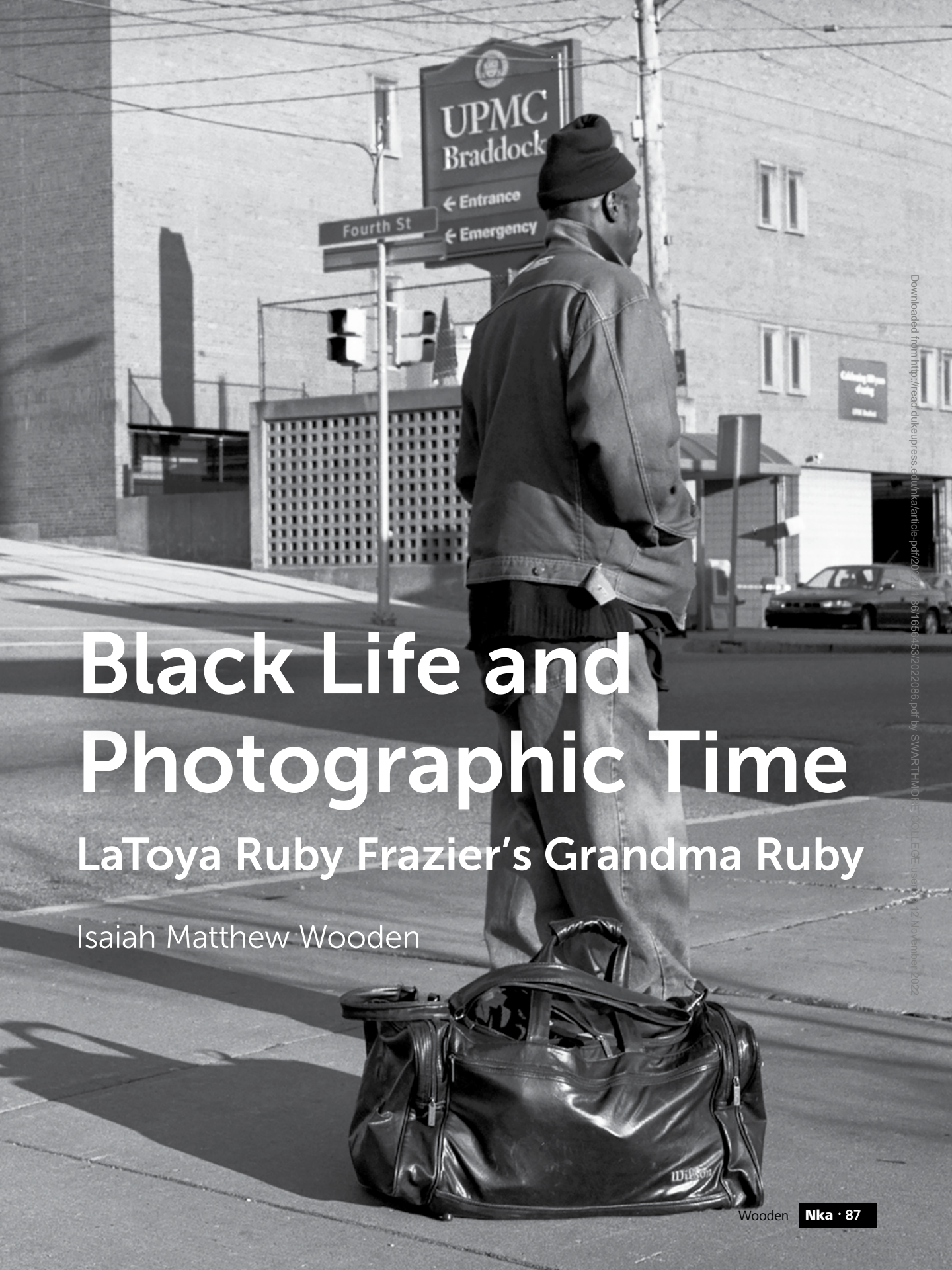




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LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and UPMC Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue*, 2007. Gelatin silver print. 20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm). © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Used by permission. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery



