

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

LATOYA RUBY FRAIZER INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

LaToya Ruby Fraizer
Photographer
December 6, 2019
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 17 minutes and 24 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

LaToya Ruby Fraizer

Photographer

Creative work

01:00:18:01

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, in 2016, I was commissioned by *Elle* Magazine in Hearst Corporation to produce a photo essay in their fashion magazine, in their September issue, about the Flint water crisis. So, it had already been going on since 2014 and so two years later, I arrive to Flint.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

At that time, I was thinking about, you know, it took fourteen years to make the notion of family with my mother and my grandmother; three generations of women in a steel mill town. So how could I possibly follow that up with now dealing with a

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man made water crisis in vehicle city. So, I told him I would take the commission if they found me a family of multiple generations. And so, Amber Hassan, who is Shay's manager, was the primary person that was found, and when I arrived to Flint, she decided for health reasons that she preferred me to focus and collaborate with Shay Cobb. And so, that's how Shay and I met and how I've built this very robust friendship with a lot of the artists that are there in Flint through Amber and Shay.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, when I arrived, as soon as we sat down at the table in Captain Cody's, which is her favorite diner to go to after she drives her first school bus route, we looked at each other and she was remembering her grandmother, Hazel. It was the death anniversary, and we instantly bonded over our grandmothers. I was raised by my grandmother so as soon as we had that moment, we knew. And it just made a lot of sense for she and I to collaborate together and here we are four years later.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

But when I initially had the encounter with Shay, it was for several months that I was photographing Shay with her mother, Mrs. Renee, and her eight year old daughter, Zion. And Shay was faced with the challenge of having to decide to protect her daughter's health, right. Because she's eight years old and the issue with lead is, in an eight year old child, is going to leach into their brain, it's going to cause cognitive disorders, problems with education and the American Pediatrics Association has proven that children under eight exposed to high levels of lead, won't graduate high school.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, there are all of these serious issues facing her, and so she makes the decision, over those several months that we photographed together to produce this photo essay for *Elle* Magazine, to leave her mother and make the reverse migration back to the South where her father lives on land that his family has always owned. And so, that's how we arrive to Mississippi. And I think what's really important and poignant about my desire to go to Mississippi is it couldn't have been more than a week that I was photographing Shay in Flint and we were in her mother's house, where she and Zion were living at the time, and she said she wants to show me a picture and I said "Ok."

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

She said her father sent her something, you know, sent her a message. And as soon as she showed it to me, I couldn't get this out of my mind. It was a picture that Mr. Smiley decided to send his daughter, and it's a picture of her at the age of twelve, kneeling on the ground and taking her first sip of water from a freshwater spring on the land that she's going to inherit. And I just became obsessed with this image. I had never been to the South. My family is from the South and so this deep curiosity went when I saw that image and I went back to the editors at *Elle* and I said, "We need to do a part two... like there's another part to this story that is a massive twist and a really empowering ending to the water crisis."

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

They decided, because there was a lot of change over, especially with the editor and chief and so, we were never able to do a part two. But I wouldn't let it go, so when the piece came out in August of 2016 and ran and print in the September issue, I decided that following spring to go to Mississippi to meet her father, Mr. Smiley. To ask him like how did he know to take a picture when she was twelve and use it all this time later to send it to her with a message that said "This water won't kill you. Come home."

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I mean the power of that right... and this is how I know universally if photographs are used in the right context, with the right message and the right intention, anyone can do this and empower themselves. So it's also a nod to him having that fourth right understanding and insight to take the photograph, years ahead of this crisis, and then send it to her to summon her home with his grandbaby.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, it was really this desire and fascination, and the understanding of the magnitude of someone using a family album photograph to save someone or to spare someone's life. That really drove me to make *Flint Is Family* part two, which is what you saw me photographing today. And so, it's been four years and I've been photographing with Mr. Smiley since 2017, so we're almost going into a two and a half, three years of me being in his life as well.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

But I think there's a real power in sharing this narrative and visual story-telling with America to show these kinds of hidden histories and hidden stories that never make it in corporate media, or mass media or in Hollywood. You know, the fact is, you know, Shay's father's family weren't enslaved, and it's ninety acres of land with her own fresh water spring, her own fruit trees, she has four Tennessee walking horses. The symbolic meaning and power in seeing these kinds of palpable images of young Black women, right. Two generations of women, and this beautiful relationship between Shay and her father and the way that Zion looks at both of them. And what you saw me photographing today was really capturing the tenderness between Zion and Mr. Smiley, who she refers to as her "Papa."

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

When I first met him and interviewed him, it was very clear that he's a cowboy and that's how he always has felt. And I've looked at his family album images and since he was four years old, he's been dressed as a cowboy. When his family moved him to the west side of Chicago, he was still dressed as a cowboy. And the sincerity with it. I had never met a Black family, or in particular, a Black man in the South that breeds, trains, and raises Tennessee walking horses.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

The power and why I'm photographing horses is they have a very symbolic meaning. Plantations... When you were on a plantation, the overseer would be riding a Tennessee walking horse, and as Mr. Smiley was explaining this morning during a shoot, it's the gate. It's the way that they walk. So, they move with this easing, glide

across, which would allow the overseer to look over all of the slaves on the plantation.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so for me to photograph Tennessee walking horses in 2020 of a Black man who's a freed man, a veteran, who owns all his land, is a retired auto worker and a proud father and grandfather. There's a real power in that and again, another hidden narrative. We don't see these kinds of histories. In fact, Black people in America have been denied knowing that, you know, indigenous people and African and African American cowboys have always existed. So I think showing it intergenerationally, because not only are the horses Mr. Smiley's, they also belong to Shay and Zion

