

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Zoë Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier, American Witness," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 1, 2021



ARTS AND LETTERS

LaToya Ruby Frazier, American Witness

A marriage of art and activism, the artist's searing photographs reveal the human toll of economic injustice.



LaToya Ruby Frazier in her Chicago studio, photographed on Dec. 28, 2020. Naima Green

WHEN GENERAL MOTORS announced plans to slash its domestic work force in 2018, company stock soared 5 percent. LaToya Ruby Frazier, a Chicago-based artist whose photographs and videos champion unsung members of the working class, was furious. She decided to embark upon a new series devoted to the autoworkers who were contending with the possible loss of their plant in Lordstown, Ohio; they would be the subject of an upcoming exhibition and a

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published photo essay. But before any of that could happen, the workers had to agree to let her into their lives. Frazier traveled to their union hall and sat in the foyer as the members filed in for a big meeting that would begin with a vote on her. She was both astonished by their diversity — they were young and old, Black and white, male and female — and aware that she wasn't necessarily welcome. "As a Black woman, I know what it feels like when someone's eyes rest on me in a hostile way," she said. "And I think they have a right to do that. ... You're being told awful news that is going to destroy your livelihood, your income, your family, your community. These people were not in a good mood when I got there." The doors closed and Frazier waited, heart pounding, while Local 1112 of the United Auto Workers union decided whether to grant her unprecedented access.

The vote was a unanimous yes. The doors opened and Frazier strode inside with four cameras slung across her chest and shoulders. She immediately dropped to the floor and began crawling around the perimeter of the hall, capturing the expressions of anguish, confusion and disbelief written on the faces of people whose lives were falling apart.

Frazier's radical empathy has brought her to places whose occupants have every reason to distrust outsiders. She photographs communities gutted by unemployment, poverty, racism and environmental degradation, seeking out subjects dehumanized or ignored by the mainstream media. At 39, she sees her life's work as an archive of humanity, one that particularly documents the courage and diversity of blue-collar workers and the consequences of the policies that condemn them to struggle. For her, this is what it means to be a patriot. "I am showing these dark things about America because I love my country and countrymen," she said. "When you love somebody, you tell them the truth. Even if it hurts."

Socially conscious artistic practices may be in vogue these days, but Frazier goes beyond hollow claims of "raising awareness" with an essay in a magazine or a show at an art museum. She is the rare photographer who approaches relationships with her subjects as lifelong commitments, and who tries to make substantial, material differences in their lives. Frazier's conviction in art that involves — and transforms — entire communities aligns her with Rick Lowe, an artist who, with his collaborators, famously converted an underserved swath of Houston into a nexus for housing, art programming and neighborhood development activities. She also carries on the legacy of the German artist Joseph Beuys, who believed that participatory art could heal society. Frazier, though, pursues these conceptual ideals while still producing formally elegant images using traditional techniques. Working mainly with a medium-format camera and black-and-white film, her intimate domestic portraits and expressive landscapes are classically beautiful, even when they depict harrowing realities. Making photographs as poetic as they are political is, for Frazier, a way of honoring her subjects. "She doesn't pop in and pop out," said the artist Carrie Mae Weems, Frazier's friend and early mentor. "These are long-term projects that deeply

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matter, not only to her but to the community and, ultimately, I think, to the nation.”



“Christina Defelice, UAW Local 1112, (Transition Center Customer Service Representative, 11 years in at GM Lordstown Complex Trim Shop), with a photograph of her father Jerry L. Canter and fellow scheduled clerks Frank Powers, Charles Steiner, Charles Walters, Al Basco, Jim Nichols, Mike Dobransky, and Rendal Stout, inside UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandy Alli union hall, Lordstown, OH, 2019” (2019).

This fall, Frazier will publish “Flint Is Family in Three Acts,” a record of her five-year collaboration with people affected by the ongoing contaminated-water crisis in Flint, Mich. “The Last Cruze,” a formidable and moving volume of portraits and interviews with the autoworkers, was released in December. “If you take the work seriously, it changes how you see people,” said the artist Doug DuBois, another friend and mentor, who taught Frazier at Syracuse University. Her work has the power to propel viewers “from empathy to activism,” he said. “If you get it, you’re going to get angry.”