Black Life and Photographic Time

LaToya Ruby Frazier's *Grandma Ruby*

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

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Photographer and video artist LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* series (2001–14) strikingly looks forward through the past.¹ The project traces its origins to Frazier's teen years growing up in the industrial suburb of Braddock, Pennsylvania, a once-thriving mill town just nine miles outside of Pittsburgh that drew many African Americans northward in the decades following the failures of Reconstruction. Like so many of the manufacturing communities in western Pennsylvania, Braddock began experiencing rapid decline in the 1970s when, due to several factors, including advances in technology and access to cheaper labor pools abroad, American steel no longer dominated the global market. Indeed, the town had become something of a shadow of its former self by the time Frazier was old enough to begin maneuvering its streets on her own in the 1990s. If in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries African Americans came to places like Braddock to pursue and experience the opportunities for success and well-being that had been denied them for centuries, subsequent generations would be left to contend with the blotting out of those hopes and dreams. Frazier uses her photographic practice to document some of these developments and reckon with the implications and meanings of these changes in conditions for those suffering their consequences. Often central to and reflected in her work, as *The Notion of Family* series exemplifies, is a critique of the narratives of progress that have become crucial to sustaining investments in the time of history and capital.

Frazier, whose accolades include a Guggenheim Fellowship (2014) and a MacArthur Fellowship (2015), notes that she has been an artist for most of her life. "Since I was a child, I was always looking at my grandmother and my step-great-grandfather and my mother, and it started out with drawings and paintings," she explained in a 2018 interview with *Aperture*.² The story goes that she began using disposable cameras to capture some of the people in her orbit, including the classmates with whom she rode on the bus to and from high school when she was a teenager. While she "didn't quite understand



Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls, 2002. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Used by permission. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

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Grandma Ruby Holding Her Babies, 2002. Gelatin silver print. 20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm). © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Used by permission. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

the significance of that moment,” as she observes in an interview with fellow photographer Dawoud Bey, these quotidian acts would nevertheless deepen her appreciation for the medium of photography and expose its capacity to render present histories and realities that might otherwise go forgotten or unrecognized.³

For Frazier, the complex relationships she negotiated with some of the elder members of her family—and the complex relationships that many of them negotiated with the municipality in which they had worked to make a life for multiple generations—were among the experiences she felt inspired and compelled to archive. This led her to become more intentional about turning the camera on loved ones like her Grandma Ruby, her step-great-grandfather Gramps, her mother, and the environments in which they lived and moved. She also became

more deliberate about exploring the possibilities (and limitations) of portrait photography, a genre that would necessitate confronting her own vulnerability both behind and in front of the camera. What ultimately emerged was a photographic collection that not only offered an intimate look at a Braddock family—Frazier’s family—but also an incisive interrogation of the forces and conditions that precipitated and, indeed, necessitated its disintegration. This was no doubt slow work—both the disintegration and Frazier’s documentation of it. *The Notion of Family* series took Frazier more than a dozen years to complete. She endured the loss of several of her subjects along the way—Grandma Ruby, perhaps most notably. Frazier anticipates and entangles the no longer and the not-yet-here throughout the series and, in so doing, creates crucial space to offer up thick commentary on the personal,

communal, economic, and environmental effects of the decline of industrial activity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The Notion of Family series is as much a “public account of the private life of a working-class African American family” as it is a “powerful and well-researched exegesis on genocide and greed,” Laura Wexler writes.⁴ The project, which includes still lifes, landscapes, aerial shots, and performances, as well as portraits, places the rich contributions of African Americans at the center of the story about the rise and collapse of the American steel industry, casting a spotlight on the profound toll and toil that laboring for the industry often took on the lives, bodies, and communities of Black folk. “The tradition and grand narrative of Braddock is mostly comprised of stories of industrialists and trade unions,” Frazier observed in a 2015 TED talk.⁵ Indeed, Braddock perhaps circulates most widely in the popular imaginary as one of the key sites that the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie used to grow the American steel industry in the nineteenth century and to accumulate his unprecedented wealth. Carnegie opened his first steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, in what is present-day North Braddock in 1875. While many of the other industrial mills that sprung up near it have since shuttered, it remained in operation some one hundred fifty years later. What the narrative about the mill’s connections to one of the richest men in American history serves to obscure is the sheer number of people who labored for decades to make it a successful enterprise.