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so, the horses you saw today, the ones I was photographing eating the hay and then of course Jackson, who I did the portrait of Mr. Smiley with, all of them have certificates. They are all descendants of real royalty of real horses that won so many championships. I even took the time to photograph all of the championships that Mr. Smiley won and also his son, who also was in that magazine we were looking at where he won and he was the only Black rider on a Tennessee walking horses in that competition.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so, even the images of seeing Mr. Smiley with horses in Flint, Michigan. So when he was forced to go North and ends up working for General Motors in Flint, he had

horses up there. So Shay grew up with the community knowing, like, you know, here's this girl in the neighborhood who has her own horses. So today you met the three mirrors, which are Dolly, pt's Ms. "One of a Kind" and, Blue. And then the one that's in the portrait was nibbling at Mr. Smiley's flannel is Jackson. It's "I am Jackson" is his full name. They have these amazing, official names. So I think that's important... to photograph that today and to show America what that means and the power of that image and also to empower him.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? What he has done is substantial and the fact that he also has the awareness to train his granddaughter and daughter on how to take care of that land, how to take care of the horses right. They ride on those horses together, they check their whole property together. And also how to take care of the spring, the water spring which is on the other side of the road. So they own the other ten acres across the road as well when we came off the property and turned right. I think it's just power to see the symbolic meaning and the cultural meaning of those images, and the shifting of power in American history and who gets to tell that story and who is seen as a victor, as a hero, as a king or a queen.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And in this case, it's Zion, right? Who is going to be the most empowered because now she has, through these series of photographs we've made for four years, regardless of the brutality and the inhumane treatment she's facing in Flint, Michigan, she's going to inherit that and she has a bountiful supply, you know, of her

own power and autonomy. You can't separate man from land and the fact that this young woman is going to be the queen of that land I think is substantial and life changing, and people need to see that. Other people need to be empowered by that and know that this is real, this is tangible and this exists.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Before I even arrived to Flint, and this is in every body of work that I make, before I arrive, they are given information about who I am, links to my website, then when I arrive, I don't come with any equipment or a camera. It's literally just me presenting myself to the family. In this case, it was meeting Shay at that diner and just sitting down face to face. And you know, when you are just in tune with someone. Like, we looked at each other directly into eachothers eyes and it seemed like we were the same, just occupying two different bodies. Same spirit, two different bodies. So there was a deep connection that was just undeniable for us, but in general, in my practice, not only do we send my information and a link for people to look on their own, also after I meet them for the first time, I'll give them a copy of *The Notion of Family*, so they can see.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So after Shay and I had our first meeting, I gave her a copy of *The Notion of Family* so she could get a sense of how I would be going about constructing this photo essay. But in all cases, remembering that *The Notion of Family* took fourteen years to make, I was challenged with this idea of how to tell a story with that kind of depth and breathe in only five months. And five months of me going back and forth, off and on.

So I'm not there consistently the whole way through. What I do is I get to know the person that is the main character, the main subject of the work, and I learn to empathize. Listen, like, deeply empathically listen to them empathize and put myself in their shoes, and also allow their feelings, their persona and their memory to guide me through the landscape that they inhabit.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

There was no way that I was going to be able to understand Flint, Michigan at all in five months. That is a lifetime of an encounter with an automobile city.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Only she and her family would have that innate and intimate understanding of that landscape and how their bodies move and shift through that landscape. Right? In *The Notion of Family*, I know I'm from the area called the bottom, next to the river which is next to the railway and railroad surrounded by pollution next to a steel mill. I had to learn by listening to Shay and her driving me around Flint to understand ok, she is in the fifth ward. This is one of the most heavily impacted neighborhoods because their water infrastructure is one of the oldest. This is also one of the Blackest communities and the most blighted community, and where you see people having moved away because of the collapse of the auto industry. But yet so many of them they shared all of that memory. Like, we lived here, this is our first house, then we moved here, and understanding how Amber and Shay grew up together.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And I think what was significant about her that helped me understand the landscape and how to navigate it was that she was a school bus driver. And to me, Shay is the mayor of Flint, really. Like her and Amber both should run for mayor because they are such fierce and well known public figures and champions of that city. So, I obsessively followed Shay's school bus routes. I must have looked like an insane lady. Like who's this lady stalking the school bus routes all the time? You know, and then the kids would be getting off the school bus to go home and there I am sitting in the car looking at the street signs, noticing the different neighborhoods.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Like people don't even realize it's-- Flint is not simply a majority Black poor city. There were homes that have cul de sacs with multi million dollar homes, there's redevelopment, new development, gentrification, expansion, and this is the other thing that concerned me. And so, in Shay's case, the Cobb family, they're not poor, they're not victims. They are a quintessential, middle class American family. And the only reason they are losing everything they worked so hard for is because the property value of their family home diminished and decreased due to the failed water infrastructure and now the sewage infrastructure.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? This is how poverty systemically happens. Right? That is institutional racism and designed by man. Right? It was a governor that denied the democracy of the people who are citizens and taxpayers of that city that voted not to switch to the Flint river. This is something Shay never lets go of, right. In all of her poems, in all

our interviews and all our time together, and when you strip someone's democracy from them... their right to vote, and you silence that- that overriding... and now you've caused their lead to leach into their water system, which went into their homes, which then went into their bodies.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I mean, it's so degrading and dehumanizing. It made her feel like she wasn't American. Right? And she and her family for generations worked for the same thing. And so the Cobb family, her background, part of her family is from the South. The other side, her mother's side, is from New York, all moving into Flint to work for General Motors in the sixties. I even photographed her father, Leroy Cobb's certificate with General Motors when he graduated in the school and got his promotion working there.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And one of the main things that I had to do to drive that point home visually with Shay and Zion is charter a helicopter. Because I followed her bus routes, I knew all the intersections to be at including her home, including where she studied at the University of Michigan Flint, right? Another narrative people don't tell. Right? She's an educated, fierce woman. So, I fly over with my pilot and she knows where to meet me at each plot mark we have on the map of all the intersections that run parallel to her life and how she navigates that city. And so, one of them you see that were in the fifth ward and she and Zion are standing in the garage at the back of their house, looking up at me. So, it's this portrait of them, even though they are small in the

image, but she is surrounded by her house and her community and you can see the destruction from this water crisis. And when we met, it was a painful moment because none of her family could occupy the house.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

