

BOMB

LaToya Ruby Frazier and Fred Moten

Author(s): LaToya Ruby Frazier, Fred Moten and Dawn Lundy Martin

Source: *BOMB*, Spring 2018, No. 143 (Spring 2018), pp. 89-96

Published by: New Art Publications

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26578910>

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LaToya Ruby Frazier and Fred Moten
by Dawn Lundy Martin



89 LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea Cobb* with her mother Ms. Renee and her daughter Zion at the wedding reception standing outside the Social Network Banquet Hall, 2016/2017, gelatin silver print, 20 × 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome.

I brought LaToya Ruby Frazier and Fred Moten to the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics at the University of Pittsburgh for individual presentations of their visual art and poetry, followed by a conversation. As a poet and as curator for this series at CAAPP, I'm interested in the discomfort, surprise, and innovation that can occur when disciplines and genres are made adjacent, overlap, and collude. What happens when a photographer/video artist and a poet share a platform? What are the mutual languages, and where do they struggle to make sense of the other's sense making? In this case, perhaps, where and how is blackness located in the work (if *location* is even the right word), and how does this so-called blackness reach outside of the work and into the social? Or into our bodies? Or into meaning, writ large? Furthermore, I wanted to invite two artists and thinkers whose work challenges the machinery of the regime and its inside-out, upside-down logics, its intentional and insidious omissions, its erasures, and its makings of monstrosities when it is itself the monster.

The following is a revised version of our public conversation at the university's Heinz Memorial Chapel on January 18, 2018.

—Dawn Lundy Martin

Theory + Practice is a series supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



LaToya Ruby Frazier presenting at Heinz Memorial Chapel, University of Pittsburgh, January 18, 2018. Photo courtesy of Heather Kresge Photography.

DAWN LUNDY MARTIN I'd like to start with a wide lens and begin with a question about creativity. Maybe it's a question about black creativity, without a desire to reduce blackness to a knowable quality of being. I'm referencing the creative impulse and ability to make something in the midst of attack, annihilation, deportation, absence of water, absence of healthcare, and so on. This strikes me as akin to an escape from the inescapable. So I'm wondering if we could talk about how the creative manifests as a response, or how it emerges given the surrounding conditions. Why create, instead of destroy?

FRED MOTEN I was thinking about this a bit earlier today. And my sense of it, maybe in an almost dada sense, is that I don't know if creativity and destruction are really opposed to one another. I think they're all bound up with one another. That's maybe why some folks want to think—or want to think other people might think—that black art, or black music, is a form of amelioration of, or compensation for, violence. My sense has always been that it's a way of documenting violence, and, in a certain sense, preserving violence, and maybe even, hopefully, a way of transforming or turning the direction of that violence against the grain of brutality that produces its particular forms and conditions. So, you know, it's not that the music isn't supposed to make you feel good; it's just that it's also supposed to make other things feel bad. This art is a challenge and a disruption, not only to already existing structures of power and force and brutality, but to us insofar as we reflect, or accept, or internalize, or help to disperse and distribute such brutality.

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER This makes me think about a couple of things. While working on *The Notion of Family* (2001–14) for fourteen years, I was definitely self-destructive. But the person you see sitting here today isn't the person in those photographs.

There's something my mother told me—she and my father are here at this event, right in the front row, and I'm really proud because this is a first. One day she asked me to make a portrait with her. And when I'd printed it and come home—I'd always show my mom and my grandmother the contact sheets and eight-by-ten resin-coated papers—she pointed at the image and said, "I wanted you to make this photograph because the moment you took that picture, it was no longer me. And that's the whole problem here. I'm not the person in those photographs."

I'm up at Syracuse University studying Roland Barthes, and my mom just explained to me the theory of death in a photograph. Right? That's why I've always believed life is the experience and criterion for knowledge. What is theory if you're not applying it to real, daily lives? And something that really impacted me in terms of documentary work, and what you're starting to say about creation instead of destruction, is

that if it wasn't for the photographs Lewis Hine made here in Pittsburgh, when they did surveys in the early twentieth century, people wouldn't have known about the condition of working-class people's lives. It was through that creativity, through making those images, that child-labor laws eventually came into existence. We still need to work for many more changes, but it was essential and important that he documented that.

There's also James Baldwin's essay "The Creative Process," which I usually read from everywhere I go. I think Baldwin was right about the artist being present not to obey or be in league with politicians and the state, but to put up a mirror and show the truth and the knowledge of what people are afraid of, basic things like death, love, and suffering.

And one last thing: Lyndon B. Johnson founded the National Endowment for the Arts because he was hopeful that people who didn't know each other and were indifferent to each other could potentially learn from one another and see each other's humanity. Possibly. Now we see that the National Endowment for the Arts is under attack, under this administration, and so are the arts generally. It's like we're back in the McCarthy era.

