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AN ALTERNATIVE VISUAL NARRATIVE: LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* Madison Schultz

ABSTRACT

LaToya Ruby Frazier's body of photographic work titled *The Notion of Family* (2003-2014) explores the toll the steel industry in Braddock, Pennsylvania, took on the black community there. The history of black Braddock is riddled with social, political, racial, economic and environmental hardship spurred on by the steel industry. Frazier intimately chronicles the lives of three generations of women—herself, her mother, and her grandmother—and their place in that history. The alternative visual narrative that Frazier creates commands viewers' attention in telling a story that has been largely ignored by the American public. This essay contrasts Frazier's work with that of painter Robert Qualters and photographer Barbara Peacock to assess how her images differ from other efforts to chronicle memory and history in small American towns.

In 2014, after eleven years of documentary work, LaToya Ruby Frazier shared *The Notion of Family* with a society whose racial tensions were reaching a boiling point. Her award-winning photobook follows three generations of African American women in Braddock, Pennsylvania—herself, her mother, and her grandmother. Home to Andrew Carnegie’s first steel mill and the first U.S.-based Carnegie library, Braddock has for more than a century also been home to an African American population that has been segregated, subjugated, and exploited. Frazier’s work reveals this hidden history, examining the toll the steel industry and racial exclusion has taken on Braddock and on her family.

Frazier’s activism sets *The Notion of Family* apart from contemporary documentary art that offers more nostalgic representations of childhood memory and history. In 2015, the book won the Publication category of the International Center of Photography Infinity Award, an award intended “to bring public attention to outstanding achievements in photography by honoring individuals with distinguished careers in the field and by identifying future luminaries” (“Infinity Awards”). Elsewhere, *The Notion of Family* has been hailed for acknowledging and expanding on “the traditions of classic black-and-white documentary photography” as it “tackles contested territory” (“About”; Gavin). For Frazier, art is a weapon: “Through reclamation of our narrative, we will continue to fight historic erasure and socioeconomic inequality” (Frazier, “A Visual History”). This essay examines Frazier’s *Epilepsy Test* from *The Notion of Family* alongside Robert Qualters’s oil-on-canvas *Braddock, Maple St.* and Barbara Peacock’s *Parent’s Market, 1982* from her *Hometown* photobook to assess how Frazier’s images differ from other works that chronicle memory and history in small American towns.

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Before turning to close reading, it is important to contextualize Frazier’s work within the history of Braddock in the eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh. The African American community that shaped Pittsburgh is often excluded from mainstream narratives that champion Braddock as “a poster child for Rust Belt Revitalization” (Frazier, “A Visual History”). In her conversation with Dawoud Bey, Frazier recounts purchasing the book *Images of America: Braddock, Allegheny County* during a 2009 visit to Braddock’s Carnegie library:

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. (Frazier and Bey 152)

As Pittsburgh became a manufacturing center in the mid-1800s, it also became an arena for intense labor strife. Labor unions began to form and then organize strikes against the steel giants. These unions were racially exclusive, so the only opportunity for African American workers to enter the industry came in the mid-1870s as strikebreakers. In 1910, agricultural depression and natural disasters in the south and heightened demand for industrial workers in the north resulted in a mass northbound migration of African Americans (Dickerson 137-38). This Great Migration during the steel industry’s heyday brought Frazier’s family to Pittsburgh. Braddock was a hub of industry and commerce, and Frazier’s family, including her grandfather, helped build its history as steel workers.

Caught in this fracturing, African American workers were segregated geographically and subjugated in lower-level, manual-labor jobs.

The dynamics of the region began shifting through the 1920s to the 1950s. In *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America*, Allen Dieterich-Ward notes that “The area’s rugged topography . . . coupled with the ethnic diversity of hundreds of thousands of new blue-collar residents and the ability of corporations to manipulate municipal boundaries resulted in a political configuration that was as fractured as the economy was integrated” (2). Caught in this fracturing, African American workers were segregated geographically and subjugated in lower-level, manual-labor jobs.

In the 1960s, Braddock’s steel industry began to collapse. An industry-wide strike drove steel mills to bankruptcy and sent the industry into an unusually severe decline. As Corinne Segal recounts in a 2015 PBS article based on an interview with Frazier, the population in Braddock decreased and infrastructure crumbled as white residents moved away, leaving “communities of color that were frequently barred

from getting loans to buy homes elsewhere.” This diminished Braddock is the one that Frazier’s mother knew in her adolescence. During the 1970s, a revitalization movement referred to as the Pittsburgh Renaissance came about. Critics of the movement argued that revitalization forced a modernist vision on stagnating mill towns, which resulted in “an uneven transformation that laid the foundation for the social bifurcations still evident in metropolitan Pittsburgh today” (Dieterich-Ward 4).

