

CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF
SOCIALLY ENGAGED DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE UNITED STATES,

2000-2010

by

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INTRODUCTION

St. Charles, Virginia. A camera captures two women sitting together in a single chair, each with a cigarette in hand (fig. 1). The figures are both fair-skinned and share the same shade of brown hair, which they have each pulled into tight ponytails with brightly colored scrunchies. The two use their opposite arms to draw the other closer—the older woman pulls the younger against her face and the younger girl reciprocates with her hand around the other's neck. They seem to be celebrating, surrounded by balloons, a drink, and a radio. The two are smiling, their toothy grins inches apart from the other.

Pointe-aux-Chenes, Louisiana. An older woman and young girl stand in the center of a road, backs facing the camera (fig. 2). It is October, but the figures are dressed in denim jeans and short-sleeved blouses; here, the weather has not yet cooled. The photograph's title, *Jane Verdin with her granddaughter, Point-aux-Chenes*, identifies the two as members of the same family. Both wear their hair down, though the older woman's is far longer, pulled into a large barrette. As it reaches her hips, the color transforms from gray to a deep brown that matches the adolescent's short, cropped cut. The grandmother wraps her arm around her granddaughter, who echoes the motion. Both wear flip flops, but the child's soles, a bit too large for their wearer, extend far past her heels.

Braddock, Pennsylvania. In *Grandma Ruby and J.C. in Her Kitchen*, an elderly woman stands in front of her kitchen stove, appearing haggard and weary (fig. 3). The woman's face is in motion, blurred slightly in the camera lens, but viewers can discern forehead wrinkles and puffy undereye bags. She wears a wedding ring, bracelet, and cross necklace, and has her grey hair pulled back behind her neck. It is messy on top, as if the woman has only just woken up. She reaches her arm across the kitchen and gently rests her fingers on a chair, where a young boy sits.

He stares straight ahead at a white refrigerator with pictures of family members adhered to the upper freezer.

In each of these three photographs, made by Hannah Modigh, Kael Alford, and LaToya Ruby Frazier, respectively, working-class Americans are fortified by one another to endure against adversity. Each image is localized to a particular place—Virginia, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania—and time. Plagued by a barrage of externally imposed social and economic issues, the subjects of these photographs, set in small pockets of deindustrialized America, rely on transgenerational lines of localized persistence to combat cultural erasure and total infrastructural abandonment. Images from each artist’s series illuminate the impermeable nature of communal and familial bonds and, as I will argue, respond to broad patterns of American history.

In his 1999 volume *Crisis of the Real*, Andy Grunberg divides photography scholars between two dominant philosophical perspectives, describing them as either “connoisseurs” or “contextualists.”¹ According to Grunberg, critics who align themselves with the first category primarily concern themselves with the aestheticization of the medium by holding authorship and originality with the upmost regard in the pursuit of legitimization and art-objectification.² In direct opposition to the followers of the “connoisseur” ideology are the “contextualists,” who adopt a socio-historical model of studying photography. The title “contextualists” is aptly assigned, as the writings of contextualist critics like Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Rosalind Krauss, Sally Stein, and Carol Squiers largely rely on historical context as the basis for their arguments.³ Their poststructuralist consideration of the image recalls the teachings of Karl Marx and Walter

¹ Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974*, 2nd ed., Writers and Artists on Photography, (New York, N.Y.: Aperture, 1999), 167-71.

² Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974*, 168.

³ Ibid.

Benjamin: in presupposing the world as innately political, contextualists view the image as an opportunity for a distinctly temporal interpretation of culture.⁴ This thesis will do the same.

I selected each of these series as powerful contemporary examples of socially-engaged documentary photography and in my subsequent research found similarities in their place-based modes of investigation. To negotiate the local and global entanglements imbedded in each of these series, I will employ critical regionalism as a methodological umbrella for understanding race, gender, and class in these photographs. This methodology, drawn from neo-Marxist architectural theory, recognizes the local's connections to its specific place while also situating it within a global context.⁵ From each artist's series, I have selected photographs whose working-class subject matter, I contend, can be most effectively read from a critical regionalist view. In my subsequent discussion of *Hillbilly Honey*, *Heroin*, *Bottom of da Boot*, and *The Notion of Family*, I examine artistic expressions of place that problematize the unjust undercurrents of American contemporary society by exposing human and environmental exploitation and gross economic inequity.

In 2000, Indian-American anthropologist and cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai explained that globalization “produces problems that manifest themselves in intensely local forms but have contexts that are anything but local.”⁶ Appadurai's contention resonates with an art historical application: in order to understand the art and artists responding to the contemporary problems of a globalized world—locally-manifested—one must construct a network of similarity. Following the critical regionalist approach proposed by Douglas Reicher Powell in his study of American

⁴ Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974*, 168.

⁵ Christopher Ali, "Mapping the Local," in *Media Localism: The Policies of Place* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 32.

⁶ Rosina S. Miller, "Sharing Prosperity: Critical Regionalism and Place-Based Social Change," *Western Folklore* 66, no. 3/4 (2007): 373.

culture, this study will disentangle the local and global dimensions of Modigh's photography in St. Charles, Virginia, Alford's work in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, and Frazier's project in Braddock, Pennsylvania. I argue that critical regionalism provides a perspective from which to view how these three photography projects participate in broader interrogations of contemporary American life and history. Furthermore, my application of this methodology to visual culture has much to contribute to cross-disciplinary discourse on critical regionalism. Presently, critical regionalist research is primarily associated with the fields of critical geography, literary criticism, environmental studies, and history, and lacks discussions of place-based artistic representation.

As Powell explains, the concepts of the local and global are inseparable, as regions are never isolated spaces but are instead entwined with larger cultural forces.⁷ He goes on to argue that even when a region or network of places is isolated and stigmatized, "these demarcations are always in relation to broader patterns of history."⁸ Thus, when examining the cultural production and artistic representations of individual regions and places, it is necessary to recognize the object's cumulative and complex meaning resulting from the interplay between the local and global. It is on this interaction that the crux of my research stems. Americanists, in particular, have increasingly considered such a perspective in deconstructing our contemporary globalist world. In US regional studies, geographers, historians, literary critics, and eco-critics have called for and "enacted scholarship on regional culture that approaches the idea of region as a rich, complicated, and dynamic cultural construct rather than a static, stable geophysical entity."⁹ In contemporary studies, such a reckoning is crucial. In 2014, Griselda Pollock applied something

⁷ Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5.

⁸ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 5.

⁹ Ibid.

similar to critical regionalism by describing the nuanced character of our contemporary globalist world as paradoxically connective and differentiating. In art historical terms, she considers the “reading” of an image as a document for a Walter Benjamin-influenced “reconstellation of relations” between otherwise diverse geopolitical states and cultural ideologies.¹⁰ Like critical regionalists, Pollock recognizes place as a setting bound by its specific character and its spatial relationships with larger cultural and geopolitical networks. My study is in part an attempt to foreground the significance of critical regionalism’s understanding of place to the discipline of art history and expand upon Pollock’s reconstellation of relations.

Following this line of thought, I suggest the formation of a singular American identity an ineffectual pursuit; instead, I utilize these three series as examples of distinct American histories that can overlap, conflict, and intermingle in thought-provoking ways. Positioned as case studies, I will analyze how each series “exerts its influence in the ongoing struggle over the meaning of a particular place in the context of a specific issue or set of issues.”¹¹ Powell has previously examined how film can be used in such a manner; with this thesis, I position art as an equally viable object of cultural production from which to engage in critical comparison. This is not to say I am arguing that Hannah Modigh, Kael Alford, and LaToya Ruby Frazier knowingly approach their artmaking from a position of critical regionalism; instead, I am identifying a trend in their work from the perspective of an art historian and associating that trend with a critical regionalist methodology. These photographs, which I consider “critical regionalist photography” share significant similarities: each community has been industrialized, either by the coal, steel, or oil and gas industries, and then deindustrialized, abandoned, and discarded. As Powell contends

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, “Whither Art History?,” *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014): 16.

¹¹ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 121.

in his study of Appalachia, the callous deindustrialization of such communities has reshaped the culture and character of their respective regions and, as a result, “postmodern currents across the humanities and social sciences. . . . have made a scholarly commonplace of the notion that places are the outcome, not the backdrop, of social, cultural, political, and economic activity.”¹²

Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith found similar significance in their description of Appalachia by placing the local within a larger web of interconnected settings:

These are places of extravagant natural wealth and enduring poverty, places where the raw consequences of unsustainable economic practices predicated on human and environmental exploitation are unusually stark. . . . nonetheless sites of critical economic activity because they contain the arable land, abundant water, fossil fuel deposits, and other resources on which the global economy depends. . . . Defined by capital and its boosters in terms of exploitable resources. . . . these places are also given meaning by the human relationships, histories, and desires arising there, different from the commercial ones though by no means uniform.¹³

The local is not simply a place: It is personal, subjective, and contradictory. It cannot be severed from the global and must indeed be contextualized holistically and situated within what critical regionalists deem the “larger geopolitical flows of people, imagery, capital, and ideology.”¹⁴

This geopolitical flow was particularly significant in the early 2000s. The decade in which Modigh, Alford, and Frazier carefully fashioned images of resiliency in local communities was one of record-setting demographic highs and equally-significant economic lows. According to the census, of the 40 million immigrants in the United States in 2010, 13.9 million arrived in 2000 or later, making it the highest decade of immigration in American history at that time.¹⁵

The visual character of the country was diversifying racially and ethnically while cultural

¹² Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 4.

¹³ Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁴ Ali, "Mapping the Local," 32.

¹⁵ Steven A. Camarota, *A Record-Setting Decade of Immigration: 2000-2010*, Center for Immigration Studies (Washington, DC, 2011), 1.

pluralism and multiculturalism were becoming more prevalent and social issues were beginning to attract a national consciousness. In addition, scientific and technological development was evolving at a rapid speed: USB drives replaced floppy disks, the advent of text messaging redefined the concept of interpersonal communication, and social networking internet sites like MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) catapulted the world into a new age of electronic global connection. These demographic and technological changes were accompanied by a decade of political and economic volatility, from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to subsequent military conflicts in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The nation's economy began to decline; the 2000s have since been described by researchers as a "lost decade" for U.S. jobs.¹⁶ In 2007, following the collapse of the American housing market and the subsequent erasure of more than half the capitalization of the national stock market, a period of economic distress, colloquially known today as the Great Recession, became the most severe postwar recession in American history.¹⁷

By the time Barack Obama, the country's first Black president, was sworn into office in 2008, employment opportunities were scarce. From 2007 to 2009, the labor force lost more than 7.5 million jobs, leading the unemployment rate to skyrocket to a shocking 10.1% at its peak.¹⁸ The resulting recession-induced increase in poverty disproportionately affected the lower classes and was especially prominent among young men, women, and children.¹⁹ In 2011, Andrew Sum, Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern

¹⁶ Steven A. Camarota, *A Record-Setting Decade of Immigration: 2000-2010*, Center for Immigration Studies (Washington, DC, 2011), 2.

¹⁷ David B. Grusky, Bruce Western, and Christopher Wimer, *The Great Recession* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 4.

¹⁸ Grusky, Western, and Wimer, *The Great Recession*, 3-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

University, described the labor markets for young, working-class, and lower-middle class workers as in a “true state of depression.”²⁰ People of color were at a greater disadvantage than white Americans, with segregated and poor neighborhoods experiencing the highest levels of property foreclosures.²¹ Despite efforts by the Obama administration to combat the spiraling American economy—which included an Economic Stimulus Plan, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and a \$700 billion Bank Bailout Bill—those living on the lower margins remained disadvantaged.²² By 2011, public trust in the American government had reached a historic low—a record which, as of May 2021, has yet to be broken.²³

For post-industrial American communities like Braddock, Pennsylvania, and St. Charles, Virginia, where the local economy was driven by steel and coal plants, respectively, the elimination of blue-collar jobs from 2000 to 2010 was especially startling. According to Harvard Business professor Gary Pisano, in the mid-twentieth century, manufacturing represented 27 percent of the nation’s GDP and employed no less than 30 percent of the American workforce.²⁴ By 2010, the industry produced only 12 percent of U.S. gross domestic product and employed only 9 percent of the workforce.²⁵ Meanwhile, the South faced additional issues. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina destroyed countless oil rigs, onshore refineries, and decimated the physical

²⁰ Andrew M. Sum, "Ringling Out the Old Year and the Lost Decade of 2000-2010," *Huffington Post*, 2011.