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Frazier herself is fierce, prone to eloquent, impromptu diatribes on oppression in its many forms, from Reaganomics to redlining. She wears gold-rimmed glasses and her hair in an Afro, a look she describes as “militant nerd.” And she’s funny — quick to find the dark humor in bleak situations. A few years ago, when a doctor told her that lupus, an incurable autoimmune disease, had rendered her skin photosensitive to the point where she can’t safely go outside on sunny days or even sit under fluorescent lights, she couldn’t help but laugh. “So I’ve become one with my medium?” she asked, her raspy voice incredulous. “I’m cracking up. He doesn’t think it’s funny, but it’s like, how ironic.”

IF FRAZIER IS drawn to families, it’s because she knows that the ways in which they form — and fracture — often reveal larger histories. The story of her own family is a chronicle of the rise and fall of American industry. Her ancestors moved to Braddock, Pa., in the early 1900s, joining the first Great Migration that brought more than a million Black workers from Southern towns to Northern cities in search of better economic opportunities and to escape Jim Crow. Braddock is home to the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, Andrew Carnegie’s first mill. Frazier’s grandmother knew it as a bustling Pittsburgh suburb with department stores, theaters and restaurants. But by the time Frazier was born in 1982, the industry had collapsed. Businesses folded, basic amenities had become scarce and the streets were lined with the wreckage of empty homes. Most of the white population fled, and the people who remained lived in exile from the lives they had planned on leading. Frazier spent her infancy with her mother, a nurse’s aide and bartender, her father, an artist and interior designer, and her two siblings in a public housing project wedged between the Monongahela River and the factory that had once been the lifeblood of the town.



“Momme” (2008).

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Frazier's earliest memories are of the mill. The flames from the flare stacks would burn blue at night, and thick soot that could turn a white shirt gray by lunchtime billowed in the air, staining cars, streets and windows. "If you're growing up in Braddock, Pa., in 1982, you're looking at some serious devastation," she said. The union-busting, erosion of social welfare programs and outsourcing of jobs plunged countless Americans — especially women, people of color and blue-collar workers — into poverty. Frazier grew up watching the crack epidemic infiltrate the community and, with it, the rise of war on drugs policies effectively designed to criminalize the poor. Her mother, Cynthia, abused crack cocaine at the time. From the age of 5, Frazier lived with her maternal grandmother and step-great-grandfather, whom she called Gramps.

Grandma Ruby, the artist's eponym, was a redoubtable guardian who kept her granddaughter safe by keeping her busy. Frazier played the guitar by 6 and viola by 9; participated in after-school science fairs, mock trials and debates; and competed on the basketball team. Frazier took her first photography class as a student at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, where she enrolled in 1999, and where she found a mentor in the artist Kathe Kowalski, who introduced her to the portraits of the rural poor that the Farm Security Administration photographers had taken during the Great Depression. Studying the work of Dorothea Lange, Frazier was both inspired and frustrated. Lange, who had traveled the Dust Bowl as a government employee, building a record of human suffering and resilience to rally support for New Deal aid programs, had taken copious notes about the gaunt, dispossessed farmhands she photographed, but these were often not published with Lange's images. As a result, her subjects were reduced to types, their identities erased. Florence Owens Thompson, the woman in "Migrant Mother," Lange's 1936 masterpiece, was not named for more than 40 years and was never compensated for her participation in what became the most iconic image of the Great Depression. How, Frazier wondered, could she change the skewed power dynamics that had long defined documentary photography?

She decided she would tell her own story, tracing the ways in which industrial decline, poverty and the war on drugs had shaped and changed her family. Over the course of the next decade and a half, Frazier would reveal — in 108 searing portraits, tender still lifes and stark, unsentimental landscapes — the human cost of abstract economic policies in a series she later titled "The Notion of Family" (2001-14). Shooting in black and white and relying mostly on available light, Frazier nodded to her idols Gordon Parks and Lewis Hine, photographers who used their cameras to demand social justice, but managed "to reinvent the tradition and history of documentary photography and make it her own," said the artist Gregory Crewdson, the director of graduate studies in photography at the Yale School of Art, where Frazier has served as a guest critic. "Historically the tradition of documentary photography has been of the photographer going into a location and documenting it as an objective observer from the outside looking in, but her pictures show a much more complicated blur between her and her subjects that perhaps shows more complexity, more depth, more intimacy, more of a personal investment."