But yet, this is where they were raised and spent all of their time, and this is where the grandparents passed. And so it was– it was a tumultuous time to enter into her life, and she didn't have to trust me, but I think it goes back to even what I teach my students, you don't arrive with all of your equipment looking for this thing as an outsider. You need to be present and talk to people for as long as it takes. And it's not a surprise that the first image Shay and I made was in her bedroom. I had already made it up and her mom, Mrs. Renee, doesn't let anybody in the house, and I love her mom, Mrs. Renee, she reminds me so much of my mother; very guarded, protective, no nonsense and will cut you with words at the drop of a hat.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, the fact that she let me in the house and invited me and allowed me to go upstairs, and even allowed me to wave while she was sitting in her bedroom cause bedrooms were perpendicular, already showed this trust and acceptance. And so that first photograph, it is of Shay... Zion is looking out the window, on the dresser are the pictures, these beautiful drawings of her grandparents Leroy and Hazel, and then Shay's kneeling on her bed doing her Aunt Andrea's hair, getting ready for Andrea's daughter, Nepherteties' courthouse wedding. So here's this grand wedding happening in the midst and in the middle of a water crisis. And this is how powerful

and resilient the Cobb family is. Right? And Shay said, “Don’t come here and expect to see us in these tattered clothes and as a victim.” You know, “We’re going to have this wedding,” and nobody thinks about a water crisis on a wedding day. This was... you know, a real lesson that I’m teaching visually about, not only empathizing but listening and taking the instruction and allowing the images to be authored by someone else like that’s a real collaboration.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And I also knew to take those cues because I had been closely looking at Ralph Ellison and Gordon Parks’ collaboration in the late forties for *Invisible Man*. And in that collaboration, Ellison details to Parks the pictorial problem. And in that pictorial problem is a list of certain kinds of images that he would like Parks to make. And so, you know, he’s asking him to make images that are both symbol and document, but also images that psychologically impact the viewer. And so, understanding that a poet like Ellison, who took photographs, but isn’t really a photographer...

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Giving these kind of instructions to Parks well, Shay Cobb is a poet. I’m a photographer. We’re two younger women, and here we are seventy years later, addressing Ellison’s pictorial problem as the instruction for Parks. So this is why it just seems so effortless in terms of my commitment, not only as a teacher, but also my commitment to Gordon’s legacy of understanding how to take the feeling of a place and the feeling of being robbed and dehumanize or the feeling of the trauma

behind institutional racism are constantly being under siege in America because you're Black. How do you convey that to a viewer in an affocative feeling in- in- in an undulating poetic visual way? So when you see the collaboration with Ellison... I mean, these are very surreal images that we don't typically see from Parks, and so this collaboration with Shay is a mix between that, right. Her poems, the images, but allowing her to be the one that's determining everything and guiding me, and me simply being that platform and understanding that kind of visual language.

Using art for social justice

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I think, you know, when I read Gordon's autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*... I mean, everything that he went through, right, to know that he almost lost his life, right? Couldn't comfortably live in a home, family's putting him out and then he's coming all the way to Chicago, then he goes to Washington D.C. and realizes all the segregation and racism in the North. The fact that he could go through all of that, nearly lose his life, come to this camera and to define himself on his own terms and to say with the camera, "This is how I'm going to make my mark and change all the things that I don't like about America," Right? All the things that he hates about the universe, and all these kinds of social economic inequalities... To see him do that was remarkable, and it stays with me because, you know, you can't control the circumstance you're born into.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I grew up raised by my grandmother, living in a dilapidated house next to the railroad and watching everyone kinda disappear, and the city shrink, and have all of our basic human rights stripped from us. And as much as that hurt, I found that the healing in that and the ability to cope and move forward through art. It started out by being drawings and paintings and then eventually moving into photography. But I think that as long as you understand, as an artist and an image maker, you're not changing policy and laws, but what you are doing is making... these kinds of inequities visually tangible. That you're making a human record. Records are stacking up. All of these things that our government, our politicians, our companies have done to dehumanize poor people, disenfranchised people. Right? What does it say in the bible? "What we do to the least." And we see it over and over, and of course in both of our cases, Parks and myself, we are caught up in that before we find this new life with the camera.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I think in terms of rendering a social justice, knowing that you're the one that's making a certain record so that... that camera and all that darkness, negativity, death, sickness, and destruction, that camera is still extracting that light, imprinting on that seloid, right. Evidence, truth, justice, a fight. Even if the government doesn't want to recognize it, even if the corporate media doesn't want to report on it, you've gone out there as an insurgent on your own terms and have made that evidence real and tangible. To stand, you know, the history of time. Right? It will never be erased. It is documented and it's a gelatin silver print, so it's not going to disappear. The