²¹ Grusky, Western, and Wimer, *The Great Recession*, 13-14.

²² U.S. House of Representatives, "12 USC Ch. 52: Emergency Economic Stabilization," *United States Code*, 2008.

²³ "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021," Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>. In October 2011, the ‘moving average’ for public trust in the American government was at 15%, with individual polls reporting that just 10% of the population believed they could “trust the government in Washington to do what is right.”

²⁴ Gary P. Pisano and Willy C. Shih, *Producing Prosperity: Why America Needs a Manufacturing Renaissance* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), x.

²⁵ Pisano and Shih, *Producing Prosperity*, x.

and cultural landscape of New Orleans. In its aftermath, the Bush administration's response exposed the unjust and systemic ideologies of a class-based system of government assistance. In other words, Katrina's victims—the poor, sick, and elderly—were shamelessly left unprotected by the state. The hurricane exposed the American government's new biopolitics of disposability, defined by scholar and cultural critic Henry A. Giroux as the callous abandonment of poor, often black, populations marginalized and ostracized. "Excommunicated from the sphere of human concern," Giroux posits, these Americans "have been rendered invisible, utterly disposable, and heir to that army of socially homeless that allegedly no longer existed in color-blind America."²⁶ Meanwhile, the lower Mississippi industrial complex—referred to by Louisiana State University's Craig E. Colten as "a sinuous arrangement of petrochemical plants and working-class communities"—caused a series of major environmental calamities to the southern coastal region.²⁷ As a result, residents living in Louisiana's parishes along the coast found their ancestral homes resting upon severely deteriorating foundations, with the land eroding at the rapid rate of 25 to 30 square miles per year.²⁸ The area's cultural heritage risks being lost indeterminately, swallowed by the sea.

My argument in this thesis is that critical regionalism is a previously overlooked but highly effective method for examining contemporary American art because it disentangles—but recognizes—both local and global influences. It is especially useful for documentary photography that intimately examines a specific place, as the genre's contextualist nature

²⁶ Henry A. Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (2006): 175.

²⁷ Craig E. Colten, "An Incomplete Solution: Oil and Water in Louisiana," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 91.

²⁸ Kael Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, 1st ed. (Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012), vii.

necessitates a social art historical approach. Amid a decade of national crisis and economic turmoil, communities like those documented in *Hillbilly Heroin*, *Honey*, *Bottom of da Boot*, and *The Notion of Family* clearly suffered and were often treated as cannon fodder for profit-hungry companies who eventually withdrew and abandoned their former workers. Towns like Braddock, St. Charles, and Pointe-aux-Chenes—the settings of each series—whose economic struggles plague their small but resilient communities, dot the landscape of modern America. Their impoverished residents constitute the central subjects of projects by LaToya Ruby Frazier, Hannah Modigh, and Kael Alford. Avoiding the over-intellectualization of academic or theoretical dialogue, these contemporary photographers capture the lived experiences of low-income populations during the first decade of the twenty-first century. By dealing with issues of gender, class, and race they each bring to light a more nuanced, microhistory of American citizens.

CHAPTER 1:
HANNAH MODIGH, *HILLBILLY HEROIN, HONEY*

In 2016, Hannah Modigh received the inaugural Magnum Photography Award for Single Image: Portraiture. That year's international competition was co-organized by the Magnum Photos agency and LensCulture magazine. Magnum Photos, perhaps the most prestigious photography agency in the world, was founded as a cooperative venture in 1947 by photographers Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David Seymour. Over the years, its roster has included socially-engaged portraiture artists such as Eve Arnold, Inge Morath, Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Marc Chagall, and Susan Meiselas, among others. However, the recipient of their prestigious award for 2016 was relatively unknown in the photographic community, which is fitting as the award-winning photograph captures an oft-overlooked American reality.

In the winning photograph—which I will call “Hair Dying in Kitchen,” as the artist does not title her own works—photographer Hannah Modigh depicts a mother and daughter in their home (fig. 4). The woman wears an old-fashioned, loose-fitting white cotton nightgown. Her facial expression is fierce, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Her arms bend at the elbow, hands gently weaving through sections of her daughter's hair. The girl, seated in a chair in front of her standing mother, stares blankly out the kitchen window. Her hands are loosely folded in her lap, puckering the fabric of her pajama pants. Her skin is fair, supple and freckled with the occasional hormonal acne outbreak common in teenagers of her age. A well-worn pink towel sits draped around the girl's shoulders, stained with the dark brown-colored chemical dye that her mother tenderly folds into her locks.

The intimate domestic scene belongs to a larger collection of images from the artist published in a photography book entitled *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*. Named for its subjects' drug of choice, the book begins with the lyrics to "Coal Tattoo," a blue-collar anthem written by Billy Edd Wheeler and originally performed by The Kingston Trio in 1963. The lyrics detail the life of an old miner looking back on his experiences in Appalachia. Now seeking employment, he laments his broken body and tired spirit, asking "Now, who's gonna stand for me?"

I got no house and I got no job
Just got a worried soul
And a blue tattoo on the side of my head
Left by the number nine coal
Some day when I'm dead and gone to heaven
The land of my dreams
I won't have to worry on losin' my job
On bad times and big machines
I ain't gonna pay my money away on dues or hospital plans
I'm gonna pick up coal where the blue heavens roll and sing with the angel band ²⁹

Aside from this folk hymn, the book contains few words. Modigh's collection of color and black and white photographs are splashed across the publication's pages without having individual titles, captions, a plate list, or even the artist's biography. A small paragraph included on an acknowledgement page, translated from the artist's native Swedish to English, identifies the faces of her subjects as the people of St. Charles, Virginia from 2006. Modigh's documentary-style portraits of St. Charles expose the American ideology of disposability in early 2000s Appalachia and address the lasting consequences of American industry-occupation. St. Charles is effectively immortalized through the eyes of the artist. Modigh's *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey* bears

²⁹ Hannah Modigh and Gösta Flemming, *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*, (Stockholm: Journal, 2010).

critical witness to an impoverished but irrepressible pocket of working-class Americans who rely on themselves and each other in absence of social safety nets.

The setting of Modigh's project, a small North American community nestled in the Appalachian mountains, is rural and geographically isolated. Situated within the sliver of Virginia that rests between Kentucky to the north and Tennessee to the south, the municipality of St. Charles is one of three towns in Lee County, the westernmost district of the state. In their book *Transforming Places*, Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith explain the region as a site of intense and complex political crosscurrents and class-based resistance.³⁰ This is an ideal locale to apply a critical regionalist treatment of art historical objects, as Appalachian issues are frequently connected to national and global issues.³¹

In Modigh's untitled images, community members are pictured in homes surrounded by their rural environment, emphasizing the locals' intimate attachment to their isolated homeplace. For example, in one photograph a family of six stands outside their home (fig. 5). Remnants of used cookware, discarded textiles, and wire chairs are scattered around the dilapidated lawn, whose grass appears in small patches breaking up its otherwise barren, dirt surface. The forest looms directly behind the humble home, receding up into the distance. Another photograph from the series, which captures two adolescent girls playing atop a small wooden bridge at dusk, is similarly set against the backdrop of neverending trees (fig. 6). The bridge's slats are cracking and splitting from age, the deep reddish-brown of its wood mirroring the rusted posts of the chain-link fence beside it. At the far right side, a modest white home is surrounded by tall, autumn-colored trees, bathed in the golden gloss of late-day sun. Here as in her previous

³⁰ Fisher and Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

photograph, Modigh conveys the people of St. Charles as remote from contemporary urban society and intrinsically related to their sense of community.

In his examination of critical regionalism in literature, Powell uses *The Grapes of Wrath* and *River of Earth* as examples of community-specific texts, “engaged on terms that connect them to broader histories and patterns of representation by investigating their regionality.”³²

Here, I propose reading *Hillbilly Heroin*, *Honey* in a similar fashion. I argue that the emphasis on place in Hannah Modigh’s photographs of St. Charles is especially important for their narrative prowess. Despite its remoteness, most scholars consider Appalachia’s geographic positioning as only one of the primary causes for the area’s poor living conditions. In the mid-twentieth century, Harry Caudill, an Appalachian lawyer and activist, described the destruction of Appalachia as induced by its economic connections rather than its isolation: “Coal has always cursed the land in which it lies. . . . it mars but never beautifies. It corrupts but never purifies.”³³ Like other communities in this geographic region, St. Charles has a fraught history of tension between the profit-hungry pursuits of early coal companies and the miners who provided the labor for their business. Prior to the late-nineteenth century, the area was largely unpopulated. As wealthy American businessmen became more and more enticed by the moneymaking opportunities in the land’s coal-rich mountains and plateaus, economic opportunities for poor Americans expanded into the undeveloped country.

Despite providing consistent work, industry patriarchs exploited their workers. Miners worked exhausting seven-day workweeks covered in dust and surrounded by the ever-looming

³² Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 178.

³³ Drew A. Swanson, "Coal: Sludge Ponds and Vanishing Mountains," in *Beyond the Mountains: Commodifying Appalachian Environments* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 178.

presence of frequent on-the-job injury and death.³⁴ The living conditions in coal towns were similarly bleak, having been built and subsequently controlled by the companies for which its residents toiled.³⁵ Lacking access to basic necessities like food supply, healthcare, decent wages, and environmental protection, early-twentieth-century coal miners and their families, while technically employed, lived in a “perpetual state of insecurity.”³⁶ As such, the history of labor relations in western Virginia and eastern Kentucky, in particular, is highly divisive. The legacy of exploitation holds lasting influence over the populations who now inhabit the area and in towns like St. Charles, the not-so-distant remnants of exploitative capitalism and union warfare remain.³⁷ Where the once-flourishing industry of coal mining drew scores of working-class Americans in nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the hills of Appalachia, the area today has been largely abandoned by the corporations who initially formed their foundation for survival. In St. Charles, most coal mines have closed entirely, thus eliminating the town’s main source of economic opportunity. Transgenerational economic hardship has seeped into the lives of the descendants of nineteenth and twentieth-century coal miners, who find themselves living in dire conditions not unlike their ancestors, but now without the mountain’s operational mines providing work.

Those who remain face a new challenge: during the historical moment in which these photographs were taken, the United States’ narcotics epidemic had only recently exploded in Appalachia. In fact, the title for Modigh’s series, *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey* was derived from the

³⁴ Karida L. Brown, "The Coming of the Coal Industry," in *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 17.

³⁵ Brown, *Gone Home*, 178.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18

town's illicit use of OxyContin, a drug whose widespread use began in the late 1990s.³⁸ Congress named the first decade of the century as the "Decade of Pain Control and Research" and many considered Purdue Pharma's advent of OxyContin in 1996 a godsend for those suffering a wide variety of ailments.³⁹ Marketed as a less addictive medication than Percocet or Vicodin, Purdue touted OxyContin as both safe and effective for public consumption. However, its high-potency dose of oxycodone soon proved just as addictive and detrimental to its users as its predecessors, with its pharmacological and social side effects plaguing communities across America. Users quickly realized that grinding up their capsules and snorting the crushed powder compressed the drug's extended-release effect and produced an immediate and intense high akin to the experience of using heroin.⁴⁰ Compiling lists of doctors who were more inclined to prescribe the drug, Purdue Pharma targeted rural practitioners specifically, catering their marketing towards those primary care physicians whose fluency on pain management was less comprehensive than that of specialists.⁴¹

The most prominent site of OxyContin abuse was Appalachia. For their study in *Appalachian Health and Well-Being*, researchers Behringer, Bowers, Couto, and Dunn found that: "on a per capita basis, drugstores, hospitals, and other legal outlets received more prescriptions for painkillers than did the rest of the nation."⁴² They also cite Appalachia's job

³⁸ Hannah Modigh, "Artist Statement Hillbilly Heroin, Honey," accessed February 27, 2022, <http://hannahmodigh.se/artist-statement-2/>. According to the artist, "for me, taking pictures and coming close to the people I [met] there affected me greatly, it became my heroin. That is the reason for the title." Despite comments like these, Modigh contends that she does not sensationalize her subjects.

