

GLADSTONE

LaToya Ruby Frazier, "Photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier's lesser-known history of America," *Financial Times*, June 15, 2024



FT Magazine Photography

Photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier's lesser-known history of America

As her work goes on show at MoMA in New York, she writes about the hidden narrative in her photographs of the Flint water crisis

LaToya Ruby Frazier JUNE 15 2024

The Flint water crisis began in 2014 when Michigan state officials, headed by governor Rick Snyder, switched the city of Flint's water supply from a Detroit treatment facility fed by Lake Huron to the contaminated Flint River in an effort to cut costs. As the discoloured, pungent water was piped into homes across the city, the levels of lead in the majority Black population's blood began to rise. Some people had seizures. Hair loss, skin itching and rashes were widespread. Complaints about the quality of the water mounted but were dismissed. For a year and a half, the water coming out of the taps across the city ranged from blue to green to brown. A report released by the Michigan civil rights commission in 2017 concluded that the events were partly caused by systemic racism.



Shea standing above the Flint River on the Flint River Trail near the University of Michigan–Flint Campus, Flint, Michigan. From 'Flint is Family in Three Acts, Act I', 2016-17 © LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Two years into the crisis, shortly after then president Barack Obama declared a state of emergency in Flint, I was commissioned by Elle magazine to produce a photo essay about the city for the September issue. Over the course of five months, I documented three generations of women affected by the contaminated water. In an aerial photograph, one of these women, Shea Cobb, who was born and raised in Flint, is seen on a bridge that crosses the Flint River. She stands above the water that has poisoned her body and her city, looking defiant. The first time I showed Shea the portrait, she recalled what her uncle Rodney told her as a child: “If you ever fall in the Flint River, you go straight to the hospital, because you don’t know what’s in there.” She paused and went on to describe the water: “Faecal matter . . . toxic chemicals and waste . . . The Flint River downstream has always been toxic.”

While we were making photographs together one day, Shea showed me a family photograph that had been sent to her by her father, Douglas R Smiley, just before I arrived. It depicted a young Shea in 1997 drinking water cupped in her hands from a spring on land owned by their family in Newton, Mississippi. Her father had texted her the picture with the words: “This water won’t kill you. Come home.” It was a way to encourage Shea to return to Mississippi, and it worked. She left her job as a bus driver in Flint and headed south, hoping to find a better, safer life for herself and her nine-year-old daughter Zion.

I saw in this photograph another story, a hidden narrative about Black life in America that is rarely told. Here was a Black father who loved his family so deeply that he had amassed a bountiful supply of water, food, shelter and land to pass down to them, and who gave them respite from the ecological disaster that devalued their land and home in the industrial north. It was as if Mr Smiley had inclined his ear to Ralph Ellison, the 20th-century writer, when he wrote that “the cultural history of Negroes in the North reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology, a people which aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain; but which, in migrating made some fatal error of judgement and fell into a chasm of maze-like passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end ever against a wall.”

The photograph inspired me to follow Shea and Zion’s reverse migration from Michigan to Mississippi. I wanted the country to see a different truth, a different reality, of Black freedom, inheritance and self-sufficiency, that countered Shea’s troubled life in northern industrial America.