Frazier collects the remnants of this strife-riddled history in *The Notion of Family*, featuring images of her grandparents’ physically-spent figures as well as the mangled remains of buildings and other structures in Braddock. In her photography, viewers see a family that has been both bound and weathered by the history it has experienced and steel mills and industrial complexes whose glory has departed. With a profound understanding of the fullness of Braddock’s history and her family’s place in it, Frazier’s photography articulates the “intersection of the steel industry, the environment, and the health care system’s impact on the bodies of [her] family and community” (Frazier, “A Visual History”).

Frazier collects the remnants of this strife-riddled history in The Notion of Family.

Epilepsy Test, a diptych that juxtaposes a worn human body and a decimated structure, represents the thematic subject matter of *The Notion of Family* as a whole. One photograph features the back of an African American woman in an open hospital gown. The other features a dilapidated building strewn with fallen metal, tangled wires, and other debris. The composition of the image connotes a sense of malady. The wires attached to the woman’s body in the image mimic the wires hanging haphazardly from the abandoned structure on the right. The deserted nature of the building speaks to the worn, even spent nature of the person alongside it. Next to the lifeless wires of the old structure, these medical wires do not suggest revitalization. This plainly is not an optimistic picture of someone receiving life-giving medical care.

The lines in both images are slanted—they do not fall precisely perpendicular to the edge of the frame. This skewing implies a fallen state. Where straight lines might suggest a sense of uprightness, polish, or wholeness, the slanted lines (in conjunction with the subject matter of the photographs) let viewers know that something has been lost here. These bodies and structures are no longer upright, no longer polished, and no longer whole.



Epilepsy Test, from *The Notion of Family*. LaToya Ruby Frazier.

The framing is also important. Blurred material to the left of the woman’s body gives viewers a sense that they are looking in on the scene: *this is not their story*. However, the closeness of the shot and the vulnerability of its subject asserts a compelling urgency about the moment and the larger story it tells. The image seems slightly overexposed, as it accentuates shadows and lacks pure white highlights. The darkness cements a solemnness about the story being displayed. Because the image is scarcely lit—detecting certain details requires some strain on the part of the viewer—the scene also appears ominous. The effort alerts viewers: they must pay close attention.

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Like Frazier, Robert Qualters chronicles both the history of Pittsburgh and an individual’s memories and experiences within the place. Under closer examination, though, the two artists tell different versions of the story. Qualters portrays the dominant narrative of Pittsburgh and has been hailed as a “quintessential Pittsburgh artist” (Thomas and Guidry). Qualters’s early memories of his hometown include details like “fifteen-minute radio programs called serials” and “gritty, shiny specks of stuff from the steel mills on the snowy street” (Clarke ix). In contrast, Frazier speaks of her past in terms of “environmental toxicity and pollutants and systemic racism” (Sargent).

A visual comparison cements these differences. Both Frazier and Qualters use multiple scenes to depict a single place, which speaks to the multifaceted nature of Pittsburgh and its narratives. Qualters’s *Braddock, Maple Street*, painted in 1986, features five different scenes on the titular street. In the largest image on the top left, children play in the street, which is reminiscent of Qualters’s own memories of his formative years in the Pittsburgh suburbs. A woman traveling home with what appears to be a brown bag of groceries represents another staple of daily life for middle-



Braddock, Maple St.. Robert Qualters.

or working-class individuals. In the background, workers, both black and white, cheerily complete tasks. It appears that the building in the image is being constructed or perhaps even revitalized by these blue-collar workers. The scene stands in stark contrast to Frazier's diptych, where working-class bodies take the foreground and the demise—not the reconstruction—of structures and lives is emphasized.

The bottom frames of Qualters's work depict two old steel mills. In the left panel, the monochromatic grays and blues convey the notion that this place once held glory, but it is no longer thriving. However, the romanticized images of small-town life in the other frames are evidence that although this structure has lost its vitality, it has not robbed the city itself of animation. The shadows on the buildings denote the sun rising behind viewers of the scene. Coupled with the comforting and nostalgic pink hue of the entire piece, this allusion to a rising sun hints that the community not only has a future to hope for, but a past to look back fondly upon.

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In her study of Qualters's work, art historian and curator Vicky Clarke notes that while Qualters "does frequently include his hometown, he mostly utilizes it as a stage for personal and communal memories, histories, and stories, both real and fictional" (46). The narratives in Qualters's work are arguably a result of his lived experience, of his age, race, gender, and class. Born in 1934, with a school teacher mother and a local politician father, Qualters has been differently affected by broad social, economic, and political dynamics. The destruction and demise of steel mills can take a place in the background because they are not vital to his lived experience. Frazier does not enjoy this

luxury. The steel industry and its impact must be integral to her work because they have been integral to her life, as well as the lives of her family and people. The sense of lost vitality in her work is a result of the liveliness that has been slowly drained from her community.

In *The Notion of Family*, Frazier questions whether the narratives of people who are subject to exclusion or strife can be portrayed by people who are other to those realities. Qualters's work is evidence that even those who spend their lives near certain narratives cannot necessarily be inside those narratives. As an African American woman from a working class family, Frazier has authority to speak a narrative that Qualters does not. By chronicling this narrative from within, Frazier demands that attention be paid to her personal family history and to the broader history of African American Braddock.