³⁹ Russell Crandall, "Opioid Nation," in *Drugs and Thugs: The History and Future of America's War on Drugs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 390.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁴² Michael S. Dunn et al., "Substance Abuse," in *Appalachian Health and Well-Being*, ed. R. L. Ludke and P. J. Obermiller (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 253.

market and narcotics issues as one and the same, stating that “both substance abuse and the tolerance of abuse are rising in communities that have experienced economic losses due to plant closures, layoffs, and a dearth of well-paying jobs.”⁴³ Economic issues in the area have been suggested as the primary cause of such abuse: the “lack of job opportunities contributes to stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues among workers, often resulting in drug use to cope with emotional problems.”⁴⁴

Keith Wailoo, an award-winning historian whose scholarship primarily focuses on race, science, and health equity, also identifies the abuse of pain management medication as socially imposed. As he identifies, “economic decline, loss of work, hardship, and sometimes hopelessness (whether rural, urban, or suburban) provoke the search for relief.”⁴⁵ The explicit targeting of drug allocation to Appalachia, whose economic state has been rendered effectively disabled, recalls the biopolitics of disposability that Henry A. Giroux observed in Louisiana at the same time in the mid-2000s. Appalachians, “rendered invisible in deindustrialized communities far removed from the suburbs” have become “the waste-products of the American Dream. . . . disposable populations [that] serve as an unwelcome reminder that the once vaunted social state no longer exists, the living dead now an apt personification of the death of the social contract in the United States.”⁴⁶ In post-2000’s America, biopolitics was clearly conditioned by class exception and Purdue Pharma minted their money using blue-collar Appalachians as their target demographic.

⁴³ Dunn et al., *Appalachian Health and Well-Being*, 253.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Keith Wailoo, "Thinking through the Pain," in *The Social Medicine Reader, Volume II, Third Edition: Differences and Inequalities, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Oberlander et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 302.

⁴⁶ Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," 186.

Employment problems and drug abuse are a cyclical problem in towns like St. Charles, where young people struggle to find work, fall into drug addiction, and are unable to raise themselves out of their OxyContin-induced reality when work does arise. While there are no images in *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey* of explicit opioid abuse, Hannah Modigh became friends with many young users, who often took large doses while she was present.⁴⁷ In one image from the series—which I call “Three Teenagers on the Porch”—viewers can read the dream-like effects of the drug in the subjects’ body language as they sit together (fig. 7). The artist attributes her interest in images like these—compositionally simple, intimate, and human-focused—to her fascination with subtle expression and attraction to “postures and facial expressions that bear witness to the feelings that are not allowed to run free.”⁴⁸

“Three Teenagers on a Porch” focuses on a group of adolescents outside a St. Charles home. One of the figures rests against a wooden gate, hunched over and inspecting a piece of skin on his inner elbow. His hair is greasy, tangled, and long; draped across his face, it obscures his expression. On his other side, two figures lean against one another. The male figure, at center, closes his eyes as he rests his head against the cheek of the female figure to the left. His hair curls at the ends around his ears and is covered on top by a backwards-facing baseball hat. One of his hands holds a half-burned cigarette between its dirt-covered pointer and middle finger and sports what appears to be a large high school graduation ring. His mouth is pulled upwards at the edges in a slight smile—he appears content. The girl beside him, also hunched over on the steps, looks to kiss the forehead resting on her cheek. Her nose is pierced with a small crystal stud and she holds a cigarette in hand. Smoke rises in front of the couple, captured in the camera

⁴⁷ Hannah Modigh, “Virginians,” interview by Elin Unnes, *VICE*, August 1, 2008.

⁴⁸ Hannah Modigh, “Artist Statement Hillbilly Heroin, Honey.”

as tendrils of grey. Leaning against one another in what may very well be a drug-induced stupor, the trio appear peaceful, briefly released from the stress of everyday life in St. Charles. Where American policy has commonly focused on the criminalization of drug users, Modigh's image is significant, as it humanizes the image of addiction as a struggle rather than a sin.

It is not uncommon for documentary photographers to utilize their art in the criticism of exploitation and transform their practice into a form of activism. Nan Goldin, for instance, who struggled with an OxyContin addiction for several years herself, formed an organization called "PAIN" to address the opioid crisis by publicly criticizing those corporations who profited from the addictions and deaths of five hundred thousand Americans.⁴⁹ Her primary target was the Sackler family, whose company "Purdue Pharma" formulated, distributed, and marketed OxyContin.⁵⁰ The Sackler name is also well-known in the art world for providing funding and donations to many major international art institutions. Since its inception, Goldin's group has successfully prompted museums like the Tate, Louvre, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum to sever their financial ties with the family altogether.⁵¹ Nan Goldin demonstrated the genre of documentary photography is incredibly useful for communicating untold stories and pursuing activism through the vehicle of artistic expression. With the camera lens, a photographer can capture narratives that the traditional fine arts may overlook; its egalitarian and portable technology is far more accessible than, for example, a weighty sculpture studio. However, this is not to assume that photography is inherently truthful.

⁴⁹ "P.A.I.N Sackler," accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.sacklerpain.org/>.

⁵⁰ "P.A.I.N Sackler," <https://www.sacklerpain.org/>. In Nan Goldin's words, "The Sackler family made billions by exploiting our physical and emotional pain, and our cultural institutions are complicit in whitewashing their reputation by accepting the Sackler's toxic philanthropy."

⁵¹ Ibid.

The core of photo-documentary work is seeing and knowing, and then telling. It is a practice akin to visual anthropology: like the anthropologist, the photojournalist can suffer from the same false sense of omniscience that guided a great deal of twentieth-century anthropological research.⁵²

This is perhaps why the genre of documentary photography has been met with ethical questioning from those within and outside of the art world for decades.⁵³ Dorothea Lange, whose work certainly catapulted the field of documentary photography into an acceptable occupational practice for women, was even guilty of fashioning images that fit her own narrative. Her “Migrant Mother” photograph, for instance, was criticized for years by its subject, who maintained that her image was misrepresented.⁵⁴

Modigh’s artmaking practice lies at this precarious intersection between the fields and ethics of fine arts and photojournalism. A self-described voyeur, Modigh represents an outsider to the communities she photographs. Her photographic technique depends upon her position at the periphery:

I try to take pictures in situations where people aren't paying attention. I usually use a camera tripod. . . . When I come in I rig it, set the focus and aim the camera, then I sit down and talk to people and try to get them to tell me about their lives. Sometimes I think—I mean I can speak English—but sometimes it helped that people thought I didn't really understand what they were talking about. I could just sit there quietly.⁵⁵

⁵² Julianne Hickerson Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Newton, 153.

⁵⁵ Hannah Modigh, “Artist Statement: Hillbilly Heroin, Honey.” Modigh’s technique is similar to Magnum predecessor Susan Meiselas, who describes using a “fly-on-the-wall approach” for *Carnival Strippers*. See: “Making the Image: Susan Meiselas' Carnival Strippers Contact Sheet,” Magnum Photos, 2019, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/making-the-image-susan-meiselas-carnival-strippers-contact-sheet-documentary-usa/>.

Modigh is not an Appalachian or even an American: she is Swedish, born in Stockholm in 1980 to an artist and an anthropologist. Her father did philanthropic work for impoverished populations in India, which allowed Modigh to spend a large part of her childhood abroad.⁵⁶ According to the artist, the experiences she had during her childhood—provided by her father’s involvement with UNICEF—were incredibly formative for her practice: “although we were perceived as a privileged family, because we were white, we were also exposed to a level of poverty that was unheard of in Stockholm and gave (us) fresh perspective.”⁵⁷ In adulthood, Modigh studied photography at Fatamorgana Photo School in Copenhagen, Denmark and photojournalism at the Nordic School of Photography in Stockholm.⁵⁸ She is known today as one of Sweden’s leading photographers and has received several Scandinavian grants and awards. Yet, she continues to use low-income Americans as her subjects for projects like *Hurricane Season* and *Sunday Morning Comin’ Down*, citing her interest in southern Louisiana’s “violent” history and in the experience of San Francisco’s sex workers.⁵⁹

As scholar and theorist Ariella Azoulay explains in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, “Photography is an apparatus of power that cannot be reduced to any of its components: a camera, a photographer, a photographed environment, object, person, or spectator.”⁶⁰ The act of

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Coop, “These Photos Explore How We Keep Our Pain Inside,” *Dazed*, November 25, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/33793/1/photographer-hannah-modigh-explores-how-we-keep-our-pain-inside>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Hannah Modigh,” European Photo Exhibition Award, accessed October 28, 2021, <http://www.epeaphoto.org/review-2/201213-2/hannah-modigh>.

⁵⁹ Hannah Modigh, “Artist Statement: Sunday Morning Comin’ Down”, accessed March 18, 2022, <http://hannahmodigh.se/artist-statement/>; Hannah Modigh, “Artist Statement: Hurricane Season”, accessed March 18, 2022, <http://hannahmodigh.se/text/>.

⁶⁰ Ariella Azoulay, “The Civil Contract of Photography,” in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (Zone Books, 2008), 106.

taking a photograph of another person is a fundamentally unequal exchange: the photographer benefits financially from the sale of such work, or in the case of Hannah Modigh, receives an award for the formal success of the image. In return, “the photographed individual remains entirely outside the economic transaction.”⁶¹ In Susan Sontag’s earlier critique of Diane Arbus, a twentieth-century documentary photographer who pursued many of the same subjects as Modigh, Sontag interprets this exchange from a postcolonial lens. She cites the colonial eye of the camera lens as complicit with voyeuristic processes of objectification.⁶² From her perspective, as the machine “annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions,” the photographer exploits their role as tourist or anthropologist by studying a selected population for a short period of time before leaving once they have taken what they wanted from their subjects.⁶³ Due to Modigh’s positionality and short-term involvement, Sontag may have taken similar issue with *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey* as with Arbus’s oeuvre.

Modigh was initially drawn to Appalachia to study young men, but some of her most highly regarded images from the series, including the Magnum-award winning portrait, are of women. In 1992, Barbara Ellen Smith described the narrative of Appalachia as male-dominated and argued that historically, “women have been extras, hidden. . . . in tradition-bound domestic roles that supported their husbands, sons, and fathers. . . . women's experiences and perceptions have been peripheral in the major works of Appalachian history.”⁶⁴ Yet, in Modigh’s photographs, the lived experiences that Smith lamented were peripheral in 1992 are now in

⁶¹ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 107.

⁶² Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography after Photography*, ed. Sarah Parsons (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

⁶³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Books, 2019), 41.

⁶⁴ Barbara Ellen Smith, "Walk-Ons in the Third Act: The Role of Women in Appalachian Historiography," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1998): 5.

focus, and in these seemingly mundane moments, the relationship between lower-class survival and transgenerational strength is illuminated. For example, in the photograph I referenced in my introduction, which I refer to as “Two Women with Cigarettes,” the relationship between women is emphasized (fig. 1). Interlocked together in a warm embrace, with smiles plastered across each of their faces, the two women appear like a mother and daughter, convening together to laugh and exchange stories one evening

In “Hair Dying in the Kitchen,” Modigh captures a similar scene (fig. 7). Two generations of women interact over the ritual of hair. This act is, in and of itself, a thought-provoking detail. Hairstyling is an intragenerational practice accessible to any class. In art history, hair has often been studied as “associated with transformative life experiences, with rites and rituals, and with the marking of cultural difference.”⁶⁵ A liminal concept of juxtapositions, both natural and cultural, hair is something women have braided, brushed, combed, covered, exposed, pulled, knotted, and tenderly attended to the hair of themselves and their children for centuries. Mothers commonly teach their daughters to care for their hair in the same manner as their mothers before them, passing down these intimate and humble interactions that are ephemeral in nature but nonetheless culturally significant in practice.