As the dramatic work of the Pittsburgh-born playwright August Wilson draws our attention to, so many of those workers were African Americans who traveled long distances from their birthplaces, holding fast to the belief that contributing to one of their country’s thriving industries might allow them to make freedom mean something. The challenges that Citizen Barlow confronts in *Gem of the Ocean*, the play that comes first chronologically in Wilson’s ten-play meditation on the African American experience in the twentieth century, mirror the struggles that so many African Americans faced in pursuit of freedom dreams.⁶ Early in *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen recounts the various obstacles he faced in trying to flee Alabama to find work in Pittsburgh. To prevent its African American residents from escaping the

racist and exploitative conditions that were essential to keeping the state’s economy afloat, Alabama made it illegal for them to travel on state roads, Citizen explains. This meant that he and others had to move surreptitiously, taking unchartered, and often dangerous, paths to make their way northward. Among the first things the younger man does when he arrives in Pittsburgh is to seek out employment at one of the local mills. While he is told that the mill is offering employees compensation of two dollars a day initially, the pay is reduced to a dollar and fifty cents by the time he can inquire about a position. Being hired also requires agreeing to several other costly stipulations, including paying two dollars for room and board, which meant sharing a room and a single bed with another mill worker. “The fellow I was with want to fight about it. I’m just starting out I don’t want no trouble. I told him I would sleep on the floor. I wasn’t planning on sleeping there long,” he recounts.⁷ In the play, what Citizen soon discovers, however, is that many of the racist systems and structures from which he thought he was breaking free by leaving the Jim Crow South had their doubles in the North. Indeed, the Northern mill had much in common with the Southern plantation. Through Citizen, Wilson offers a powerful rebuke of and corrective to those narratives that serve to obscure or erase the central role that African Americans played in transforming the United States into a global industrial superpower.

The Notion of Family series reflects a similar impulse to correct the record. The story of Braddock is not just one of the meteoric rise and collapse of the steel industry. It is also one of the Black people who sacrificed so much of their lives, health, and environment to keep that industry in operation. Not surprisingly, so many of the details that Frazier captures in her photographs reveal a much more complex portrait of the effects of, among other things, poverty, environmental pollution, and the failures of the health-care system in the lives of ordinary Black people. Photography gave Frazier a tool to reckon with her feelings about the forces and realities she and her family negotiated regularly. “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



Grandma Ruby's Installation, 2002. Gelatin silver print. 20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm). © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Used by permission. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery



can only describe as an intangible slow deterioration of my family,” she observes.⁸ At its core, *The Notion of Family* series is a recuperative project, and in this way it is also fundamentally a reparative one.

Frazier uses her camera to render Braddock, and the Black people who vitalize it, socially and symbolically significant. Simultaneously, she demonstrates a keen understanding of the often complicated history and relationship between her chosen medium and its Black subjects. To be sure, Black people in the United States have endeavored to make full use of and derive maximum benefit from the representational power of the photograph since its invention in the nineteenth century. For many, the photograph has served as a vital means through which to reaffirm and concretize ideas about Black agency, subjectivity, and autonomy. Frazier has remarked often about her indebtedness to and departures from the tradition of social documentary photography, in particular. She has suggested that what initially drew her to documentary photography was its capacity to bring meaning and value to people and places dismissed and disrespected by mainstream society. She recognized early on, however, that the tradition had its own troubling history with this. Indeed, there were notable ways that social documentary photographers had participated in and helped perpetuate efforts at silencing and marginalizing the marginalized. Not surprisingly, her photographic practice is profoundly self-aware and deeply self-reflexive, displaying thick commitments to approaching and engaging its subjects with an ethic of care, even as it works to expose challenging topics and themes. Notable about each of her photographs are the ways they remain alive to and, indeed, anticipate how they might be coopted as evidence of both aesthetic and political motivations, and as feelings about the social worlds they document and represent.