color is not going to change, it is not going to fall apart. So, to know that you have that and have made that mark, like there's the truth.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? And in a way, whenever I'm extracting and making that document in record of people protesting the closure of a hospital, protesting the fact that they are paying the highest water bills, protesting the fact that the government covered up the fact that it was legionnaires disease that was killing all of the people in the city of Flint, and Governor Snyder wouldn't say it. The fact that there are countless images that are telling the truth and independent artists like myself willing to tell those stories, I think is the indictment on the system. That is a social justice. I think, in some ways, maybe it's better that we're out there as insurgents on our own doing it because we're not sanitizing, neutralizing and trivializing what someone like Shay Cobb would proclaim and say about how she's been dehumanized. And in my case, *The Notion of Family*, those photographs are what enabled me to save my own life.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? It is very simple. If I didn't have those photographs, I wouldn't have been able to pay the light bill or for books I needed in school, or for when I was struck down with my terminal illness and I had to leave school... take care of myself. Those photographs would have afforded me to prolong my life. This is my life's work. These aren't projects. Those are real lives, real blood depending on that work circulating and being out in the world. And in the case of Flint, what's interesting is that I get to tell this narrative nobody wanted to tell.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I mean, I'm rewriting history and writing history. For me, these photographs are about making present history visible today; now. I don't want to wait decades later when it's too late and I can't impact change in someone's life right now. Why should people have to wait till after they're dead and gone to see justice? And why do people have to die and then be photographed in order for civil rights or justice to happen? You know, I mean it is beyond barbaric that in June of 2011, that the Attorney General of Michigan, after five years of an investigation, just decides to drop all criminal charges in this investigation for the Flint water crisis... where there were local and state representatives being held accountable. The fact that all of a sudden a change of hands, new votes, a new person takes position and, we just flush all of that five year investigation away and don't hold anyone accountable? And the people of Flint have been waiting for five years? Right? That is justice delayed and justice denied yet again in the United States. And this is the thing that I'm talking about in terms of a social justice and fighting these inequities.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

The fact that I'm making these images at the same time that that could happen, is an implication and an indictment. So these photographs run a historic timeline with the present. So even though it's a portrait, say, of Zion brushing her teeth with bottled water or a portrait of kids standing outside of North Western High School with someone wearing a paper mache head of Governor Snyder in a prison suit, jumpsuit. Like, those images are markers on a timeline that shows how America is really the

changing same. Right? We didn't end slavery, we didn't end inequality. This is really like being outraged that there was no justice from the Civil Rights Movement for a lot of these industrial small towns that people don't realize are very diverse. In that Black and brown bodies dwell in, live in, reside in. Right?

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Who is going to fight and advocate for poor people, for working class people, for people who were migrating and immigrating from other places of famine war to these small towns in America? A lot of this is my angst for the fact that this country, in terms of its class stratification, doesn't care about anyone. Black, White, or brown, if you are working class or poor. And I think that that's a real prevailing problem with the whole country, and for me, I'm beyond a Black experience. My work is talking about an American experience, period. We're American, and all the things that are happening to us are a direct ramification and a mirror to the rest of the country. We're all very connected regardless of race, regardless of class. And again, we see this in Parks' work with the Fontenelle family in *Life Magazine*.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

You see the son on the cover crying, and it's an identical match, right. That's 1968. Fontenelle sons crying on the cover. 2016/17, there's Zion with her mouth open, brushing her teeth with bottled water. The fact that those two almost seem like it's the same period.. .that's so dismal to know that. And to know that we keep brutalizing babies; innocent children. But these kinds of histories, until we eradicate them, we need artists and photographers to keep bringing it up, making it visible,

putting it on front of these covers of all of these major magazines and even within the art world, because it's the same stratification. But in that essay at *Life* with Parks in 1968...

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Which the theme was about racial inequalities, right. You turn to the first spread, and it has words, in Gordon Parks' own words where he is basically using that essay, puts it in a context of holding a mirror up. Right? What you've done for the Fontenelle family and what you do to me, is what you do to yourself. And I think that, you know, a nation that keeps touting its dominance and its wealth like you have so much wealth and it's all about Wall street, but yet you're spiritually impoverished. Like that's a problem and I think artists... we're the backbone of the country in that way and we're definitely the soul of the nation in that way that we know how to, not only be the people that bare witness, but the people that really are the ones that have the moral courage to stand up and say that "This isn't right what you're doing to this community, this population, to this person, to this individual." And I think that the country itself needs to understand how important artists' roles are.

Having agency in publishing

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

You know, I come back to this a lot where I'm constantly thinking about, you know, "Only if today was like when Parks was making images," Right? *Life Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, right. A real commision where you are on salary, right, you work full

time to make your images. Like that has been stripped away today. And the reason I go through such great length and depth to do what I'm doing with Shay Cobb, is because there is no platform like that anymore. Right? He had a full, multiple spreads where images can be run full bleed, where he was inserting his voice where he could, or working with the editors the best he could to contextualize the photographs he took. And that was a salary job, and that's what he got to focus on. Like I work four other jobs just to be able to do this, right. That was just one commission. I think what is important about the knowledge that I have about his practice and his life, is that I was able, right. He left that kind of a blueprint because of his notoriety, because of his success, because of his fame. And I think I would have to really credit this knowledge to Peter Kundhart Jr., to Leslie Parks, and to Gene, you know, his former wife, and editor and executor.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

It was two encounters that I had with Gene when Leslie and Peter introduced me to her in 2016. I was just starting the commission for Flint's family, and I really wanted to negotiate a contract on my own terms, so that I could have say over each photograph, so that I could stop them from cropping them, so I could challenge them if I didn't like the captions they were trying to write, if I didn't like the language they use, if I didn't like the way the journalist was speaking about Ms. Renee or Shay's relationship. How could I create my own contract? Because for me, this is what young practitioners don't know. Right? They're like, "Oh my god I've been chosen to shoot something for the *New York Times*, hooray! I'm just going to sign my rights away?" No. If you really want power and control over your photo essay, what Gordon

Parks' legacy in *Life* has shown me is that you really have to write your own contract; negotiate and fight for the terms so that you have a real control over that narrative and visual representation.