Moreover, in the detailed setting surrounding the two women, a network of support is hidden in plain sight. In this domestic scene, the white paint of the room’s back wall peels off its horizontal slats of wood. Natural light illuminates the space, pouring into the kitchen from two sets of windows that are clouded with grime around their panes. The counter and sink are littered with outdated cookware: a coffee machine, crockpot, dirty tupperware, and a single red solo cup are among the objects that are visible within the photograph’s frame. The refrigerator, situated

⁶⁵ Angela Rosenthal, "Raising Hair," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 2.

behind the two women on the opposite side of the small room, is covered in messages inscribed upon its white surface with dry-erase marker. Messages like “Sandy was here, 2006,” “I Love Ya’ll,” “Alex Pritchard wuz here, 9-10-06,” “I rock more than you,” and “Guys, I love y’all,” loosely articulated smiley faces, heart-shaped doodles, and cursive signatures make up the yearbook-like appearance of the standard kitchen appliance. Haphazardly arranged, the scribbled texts and accompanying drawings clearly hold more significance for the family than the discarded remnants of plastic cutlery; the refrigerator is a hopeful canvas. In the middle of an impoverished family’s kitchen, a monument of memories, relationships, and inspirational texts alleviate the otherwise grim setting. This basic kitchen appliance embodies the collective strength of family and friendship, recalling other familial mark-making practices like measuring children’s height on the door frame or carving one’s initials into the bark of trees.

The transgenerational aspect of Appalachian collective strength is complex, as young people in towns like St. Charles are often told that they must leave their mountain communities to achieve success.⁶⁶ At the same time, Fisher and Smith explain, “the history of resistance, the desire to connect to culture, people, community, and land, and the richness of culturally based assets have the potential to position youth in central Appalachia as talented and innovative change makers.”⁶⁷ In Appalachia, Modigh captured the interpersonal resiliency of a people framed within the cultural politics of American nationhood as what Fisher and Smith term an internal “Other”: “A repository of either backwardness and ignorance or, alternatively, the homespun relics of the frontier; in both cases, it is a place behind the times, against which national progress, enlightenment, and modernization might be measured.”⁶⁸ In such a region,

⁶⁶ Fisher and Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, 78.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

whose overlapping stereotypes, assumptions, conflicts, and tribulations speak to both local and global issues, one must treat “place” as not just a tangible landscape, but also a “continually re-imagined social relations and possibilities.”⁶⁹

Modigh left St. Charles after just two months, but the photographs that she made while there have encapsulated a lived experience that most Americans do not know or see. The history of the United States’ uneven geographic development and often exploitative capitalist structure “succeeds at segregating the rich from the poor, the elderly from the young, and various ethnic groups from one another.”⁷⁰ Projects like as *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*, which illuminate the smaller spaces and microhistories that are traditionally precluded from everyday Americans, may encourage the act of telling alternative stories. As scholars Katie Richards-Schuster and Rebecca O’Doherty explain, such representation “that challenges dominant understanding of Appalachian people and Appalachian issues begins with young people taking control of their own story and strengthening their sense of self within the context of larger social change efforts.”⁷¹

The success of such local change resonates on a global scale; as Powell argues, “for all that is wonderfully or tragically unique about [a] region, there is at least as much that connects it with the experiences of other cultures and subcultures on a global scale.”⁷² For this reason, employing a critical regionalist methodology for the art historical inquiry of *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey* effectively reconciles the distinct locality of St. Charles’ geographic isolation, opioid epidemic, and coal-industry occupation with larger patterns of working-class exploitation and rural health inequity.

⁶⁹ Fisher and Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, 7.

⁷⁰ Ali, "Mapping the Local," 35.

⁷¹ Fisher and Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, 90.

⁷² Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 4.

CHAPTER 2:
KAEL ALFORD, *BOTTOM OF DA BOOT*

Photographed in September 2008 on the porch of his home, a young man named Jacob Walker stares directly into the camera (fig. 8). The lens flares across his chest, creating small halos of light that flicker over his torso. Turning to one side, Walker displays an upper arm tattoo: a shaky and rough outline of the state of Louisiana. Underneath the sketch, the caption “Bottom of da Boot” identifies Walker’s location in Isle de Jean Charles, a community at the southernmost part of Louisiana whose stilted homes are continuously bombarded by the ever-receding shoreline of the gulf coast.

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit Louisiana. The storms obliterated the city of New Orleans and decimated 118 square miles of Louisiana’s coastal wetlands and marshes.⁷³ Between then and 2011, award-winning international photojournalist Kael Alford (American, born 1971) documented the affected communities of Isle de Jean Charles and Pointe-aux-Chenes, Louisiana and formulated a collection of images that she—inspired by Walker’s ink—titled “Bottom of da Boot.” In the photography book of the same name, the artist writes, “what I found in Louisiana was a complex American history that had been largely unrecorded, in a distant part of the country that felt foreign and oddly familiar.”⁷⁴ Funded by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, as a part of the institution’s “Picturing the South” series, Alford’s exploration into a community on the brink of disappearance seeks to immortalize an indigenous heritage that the master narrative of American exceptionalism has often overlooked. Seeking knowledge in an environment plundered by the exploitative practices of a multinational fuel

⁷³ Gina Schilmoeller, “Invoking the Fifth Amendment To Preserve and Restore the Nation’s Wetlands in Coastal Louisiana,” *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 19, no. 2 (2006): 317.

⁷⁴ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana’s Disappearing Coast*, xi.

industry, Alford identifies joy, pleasure, conviction, and fidelity in the faces of her subjects and unveils the heartbreaking beauty of a place subject to inevitable land loss. As Alford puts it, “Like the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, what is being lost on the coast of Louisiana is more than a neighborhood or a storm buffer. It’s a piece of our collective memory and a unique piece of heritage that defines us as a nation.”⁷⁵

The aptly named “wetland crisis” is an ongoing issue for the area. Louisiana has the highest rate of shoreline erosion in the United States today.⁷⁶ Since the oil and gas industry’s incursion, the area transformed into what Louisiana State University geography and anthropology professor Craig E. Colten terms a “sacrifice zone.”⁷⁷ This phrase, derived from the field of cultural ecology to describe impacts made by traditional agricultural practices, has been more recently adopted by scholars to refer to “areas degraded by modern industrial societies in the pursuit of economic and military gain.”⁷⁸ In this case, it characterizes a place in which “the drive for industrialization and economic gain took precedence over environmental stewardship.”⁷⁹ As a result, *Bottom of da Boot* may very well soon be a reliquary of a bygone people. Considered from a critical regionalist perspective, the series can be seen as a cultural assemblage of images that negotiates the distinctly localized culture seen within the camera’s frame with the images’ wider implications as a micro historic record of early 2000s American life. Each image responds to the particularities of place and problematizes the larger forces at work throughout the country. In this case, the fluctuations of the oil and gas industry devastate

⁷⁵ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, vii.

⁷⁶ Bill Good, "Louisiana's Wetlands: Combatting Erosion and Revitalizing Native Ecosystems," *Restoration and Management Notes* 11, no. 2 (1993), 92.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

pockets of low-income populations. Nevertheless, transgenerational strength and cultural fortitude emerge in Alford's images, which form a relic of a people who persist in place while resolutely battling the conditions of their erasure.

The state's Indigenous population has been able to survive for centuries. For generations, pockets of Native Americans, Acadians, Africans, and Isleños congregated in areas like Pointe-aux-Chenes and Isle de Jean Charles. Kael Alford's maternal grandmother was born on this desolate stretch of Louisiana's coast and many of its remaining residents descend from the same Native American communities.⁸⁰ According to local tribal records and accounts from nineteenth-century American anthropologists, the artist's Indigenous ancestors travelled from Mississippi to settle on the Louisianian coast in the early 1800s.⁸¹ From there, women of the Houma nation, in particular, took French settlers as husbands, adopting their names and language "but pulling these men into tribal society; the resulting children would be viewed as Houma by both the nation and non-Natives."⁸² Today, the visual makeup of lower Point-aux-Chenes and Isle de Jean Charles, connected by a narrow, four-mile stretch of Island Road, is multiracial and multiethnic. Those who have Native American heritage typically identify as "Indian" and distinguish their ancestral wetlands south of Pointe-aux-Chenes from the rest of the coast with a sign that simply reads "Indian Land, Keep Out" (fig. 8.5).⁸³ However, little conflict occurs between locals, regardless of race or ethnicity. Instead, lower Point-aux-Chenes's Black, white, Indigenous, and mixed populations are collectively situated against the encroachment of upper-middle class suburban culture to the north and the Gulf of Mexico to the south.

⁸⁰ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, vii.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁸² J. Daniel D'Oney, *A Kingdom of Water: Adaptation and Survival in the Houma Nation, Indians of the Southeast*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 53.

⁸³ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, xv.

Alford's photographs like *Susie Danos in Her Garden* accentuate the irrepressible character of such unyielding communities (fig. 9). The photograph was taken in August, 2010. The sticky Louisiana air hangs heavy around the sweat-soaked figure of Danos, who is sitting in her garden on her knees. In one hand, she folds a garden hose in half, redirecting its stream downward into the grass beneath her. Its water drenches her thigh, soaking into the denim of her blue jeans. Her dark beige skin, tanned and leathered by the Southern sun, settles in wrinkles around her eyes. Her facial expression is emotionally neutral, but her eyes are warm. Surrounding her figure, patches of rich green flora grow upwards towards a blue sky and envelope the gardener in an embrace by arms of her own making. A dead, grey tree behind Danos stands in stark contrast to her lush, vibrant, and carefully attended garden. In artworks such as this, a critical regionalist approach can equip art historians to confront a problem that is, according to Powell, "not simply 'environmental' in a narrow sense but is a broader problem of cultural politics that has a particular geographical and spatial structure."⁸⁴ The tree, likely killed by encroaching salt water, embodies the ominous incursion of the Gulf of Mexico prompted by excessive drilling and extraction that leaves miles of once-strong trees shells of their former selves. Locally, the image is a document of the ecological issues facing Louisiana's coastal residents. In a much broader sense, the photograph speaks to the global conflict between the natural world and the petroleum industry.

In a 2015 issue of the *Tulane Environmental Law Journal*, Oliver A. Houck, the David Boies Chair in Public Interest Law at Tulane University, reviewed the actions of the state's oil and gas "kingdom" in Louisiana's Coastal Zone.⁸⁵ Characterizing the oil and gas industry as the

⁸⁴ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 83.

⁸⁵ Oliver A. Houck, "The Reckoning: Oil and Gas Development in the Louisiana Coastal Zone," *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (2015): 187.

most important power in Louisiana, the author traces its reach beginning in the early twentieth-century, when John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company began "soaking" state governance in "oil like a pelican fishing a slick."⁸⁶ Since 1955, scientists have been concerned with the industry's mineral operations and warned that their process and development would likely result in permanent ecological damage.⁸⁷ Despite their cautioning, it was not until 2005, when hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit Louisiana that the industry's impact was realized by those outside of the scientific community. Images of the marsh landscape, torn apart by oil and gas canals, were published in newspapers and appeared on television. These canals had quietly infected the landscape, opening the proverbial floodgates for Gulf water to stunt and kill local vegetation and replaced "a network of living veins and capillaries with straight-line ditches that drained areas above them and flooded those below."⁸⁸ Houck found that the state protected the responsible parties from legal recourse. The state government had effectively merged with Big Oil, becoming "a single organism with interdependent moving parts, a company de facto in its own right that surfaces in myriad ways."⁸⁹ In Louisiana, the petro-government relationship had become the norm for twenty-first-century Americans.