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“Zion, Her Mother Shea, and Her Grandfather Mr. Doug Smiley Riding on Their Tennessee Walking Horses, Mares, PT (PT’s Miss One of a Kind), Dolly (Secretly) and Blue (Blues Royal Threat), Newton, Mississippi, from the series *Flint is Family, Part II*” (2017).

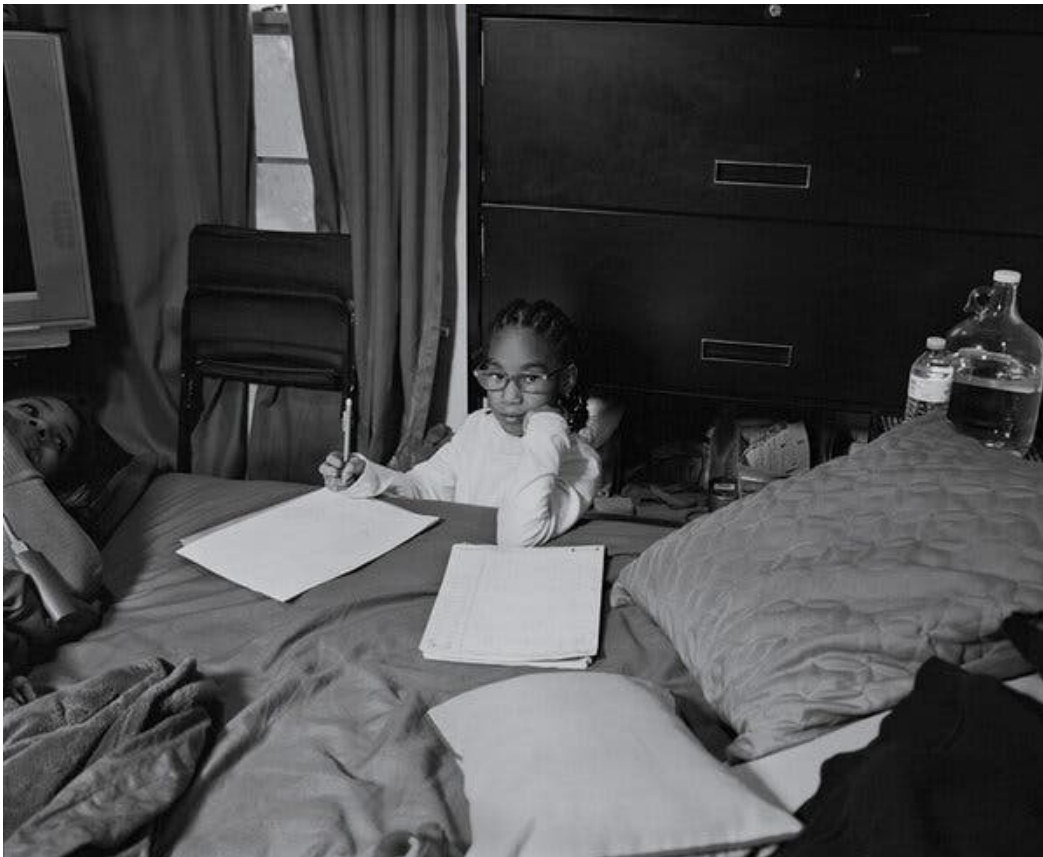
Some of the earliest images in the series depict Gramps’s cracked and swollen feet and Grandma Ruby wiping him clean. He had been a mill worker, and his physical deterioration became a symbol for Frazier of the dissolution of upward mobility. The photographs of Grandma Ruby demonstrate the fortitude of a woman who quietly persevered through segregation, a widow who raised six children alone. In “Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls,” from 2002, she stands in her darkened living room, illuminated from one side like the saints and angels in paintings by Frazier’s favorite Italian masters, Caravaggio and Bernini.

But it’s the work that Frazier made in volatile collaboration with her mother that forms the most compelling through line in the series. Photography became their primary means of confronting the frayed ends and live wires of their relationship. “Mom and Me on Her Couch,” a picture from 2010, shows Frazier and Cynthia

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dressed identically in jeans and white tank tops, leaning away from one another at opposite ends of a sofa. Frazier looks drained; her mother, grimly preoccupied. The emotional rift between them finds expression in the chasm between the cushions, a vertical boundary line that extends upward in the form of a window bar.