Black Life, Photographic Time

Further striking about *The Notion of Family* series are the ways it bears witness to Black life experienced in real time while also demonstrating the impossibility of the dominant temporal order to account for Black

living and being. What Frazier surfaces in the series are the ways normative temporal regimes often function to deny the existence of Black people and Black life altogether. It is precisely such regimes that allow for the cruel shortening of time that makes it possible for the grand narrative of a place like Braddock to pass over decades of Black effort and innovation to center nineteenth-century white industrial ingenuity and twenty-first-century white pioneering. Frazier powerfully capitalizes on both the temporality and surface of photography to “tell us . . . that we require different arrangements of the possible,” to echo Christina Sharpe.⁹ Reflecting on several of the images from Frazier’s *Flint Is Family* series (2016), which saw the artist document some of the everyday obstacles that three generations of women living in Flint, Michigan, were forced to negotiate in the wake of the deliberate poisoning of their hometown’s water supply in 2014, Sharpe draws particular attention to the artist’s encapsulation of the beauty and terror of the everyday. “The ones of people draw you in and slay you with their bittersweet detail—family photographs, dolls, a look—generations of Black folks who insist on making a home and family on ground so impacted with antiblackness, ecocide, financialization, and extraction that it barely sustains life.”¹⁰ That so many of the images from *Flint Is Family* rehearse many of those included in *The Notion of Family* series testifies to the ubiquity of the violences and violations that Sharpe enumerates. It also speaks to the recursivity of both photography and the lived experience of Blackness in the modern world.

Scholar Shawn Michele Smith has been especially useful for thinking through the temporality of photography and its relationship to the photographic practices of contemporary Black visual artists like Frazier.¹¹ In examining the photography of several contemporary artists, including Rashid Johnson, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems (whom Frazier often credits as a mentor and inspiration), Smith draws attention to the ways that “the history of photography” and “the photography of history” are deeply intertwined. She suggests “that there is a temporal recursivity intrinsic to photography, a backward and forward movement to the medium” that necessitates a toggling between time. “The photograph is emblematic of the way a past continues to

inhabit and punctuate the present, and also one of the central vehicles through which that temporal collision takes place,” Smith writes. In this way, the photograph serves to expose “the openness of the present to the past.”¹² Of course, even as the photograph might invite its viewers to shuttle between now and then, it also demands a kind of imaginative work that has the potential to elevate spectators beyond the discourses binding time to linear metaphors. What the work of Frazier reveals, as well as several of the artists that Smith brings critical attention to, are the ways in which the photograph at once instantiates and activates complex temporalities that serve to eclipse the temporal logics deployed to make a very confusing world seem less confusing. Thus, even as photography might be mobilized as an important tool to return to and reckon with unfinished business from the past, as Smith illuminates, it very often does much more. This is especially true of many of the photographs produced by those Black visual artists who, like Frazier, are keenly attuned to how the medium has been used over time to fix Black people in the past and to frame them as always already belated. The repetition that Smith suggests is intrinsic to the medium no doubt provides an opportunity for the Black photographer to exploit the ways in which what is captured by the camera so often exceeds both itself and the limited vision of its chronicler. Surely, there is much to be gleaned and excavated in the gaps. Black cultural practitioners have continually mined these gaps to imagine and form the “different arrangements of the possible” that Sharpe spotlights. It is precisely in the gaps that the kind of improvisation and call-and-response that are so prevalent throughout Black culture find resonance.