The recent history of the oil and gas industry activities off the coast of Louisiana exposed the corrupted political system of a state whose government is so highly influenced by a corporate oligarchy. The official action taken by the Louisiana government proved to be apathetic and unsuccessful in addressing the plights of their citizens in sacrifice zones. For example, the state's \$50 billion Coastal Restoration Plan, proposed in 2011, heralded relocation as the sole solution

⁸⁶ Houck, "The Reckoning," 189.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 225

for those losing their land.⁹⁰ Residents are unconvinced relocation is necessary, as community members have yet to be faced with a challenge they could not meet. For generations, the families in Alford's photos simply rebuilt and restored their homes when necessary. According to professor Craig E. Colten, the socially and geographically marginalized communities of Indigenous Louisianians have adapted to the natural and human-induced environmental changes:

Three principal adaptive mechanisms undergird their resilience: social networks or social capital, mobility, and ingenuity. Social capital embodied in family, ethnic, and religious support networks has enabled those engaged in natural resource-based livelihoods to withstand both ecologic and economic disruptions. Likewise, mobility—both economic and geographic—has provided a means to escape disruptive conditions and secure an alternative source of livelihood. Finally, ingenuity or creativity has furnished a means to apply skills and techniques intended for one purpose to a different set of circumstances.⁹¹

Self-sufficiency, independence, and living-off-the-land are practices that locals consider integral to their cultural identity. In her photograph titled *Sandy "Cookie" Naquin at Robert Dardar's place*, Alford depicts a dwelling with such a phoenix-like, cyclical lifespan (fig. 10). A woman identified as "Cookie" Naquin sits on a bright yellow cooler outside her neighbor's home in June of 2008. She holds an amber-colored glass beer bottle in her hands and has another sitting at her feet next to a propane tank. Naquin wears a white cut-off Michelob Light muscle shirt with navy blue gym shorts and flip flops and her hair is covered with a red, white, and blue American-flag patterned cloth. Her skin is tan and her fingernails bare, but her toenails are painted a dark pink shade. She has a partially obscured tattoo on the side of her right calf, and a single silver eyebrow piercing. Like Danos, Naquin's body language looks as if she has been told to

⁹⁰ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, xiii.

⁹¹ Craig E. Colten, "An Incomplete Solution: Oil and Water in Louisiana," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 700.

momentarily pose; one can imagine that she, frozen in time, briefly and casually presents herself to the camera before drawing her beer to her lips and relaxing back into her stoop.

The porch is a modest structure, its vertical metal panels weathered and sun-bleached. Behind Naquin, a small doll balances on a nail hammered into the doorframe. Wearing dark wash denim overalls and a red-checkered shirt, his appearance is that of a working-class farmer or fisherman. The open shed is unlit and cluttered with tools, cords, buckets, and other storage materials. Cookie looks at the camera without much facial expression, but in her subtle glance, ferocity exudes. She sits with her head held high, her chin tilted upwards in an authoritative gesture. Brows furrowed slightly, her eye contact is unwavering and intensely focused on the camera. Her body language and facial expression speaks with a defiant tone—typical of Alford’s subjects. Jacob Walker, Susie Danos, and Sandy “Cookie” Naquin present themselves as self-aware and authoritative.

Alford’s series on the conditions of poverty on Louisiana’s coast is a marked departure from the dubious legacy of documentary photographers like Walker Evans and Shelby Lee Adams, whose projects south of the Mason-Dixon line have been met with criticism by cultural theorists like Susan Sontag.⁹² As Ariella Azoulay has identified, “weak populations remain more exposed to photography, especially of the journalistic kind, which coerces and confines them to a passive, unprotected position.”⁹³ In contrast, when Alfred’s work was exhibited at the High in 2012, Brent Abbott, the museum’s curator of photography, argues that her images delve “deeply

⁹² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Books, 2019). Most notably, Sontag has argued that many photographers are more akin to sexual voyeurs than humanitarians or objective documentarians.

⁹³ Ariella Azoulay, “The Civil Contract of Photography,” in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (Zone Books, 2008), 117.

into storytelling in a way that embraces the gray area between journalism and art.”⁹⁴

Appropriately, Alford originally trained as a journalist and spent a decade of her career as a war photographer documenting military conflicts in the Balkans and Middle East prior to returning to the States in 2005. When she subsequently produced the collection of photographs that became *Bottom of da Boot*, she drew from those earlier experiences. She enlisted local guides and kept the ethics of photojournalism as a necessary component of her artmaking process. According to Abbott, the photographs, which he considers “deeply intimate documents of a people and place in the process of disappearing,” give a “human face to the costs of our modern world.”⁹⁵ By 2012, only twenty-five families remained in Isle de Jean Charles; with the area’s high rate of erosion, it is very likely that photographs from her series are now representative of the disappear[ed], as it has been over a decade since Alford originally finished the project.⁹⁶

The photographic process is an interpersonal relationship involving an observer—the photographer—and the observed—the subject.⁹⁷ Ideally, that relationship is one of co-creation, in which both parties can assume power in the process. Traditionally, however, the relationship between the observer and the observed is often fraught; “as the observed or represented, subjects of visual journalism exhibit behaviors ranging from submission to manipulation—as to the observers—and can be powerful or helpless.”⁹⁸ To combat this imbalance of power, Alford visited her subjects several times a year for four years to gain their trust. According to the artist,

⁹⁴ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, iv.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, viii. Abbott also regards Alford’s accompanying photographic essay as furthering an equally-important tradition of including writing as an aspect of socially engaged documentary photography.

⁹⁶ Kael Alford, “Commentary on Bottom of da Boot: Losing the Coast of Louisiana,” *The Georgia Review* 66, no. 1 (2012): 148.

⁹⁷ Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*, 39.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-42.

“I was not the first to seek stories here, and initially I was treated with a healthy dose of suspicion; nearly two years went by before anyone even acknowledged me as a repeat visitor.”⁹⁹ From there, the artist built a rapport with the community and became privy to their personal familial lore and cultural narratives passed down through generations.

Community members cite specific tribal affiliations as Houma, Chitimacha, Biloxi, Choctaw, Acolapissa, or Atakapa, but generally, neighbors just claim common ‘Indian’ ancestors, as generations of intermarriage have blended the families of separate historic tribes.¹⁰⁰ Generations upon generations have remained in the area and the surnames of the subjects in Alford’s photographs—Verdin, Billiot, Chaisson, Corteau, Naquin, and Dardar, among others—can be traced to the families of early nineteenth and twentieth-century coastal Louisiana.¹⁰¹ Ironically, the communities’ multicultural background is their most significant barrier to having appropriate tribal protection under federal law. The Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs has strict guidelines for federal tribal recognition—one that requires documented heritage and continuous political organization related to a single tribe or single group of tribes.¹⁰² In response to the coastal United Houma Nation’s 1994 application for federal recognition, the bureau denied their right to official tribal affiliation with the justification that “there is no evidence linking [UNH] ancestors to a particular historical tribe, or to historical tribes, which combined and have continued to function as a tribal entity.”¹⁰³ As of April 2021, the United Houma Nation had 19,000 enrolled members across six parishes in Louisiana.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately,

⁹⁹ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, xviii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰¹ D’Oney, *A Kingdom of Water: Adaptation and Survival in the Houma Nation*, 59.

¹⁰² Alford, “Commentary on Bottom of da Boot,” 141.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Kezia Setyawan, “United Houma Nation Works to Reduce Inequity, Vaccine Skepticism,” *Houma Today* (The Courier, April 5, 2021), 2.

as of 2022, the United Houma Nation and the residents of Point-aux-Chenes and Isle de Jean Charles remain federally unrecognized.¹⁰⁵

Despite having familial ties to the area, Alford remains innately aware of her intercessional standpoint in relation to her subjects. In an essay the artist wrote for the *Georgia Review*, she self-reflexively examines her privilege as a relative outsider and self-identifying white woman, wondering whether the history of Pointe-aux-Chenes and Isle de Jean Charles is hers to tell.¹⁰⁶ Citing the problematic oeuvre of twentieth-century ethnographer and photographer Edward S. Curtis, she states, “with the legacy of Curtis in mind, I tried to avoid exaggerating ‘Indian’ symbols or suiting a preconceived narrative as I photographed.”¹⁰⁷ As such, there are few instances of Native American iconography present in her series. *Mandy Verdin at home*, a 2010 photograph of a community matriarch in her home, is one notable exception.

In the photograph, an elderly woman wearing a large green t-shirt leans against her kitchen counter, half-burned cigarette in hand (fig. 11). She is positioned in the middle ground of the portrait; in the immediate foreground, a claustrophobic collection of objects clutters the surface of the counter. At the far left, a carved bust of a Native American man wearing a headdress sits surrounded by magazine pages and junk mail. Behind it, a half-finished Tostito’s Scoops bag, vitamin bottle, and large plastic bag of assorted prescription pill containers make up the center of the photograph’s composition. On the right side, another Native American statue decorates the room. Likely made of ceramic or wood, this figure is painted. His skin is dark beige, hair deep brown or black, and he has his hair drawn in two braids, wrapped in red. Behind

¹⁰⁵ “Federally Recognized Tribes,” U.S. Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://www.bia.gov/service/tribal-leaders-directory/federally-recognized-tribes>.

¹⁰⁶ Alford, “Commentary on Bottom of da Boot,” 142.

¹⁰⁷ Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, xvi.

the statue, Mandy Verdin rests her elbows on the counter. Her unkempt hair extends down her shoulders and back. A shadeless lamp sits beside her; its exposed bulb oddly naked in contrast to the busy room. Photographed amidst her personal possessions, Mandy Verdin confidently gazes into the camera.

Alford discovered that Point-aux-Chenes residents of Indigenous ancestry, like Mandy Verdin, were fairly private with their “Indian” identity and reserved the symbols of their heritage for indoor spaces.¹⁰⁸ As such, Alford approaches subjects like Verdin sensitively. She does not romanticize or sensationalize Verdin’s “Indian” identity. Instead, the artist simply creates a portrait of a resident among the objects she actually keeps inside her home. In direct opposition to the colonizing social scientific analyses of outdated anthropological and ethnographic research, Alford’s *Mandy Verdin at home* gives power of self-representation to her subject, who is featured amongst her chosen belongings.

Despite the innumerable obstacles faced by coastal Louisiana’s Indigenous population, a determined sense of conviction for the protection of local cultural heritage appears strong in Alford’s images of younger generations. In *Fill dirt*, the Billiot girls stand on a pile of unearthed dirt near the road in Point-aux-Chenes (fig. 12). It is October of 2010, the last month in which artist Kael Alford visited the area to document its citizens. An older girl, who wears a blue spaghetti-strap tank top and black shorts, is nearer to the camera. Her sock-covered feet sink into the mound of soil beneath her and she sassily rests one of her hands on her hip in a contrapposto pose. The other arm hangs relaxed at her side and her shirt’s strap falls from her shoulder onto her upper arm. The child’s head is cocked slightly to the right, as she stares into the camera with

¹⁰⁸ Alford, “Commentary on Bottom of da Boot,” 144.

large, brown eyes. Her youthful and unblemished face is full, and her mouth is shaped in a subtle downward arc, leaving the ghost of a pout on her lips. The other girl stands behind and to the right of her older sister, mirroring her expression. The younger of the two has a slighter frame; her lime green tank top and khaki shorts fit loosely on her slim figure. Her right leg is straight, but she bends her left at a ninety-degree angle, leaving her bare foot perpendicular to the other, which has sunk entirely into the earth, out of sight.

Historically, the children's surnames can be traced to one of the original Houma unions from the 1820s, specifically to the marriage between French settler Jacques Constant Billiot and his Indigenous bride Rosalie Courteau, whose seven sons "are held as the progenitors of the modern Houma nation."¹⁰⁹ The Billiot girls are the direct product of generations of placed-based resistance. By employing critical regionalism and reading *Fill dirt* within the context of local Houma history and broader American and Louisiana history, the photograph's symbolic resonance and art historical significance can be more clearly considered. Standing upon the upturned tissue of their ancestral land, the two girls present themselves as authoritative. Their placement and poses convey ownership and they gaze at the camera as if communicating they will continue to own and protect this place. The dirt, having been first unearthed by the oil and gas industry's excessive canal dredging, is representative of the region's exploitative treatment by an American capitalist economy. Here, the girls reclaim the "fill dirt"—not just on the basis of land ownership, but also as an act of Indigenous cultural persistence.

