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abstract:

The identity of the working-class woman is a particularly precarious one, as stereotypical western feminine ideals are not associated with any of the archetypical trades of the working class, which has instead embodied the masculine ideal of the manual, industrial labourer. In this essay, I argue how the struggle of working-class femininity extends to gender roles of the (former) working class more generally, investigating how this becomes apparent in photographic representations of council housing communities in contemporary art, taking Richard Billingham's body of work Ray's a Laugh (1996) and LaToya Ruby Frazier's work The Notion of the Family (2001-14) as case studies. Both Billingham's and Frazier's work deal with the identity of the working poor from the inside: they represent the decline of the working class and the demise of blue-collar communities, lacking investment and falling prey to the dismantling of the welfare state.

The image of the post-war, post-industrial (and post-feminist) underemployed female has been analysed principally by sociologists and media studies researchers in relation to reality TV programmes, which produce and represent the working class female body as abject. I will therefore employ cultural theory as well as sociological research studies by Beverly Skegg, Imogen Tyler, and Angela McRobbie to identify stereotypes of working-class femininity in visual culture to then assess their relationship to lens-based artistic representations of the working class. The analysis of working-class masculinity and its place in the post-industrial, precarious labour market has been even more limited especially regarding art (let alone photography), with the exception of Angela Dimitrakaki's essay "Masculinity, Art, and Value Extraction" (2019). The article draws on her discussion as well as on Norbert Trenkle's "The Rise and Fall of the Working Man" (2008) to investigate Frazier's and Billingam's depictions of male family members and

show how the decline of the working class, through deindustrialisation, precarisation, and the dismantling of the welfare state, has impacted the image of working-class masculinity.

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How Not to Aim the Camera Downward. Representing the Feminized Working Poor

> One of my goals is to disrupt the privileged point of view that only educated and elite practitioners can create work about the poor or disenfranchised.
>
> LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family*[1]

Images of the working class have always had great ideological potential, whether used heroically in socialist propaganda or as a tool by reactionary politics to stigmatize the lower classes. Over the twentieth century, however, the latter usage prevailed. Photographic art historian Darren Newbury stresses the impact of the visual representation of the working class on its public perception. He argues that "over time the photographs and the ways of life they visualize become resources of social and cultural memory and imagination; the indexical becomes iconic."[2] Newbury concludes that photographs of working-class communities carry an enormous responsibility, with moral and ethical implications.[3] Disgust toward the working class has been established as emblematic of middle-class identity, thus playing an essential role in the production and reception of the representation of the working poor. As Pierre Bourdieu makes clear, the lower classes are characterized as intrinsically lacking the knowledge of and discipline for behaviors that would save them from "poverty."[4] Drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of class identity, sociologist Stephanie Lawler suggests that "working-class history has always been evaluated by

Fig. 1: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (NRAL 2)*, 1994, colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 105 x 158 cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

outsiders, and according to [the outsiders'] political persuasions"[5] – just as the working class has predominantly been *represented* and *judged* by outsiders, usually the middle class. Thus, considering the impact that representations of the working poor have, and taking into account how they are ideologically appropriated by outsiders, this essay will look at two examples of artists from working-class backgrounds representing their own communities through photography: Richard Billingham's series *Ray's a Laugh* (1996) and LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of the Family* (2001–2014). I will first outline how the representation of the lower classes in the second half of the twentieth century is intertwined with photographs of social housing communities in contemporary art, as their image becomes a dominant mode of representing the "former" working class under deindustrialized late capitalism.[6] I deploy the term "feminization" of labor, coined by Guy Standing, to explore how it ties into traditional notions of gender roles, outlining why it is often used synonymously with "precarization."[7] The paper will then focus on how deindustrialization and this precarization of labor since the 1970s are reflected in representations of gender in the photography of social housing communities, before going into a detailed analysis of exemplary images from Frazier and Billingham's respective series. Finally, I will conclude with how both artists deal with the identity of the former working class from the inside, and how their photographs show the decline of the blue-collar cities and social housing communities in which they grew up.