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Like I am visually representing people like how a lawyer represents the plaintiff and their client. Right? And that is a real fight, and so this is another answer to the social justice question because it was important that the way the images... So if you go back to the ten pages, I negotiated that it would be ten pages right before the reader gets to the big, colorful fashion spreads, that you couldn't have any ads in them. No ads in between any of the pages, right. And I learned that from the magazine of the year when it went bankrupt and Ellison and Parks' collaboration wasn't published and then the negatives get caught up in this lawsuit, and then, you know, we have to rely on, years later, curators and historians piecing it back together. Like, that was something I kept thinking about. Or like Parks' expedition *The Making of An Argument*, where we finally are allowed to have a pure look behind scene to see how Parks was picking and choosing his battles with these editors. Now we know that Red Jackson was depicted as a villain in that spread...

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

When yet Parks' image is showing him as a- as a human being, as an innocent person kind of hiding in that shadow, retreating in that shadow with the light hitting him, but the fact that the designer or the editor put this image of like Harlem engulfed and the Harlem gang leader, and making it seem like he's looking over as

this dark, sinister figure in Harlem. Like this is not what Parks' photographs are for and it's not how they are meant to be used. And so, like, this is why I'm so indebted to understanding that legacy and having encountered someone like Gene who was able to tell me some more of those stories behind the scenes, and that's what allowed me to really fight in that photo essay for Shay Cobbs; voice her perspective and the representation. And the other thing is, a Harlem diary (*Diary of a Harlem Family* (1967))...the family-- Harlem Diary that goes with the Fontenelle family...

01:40:25:00

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Well, after that comes out, Parks is... commissioned to make that film, but in the film, it's a video that he's clearly directing. He's speaking in that film directly to you and me, directly to the country. Right? Like, we have a problem here with how the Fontenelle family is being treated. Because of that video, I was able to then use that as an example to give Shay Cobb the last word in *Flint is Family* because it was an online piece and in print, I was able to build out this film, *Flint is Family* that enabled me, just like Parks used his photographs and kind of went over that Ken Burns effect with his voice coming over it, I was able to do that with Shay, instead of it being my voice, the photographers' voice, the author voice. That it would be Shay, the subject speaking on her own terms and in her own language.

01:41:27:03

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, opening that video and film with her where she starts with a two minute poem, which is a complete rebuttal and rhetoric to mass media and politicians, and then to go eleven more minutes detailing everyday to what it means to have to bathe in

bottle water, not being able to cook at all, trying to protect her daughter and still pay the highest water bills. And if you fail, the city is trying to call Child Protective Services on you or rip your family apart. I mean, this is crazy that they criminalize something and use it against people. That is inhumane and very unjust. So, knowing all of that about what he went through and was up against, helped as a guiding force to make my own contract.

01:42:22:06

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Fight to not have the ads, have uninterrupted spreads, like a real opportunity to control and edit those images, and then to let her have the final word and not leave enough time for them to try to edit that video. So what she said is exactly the way it aired and premiered in their online component of that five part series, and that had never, ever been done before. But, I wouldn't have known how to do that without the knowledge and the impact that I have of Parks' legacy.

Choosing to photograph families

01:43:06:18

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

It was the year 2000. I was in an intro photo class photographing at a homeless shelter in Erie, Pennsylvania because that year was the highest population of homeless children in the United States... In Erie, Pennsylvania, which is thirty minutes from where I was studying at Edinboro University and being trained and taught about the history of social documentary work, but long term, lifelong social documentary work. So there I am, in this shelter seeing it. Right? There were

families of six, of seven that were homeless. Like all of these families in these homeless shelters from little babies all the way up to people in their forties, fifties, and sixties that some were even alone. And so, I started going to that shelter.

01:44:12:17

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I just felt such a deep concern and empathy for them, and I think because I've never been afraid to publically examine my own family. In short, to answer your question, a part of me continuously returning to the theme of family and always focusing on family, is the fact that my family was fragmented... was broken. And I never understood why. Right? And I think a part of why I continue to do this work is every family I encounter, every country, every county, every municipality, every home I go into. It's like I get a piece of what was taken. I get a piece of what was taken from me and my family back. So that's a personal thing. It never heals me, but there's something about functioning in that realm of different ways of thinking about family because as a kid I was depressed because I didn't-- you know, was raised by my grandmother. My parents weren't there. I didn't live in the same house as my siblings, and you go to school and you want to try to go to college and grad school. Well, the higher you go up the social ladder, the more you see more nuclear families and you feel more of an outcast and alienated, and they treat you differently because you come from a fragmented family. So every single body of work I make, even if I don't photograph a family but I spend time with them, that gives me a piece of my humanity back from having my own personal life and family stripped from me and I couldn't control that. Right? I had no control over that.

Reflection on Gordon Parks' work

01:46:02:23

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So when you look at, I think, one of the most powerful images in *A Harlem Family*, with the Fontenelle family, is when you see the whole family there... in the government office there... They-- are they in the...

01:46:21:03

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

public assistance office. Like, there it is right there. In one image he shows you, symbolically, how the state, how the government unravels Black families and their lives. He does it again; Ella Watson 1942. She's standing... it's not that she's holding the mop and the broom and taking after that famous painting, it's that she's standing in front of the American flag, in an office in Washington D.C...Is a Black woman who's a janitor that cleans those offices in a society and nation, and government that doesn't recognize her as a full human being. It's all of those layers that he masterfully puts and distills into one portrait about one person. All of the societal ills, all the social inequities.