Mobilized against the insatiable hunger of the Gulf, the people of Alford's series collectively resist being swallowed by the sea. However, the end is inevitable; in the artist's

¹⁰⁹ D'Oney, *A Kingdom of Water: Adaptation and Survival in the Houma Nation*, 59.

words, “the families anchored to this landscape may outlive it. If so, I hope these images evoke the spirit of their resilience and the visual poetry of their ephemeral homeland.”¹¹⁰ Her series, which she laments will soon be a ‘reliquary’ of an already forgotten American history, serves as an important reflection of a distinct historical moment in post-2000s America in which a series of natural disasters, exacerbated by industrial-generated pollution and coinciding with the culminating damage of decades of oil and gas canal dredging, fundamentally shifted the landscape of coastal Louisiana. As such, the daily lived realities of residents, whose self-sufficient lifestyles remain dependent upon their land for survival, became tethered to the fleeting idea of cultural permanence. Those most affected were of Native American ancestry. The Houma nation’s subsequent and ongoing fight for resistance against Big Oil occupation exposes the second-class status of Indigenous people in contemporary America. Impotent state and federal government entities, whose semblance of support in post-Katrina Louisiana has provided nothing more than an illusionary sense of goodwill to residents, continue to practice a politic of disposability in regard to its lower-class citizenship.

Despite the difficult conditions imposed by external forces on the people of Point-aux-Chenes and Isle de Jean Charles, the figures in Alford’s photographs prevail in their quest for the continuation of their coastal Indigenous identity. Alford does not idealize poverty in a fetishistic or pitying manner, avoiding what Cynthia Joseph has described as a propensity to romanticize the local, which “serves to mask the role advanced capitalism plays in the reproduction of class dominance and inequality.”¹¹¹ Instead, the artist affords a dignity to her subjects that older documentary projects have failed to achieve and shines a light on the exploitative role of

¹¹⁰ Alford, "Commentary on Bottom of da Boot," 148.

¹¹¹ Ali, "Mapping the Local," 34.

advanced capitalism in Isle de Jean Charles and Point-aux-Chenes. Arguing that Alford's practice takes an essentially positivist approach, Brent Abbott reminds us "of the importance of bearing critical witness to society for political as well as historical purposes, and rightly espouses that communication of that experience can lead to greater understanding."¹¹² This understanding can be most practically gleaned from a critical regionalist view, from which art historical meaning emerges from the interconnected issues of Louisiana's wetland crisis, the American petro-industrial complex, and the lived conditions of Indigenous peoples. From this view, it is clear Alford's project illuminates the efficacy and impact of long-form socially-engaged documentary photography, and ultimately reveals the effects of corporate-led environmental degradation on Americans living at the precarious border between land and sea.

¹¹² Alford, *Bottom of da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*, ix.

CHAPTER 3: LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER, *THE NOTION OF FAMILY*

In LaToya Ruby Frazier's *Momme Wrestle*, two generations of Frazier women record themselves wrestling in their home (fig. 13 and 13.5). The video from 2009, represented in Frazier's award-winning book *The Notion of Family* as a collection of stills, captures the women's bodies intertwined against the backdrop of an upright mattress. Both wear tank tops and boxer shorts. The two wrap their arms around each other's shoulders and bury their hands in the other woman's hair. As the scene progresses, the "wrestling" match appears more and more a sequence of intentional interactions; their grappling limbs are not in positions of power or control, but embrace. In several stills, the two figures, one mother and one daughter, appear resting their foreheads against the other in mutual understanding. The women's gestures are intimate, and their body language is mirrored. It is difficult to recognize the figures' facial expressions, but their physical closeness articulates a distinctly familial bond. Describing the scene, the artist explains, "we are wrestling with internalized life experiences, perceptions of ourselves, and familial personas developed by sociopolitical baggage."¹¹³

Images like this make up the artist's first monograph, a personal and collaborative project that reads as a family photo album. By insightfully exploring the effects of economic decline on small town residents, Frazier creates a commonly overlooked history of America in *The Notion of Family*. Producing formally impressive black-and-white images using traditional photography techniques, Frazier's medium-format camera eloquently captures the fierce transgenerational solidarity of a single family against the landscape of a forgotten section of Pittsburgh. Frazier's

¹¹³ LaToya Ruby Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, Paperback ed., (New York City, NY: Aperture, 2016), 85.

poetic oeuvre, fashioned over the course of several years, depicts the artist's life growing up in a deindustrialized borough of Pittsburgh known as Braddock. Here, generations of low-income, predominately black residents remain under the thumb of twentieth-century American industrial magnates like Andrew Carnegie, whose steel plants made—and then unmade—Braddock.

Frazier's positionality in regard to her subjects separates her artmaking practice from that of Modigh and Alford, who never appear in their own images. Where the artist-as-photojournalist faces the temptation of omniscience, LaToya Ruby Frazier weaves a photographic record of her own family and community with a lens that speaks from a participatory viewpoint. The narrator is both subject matter and maker. Frazier, more than Alford and Modigh, is overtly political. As I will demonstrate, her work recognizes the complex environment of Braddock as a product of both its local history and the larger contexts of racism and its legacy in late-capitalist America. Using a critical regionalist lens, I suggest *The Notion of Family* reveals how the experience of local Braddock residents represents the human cost of the ideology of disposability in contemporary America. As Powell articulates, a critical regionalist approach links "individual moments of cultural struggle to larger patterns of history, politics, and culture, by understanding how they are linked not only in time and in the nebulous networks of discourse but also in space, through relationships of power that can be material and cultural."¹¹⁴ *The Notion of Family* is an exemplary work to use as a case study for such a methodology, as Frazier herself has affirmed, the series "spirals from the micro to the macro."¹¹⁵

A fourth generation Braddock-native, LaToya Ruby Frazier spent her life surrounded by women, personally and professionally. The artist was formally trained by several women artists,

¹¹⁴ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 97.

¹¹⁵ Clorinde Peters, "Visualizing Disposability: Photographing Neoliberal Conflict in the United States," *Afterimage* 44, no. 6 (2017): 9.

including Kathe Kowalski, who encouraged her to weaponize her camera as a tool for social justice.¹¹⁶ Another mentor, artist Carrie Mae Weems, attributes Frazier's devotion to long-term projects as influenced by a deep inner sense of self-responsibility that matters to her, her community, and the nation.¹¹⁷ In college, Frazier became enamored with documentary and socially-engaged photography and wondered whether she could "change the skewed power dynamics that had long defined documentary photography."¹¹⁸ Following the philosophies of Gordon Parks and Lewis Hine, Frazier decided to expose her own history by "tracing the ways in which industrial decline, poverty and the war on drugs had shaped and changed her family...[revealing] the human cost of abstract economic policies."¹¹⁹

The Notion of Family is, first and foremost, a family album. Cognizant of their central and vital roles in the series, Frazier credits her mother and grandmother as official collaborators on the project and explicitly positions her family in the historicizing of her town. As she explains:

Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I grew up in significantly different social and economic climates; each of us are markers along a larger historical timeline. Grandma Ruby, born in 1925, witnessed Braddock's prosperous days of department stores, theaters, and restaurants. Mom, born in 1959, witnessed the close of the steel mills, white flight, and disinvestment at the federal, state, and local levels. I was born in 1982. I witnessed as the War on Drugs decimated my family and community.¹²⁰

Frazier's mother was never really an authority figure in her life. Cynthia Frazier fell addicted to crack cocaine soon after her daughter's birth, and from the age of five until her adulthood,

¹¹⁶ Zoe Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness," *T Magazine*, 2021, 34.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 38.

LaToya Ruby lived with her maternal grandmother and step-great-grandfather.¹²¹ Nevertheless, as I will show, the transgenerational solidarity of Black women shaped a significant aspect of Frazier's work.

In 2005, Frazier photographed herself and her mother in their home. Titled *Mom Relaxing my Hair*, the picture shows the younger woman sitting in front of a large vanity mirror staring at her reflection (fig. 14). The vanity features a variety of hairstyling materials: an open container of petroleum jelly lies on the right and different-sized combs are scattered across the vanity's surface. On the left edge of its surface, a pill bottle sits next to a box of aluminum foil. On the right, a shade-less lamp fills the room with light. Frazier's forty-six-year-old mother stands at the left, looking at her twenty-three-year-old daughter in the glass. The scene resembles Modigh's *Hair Dying in the Kitchen* (fig. 4) in showing multiple generations of women convene over the styling of hair. The older woman holds a pair of disposable gloves while gazing attentively at her daughter's mirrored image. Her lips are pursed as she scrutinizes her work. Comparatively, her daughter's face is blank.

Despite the obvious differences between Braddock and Appalachia, in using a critical regionalist methodology for the art historical inquiry of *The Notion of Family* and *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*, I find "multiple linkages bind[ing] the experiences of disparate geographical sites."¹²² Like Modigh's images of Appalachian women, Frazier photographs residents of areas that have been exploited by industry (steel and coal, respectively) and who engage in a form of personal expression that enacts a semblance of self-control and who present agency in self-fashioning. Rose Weitz has written of hairstyling as a ritual of resistance and as a means of

¹²¹ Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness," 34.

¹²² Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 97.

seeking power. Hairstyles and hairstyling practices, like those visualized in these artist's images, can function as important cultural artifacts: "simultaneously public (visible to everyone), personal (biologically linked to the body), and highly malleable to suit cultural and personal preferences."¹²³ Frazier's mother applies a different treatment to her daughter's head than Modigh's white Appalachian mother. Intended to chemically 'relax' or straighten curls rather than to color, this technique is most commonly used on afro-hair textures. The practice has been sometimes attributed to the cultural erasure of Blackness, as the treatment's result mimics the straight texture popularized by Eurocentric standards of beauty.¹²⁴ Viewers can see the white relaxing cream plastered on the back of the artist's head, closest to the camera lens, and in the front, through the mirror reflection.

In Frazier's 2004 photograph *Mom and Me outside the Phase*, the artist explores Braddock outside of the domestic space (fig. 15). The photograph, set on the sidewalk in front of a local building, captures the artist walking away from the camera while her mother faces the lens. The older Frazier stands in a contrapposto pose in front of an open door, holding her handbag and keys. Peering inside, one can discern a wall consisting of semi-opaque blocks of wavy glass—an outdated architectural and interior design style from an earlier era of Braddock. LaToya, 22 at the time, faces away on the left of the frame. Sporting white sneakers, joggers, a heavy jacket, and a backpack, the figure's fabric is wrinkled in motion as she walks away. With her right leg in front of the other, the artist moves further away from her mother, who remains still.

¹²³ Rose Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 5 (2001): 667.

Frazier's portraits with her mother are perhaps some of the most complex photographs from the series. As seen in *Mom and Me*, the women appear in opposing positions or face opposite directions. The two, often at odds in their relationship, became collaborators with the camera. As Zoe Lescaze reports in the *New York Times*, "photography became [LaToya and Cynthia's] primary means of confronting the frayed ends and live wires of their relationship."¹²⁵ The photograph also about Braddock, which appears here as a stagnant wastebin rather than a living community. The glass wall references a twentieth-century era in which Braddock was economically thriving. As the years go by, old styles and dated architectural structures betray the area's abandonment. However, as Frazier communicates through her photographs, this is not a ghost town—people like herself and her mother remain, attempting to push forward and upward in an area where mobility has essentially been eradicated.

As Frazier grew up under a matrilineal authority, many of her photographs concern the issues of Black women. The United States' systemic maltreatment of Black women is revealed in the figure of Grandma Ruby, whose stoic brand of persistence is local to Braddock, but is predicated upon a global history of oppression and injustice. Groundbreaking Black feminist bell hooks described the Black home as a site of resistance:

It was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. . . . this task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.¹²⁶

As Frazier explains, her maternal grandmother, like many marginalized people, "internalized the idea that Black women aren't supposed to cry; they're to remain silent and endure suffering."¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness," 35.