Grandma Ruby, Then and Again

The stories that Frazier tells through her photographs are deeply personal ones. Thus, even as she spotlights some of the economic, political, and cultural forces that have further intensified the state-sanctioned trials and traumas that Braddock’s residents have had to deal with in recent decades, she also provides a more intimate look at how people have experienced their impacts. Among the most evocative images in the series are those that sharpen focus on subjects like Frazier’s Grandma Ruby. Take, for example, *Grandma Ruby and UPMC Braddock Hospital on*

Braddock Avenue (2007), an image that Frazier has used across multiple exhibitions. The image features Grandma Ruby standing just a few feet away from University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) Braddock, staring plaintively toward something in the distance. She is joined in the frame by another Black man, who stands close by with his back to the camera and a large black duffel bag near his feet. The expression on Grandma Ruby's face suggests that she has perhaps been in this very position before. The annotation that Frazier provides for the image affirms this. "Grandma Ruby and I spent many mornings and afternoons drinking coffee in the gift shop. Her favorite shortcut was taking the lower-level elevator from Braddock Ave. up to the main lobby on Holland Ave.," it states.¹³ What Frazier highlights with the two observations here are the ways the hospital was, for so many, an integral mainstay in their lives. Not only was it an important space for seeking care and employment, but it also served as a crucial site for enjoying everyday pleasures and making lasting memories. It was likewise a pivotal locus for marking endings and beginnings. "Grandma Ruby passed away in UPMC Braddock Jan. 18, 2009, at 9:15 pm.," Frazier explains.¹⁴ For those who have followed Frazier's career over the years, this information is not new. And yet, it is somewhat difficult to reconcile the finality of the statement with the quiet grace and dignity that Grandma Ruby embodies in the photograph. The straightforwardness of the message, in fact, only intensifies the range of emotions the photograph conjures.

While many of the photographs in the series speak to the relationship of photography to death that Roland Barthes highlights in *Camera Lucida*, it is perhaps best exemplified in *Grandma Ruby and UPMC*. In his heavily cited reflections on photography, Barthes reminds us that, while we often confuse looking at a photograph with looking at life, the photograph can only ever provide a snapshot of something that has been lost and is impossible to recover fully.¹⁵ Photography is no doubt a powerful "witness to life."¹⁶ Nevertheless, as Peggy Phelan notes, it also functions as a rehearsal for death. Photography, in both Barthes's and Phelan's estimations, forces the spectator to confront death precisely because, at its core, it is a posthumous medium. The moment that the photograph

documents or captures disappears, never to be experienced the same again as soon as the camera clicks. Given this, we might think of the ways the medium "provides the viewer access to the ongoing psychic work of mourning loss," as Phelan suggests.¹⁷

In looking across the images of Grandma Ruby in the series, one gets the sense of how Frazier, much like Barthes, has maintained a deep interest in finding and capturing "the truth of the face" that provided her with so much love, care, and nurturing throughout her life.¹⁸ The story of Grandma Ruby that the photographs tell is incomplete and pushes against neat chronology. Still, in shuttling between, across, in, and out of time, the images render past and future events remarkably present. Many of these images are also accompanied by annotations. Frazier pairs one of the older photographs she includes in the series, *Grandma Ruby Holding Her Babies* (2002), with a gloss that provides insights into Grandma Ruby's personal history and personality. Composed of just four sentences, the annotation is short on details, and yet it still manages to be quite revealing. "Grandma Ruby's husband died on Mom's first birthday. Left to raise six children during the '60s could not have been an easy task. She worked as a manager at Goodwill," the gloss begins. "Grandma Ruby internalized the idea that Black women aren't supposed to cry; they're to remain silent and endure suffering," it concludes.¹⁹ Mixing factual details with personal commentary, the gloss packs an emotional punch precisely because of the ways it intertwines the intimate with the political. Grandma Ruby, Frazier reminds us, has known loss for much of her life. The older woman's response to this daily fact of life was to do what she could to ensure that her children were taken care of, even if that meant bottling up her own grief and despair. This is not to suggest that her life was devoid of joy. Indeed, *Grandma Ruby Holding Her Babies* places her in the frame with some of the things that she came to love immensely: her dolls.