Deindustrialization, social housing, and the image of the working poor

Fig. 2: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (RAL 35)* , 1994, C-print, 105 x 158 cm, colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 105 x 158 cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

During the first half of the twentieth century, whether in the form of council housing towers in the UK or public housing projects in the US, such homes were presented as the residences of the deserving, working poor. At the end of the century, however, social housing in both countries came to be seen as something run down by its undeserving, benefit-claiming tenants.[8] This shift in perception, predominately manifested in reality TV programs, is a result of the moving of industrial production to the global south and the (neo-)conservative politics of the Reagan-Thatcher era. The same welfare states which had been holding liberal Western democracies together – and for whose promises an earlier generation of workers denounced rebellion – had been dismantled.[9] This process coincided with the working class being rendered precarious by capital. As Aaron Benanav asserts, "the advent of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state [had] made it possible for employers to undermine workers' benefits, working conditions, job protections, and union organizations,"[10] resulting in the increased probability of unemployment, extended periods spent searching for jobs, and the greater likelihood of the unemployed having to accept jobs with worse working conditions.

Though initially used to describe the quantitative increase of women participating in the workforce, the "feminization of labor," according to Standing, encapsulates this era of flexibility, insecurity, and precariousness, "in which many more men as well

as women [were] pushed into precarious forms of labor."[11] As a result of post-war austerity policies, more women had been forced into the labor market so as to support their households with additional income. Without entitlements, women were forced to accept precarious forms of work, being obliged to do essentially any income-earning work they could get.[12] These jobs would usually entail unskilled labor, irregular working hours, and low wages. The subsequent spread of these types and conditions of labor, perceived to have been endured predominantly by women, while employment traditionally associated with men – craft-based, regular, unionized – decreased, is thereby referred to as the feminization of labor.[13] In the neoliberal western state, the notion of labor as a male-dominated domain was therefore undermined, as precarious short-term work replaced industrial labor, increasing the number of marginalized and economically oppressed people. Standing lists a number of factors which foster(ed) this development toward increased income insecurity, among them global trade and the moving of production facilities to countries with low labor costs. i.e. fewer workers' rights.[14] He also stresses the impact which the erosion of the legitimacy of welfare systems – caused by loss of faith in the "redistributive welfare state" and the rejection of Keynesianism – had, leading to the privatization of social protection.[15]

In the UK, the Thatcher and later the neoliberal New Labour governments pressured councils into selling their estates, yet did not subsidize or build nearly enough alternatives. The few properties that remained state-owned after privatization and the Right to Buy policy of the 1980 Housing Act were prioritized for those most in need. Thus, housing estates came to be seen as a last resort for those who could not afford to live anywhere else.[16]

The negative image associated with council hosing at the end of the century was also fostered by a change in its architectural form. In the first half of the twentieth century, council housing

consisted of individual terraced brick houses, but after World War II there was a move toward concrete high-rise estates, which were in many cases of lower quality and poorly maintained. The estates were treated as a "social dumping ground,"[17] which in turn generated highly segregated cities where "large chunks of society simply don't mix with people from council estates,"[18] as Owen Jones argues. Convincingly, he further points out that:

> the only interaction many have with them is through TV screens and newspapers, as larger-than-life, intentionally comic characters [...] become the whole reality. There aren't programmes portraying normal people on council estates just getting on with their lives [...]. There is, however, an ample amount of media coverage and reality TV shows dedicated to hunting out the most extreme examples to pass them off as the tip of the iceberg: the feckless, the workshy, the scrounging.[19]

Likewise, in the US, where, even at their peak, social housing programs had never been as extensive as in the UK, reactionary politics and austerity economics dismantled the frugal welfare state that had been built since Roosevelt's New Deal. During the 1980s, Reagan's austerity government dramatically defunded the Housing and Urban Development department in favor of the military budget. Diminished federal funding and limited property tax income for cities whose wealthier citizens had moved to the suburbs, combined with Reagan's push for a free and deregulated property market, led to a decrease in low-cost rental units – from 6.5 to 5.6 million. However, the number of people eligible for social housing increased from 6.3 to 8.9 million during that time, leaving 3.3 million people on the waiting list, many of them homeless. Furthermore, Reagan shamelessly used the stigmatization of unemployed workers for his reactionary politics, coining the term "welfare queen," painting a picture of