DLM So it's not you in the actual photographs, but there is, as I experience them, an intimacy, and I imagine that there's a kind of vulnerability. Something is revealed. I'm wondering, in the making of the work and in its exhibition, about the relationship between how the image or the person is transformed, the experience of vulnerability in making it, and what's revealed in it for you—especially in *The Notion of Family*.

LRF When I look at the book now, I think—and here I'm speaking to my younger self—that in the process of making those images, I was providing an answer. Like, what did it mean to stumble around and find my own identity, perspective, and voice between two very powerful women, my mother and my grandmother? There's also a refutation of the fact that we live in a society that devalues black women. No one believes us when we say anything. We're constantly being questioned, or just not seen, because they see us as less than anyone, less than human. I'm the teacher, the professor, in my photo class, but the students will walk in and say, "Where's the teacher?"

The photographer Sandra Gould Ford talks about how we're always in the process of becoming, in this process of being. Film and gelatin silver prints are just silver halide crystals and celluloid. It's light. It's not tangible. So, you know, to make yourself appear seemingly fixed on a piece of paper, even *that* isn't fixed. "There is nothing stable under heaven," is what Baldwin says, and this is the same for the photograph.

FM One of the things that fascinates me about about your work in particular—*fascinates* is not even the

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92 (i) LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme (shadow)*, 2008, gelatin silver print, 15.5 × 19.5 inches. (ii) LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby, J. C. and me watching soap operas in her living room*, 2007, gelatin silver print, 20 × 24 inches.



93 LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby's refrigerator*, 2007, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome.



94 LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme Silhouettes*, 2010, nine gelatin silver prints, 74.5 × 62.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome.

right word, how about *messes me up*?—is that I have my own Pittsburgh connection, too, which I've been feeling very much the last two days. When I was fourteen, we moved to Pittsburgh from my hometown, Las Vegas, so that my mom could go back to graduate school here at Pitt. When she was finishing school, she worked for this federally funded job-training program, one of those last remnants of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. In some of the steel towns along the Monongahela River, she worked with folks who were being displaced from and dispossessed of the chance for employment. And I went along to some of those towns, such as Clairton and Homestead, that are close to Braddock, which appears in your work.

And it's funny, these sort of triplets that you make, these trios that constantly infuse your work—you, and your mom, and your grandmother—make me think so much of me, my mom, and my grandmother. Because we were sort of a trio like that too. There is also Shea and her mom, Renée, and her daughter, Zion, in your series of photographs of people from Flint, Michigan—*Flint is Family* (2016–17). There's this way in which, even though you're saying you're not the same person as you were in those photographs, and your mom's not the same person she was in those photographs—somehow, strangely, without you ever having known me or my mom—I'm in them. And obviously it produces all kinds of complications insofar as I'm not within this context of three generations of women. I mean, who am I? Where am I? What's my own gender and sexual identification within those things? I'm such a momma's boy, so marked. I've been so fundamentally handled, as Hortense Spillers would say, by my mom and my grandma. They're with me so much; they're in my body; they constitute my body. They deconstitute it too. All of these things come to mind when I look at your photographs.

DLM That's a good segue because I want to talk about the number three. After our conversation yesterday, I did some thinking about that number and went down a research hole. Now I can't bring all of that material into this because it's too much, but I'd be remiss not to ask you about the number three. I'm thinking about Fred's book of poems *The Feel Trio* (Letter Machine Editions, 2014), organized in three sections. Yesterday, LaToya said she liked to work in threes, in triads, and then you said trinities, which made me think of being here in this church today and of the Holy Trinity—God, the Son, the Holy Ghost—and the impossibility of that: three beings, one god.

I was also thinking about how I like impossibilities, and when I said yesterday that I often think of threes in lists in poetry, and when I recognize that happening, I'll add a fourth thing, LaToya, you were horrified. You were like, "Four seems so finite." And Fred, in *The Feel Trio*, the mystery of three seems to indicate a refusal to cohere. I think it has something to

do with the blues, but also irreconcilability. An inability to be represented seems to be related to the forms your poems take. And so I was hoping you could both talk about the number three and its significance in your work.

FM I don't know—three? It's crazy. It's like I can't even help it. It's become a sickness; I now have to figure out all these ways to make three go evenly into ten and eleven. I have three trilogies. I'm working on two trilogies, each of which is made out of five books. So how does that work?

I don't think I'm such a trinitarian, but one of the things running through my mind—again because it's a Pittsburgh memory—is the first concert I went to: Parliament Funkadelic in the old Civic Arena. Is it even there anymore? Star Child, aka George Clinton, came out of the top of the arena in a spaceship with some silver platforms on. And I just remember: "Hey I was diggin' on y'all's funk for awhile / Sound like it got a three on it, though, to me." Like, what's that mean? Maybe that's the origin of the mystery of the three. What did Clinton mean when he said, "Sounds like it got a three on it, though, to me"?