01:47:31:19

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Always in one portrait. And those portraits stay with me. They stay because they're so true in what he is conveying. As subtle as they are, they are just so powerful and loud, but yet so quiet and somber. And so for me, I'm making those kinds of images that show you structures of power; forces around you that are always at those edges just trying to dismantle you, trying to destabilize you, trying to strip you of any kind

of basic human right. You know? So from the beginning of this nation's inception, it's always been about a continual perpetuation of displacement, dispossession, alienation, dehumanization and, the removal of any kind of basic rights or even a civic dialogue to demand those rights, you know. And I think that that's why I'll never tire of always looking to Gordon whenever I get lost, or stumble, or trip or I'm not sure about the way I'm handling something or making an image, like, I just know it.

01:48:55:22

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

When I'm shooting images of people, I will see a Gordon Parks image, I will see a Dorothea Lange image, I will see a Walker Evans image, I will see a Lewis Hine image, I will see Carrie Mae Weems, a Dawoud Bey. I will see them, and I'll know that I'm making that segregate, that I'm making that portrait that's in conversation with all of that legacy, all of that history. I think that's really important and a mark of an artist who's been mentored by the people that, you know, I just named. So, you want to have that conversation with them, and I think this is collective. We're all a family, we're all a lineage that is very indebted and responsible and holding ourselves accountable. And so I want to play my part. If I was born in an industrial small town, then that's the hand that was dealt and I know sometimes in these more bourgeois larger cities, people don't understand that people like me exist, and I'm here to let them know we do.

01:50:00:11

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And that's why I make the work of beautiful Black people in these industrial, concrete mazes, as Ellison put it. We left the South, coming all the way North thinking that we were going to get to some promised land, and we never got there. Just like *Invisible Man*, just like their collaboration and this is what you see happening to Shay Cobb. Here she is in the industrial north... Having her water poisoned, having to make that reverse migration back South just like Ellison proclaimed. And so, you know, these are the things that I think about in terms of those portraits that he made and how you deal with society and power and institutions, and why I think he's hiding kernels of that in every single portrait that you look at. In all of his bodies of work.

Impact of photography

01:51:10:13

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Because I embedded myself in every personal facet in detail of Shay's schedule, one of the routines we had was picking Zion up from school or after school, and I remember going to her charter school. Right? This is a charter school in Flint. And I go inside of it and I see the fountain covered up in plastic and it says, "Contaminated. Do not drink." And I couldn't pick up the camera. It pricked me. It wounded me. It just hit me so hard in the gut because we know the history of seeing those images, so Gordon captures it in color. You see the woman at the fountain or the little girls behind the fence, they can't go to the playground. You see it, and I think it's even more powerful because it is so colorful. It does feel like this innocent, colorful fairytale with what's lurking underneath which is this nightmare of inequality.

01:52:21:10

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so, as soon as I saw the fountain, I was jolted and I froze up and couldn't get the camera. I took it in my mind's eye, and immediately, of course, Parks' image of the fountain that say "Coloreds Only" or "Whites Only " pops up. But I think in the human part of me it just hurts because you don't want it to be true. And in my spirit I knew things haven't changed. It looks different, right. It didn't say Colored or Whites on it, it said "Contaminated. Do not drink" or "Don't drink" or "Don't use." To see that, in a charter school, in 2016, in the United States of America, after everything everybody went through fighting for civil rights.

01:53:16:07

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

To see it all roll back like we can physically, tangibly see it... that all of that work, all of those people who marched and died for this, vanished and taken away. The roll back era is real and we see it at a devastating magnitude in small towns across the United States. So I think I've matured to a point where sometimes it's ok to not take that photograph because it wounds you so much personally because you don't want it to be true and you want to fight for something better, right? I think Parks wanted to leave the world and society in a better place than what he was born into. Right? That's that choice of that weapon. And the fact that there was nothing I could do about it at that moment. I wasn't going to do it because I don't want to show Zion something she already knew.

01:54:18:23

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? Zion-- we had to have that conversation. I had to listen and watch Shay have that conversation with her right before she's doing her homework. And again, another image of Parks comes to mind. Fontenelle family; you see the kids studying. I don't care how much systematically your humanity has been stripped from you, they can never take your knowledge. Even if you had to borrow that book from somebody else, or even if that book doesn't have anything to do with your own will and victory and triumph. Parks intentionally always photographed kids with books, and that's why I'm sitting there on the bed with Shay and Zion while Shay, you see her right at the edge of the frame looking at Zion and Zion sitting there looking up at me, because telepathically... like knowledge is power. And I'm making that photograph, and scribing this photograph for her to have in her memory, so she knows, just like Parks did with the Fontenelle kids; Knowledge is power.

01:55:25:18

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And it doesn't matter how impoverished you are, you can still study or letting Americans know that just because someone has been stripped of any type of economic power, doesn't mean they're not intelligent or that they don't study. And then, of course, in my photographs right to the left of Zion and the viewer's right, you see the still life of the glass water jug filled with alkaline water, and right next to that you see a plastic water bottle filled with water. So, you know, these are the kinds of images that I think are important to make in conversation with that history and context.

History repeating itself

01:56:18:07

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

So, you know, for a few years now, I just kinda just been spinning my wheels here. Like, what's it going to take for me to make a platform that empowers and enables everyday people to mediate and tell their own story. And again, I- I- I, in a strange way, have this nostalgia for thinking about how life was a platform for Parks, and then of course once that weighed on him so much, and I think they probably really made him upset a few times and I've also gotten angered in many meetings lately with editors in New York. The fact that he left and went to Paris and was doing fashion and shooting color, and then *The Learning Tree* oh my god. What an incredible film.