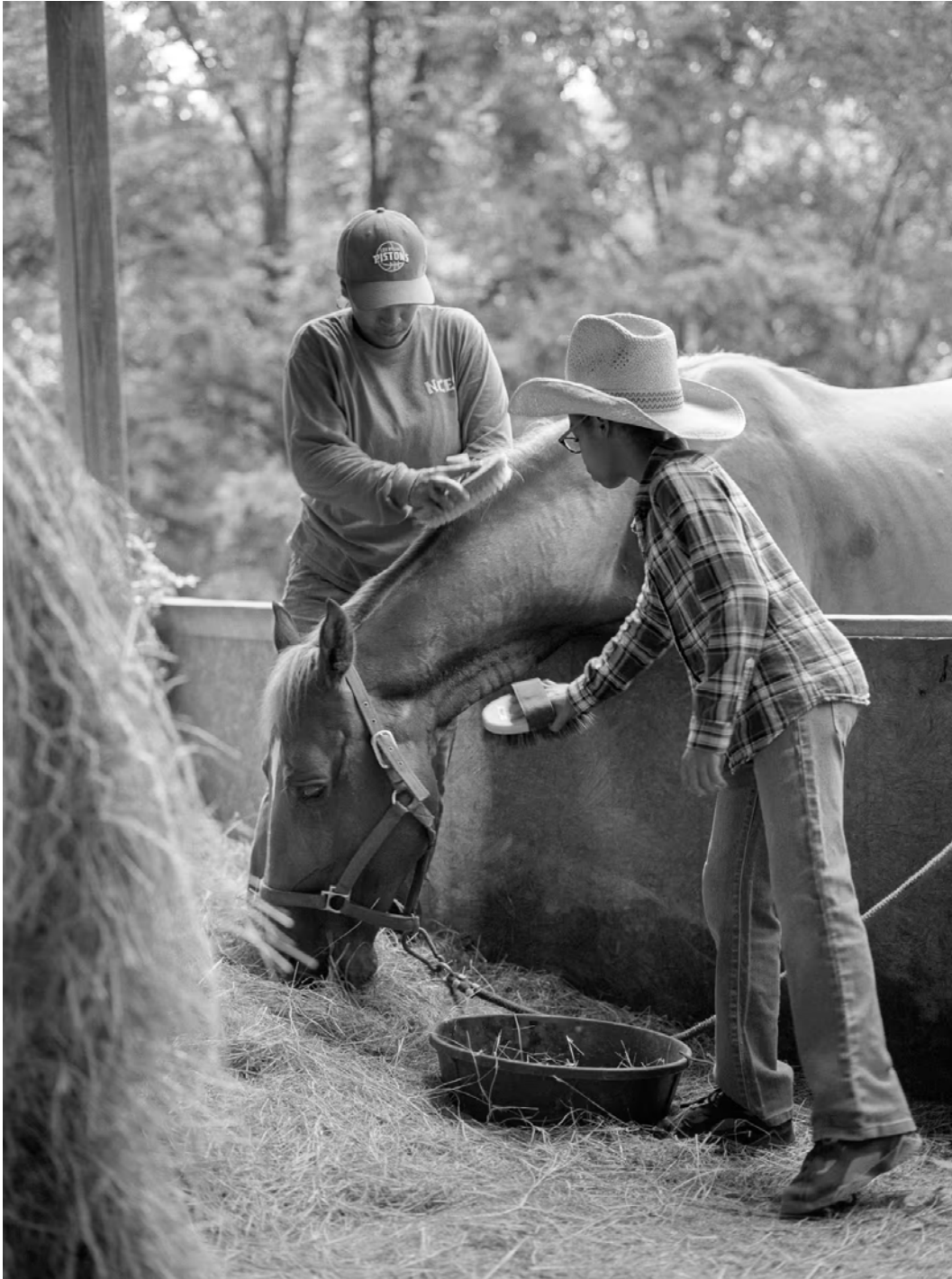
Ten years on from the start of the Flint water crisis, as these photographs go on view in my survey exhibition at MoMA, it’s this story that I want to tell you.



Shea Cobb, Amber Hasan, and her children, nieces, and nephews (Zari, DJ, Jayda, Justin, Justace, Jaylen) and their friends playing in the water. Moses West Is spraying from his atmospheric water generator on North Saginaw Street between East Marengo Avenue and East Pulaski Avenue on July 29 2019, Flint, Michigan, from 'Flint is Family in Three Acts, Act III', 2019-20 © LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

I travelled with Shea and Zion to Newton, Mississippi, to visit Mr Smiley at his three-bedroom mobile home 67 miles east of Jackson. Zion jumped out of the car and ran into the arms of her “paw-paw”. Mr Smiley’s laugh, his smile and loving eyes made me feel like I was meeting old family. During my stay, Mr Smiley would get up at 5.30am every day to make breakfast for Shea and Zion: grits, a kind of porridge made from dried corn, eggs, cheese on toast and deer sausage. Then he drank a cup of coffee, listened to smooth jazz in his truck, and said hello to the morning.