The photograph is arresting in its elegance and simplicity. Grandma Ruby is positioned in the center of the frame, sitting on a bed. The fact that she is still wearing so many accessories suggests that she is not quite ready to retire for the day but is still very much at home. She tilts her head to look down lovingly at the two dolls she is cradling in both arms. One doll is Black, the other is white. Both don gowns with

intricate lace details. While the two still life paintings adorning the walls behind her and the various linens covering the bed suggest a preference for things without too many frills, the dolls' clothing (coupled with her own accessories) bespeak an investment in having the things that she cares about in her life look nice. This investment comes into even sharper focus in two other photographs from the series, *Grandma Ruby's Installation* (2002) and *Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls* (2002). Both provide a glimpse at just how many dolls and other collectibles Grandma Ruby has amassed over the years. As the title of *Grandma Ruby's Installation* perhaps indicates, there is a deliberateness to where and how things are positioned in and around the home, which serves to transform the meanings and perceptions of its various spaces. The fireplace at the center of her living room, for example, becomes a significant site to showcase the full range of Grandma Ruby's collections.

Frazier reads the installation as a barrier of protection from an outside world intent on trying to diminish Grandma Ruby's light and life. "Grandma Ruby's interior design was a firewall that blocked external forces," she writes in an accompanying annotation, adding, "She would not be subjugated to a lesser status."²⁰ The latter comment underscores the fact that Grandma Ruby was fundamentally a woman who took great pride in working hard to provide for her family. One also gets the sense in looking at *Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls* that she also took great pleasure in ordinary activities like lighting up and smoking a cigarette. There is a delicate choreography to the way she holds the cigarette between her index and middle fingers as she simultaneously presses it between her lips. Her eyes lock in on the lighter in her other hand, as she waits for it to produce the flame that will ultimately help satisfy her nicotine craving. Frazier concludes the annotation accompanying *Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls* by noting, "The shadow from the steel mill always hovered above us."²¹ The gloss serves as a reminder of just how monumental the plant was and remains in the lives of Braddock's Black residents. Grandma Ruby may have fashioned her installation of dolls, stuffed animals, and other knickknacks as a source of protection against outside forces, but even

it could not fully safeguard her and her family from the impositions of the industrial monolith.

Notably, in drawing attention to the omnipresence of the steel mill, even as it remains out of view in the photograph, Frazier anticipates and pushes back against those who might immediately attribute some of the health struggles that Grandma Ruby and other members of her family would later face (which she documents in other photographs included in *The Notion of Family* series) to personal habits and rituals like smoking. To be sure, even as she focuses her camera on quotidian troubles and everyday joys, Frazier remains unwavering in her commitment to shedding light on some of the structural and systemic forces that have served to ensure that some people are more vulnerable than others to premature death.

Through *The Notion of Family* series, Frazier powerfully demonstrates the capacity of photography to do something in the world. And, in so doing, she creates possibilities to refuse the kind of willful forgetting and violent obfuscating that insists upon rendering the Black people who have vitalized communities like Braddock for generations—Black people like her Grandma Ruby—invisible or fungible.

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Notes

- 1 LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2016).
- 2 Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* Confronts Racism and Economic Decline," Aperture Foundation, March 22, 2018, YouTube video, 0:01–0:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.
- 3 Frazier and Dawoud Bey, "LaToya Ruby Frazier and Dawoud Bey: A Conversation," in *The Notion of Family*, 149.
- 4 Laura Wexler, "A Notion of Photography," in *The Notion of Family*, 143.
- 5 Frazier, "A Visual History of Inequality in Industrial America," TED, March 2015, 01:05–01:11, https://www.ted.com/talks/latoya_ruby_frazier_a_visual_history_of_inequality_in_industrial_america?referrer=playlist-how_art_shapes_conversations.
- 6 See August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006).
- 7 Wilson, *Gem*, 22.
- 8 Frazier and Bey, "A Conversation," 152.
- 9 Christina Sharpe, "Scale," in *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, conceived by Okwui Enwezor, (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Phaidon, 2020), 114.

- 10 Sharpe, "Scale," in *Grief and Grievance*, 114.
- 11 See Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
- 12 Smith, *Photographic Returns*, 1.
- 13 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 101.
- 14 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 112.
- 15 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- 16 See Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 979.
- 17 Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography," 980.
- 18 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 67.
- 19 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 27.
- 20 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 14.
- 21 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 14.