01:57:11:10

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

It's just such an incredible film. I would like to make my own film and you know I have been patiently waiting. You know, waiting to mature, be wiser, waiting for all the right parts and pieces to be in the right place for the right healthy relationships. And I think that's also what I admire about him. It seemed like no matter where he was with the steps he was taking, there was always the right people right there to encourage him or to support him... which is why I don't think it's a coincidence that, you know, Peter Kunhardt Jr. enters into my life in 2015 and then we take off from there. As friends and me seeing Parks archives and work, but I think about making films often, but there's also this part where I'm thinking well, Hollywood and films and large films are also difficult and we live in an era where people are more used to mini docs, small things.

01:58:17:12

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so I do daydream about this. Like if you take the show Democracy Now and turn it into a platform where you're democratizing art. So, I want to make my own, like, Art Democracy Now where I go from state to state, small town to small town, collaborating with families, workers. Right? Whether they are auto workers or farmers...whether they're Black, White, latino, immigrated from somewhere else. As many different people as possible. I'm really committed to this idea of class consciousness, and of creating a movement through solidarity of all backgrounds, but wanting to build it from the bottom up, right, the ground up. I'm very interested in that, and I think the only way to do that is to continue to build this archive that I'm already building. And each body of work in my case has lead to the next one.

01:59:18:02

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

It's not a coincidence that I went from working in Flint, Michigan for four years with the Cobb family to just slightly pivating to going into northeast Ohio into Lordstown where I photographed many families who were dealing with the plight of the fact that their parent or loved one was laid off by General Motors. Right? Each body of work leads to the next. When I came out of Boranage, Belgium. Photographing the coal miners talking about their memory, how they migrated, and showing how industry creates a sub-culture across, right. In Belgium they were Belgium, Italian, and Turkish working in those coal mines. All in one community. By the time we created that body of work in two years, it lead me to go back home to Pittsburgh where I photographed a woman named Sandra Gold Ford, who had the foresight and

knowledge to photograph Jones and Laughlin Steel, which is still Andrew Carnegie's competitor in Pittsburgh for steel.

02:00:31:09

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? It all comes full circle. All of that steel was used and large coils of steel in Lordstown to make the molds for the car... the Cruise Sidan. So it's all full circle: following global economy, steel, coal, all the materials we rely on in this country. And by looking at-- following the capital and the global capital and the economy and the shifting industries is how I meet the workers and then go into their homes and meet their families. So, I create this whole new diverse universe of working class people. And then make their stories overlap or show how much they overlap that they see themselves in each other, which visually creates a unification... A solidarity. And then intellectually and ideologically, I argue for this type of class consciousness. I think this is a complementary aspect and element to what Parks was doing, or what all those artists in Harlem were doing. Because you can't talk about race without talking about class, and this country needs to see that. Right? And I don't think it's ironic that we're now looking back at Fred Hampton Jr... thinking about his life. People wanting to make films and teach young folks about who Fred Hampton Jr. is. I think about him and Parks because I'm in Chicago.

02:02:05:07

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

You know, what would that have looked like if they encountered each other or he made a portrait of Fred Hampton Jr.. Like, to me, that's like my ideological worlds colliding, you know. And I think if you care about humanity, you have to address

class along with race because when you do, they expose how capitalism divides and conquers all of us, period. And how you see so many people living below the poverty line in the world's most wealthiest nation? Which is definitely not a superpower anymore, and these are troubling, termalchurus times.

02:02:50:14

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And I think it's so important to create another type of complex narrative storytelling on multiple mediated platforms, free from the kind of elitist, bourgeois, or like...control of one particular demographic, controlling the stories. I mean the thing that distrubed me at Hearst Corporation is when I went into the offices of Elle, you look over all those cubicals...

02:03:18:10

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

... they were all White women, and I'm like, well how are you about to tell a story about Shay Cobb if you have no cultural sensitivity to everything that compromised her and put her in this situation in the first place? There's no understanding of that. They don't come from that social order... social world of an industrial middle class family that used to work for the auto industry. People actually think that people like that don't exist anymore.

02:03:53:05

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

It becomes the driving force to why I get up every single day and make a poignant decision to make work that is beyond what I look like. Right? It is time for people to understand if they are going to talk about my work that they don't see it through this

very narrow lens of saying, “LaToya makes photographs about Black people.” No, I don’t. I make photographs about human beings. Right? I make photographs about Americans. I make photographs about people that are caught up in these complex intersections and situations revolving around industry, labor, capital, shifting economies, shifting landscapes, the environment, health care, education.

02:04:52:10

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

All of these things that really show how we are divided and conquered and subjugated to always blame each other, instead of this larger apparatus that is hanging over our heads, which leftist economists might call neoliberalism that is falling apart and is taking this new shift with this rise of facism coupled with that on steroids. I think it’s important to show up for as many people as possible, whether I speak their language or not. When I was in Bornarage, Belgium, I had a translator. I was a stranger in their village, and had the audacity to show up.

02:05:42:00

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

They all knew my work, but the first thing these men said to me, “Why are you here? You’re an American, you’re a woman, and you’re Black. Why do you care about us?” And I just smiled at them. Most people would have retreated in fear. I thought it was great. Because I was like, “Man, you sound just like all the people that I used to see my grandmother and my mother’s age in Braddock. Right? After the industry closed, after everything went overseas when people... like they lost-- they became disillusioned. That kind of feeling that comes from someone that's a coal miner or steel mill maker, and they’re very confrontational and direct, which I love as a

Pittsburgher, I must say. That's where we get all of our sensibility from. So, they were actually speaking my language, it didn't scare me. Even though I didn't speak French or Italian-French, since they were-- A majority of them were Italian, but people didn't know that. Right? Here I am, in the coal mining region of Boranage, Belgium, where I encounter a whole community of Italian people that migrated there fleeing facism, poverty, and war in 1948.