¹²⁶ Bell Hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings, The 2nd Edition*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Demeter Press, 2021), 100.

¹²⁷ Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 27.

Grandma Ruby's first husband died the day her daughter Cynthia turned one year old. From then on, she worked as a manager at a Goodwill store, enduring what her granddaughter has described as a lifetime of suffering wrongs without weakening.¹²⁸ "The photographs of Grandma Ruby," Lescaze writes, "demonstrate the fortitude of a woman who quietly persevered through segregation, a widow who raised six children alone."¹²⁹ According to hooks, even within the Black community, the role of Black women in the crucial task of making home a community of resistance has been minimized, and the lived experiences of those fashioning such culturally significant spaces have been historically devalued.¹³⁰

In *The Notion of Family*, Frazier captures the hardworking and undervalued image of the woman who raised her in images like *Grandma Ruby and J. C. in Her Kitchen* (fig. 3). The photograph, which features the elderly Frazier matriarch with her grandson, articulates her role within the family and community as one of leadership. Her position behind the child, who faces forward, suggests her status as a mentor for younger Frazier family members. Sitting in a chair, J.C. appears small in stature, as his head barely extends past the back edge of his chair. His hair is styled in cornrows, a traditional Black technique in which the hair is braided very close to the scalp. The hairstyle alludes to a continuation of family and cultural traditions; the figure of J. C. symbolically represents the future of Black Braddock. At the same time, Grandma Ruby is clearly plagued with medical problems. Her clavicle and chest bones protrude and her veins are visible and prominent. The woman's skin appears thin as it stretches across her hands. Her white nightgown hangs loosely over her dark, bony frame, and one sleeve has slipped off her shoulder. The fabric clings to the woman's upper left arm, barely obscuring her breasts as it falls.

¹²⁸ Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 75.

¹²⁹ Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness," 35.

¹³⁰ Hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," 102.

The important thing about *Grandma Ruby and J. C. in Her Kitchen* as an example of critical regionalist photography is that Frazier's exposure of her grandmother's local experience in Braddock actually problematizes the broader narrative of American deindustrialization and its legacy of racism. Describing her Braddock childhood, Frazier explains that the shadow from Andrew Carnegie's steel mill always hovered above her, her family, and her community.¹³¹ Indeed, Braddock's history reads much like the history of St. Charles, Virginia, where the cause of poor living conditions in twenty-first-century de-industrialized American towns can be directly traced to the paternalistic capitalist practices of their earlier twentieth-century industrial occupation. In 1872, Carnegie's mill, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works of the United States Steel Corporation, was built in Braddock, a town then named "Carnegie" after its wealthy founder.¹³² After 1916, mill towns experienced an onslaught of Black Southern workers fleeing the Jim Crow South and seeking employment.¹³³ The population of Black mill laborers continued to multiply in Braddock, their wives and children working and growing up alongside Carnegie's mill towers as they belched toxic fumes into the air. In 1980, the nation's metals and mining sector employed 800,000 people, but by 2013, mines employed only 560,000 laborers; in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, specifically, the number of manufacturing jobs dropped by approximately two-thirds between 1970 and 2000 and has continued to decline.¹³⁴ Braddock became stagnant, with former millworkers riddled with medical problems and abandoned

¹³¹ Jones, Kellie, and LaToya Ruby Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness: The Unfinished Work of the Civil Rights Movement: A Conversation with Kellie Jones," *Aperture*, no. 226 (2017): 21.

¹³² Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 138.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Walter Benn Michaels and Daniel Zamora, "Chris Killip and LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Promise of a Class Aesthetic," *Radical History Review* 18, no. 132 (2018): 23.

without care. Pennsylvania's politicians largely ignored the area, and eventually The University of Pittsburgh shut down the community's hospital (UPMC).¹³⁵

Dennis C. Dickerson's analysis of *The Notion of Family* establishes the work as a poignant embodiment of "the history of the century-old steel business in Pittsburgh's now defunct industrial region."¹³⁶ Frazier's photographs do indeed not only capture the effects of this long history of Braddock's Black steel experience, but also expose its contemporary impact. Frazier does not feign a photojournalist's objectivity; instead, she explains how her photographs are a rebuke to how the media represented the Braddock of her youth.¹³⁷ "I'm angry about being told that I was nothing," Frazier says, "that I was less than human, that my life wasn't worth saving; I'm definitely crusading against that in every single image and portrait that I make."¹³⁸ For the artist, the physical deterioration of her Grandma Ruby's stepfather, who worked in the mill, became a symbolic reminder of the dissolution of upward mobility often touted by the middle and upper classes as an 'achievable' American dream.¹³⁹ In her description of him, Frazier explains that "African American men like Gramps worked hard labor in high temperatures, tearing down and rebuilding furnaces, cleaning up split metal and slag."¹⁴⁰ She laments that "once hard labor consumed his body, it was discarded and thrown away."¹⁴¹

The women in the family fared no better; Grandma Ruby died of pancreatic cancer, Cynthia suffered severe chronic pain, and the artist herself continues to battle lupus. Frazier attributes her family's medical issues to the United States Steel Corporation, and rightly so: in

¹³⁵ Madeleine Schwartz, "Family Portrait," *Dissent* 63, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 160.

¹³⁶ Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 21.

¹³⁷ Lescaze, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness," 36.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴⁰ Frazier et al., *The Notion of Family*, 21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

her book, she lists the Environmental Protection Agency's citations for harmful emissions, listing benzene, cadmium, carbon tetrachloride, chloroform, lead, mercury, nickel, tetrachloroethylene (found in drinking water), and xylenes as just some of the chemical compounds from their findings known to cause severe medical issues in exposed populations. Yet, in 2010, Braddock's only hospital was closed and demolished due to lack of use, even as industrial pollutants killed workers and their families.¹⁴²

What Frazier captures in her work reflects the same racially-motivated biopolitics of disposability that Henry Giroux had observed in photographs of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Areas in economic decline are faced with contemporary neoliberalist and modernist ethics have redefined the category of "waste" what Giroux defines as "no longer simply material goods but also human beings, particularly those rendered redundant in the new global economy."¹⁴³ Regardless of an area's economic "usefulness" or willing labor force, towns like Braddock have been deemed loose ends by the postindustrial United States and are divested by those in power who seek monetary profit over human value.

In her 2011 diptych *Epilepsy Test*, Frazier directly addresses the politics of disposability that has plagued her family (fig. 13). Two photographs are shown side by side as one silver gelatin print. On one side of the spread is a portrait of Cynthia's back, bare underneath her open hospital gown. She sits in a hospital bed as a large, thick collection of wires fall across her figure and plug into a hanging power strip at the right of the photograph. The wires extend from there to her head, where they attach to stickers that record the electricity as her brain's synapses fire. Her hair, piled atop her head in a messy updo, overlaps the stickers and weaves in strands

¹⁴² Schwartz, "Family Portrait," 160.

¹⁴³ Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," 187.

through the medical equipment with wire and hair becoming one. Critical regionalism can powerfully engage with the history of disposability in places like Braddock and in artworks like *The Notion of Family* by examining the ways the cultural devaluing of lower-class black Americans can result in serious health inequity. “Envisioned and depicted as politically inert,” Powell articulates, “regional communities are acted upon as such, and become thus.”¹⁴⁴

The portrait of Cynthia’s back portrays the body as imbued with a locally-specific form of biopolitical disposability that reflects the country’s larger issues with further oppressing already-marginalized populations. The Black bodies of Braddock, like the bodies of Katrina, lay bare the “racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy and [reveal] the emergence of a new kind of politics, one in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves.”¹⁴⁵ Surely enough, juxtaposed to Cynthia’s portrait is a dystopian image of the demolished Braddock hospital—the remnants of a social safety net that has now been severed. In the top left, viewers can discern the empty shell of what still stands, but most of the building that is captured in the photograph’s frame is entirely gutted. Overlapping structural beams and broken concrete chunks have fallen off the building’s broken frame into a pile of rubble in the foreground. Metal wire, ripped apart and severed by UPMC’s bulldozer, twists and turns in painfully contorted directions, mimicking in shape and size the wires attached to Cynthia’s body in the photograph to its left.

The diptych is an impressive example of what I would consider critical regionalist photography. Discussing literature, Powell explains that critical regionalist texts “can build on or

¹⁴⁴ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 83.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

redirect the representational histories of places and regions in ways that foreground their implication in larger patterns of historical, political, and cultural conflict and change.”¹⁴⁶ I argue *Epilepsy Test* can be read similarly. Focusing on her own health, in addition to that of her mother, Frazier produces images of Black bodies as sites for the investigation of racial and classist disposability. The image is a representational history of not only the Frazier family, but of Braddock, and of deindustrialized Black America. The juxtaposition of Frazier’s form with the demolished carcass of the Braddock hospital communicates the biopolitics of disposability present not only in Braddock, but throughout the country.

In the May 2017 issue of *Afterimage*, Clorinde Peters categorized *The Notion of Family* as a form of socially-engaged contemporary photography on the subject of disposability, defining the term as “a social phenomenon that works through its invisibility; it is through the tacit agreement of a public that such structures of injustice are hidden in plain sight, under a cloak of common sense and economic meritocracy.”¹⁴⁷ The series has been canonized by critics and curators alike since its initial release and is the most explicitly “art-as-activism” photography series in this thesis.¹⁴⁸ In an interview with Zoe Lescaze in 2021, the artist, then thirty-nine, explained that 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.”¹⁴⁹ Frazier’s work is, in fact, archival: positioned at the intersection of the local and global, *The Notion of Family* documents the construction of place over time through the lives of women from three separate generations. By viewing her

¹⁴⁶ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 178.

¹⁴⁷ Peters, "Visualizing Disposability: Photographing Neoliberal Conflict in the United States," 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

photographs through a critical regionalist lens, one can discern that the struggles of present-day Braddock natives have been imposed upon them by larger cultural and economic forces of inequality, connecting what Powell has described as the “place-centered investigation of forms and issues” and “supposedly parochial interests of regional communities with broad patterns of conflict and struggle.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 98.

CONCLUSION

With this thesis, I have established that Hannah Modigh, Kael Alford, and LaToya Ruby Frazier illuminate the same historical happenings during the first decade of the 2000s in deindustrialized America, despite their subjects' cultural differences and varying degrees of dispossession. Taking what historian Patricia Nelson Limerick calls an “unexpected approach to the seemingly intractable divisions of history, a way to find, quite literally, common ground in seemingly detached and separate narratives,” I have employed a critical regionalist methodology as a fresh approach in examining the three photographers. As I have demonstrated, critical regionalism provides a vital way of understanding these spaces, regions, and localities as an amalgamation of local and global influences—or, as Pollock would identify, a reconstellation of relations.

In the early 1970s, Magnum alumna Susan Meiselas documented the lives of carnival strippers working in small-town county fairs throughout the northeast. She exposed the glamorous projections as mere fantasies, exploring the working-class and impoverished origins of the women and their lived experiences. In 2021, for the third edition of her book *Carnival Strippers*, American art historian and critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau revisited the project, arguing that it has become a historical document and archive for its “depiction of a now-vanished milieu.”¹⁵¹ Like Solomon-Godeau’s assertion that *Carnival Strippers* now exists as a particular archive, *Hillbilly Honey*, *Heroin*, *Bottom of da Boot*, and *The Notion of Family* can be similarly

¹⁵¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Owen Pritchard, “Susan Meiselas: Carnival Strippers Revisited,” Magnum Photos, February 15, 2022, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/susan-meiselas-carnival-strippers-revisited/>.

regarded. I contend that these “archives,” emblematic of the modern world’s extreme inequality, are extraordinarily necessary. Literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels and philosopher Daniel Zamora explain that the “photography of laboring people and working lives in our time is also the photography of the disappearance of certain kinds of labor and of lives without work.”¹⁵² Modigh, Alford, and Frazier illuminate the visual of the working class and their contemporary history as a means of resetting the power dynamics that have rendered certain people “less” valuable and others “more.” These series are not elegiac, as each focuses on a transgenerational form of persistence that maintains a sense of optimism. Regardless, *Hillbilly Heroin*, *Honey*, *Bottom of da Boot*, and *The Notion of Family* humanize the poor as individual people who are living in a perpetual state of resistance, pushing back against the abuses of a capitalist society whose “survival of the fittest” ideology is, in fact, an already rigged game.