“We both have so much angst and anger with one another, and most of that is due to the fact that my grandmother had to play the role of mother to me, which made us more or less rival siblings,” Frazier told *The Morning News* in 2009, when she was still at work on the series. “Because we’re really strong-willed women, often we butted heads.” One summer day, Frazier’s mother — angry about something Frazier had done or didn’t do — ripped all of her portfolio prints in half and threw them in the street. But they returned to the work. “I’ve always seen the beauty in my mother’s imperfections,” said Frazier. “I’ve always loved her unconditionally.” They posed and styled one another; imitating and riffing off each other’s body language in a visual call and response. Frazier’s mother was often the one pressing the shutter and controlling the image. The process, said Frazier, allowed them to drop their guard and laugh about the qualities they couldn’t help but share. In “Momme,” from 2008, Frazier looks straight ahead at her mother, who sits in profile between her and the viewer, half obscuring Frazier. The contours of their lips align in the illusion of a kiss; their features seem to form a single face.



“Zion doing her math homework from the International Academy of Flint college preparatory Charter School (est. 1999)” (2016-17).

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The power of the series lies not only in Frazier's willingness to lay bare the complexities of these relationships but in her drive to expose the ruin that industrial pollution inflicted on their bodies. Frazier likely grew up drinking carcinogenic tap water and breathing in metals, asbestos and various chemicals known to cause respiratory disorders and autoimmune diseases. She was often seriously ill as an adolescent but wasn't diagnosed with lupus until college. The disease, which causes the immune system to attack the body's own organs and tissues, became another subject within the series — Frazier didn't flinch from capturing herself enduring agonizing onslaughts of pain. Her mother was often in surgery, and Grandma Ruby died of pancreatic cancer in 2009. Frazier photographed them battling their own illnesses, as well as the protests that erupted when, in 2010, the medical group that owned Braddock's only hospital shut it down and later razed the building. Frazier's intimate knowledge of suffering and keen awareness of her own mortality suffuse the series with a somber poetry, but "The Notion of Family" is not elegiac. In its passionate call for justice, its focus is the unwritten future as much as the past.

Today, the series has been canonized by critics and curators, but when Frazier showed the images she made with her mother — both as an undergrad and then as an M.F.A. candidate at Syracuse — her classmates balked. DuBois remembers the first time Frazier pinned her prints to the wall for a critique in one of his graduate seminars. "Oh, man, I had to shut it down," he said. The "very white neoliberal knee-jerk response" from the other students was that Frazier was exploiting her mother by creating images of her drinking and using drugs. "It got very intense," said DuBois, "and I actually turned to the students, all of whom were white, and said, 'You have no idea what you're talking about.'" Black professors were also critical of the work. "The world doesn't need to see another image of a person, poor or of color, having a substance abuse problem," Frazier remembered them saying. "But the method in which me and my mother were making them was transcending all of that."

After receiving her M.F.A. in 2007, Frazier taught photography at Rutgers University and became a curator at the school's art gallery. She entered the theory-intensive Whitney Independent Study program in 2010, around the time that works from "The Notion of Family" began appearing in prominent group exhibitions in New York, including the Whitney Biennial in 2012. Publishers took note (Frazier released "The Notion of Family" as a book with Aperture in 2014) and so did the MacArthur Foundation, which awarded her one of its fellowships the year after; by then she was teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The series didn't spare Frazier from the trauma, but, she said, "it certainly allowed me to live another day."

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“Mindy Miller, Iron Workers Union Local 851, (11 years in at Auto Warehousing Company (AWC)), standing in her grandmother’s living room with her mother and grandmother, Lezlie and Marlene Miller, Niles, OH, 2019” (2019).

FRAZIER OFTEN describes her camera as a compass that leads her into dark valleys and allows her to find the light. In 2016, she traveled to Flint, Mich., a once-prosperous General Motors manufacturing hub that has been struggling since the 1970s. By the time officials switched the local water supply from Detroit to the Flint River as a cost-cutting measure in 2014, about 40 percent of the remaining residents, most of whom were Black, were living below the poverty line. The tap water turned brown; people broke out in rashes and their hair fell out in clumps. The river had been contaminated by sewage and industrial pollutants over the past two centuries, and tests revealed that people were drinking, bathing in and cooking with water that periodically contained *E. coli* and, in some cases, concentrations of lead 26 times higher than the federal limit.