02:07:08:18

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

They signed a contract...there was a contract between Belgium and Italy, where they would take the families if they signed the contract and were basically traded for the value of one bag of coal. And when one of the coal miner's daughters explained that to me, she simply just said, "We felt ashamed, embarrassed that this was the value of our life." And this is why I make my work regardless of someone's race, creed, religion, sexuality. It's about that...their humanity. The value of someone's life because at this point, the way that capitalism has us all in a choke hold... you- we are literally trying to validate the value of our right to live and exist and to have basic things like food, water, shelter, land, just anywhere to simply occupy or be.

02:08:12:09

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? And so, I think...again, it's complementary and it comes full circle to everything Parks was saying in his time he had to deal with because of his circumstance and what happened to him and how he nearly escaped the South and all of the things he had to endure, and the awful realizations he had to face in the North. Just like King had to come to terms with it. Right? Everybody always thinks

“Oh yeah, the North. We’ll prosper there, we’ll be accepted there.” No. No you won’t. You’re gonna find yourself institutionally locked out, as usual. And I think that... It is my responsibility to couple that with understanding issues around class, value of human life, and an ecosystem that we’re seeing vanish before our eyes.

Current work

02:09:18:00

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

There’s a few things happening in the— the two portraits that you saw me make today, and specifically that one at the dining room table. First of all, I hadn’t photographed them at that table. There is a still life shot. Right? An interior of that space currently on view at FS MOMA and *Flint is Family: Part Two*, but to have them sit there, you know, to continue to build on this part two to give it the real breadth and depth that it needs. The last time that I was there to visit, I saw a very tender moment between Shay and her father, Mr. Smiley. I noticed for the first time Shay noticing her father’s fragility. I don’t think it had hit her until that last visit we were together. And I felt that it hit her in a deep way to the point that, again, it was one of those feelings in my gut. And so I excused myself and went into the room to leave her alone with her father because I figured they needed to have a father and daughter time to talk about the future.

02:10:41:13

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

And so, knowing that I’m building this human document and archive for Zion to inherit, like she’s going to inherit all that land and fresh water spring, I think it’s

important to make that image for her because she's too young to understand what that means when you're a child; dealing with a parent's mortality. Right? She's not going to understand that yet. She'll have about twenty more years. And so, I think that shot at the dining room table today was almost like... it's similar to when my grandmother's in *The Notion of Family* kitchen and JC, the young cousin of mine, that I photographed as a double of myself at that age.

02:11:38:22

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

He's sitting in the chair looking straight forward and my grandmother is having a difficult morning. I didn't realize she had pancreatic cancer, so she's actually dying in that image, and I just don't know because she never told me. And you see her gown is draped off her shoulder, she has one of those necklaces on where you press the button if you fall, and her hand gently touches the back of that chair. And JC looks forward. So understanding, in a simple way, of the passing of a baton, right, a shifting of power... a moving of that elder wise spirit into that younger adolescent that is going to have to grapple with that. That photograph was about me understanding, having been witness to a very painful moment where Shay knows, "I need to be here more for my father."

02:12:43:13

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

I need to take after him, look after him, help him with this land, help him with the horses. Understanding that he knows death is always around the corner for all of us, he knows that. He even makes jokes about it. He did it today over and over. Right? There's all this beautiful humor in understanding our fate. And so in that shot, that's

why Shay is sitting perpendicular to the side profile of my lens and where I'm standing. The person who is front and center or across from that lens is Mr. Smiley, and then you've got Zion to his left in between Shay and him with her arms around all that history that she's about to inherit.

02:13:39:20

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Right? She may not know it, just like my grandmother, a woman of few words, very sterned, disciplined me, no nonsense, you better study... Mr. Smiley is the same way with Zion. That's what it was like when I first visited him and looked at him always disciplining and correcting and looking after her. He doesn't have to put it in any words; it's about his presence. So, I'm capturing that moment. So when she's my age, she's going to look at that photograph and it's going to make her remember. We may not understand what that photograph means now, but I bet you two decades from now, the fact that that's gonna jog her memory and serve a purpose. Maybe she'll be going down the wrong direction. Maybe she'll be stuck between decisions and she'll see that photograph.

02:14:36:06

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Whether it's in a museum, in a book or in her own home. That kind of power of Mr. Smiley and Shay being the guards of who's so young and precious, but about to become this victor that has to triumph over all of this inequality. She has no idea the load that she's about to have to carry. But she's going to be able to do it because that image is there to reinforce and remind her. Like this is what you do. Right? So, if she loses herself, she's confronted with that portrait, she sees that she's looking... That's

why I said, “Look at me, Zion.” She’s looking into the lens at me where she is going to be my age looking at the image. Right? So, I’m talking to her two decades from now. And then Shay and Mr. Smiley are touching by holding hands on that glass table that’s reflecting them.

02:15:34:10

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Looking at each other. So there’s the triangle, there’s the power dynamic. And so, I’m writing that history for her so that she can survive in the future whether she knows it or not. And the other thing about the photographs is they really will be used to invest in her future, which is, I think, is a part that Parks also played. Right? When you think about what he did for Flavio. He took care of him. The photographs enabled him. Right? His fame, his success, the circulation of that work enabled him to financially provide for Flavio. Just like he made America so compelled that they sent all that money in for the Fontenelle family to move to that house in Long Island. Since that platform doesn’t exist for me today to compel, right. People aren’t compelled anymore.

02:16:36:20

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER:

Nobody gave me money for *Flint is Family*. None of those editors or magazines or corporations paid Shay for living her trauma on their printed page. How is she supposed to be compensated for that? And how am I holding myself accountable to ensure that she be repaid for that? So what people don’t know about these photographs and all of the bodies of work I’ve made... in all of that, when those

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works are required, sent into all these museum collections, a portion of that money is given back to the people in the work. I've been doing it the entire time.

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