Granted, there are nuanced differences in the artist’s approaches. While the exposure of inequity generally brings a beneficial awareness to social issues, the means of image-making between the three women artists featured in this thesis diverge. Hannah Modigh, for instance, made *Hillbilly Heroin*, *Honey* in just a few months. Until she arrived in St. Charles and developed friendships with the people living there, Modigh was not connected to the people she would photograph. As a European outsider, Modigh assumed the role of an anthropologist in Appalachia. After leaving Virginia, her images did little for their subjects other than bringing awareness of class-based American inequity to Swedish art audiences. In contrast, Kael Alford had a familial connection with coastal Louisiana, and spent over five years with community members to understand the historic and systemic issues at play in Isle de Jean Charles and

¹⁵² Michaels and Zamora, "Chris Killip and LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Promise of a Class Aesthetic," 24.

Pointe-aux-Chenes. Her photographs were shown at the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, as a part of the “Picturing the South” series and carried an Indigenous history of the southern United States to domestic audiences. Finally, LaToya Ruby Frazier used *The Notion of Family* to illuminate systemic issues of racial health inequity and deindustrialization and begin her career of using art-as-activism. The most famous of the three artists featured here, Frazier is now known worldwide as a social documentarian and continues to make what I deem “critical regionalist” work.

Since making *The Notion of Family*, Frazier has consistently devoted her artmaking to representing subjects who have been dehumanized or altogether ignored by welfare systems and mainstream media. In 2016, Frazier spent five months in Flint, Michigan, capturing the visually diverse makeup of blue-collar workers and their lived experiences during the city’s water crisis. To do so, she lived with three generations of women: poet Shea Cobb, her mother Renee, and her daughter Zion.¹⁵³ By photographing their daily struggles, Frazier exposed yet another instance of a systemic problem impacting small, marginalized communities. Unfortunately, when Frazier found a possible solution—a 26,000 pound atmospheric water generator in Texas that could bring clean, sustainable water to the people of Flint—local government officials rejected the idea. Ever the activist, Frazier, in turn, took the proceeds from her solo exhibition of “Flint is Family,” in conjunction with a grant from the Robert Rauschenberg foundation, to bring the machine to Michigan. The artists and her collaborators were ultimately able to provide 120,000 gallons of free, clean water for Flint residents.¹⁵⁴ These actions set her apart from the other two artists depicted here and warrant the label of art-as-activism.

¹⁵³ Lescaze, “LaToya Ruby Frazier: American Witness,” 35.

¹⁵⁴ Frazier, LaToya Ruby. “LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Creative Solution for the Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan.” Youtube. TED Talk, December 19, 2019.

At the close of Douglas Powell's book on critical regionalism, he describes regional life as rife with connections—"moments that dramatize important struggles for justice" that could underwrite powerful solidarities across disparate geographic spaces but have been instead "obscured by a culture that separates, categorizes," and labels.¹⁵⁵ Following Griselda Pollock's renunciation of a singular "Art History" in favor of the plural "histories of art," this thesis resists separating the local from the global and offers a new approach towards fashioning a contemporary American history as one of many different, but interrelated, histories.¹⁵⁶ This is not a transnational or global study, as the photographs I have selected for close reading address a narrow breadth of the issues plaguing America between 2000 and 2010. Rather, this history is one which scrutinizes the interwoven threads of class, race, and gender in three distinct areas of the continental United States. These threads, which differ from one another individually, form the fabric of an American experience whose visual and textual makeup is notably different from the master narrative of American nationalism. Using critical regionalism, I have shown that an art historical constellation may be drawn between different artists and subjects who investigate the local manifestations of national and global issues. The forgotten and discarded towns of America—used, abused, and abandoned by the industrialized backbone of the American capitalist economy—survive in the documents of photography, where Hannah Modigh's *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*, Kael Alford's *Bottom of da Boot*, and LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* become archives of local endurance.

¹⁵⁵ Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 235.

¹⁵⁶ Pollock, "Whither Art History?," 10.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Hannah Modigh, "Two Women with Cigarettes," 2006. Color photograph. <http://hannahmodigh.se/hillbilly-heroin-honey/>.



Figure 2. Kael Alford, *Jane Verdin with her granddaughter, Pointe-aux-Chenes*, October 2010. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. *Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 93.



Figure 3. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and J.C. in Her Kitchen*, 2006. Photograph, gelatin silver print. Brunswick, Maine, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, <https://artmuseum.bowdoin.edu/objects-1/info/37589>.



Figure 4. Hannah Modigh, "Hair Dying in Kitchen," 2006. Color photograph. Magnum Photography Awards 2016, LensCulture, <https://www.lensculture.com/2016-magnum-photography-award-winners/>



Figure 5. Hannah Modigh, "Untitled," 2006. Color photograph. <http://hannahmodigh.se/hillbilly-heroin-honey/>.



Figure 6. Hannah Modigh, "Untitled," 2006. Color photograph. <http://hannahmodigh.se/hillbilly-heroin-honey/>.



Figure 7. Hannah Modigh, “Three Teenagers on a Porch,” 2006. Color photograph. <http://hannahmodigh.se/hillbilly-heroin-honey/>.

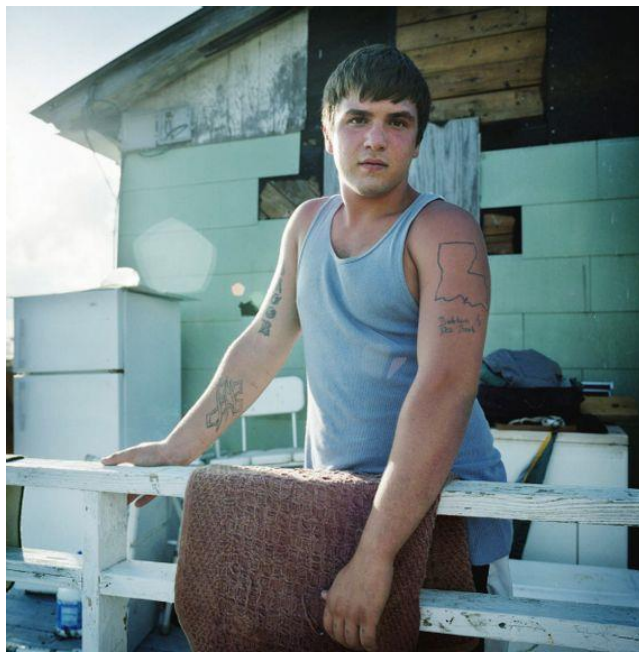


Figure 8. Kael Alford, *Jacob Walker's tattoo*. *Isle de Jean Charles*, September 2008. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. *Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 5.



Figure 8.5. Kael Alford, *Indian land with oil boom, after the BP oil spill. South of Pointe-aux-Chenes. June 2010. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 8.*



Figure 9. Kael Alford, *Susie Danos in Her Garden, Isle de Jean Charles, August 2010. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 11.*



Figure 10. Kael Alford, *Sandy "Cookie" Naquin at Robert Dardar's place, June 2008*. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. *Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 18.



Figure 7. Kael Alford, *Mandy Verdin at home. Pointe-aux-Chenes. October 2010*. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. *Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 91.



Figure 8. Kael Alford, *Fill dirt/The Billiot Girls, Pointe-aux-Chenes*. October 2010. Color photograph. In Alford, Kael. *Bottom of Da Boot: Louisiana's Disappearing Coast*. 1st ed. Atlanta, GA: Fall Line Press, 2012, page 86.

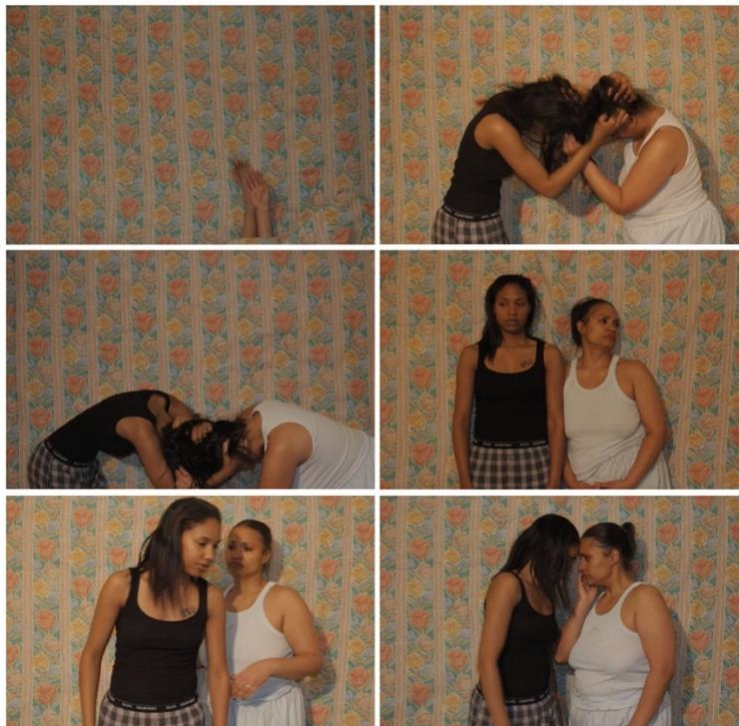


Figure 13. LaToya Ruby Frazier, Stills from *Momme Wrestle*, 2009. Digital video, MPEG4, color, silent. From Vimeo, LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme Wrestle*, 0:54. <https://vimeo.com/353803511>.



Figure 13.5. LaToya Ruby Frazier, Stills from *Momme Wrestle*, 2009. Digital video, MPEG4, color, silent. From Vimeo, LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme Wrestle*, 0:54. <https://vimeo.com/353803511>.



Figure 14. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom Relaxing my Hair*, 2005. Photograph, gelatin silver print. Los Angeles, California, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, <https://www.moca.org/collection/work/mom-relaxing-my-hair>.



Figure 15. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom and Me Outside the Phase*, 2007. Photograph. In Frazier, LaToya Ruby, Dennis C. Dickerson, Laura Wexler, Dawoud Bey, and Lesley A. Martin. *The Notion of Family*. First paperback edition. ed. New York City, NY: Aperture, 2016, page 68.



Figure 16. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Epilepsy Test (Landscape of the Body)*, 2011. Photograph, two silver gelatin print mounted on board. New York City, The Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/40258>.

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ABSTRACT

CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF
SOCIALLY-ENGAGED DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE UNITED STATES,
2000-2010

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2020

Auburn University

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From 2000-2010, three socially-engaged women photographers spent time documenting lower-class residents of the United States in Appalachia, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania, respectively. These series are reflexive of their historical moment in which locals grapple with the consequences of industry-occupation by the coal, steel, and oil and gas industries. For survival and cultural persistence, most residents face their living conditions with the collective strength of transgenerational fortitude. Each of the projects addresses issues of class, gender, and race, though their experiences differ depending upon their geographic positioning and distinct cultural makeup. In this thesis, I use their projects as case studies for my argument that critical regionalism, a methodology previously used by Douglas Powell in his study of contemporary American culture, is an incredibly useful methodology to implement in contemporary art history studies, as it reconciles the geographic uniqueness of a local culture with broader, more global forces and patterns of history. I demonstrate the efficacy of critical regionalism's art historical application using Hannah Modigh's *Hillbilly Heroin, Honey*, Kael Alford's *Bottom of da Boot*, and LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family*, ultimately finding that this perspective most effectively addresses the issues of deindustrialization and late stage capitalism in American society.