What does it mean to be erased, and how does that manifest in the world? What can one do to push back against it?

Frazier: One way it manifests is in history and the writing and/or imaging of history. For example, in 2008 a book called *Braddock, Allegheny County* was published as part of the *Images of America* series. African Americans were left out of this book completely, even though we were, and are, a part of Braddock. We have been excluded from what amounts to an official history of our own town, even as we continue to live in it! In the face of this and other exclusions, I have a strong sense of duty to visually write my family and community into the history of Braddock, and into American history. Something that is very important to me, and to my work, does have to do with erasure, with my refusal to be erased or reduced to a nameless statistic. My mother, grandmother, and I are not abstractions. Creating a visual human record of the socioeconomic inequality, lack of healthcare access, and injuries and terminal illnesses that we have endured within Braddock's historical, environmental, and social landscape is my testimony, evidence, and story. I will not remain silent or disappear.

Hockley: This brings me to thinking about self-representation, and particularly black self-representation, which has often been concerned with the interrelated ideas of 1) countering stereotypical images of black people/communities by producing "positive" imagery, and 2) increasing visibility of an ignored population. I see your work as very invested in the second element; less so in the first. Would you agree?

Frazier: Self-representation is critical. My thoughts on this are eloquently described by bell hooks in her 1995 book *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, though, so I'm going to quote her at length here:

Our capacity to value art is severely corrupted and perverted by a politics of the visual that suggests we must limit our response to the narrow confines of a debate over good versus bad images. How can we truly see, experience, and appreciate all that may be present in any work of art if our only concern is whether it shows us a positive or negative image? In the valuable essay “Negative/ Positive,” which introduces Michele Wallace’s collection *Invisibility Blues*, Wallace cautions us to remember that the binary opposition of negative versus positive images too often sets the limits of African-American cultural criticism. I would add that it often sets the limits of African-American creative practice, particularly in visual arts. Wallace emphasizes that this opposition ties “Afro-American cultural production to racist ideology in a way that makes the failure to alter inevitable.”

Hockley: This has been wonderful, LaToya. We’re thrilled to have your work on view at the Brooklyn Museum, both here and upstairs in *American Identities* on the 5th floor. Thank you!