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(In January, nine state and local officials were indicted for their alleged roles in the crisis, including the ex-Michigan governor Rick Snyder, who was charged with two counts of willful neglect of duty; all have pleaded not guilty.)

Frazier had been following the story when Elle magazine invited her to create a photo essay about the crisis. She agreed, provided that she could focus on a family of three generations of women. The editors found Amber Hasan, a writer and hip-hop artist, who declined but put Frazier in touch with her best friend, Shea Cobb, an artist and writer. Both women were wary. Press coverage of Flint had tended to skew toward the lurid or maudlin (“Oh, poor Flint, it’s so impoverished, it’s basically a hellhole,” said Hasan).

But Frazier won their trust by sharing stories of her own upbringing, and explaining that the works would be a collaboration. She then spent the next five months in Flint capturing the fullness of Cobb’s life — documenting her recording music, laughing with Hasan and spending time at home with her 9-year-old daughter, Zion, and mother, Ms. Renée. What emerged were not the harrowing photographs of a broken community one might expect. Instead, Frazier captures moments of joy — Cobb and Zion smiling at each other, nose to nose, in a booth at Zion’s favorite restaurant, and at a cousin’s wedding. “LaToya depicts Flint as just people,” said Hasan. “These are your grandparents, these are your co-workers, these are your relatives, these are regular people. Yes, circumstances are horrible, but even in that, people have real lives, they have real experiences.” The crisis is subtly present in some images — a gallon jug of clean water looms beside the bed where Zion is doing homework in one photograph, but the confidence with which the young girl, pencil in hand, returns our gaze suggests that she will be the author of her own fate.



“Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls” (2002).

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Frazier is not a photojournalist. Even when she shoots on assignment, she never claims to be objective, nor does she subscribe to the ethical code that bars members of the press from compensating subjects and sources — when she photographs someone in economic peril, she often positions herself as a surrogate family member. Every photograph she takes is a rebuke to the media's representations of Braddock that she experienced as a little girl. "I'm angry about being told that I was nothing, that I was less than human, that my life wasn't worth saving," she said. "I'm definitely crusading against that in every single image and portrait that I make."

The photo essay came out in *Elle* in August 2016, but Frazier kept shooting. The second part of the 170-work series portrays Cobb and Zion in a markedly different setting — tending horses in Mississippi, where they moved to temporarily escape the crisis. When they returned to Flint in 2017, the water was still undrinkable, so Frazier mounted a campaign, designing flags stating the number of days Flint residents had been living with lead exposure that flew atop art organizations from Nebraska to North Carolina, and helped fund Cobb and Hasan's artist collective, the Sister Tour, helping them travel, perform and speak about the crisis across the country — creating a platform in each of those cities for other women artists to share their work as well.

By then, Hasan had come up with her own creative solution to the problem. While doing relief work in Puerto Rico, she had met the developer of an atmospheric water generator, a machine that pulls moisture from the air. She pitched the idea of bringing it to Flint to city officials, but says they showed little interest. She called Frazier. In just a month, the generator arrived — Frazier donated all of her proceeds from her first solo show at a commercial gallery in New York and secured a matching grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. The machine is still there, operated by the community, producing up to 2,000 gallons of free water every day when temperatures are above 40 degrees. The third act of Frazier's forthcoming book on Flint opens with a vivid color photograph of Cobb, Hasan and their children running through streams of water from a hose hooked up to the generator. What would have been be a typical summertime scene anywhere else signaled a new era in Flint.

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"Frances Turnage, UAW Local 1112, Women's Committee, (34 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, Paint Shop), standing in her living room, wearing her work uniform, Youngstown, OH, 2019" (2019)

JUST AFTER THANKSGIVING in 2018, General Motors executives visited the company's plant in Lordstown, Ohio, and told the union leadership that they were done making the Chevrolet Cruze. "They didn't really explain it," said Timothy O'Hara, the former vice president of Local 1112. "They just got up and went out and told the entire membership who had gathered in that part of the plant." It was a moment he doubts he will ever forget. "You know, the looks on their faces — some of them actually became physically sick. There was a lot of crying."