By 7.30am, Shea, Zion and Mr Smiley were tending his Tennessee Walking Horses. He had one stallion and three mares: Jackson (I Am Jackson Jones), PT (PT’s Miss One Of A Kind), Dolly (Secretly) and Blue (Blue’s Royal Threat). One evening, we looked through Mr Smiley’s family photo albums, his certificates of registration for each of the horses, horse magazines and his favourite book about the history of the Tennessee Walking Horse, *The Echo of Hoofbeats*. As Zion held each object for me to photograph, Mr Smiley told me about the bloodlines of his horses. He told me that during slavery, Tennessee Walking Horses were used by overseers to keep watch over slaves working in the fields, due to their smooth and easy gait. It was important, he told me, to understand these particular horses as symbols of the Deep South.



Shea and her daughter Zion grooming Mr Smiley's Tennessee walking horse, Stallion, Jackson (I am Jackson Jones), Newton, Mississippi. From 'Flint is Family in Three Acts, Act II', 2017-19 © LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Mr Smiley remembered picking cotton at age four or five. “I was dragging my little sack behind me — I’m picking cotton too — like I was doing something,” he told me, bursting into laughter. “I was oblivious to the past history of slavery because I was protected by my grandfather. It was his cotton. It was his land. He planted the cotton. It’s his field. So when he got it picked he took it to the cotton gin and they paid him what it was worth.”

I started creating images of Shea and Zion carrying out daily chores with the horses: feeding them, cleaning out their stalls, putting medicine in their eyes, checking for gnats, ticks and cuts and letting them out into the field to graze and roam. At other times, I photographed the family as they took leisurely walks among the trees and bushes where plums, persimmons, blackberries and pecans grew. When I look at these photographs, I see everyday people living in harmony with nature, and I see the importance of telling stories about Black working-class land ownership. What was taken from Shea and Zion in Flint will be repaid manyfold through Mr Smiley’s labour and care in Newton.



Mr Smiley standing with his daughter Shea and his granddaughter Zion on their Freshwater Spring, Newton, from 'Flint is Family in Three Acts, Act II', 2017-19 © LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

For me the final portrait of Mr Smiley, Shea and Zion, looking regal, powerful and dignified as they sit atop their horses embodies the power of photography, as a means to reclamation and as a lamp to guide our children home. Mr Smiley couldn't have known that one day he would need to wield the power of a family photo to summon his daughter home and yet he did.

When I asked Mr Smiley why he had taken the photograph of Shea drinking the spring water and why he had sent it to her all those years later, he replied, "that picture is worth a thousand words." When the family were still in Flint he had brought Shea down to Mississippi to pick up a pony with him. He took her to a spot where clean water was bubbling from the ground. He drank first, and then instructed her to scoop a handful and drink it; when she did, he took the picture. Shea was surprised by how sweet it tasted. "It's never been dry, the whole time I've been down here," he said softly. "No matter what droughts we've had, the springhead is always running."



Zion, her mother Shea, and her grandfather Mr Smiley riding on their Tennessee walking horses, Maes, PT. (PT.'s Miss One of Kind), Dolly (Secretly), and Blue (Blue Royal Theat), Newbn, Mississippi. From 'Flint is Family in Three Acts, Act II, 2017-19. © LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

We decided to re-enact this story for Zion. We went to the exact spot Mr Smiley had shown Shea 20 years before and they dug a trench where the spring water could collect and called Zion over. I prepared my camera and Mr Smiley looked on as his daughter and granddaughter cupped the spring water in their hands. As the water slowly trickled down Zion's tiny wrists, I quietly documented the moment. Though Zion is a survivor of the water crisis in Flint, in this photograph she is a victor rather than a victim.

This April marked the 10-year anniversary of the [water crisis in Flint](#). To this day, the whole city still doesn't have adequate water infrastructure. In solidarity and remembrance, I propose a call to action. From now on, whether you are taking pictures on your phone, posting on social media or looking back through your family photo albums, I want you to think about the deeper meaning in your photographs. What story do they tell?

"LaToya Ruby Frazier: Monuments of Solidarity" is at [MoMA](#), New York, until September 7