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Barbara Peacock's work to document life in Westford, Massachusetts, over 33 years in her photobook titled *Hometown* offers a second contrast with Frazier's *The Notion of Family*. Like Frazier, Peacock operates in the broad category of documentary photography that chronicles genealogy and community. However, their aesthetics, techniques, and motives differ markedly. Peacock's work is a charming and somewhat eccentric chronicle of the rituals and characters of her hometown. It was created with the intent of making the ordinary extraordinary, using what was literally available in her own backyard to create works of art.

Peacock's *Parent's Market*, 1982 captures the nostalgic mood and quirkiness of her photography. The image features five adolescent white boys outside of a corner store. The saturated



Parent's Market, 1982, from *Hometown*. Barbara Peacock.

color and warm cast strike a nostalgic mood reminiscent of disposable cameras and older film processing. This mood is reinforced by the familiarity of the objects and brands in the image: a vintage Coca-Cola sign, a US Postal Service mailbox, Budweiser ads, bomber jackets, and corduroy pants, etc.). This could be any small town in America, which is why it resonates with viewers who remember—or want to remember—small town America. As Mel Allen notes in *Yankee Magazine*,

With a major highway cutting nearby, Westford's population nearly tripled over time, apple orchards became houses, and memories of a quieter time grew even more precious. Yet the resulting compilation of her favorite images from the past 33 years focuses less on what has changed and more on deeper truths—the bonds between people, the annual events that have always connected generations.

Peacock's collection is a documentary, a journey of self-exploration and development as a photographer, intertwined with the happenings of her predominantly white small town. Her images chronicle themes of sadness or loneliness, explore ritual and family, and play on her own memory.

What audiences derive from Frazier's work is quite different from what Peacock's piece communicates. Frazier's work is "an incisive exploration of the legacy of racism and economic decline in America's small towns, as embodied by her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania" ("About"). It is a politically charged discourse that offers insight into her own narrative and, more largely, the African American narrative that has been riddled with economic and social ills over the years. While Peacock's skill as a photographer and the merit of her work are not under scrutiny here, her work differs from Frazier's in significant ways. In turn, they should be categorized separately—Frazier's as a hard-hitting, activist chronicle, and Peacock's as a personal depiction of her hometown's memory and history.

For Peacock and Qualters, though, the stakes are low if viewers do not identify with or pay attention to their work. For Frazier, it is imperative that they do.

Peacock and Qualters's works share a relatable quality. Critics tend to agree that audiences can locate themselves within the narratives they present. The familiar landmarks and narratives featured in Qualters's paintings likely resonate with his audience, especially if they have resided in or visited Pittsburgh. For Clarke, it is that Qualters "weaves fact and fiction into compelling stories that reveal

human characteristics both universal and individual" (46). Similarly, audiences connect to Peacock's work through its nostalgic, universal evocation of American small towns: "There is enough contextual ambiguity as to the actual location that Peacock's hometown could be representative of any small town in the East or Midwest region of America, which is a factor that draws me and probably other readers into this monograph" (Stockdale). However, relatability is a highly subjective quality that cannot always be counted on to attract the undivided attention of an audience.

No piece of artwork can appeal to every audience. For instance, individuals who have not visited Pittsburgh might not enjoy Qualters's work. Viewers not familiar with small-town American culture might not identify with Peacock's work. For Peacock and Qualters, though, the stakes are low if viewers do not identify with or pay attention to their work. For Frazier, it is imperative that they do, and that they recognize its importance, even if they cannot connect with it. Frazier's work does not represent the lived experience of the majority of her audience, but it does assert that the lived experience she portrays is real and pertinent. Some of her images are alarming, intriguing, or intensely emotional. Some are forlorn, bleak, or unsettling. Her work is penetrating and urgent. She makes herself vulnerable and allows her viewers to see the story she and three generations of her family have lived to bring the importance of this narrative to the forefront of her audience's consciousness. This narrative has been overlooked or intentionally ignored in other art, media, and news, and she demands that audiences pay attention.

Frazier, Qualters, and Peacock weave a sense of identity into their larger narratives of place. Qualters's colorful paintings foreground his own memories against a background of larger societal dynamics in the Pittsburgh area. Peacock's eclectic photographs nostalgically document the ritual and character of her hometown in Massachusetts. And Frazier presents the history of her African American family as intertwined with the larger narrative of the African American community in Braddock, Pennsylvania. She creates a narrative that is both personally and politically relevant, and relays with urgency a story that has been largely ignored by the American public. Her work is compelling and questions the constructs of contemporary documentary photography by speaking history from within a marginalized community. *The Notion of Family* stands apart from other works because it presents an alternative visual narrative that demands viewers' attention. Frazier's work calls for action and opens the stage for other untold or under-told stories.

Author's Note



Madison Schultz ('19) is pursuing a double degree in Media Arts & Design and Social Justice and Photographic Media. She is an avid creator, dabbling in photography, graphic design, reading, writing, and videography. She is passionate about media and the arts and their ability to spur social change.

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