LRF I think my experience and how I came of age was always about the three—me, my mother, my grandmother. Then it was me, my grandmother, and J. C., my younger cousin. Also, as a black body in Pittsburgh, walking in the city, you understand you are enclosed by the three rivers: the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio. You understand that they're ancient and sacred. This was indigenous land.

It's very spiritual for me, especially because when I came back, I began shooting landscapes. It started out with domestic portraits, then it turned into the still lifes, then it turned into the landscapes and aerial views. I came down Ninth and Talbot in Braddock, and I looked on the side of a church, and it said: *You must be born again of water and spirit*. It seemed as if every time I looked at the landscape, I was reminded of this spiritual sense—maybe even warned.

And since everyone's so obsessed with W.E.B. Du Bois only focusing on race, they kind of forget that he's a feminist and environmentalist. I found this amazing speech he gave in 1930 at his high school about the river in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He warned his fellow alumni about how this community was polluting the Housatonic River, how they had turned their backs on the river that was the backbone of the town, how they'd dumped waste into the river and shut off its brooks. He really let them have it. That speech led me to charter a helicopter and follow the Monongahela River down to where it meets the Allegheny. And so the number three is instilled in me through the environment, the landscape, and how I was raised—always around the threes; that's where the transcendence happens for me.

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DLM I'd like to reference, again, the conversation we had yesterday over lunch, when we were talking about what's missing, what's gone. I believe LaToya said the phrase "orienting oneself via absence." That really stuck out to me. And Fred, in your book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), which I often describe as a workbook, you deal with what you call the "false image of enclosure."

So I'm thinking about both presence in response to erasure and reorienting in response to the false image of enclosure. In poetry, one of the ways we get to meaning is via the gap or the space in between what's said. I'm hoping you could both talk about that space in between and how your work seeks to negotiate it. Or that space on the other side of absence. Or in relation to absence.

LRF For me, "absence is presence" is the only way I know how to say it. The way that the shadows show up in all of my work. The stark contrast between the highlights, midtones, and shadows. The shadows actually become the foreground; they become the protagonist. The shadow is the character. Think about an image like *Momme Silhouettes* (2010) or the *Momme* portraits, which is this series that my mother and I made together. I come back to the image *Momme (shadow)* (2008), because that's the moment it hit me about absence and presence. This image, to me, foreshadows the loss of my grandmother. I didn't see it coming. I was not prepared the moment it happened because my grandmother always told me she would tell me when. And she didn't. I'm speaking about this because this day marks nine years since she passed. And *Momme Silhouettes* was really the last image my mother and I worked on, in 2010, in a very playful manner. It almost looks like a window itself, or like this tapestry, and our shadows are cast onto this bedsheet that has plants and birds on it, so it also deals with textiles, ecology, the body, femininity, and eco-feminism. But these shadows, they're there. And they're the most important thing.

The other thing for me is the absence of the men in my work—it's actually their presence. Being from this region, most of us have always had to grapple with a grandfather or father, even a brother, fighting in wars for this country. And if they do come back, you have to consider things like PTSD and whether they are ever again really present, even when you're enclosed together in the same room. Or the fact that

they work and die in the mill. During her time in the steel mills, Sandra Gould Ford preserved documents that record many horrible deaths, such as men falling into ladles of molten steel, their bodies and flesh turned into some kind of metal film. These images are seared into my mind, and I made a series of cyanotypes of these documents that recount them. So everything is always presence and absence for me, bound in the shadow, in the darkest form, and that's very baroque. I like deep shadows and texture, detail in the shadow.

FM I've always also been interested in the fullness, so to speak, of absence. Or another way to put it would be, in the presence of what's gone or who is gone. Who is it or what is it that you're walking around with? Also, what is it that you're walking through? And what does it mean to acknowledge, and to try to understand, and to try to see? Not only what shows up or what doesn't show up in a normal kind of scene, but also what it means constantly to be allowed to see through what it is that doesn't show up in a normal scene. LaToya, you were talking about how you can speak through a photograph, and I think what's really brilliant and amazing about your work is that you can see *through* it as well. You can see it, obviously, but you can also see through to what, for lack of a better term, is not there but somehow remains and is still present. For me, that's the highest compliment one can give to art.

It's one thing to constantly be confronted with artworks in almost aggressive ways—forms of art that put themselves in front of you and won't get out of your way. Then there are other kinds of art, and it's not that they're transparent, but they do constitute a brilliant, really elegant form of opacity. They allow you to see through them, not only to aspects of the world or of history that don't seem readily available to most kinds of vision, but they also allow you to see through to how things might be. And that's the most important and most far-reaching form of documentary. It documents what has been, but it also documents, in some weird and amazing way, what's going to happen.