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A few months later, Frazier was hurtling above the G.M. complex in a helicopter, scanning a sea of identical cars for the very last one to come off the line. Down on the ground, the person pointing out the right car was Mindy Miller, an 11-year veteran of the Auto Warehousing Company whose job was to inspect and park the thousands of Cruzes that came out of the plant. She worked in the blazing summer heat, when plastic seat liners that had been cooking in the sun for days gave her blisters through her clothes, and in subzero cold snaps. That day in March, Miller used her lunch break to make cardboard and paper signs memorializing the last Cruze, and she and her crew held them up as Frazier flew overhead.

Miller would get to know Frazier fairly well — the artist had been traveling to Lordstown every week since that first meeting at the union hall, and she kept coming even after production stopped, visiting workers in their homes. The series marked a dramatic leap in scale for the artist. After focusing on her own family and then embedding herself with Cobb's, she was suddenly photographing dozens of people at a time. Workers told her about the spouses, partners, elderly parents and children they had to leave behind to keep their jobs. Transfers were based on seniority and the needs of another — in some cases, distant — plant, and initially some married couples were reassigned to separate locations. One man forced to accept a position at a remote plant had never been away from his wife for more than three days and was dreading not being able to see his children at night. "And they did everything right," said Frazier, visibly upset. "They did what the contract said, they kept their word. They worked overtime, they worked so hard and they still had everything ripped from underneath them and had their family destroyed."

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“Mindy Miller, Ironworkers Union Local 851, (11 years in at Auto Warehousing Company (AWC)), standing with fellow Ironworkers at the last Chevrolet Cruze compact sedan in the GM Lordstown Complex, Lordstown, OH, 2019” (2019).

Frazier spoke to men and women of all ages, queer employees and people of color who counter “what people think an autoworker looks like,” she said. The series represents a conscious attempt to unravel the widespread opinion that these plants are filled with “racist, blue-collar white men.” She hopes the series, which includes 67 photographs, will also put an end to another pervasive notion — that she is an artist only concerned with race. Frazier’s work, like that of many young African-American artists, is often narrowly construed in terms of correcting the absence of Black representation in the Western canon. “I’m really sensitive about people saying that I’m a Black artist making work about being Black,” she said. “No, I’m not. I’m an American artist making work about America and the crisis in this country.” The true extent of Frazier’s vision is what makes her book about the Chevy plant’s demise, which has been more than two years in the making, such a

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landmark contribution. It deftly telescopes between her intimate portraits and interviews with the workers and an assiduously researched historical timeline of organized labor bolstered by wide-ranging conversations with diverse thinkers — a playwright, a documentary filmmaker and a political economist among them. Her project is among the most lucid, shrewdly compelling arguments for national solidarity in recent memory.

WHEN SHE'S NOT traveling for work, Frazier lives alone in the South Loop neighborhood of Chicago. She seldom dates, texts or uses social media. "I just think life is so short," she said. "Why spend it on distractions when you could ... make this place better than it was when you arrived? I don't see any other reason to get up every morning." Romantic companionship seems fundamentally incompatible with her ability to work. To be in a relationship is to "intentionally occupy yourself and distract yourself with other people's stuff," and that makes it impossible to realize your true purpose, she said. Hers is to serve others through her art. "I can't really do that if I'm living, you know, in a very status quo kind of way."

She finds peace in forging relationships with the people she photographs. They "all kind of fill in these wounds, these gaps for me," she said. Still, when Frazier came home after spending time with dozens of couples and families in Ohio — people who live for their spouses, partners and children — she found herself wondering what was wrong with her. "I started getting down on myself, like, 'What is your problem? Why can't you get married and have children?' You know, there are times where it gets to me," she said. Frazier lives her life as a cause — but that doesn't mean she doesn't get lonely or depressed.

In those moments, she turns to James Baldwin, who reminds her why she does what she does at the expense of almost everything else: "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war," he writes in "The Creative Process," an essay from 1962. "And he does at his best what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and with that revelation to make freedom real." To that end, Frazier said that she wants to establish a "museum of workers' thoughts," an institution aimed at fostering solidarity among working-class people around the world, where she would teach and maintain her archives. The museum would be the nucleus of Frazier's ultimate vision — a new school of thought "that can actually maybe transcend race, class, gender, citizenship, sexuality and religion. Maybe I could see it happening before I die," she said. "Maybe I could help plant that seed."