"the undeserving poor" ostensibly exploiting the welfare system.[20]

As sociologist Imogen Tyler outlines, during this period photographic representations of social housing communities became synonymous with depictions of the working poor:

> The council estate became metonymic shorthand for this 'new class of problem people', and the poverty associated with these places was imagined as a self-induced pathological condition. [...] It was by stigmatising and blaming the deficient subjectivities of the workless that New Labour was able to reconfigure poverty as a matter of choice and champion hard-working families in place of the working poor. [...] At the same time the discourses of meritocracy and choice that saturated public culture and policy documents functioned as an alibi for economic inequalities by 're-branding them as deserved'.[21]

Depictions of post-Reagan and Thatcher social housing communities thus appear decidedly stigmatizing; they coincide with the surge of reality television shows in the late 1990s portraying the redundant working class as the socially abject, the undeserving poor, and long-term unemployed, who exploited the welfare state while not adhering to neoliberal notions of self-improvement. Concomitantly with the so-called feminization of labor, a noticeable shift transpired – from the representation of a working class characterized by male manual labor in the factory to an underclass comprised of the post-industrial unemployed living in social housing.[22] In consequence, images of the working poor carry severe ideological potential: having the potential to be and having been instrumentalized by reactionary politics. The representation of these communities, then, needs to be discussed carefully, including in the contemporary art discourse.

As Lawler argues, the devaluation of the working class is tied to a narrative of decline correlating with the "heightened association of the feminine with the contemporary working class."[23]

This feminization and, hence, precarization of labor intersects with representations of gender in post-industrial working-class communities.

The post-industrial gender roles of neoliberal labor

Fig. 3: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (RAL 11)* , 1994, colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 80 x 120 cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

The identity of working-class women is particularly precarious and frequently overlooked in narratives and research on the impact of deindustrialization on communities, given that they face both classist and sexist discrimination.[24] Femininity as a construct was and still is affiliated with upper-class habitus and the ideal characteristics of the "lady."[25] As Beverley Skeggs explains, it is "a category of pure, white, heterosexuality, later translated into the ideal for middle-class women."[26] This middle-class categorization stands in opposition to the mapping of "working-class women, who, against the frailty of middle-class women, were coded as inherently healthy, hardy, and robust – often masculinized – whilst also, paradoxically, [being] a source of infection and disease."[27] While there are, of course, other concepts and ideals of femininity aside from this white middle-class one, the stigmatization of working-class women occurs through their failure to adhere to this bourgeoise ideal. It is this same ideal that lower-class women are expected to strive toward through neoliberal modes of self-improvement, restraint, and conspicuous consumption.

Derrick Price describes how the need for female manual labor at the end of the nineteenth century stood in stark contrast to this fashionable ideal of womanhood and prevented working-

class women from attaining a characteristically feminine appearance.[28] One could even argue that it was because of this ideal that female workers were not visually represented in documentary photography, even as female employment increased at the turn of the century.[29] Steve Edwards argues that this only changed in the 1960s and 70s with neo-avant-garde leftist photography and the women's movement, which focused on the struggles that arose from working in the formal economy in addition to the reproductive labor undertaken at home. This shift can be seen in the lens-based practices of artists such as Jo Spence, Martha Rosler, and Helke Sander. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that the stigmatization of lower-class women as distinct and excluded from middle-class femininity prevails. Spence, in particular, has written extensively about the struggle of working-class femininity – including from her own experience as a "socially mobile" woman – and suggests that "for working-class women to reject femininity carries a greater risk, as it pushes against the double forces of sexism and also the entrenched classism of both genders."[30] Ironically, the working conditions that have been identified as feminized would, to an extent, be compatible with the bourgeoise ideal of femininity, i.e. informal work at home, which won't earn a woman enough money to actually achieve independence. Female gender roles are thus, unsurprisingly, not challenged through the precarization of labor, which can be seen as an inherently patriarchal process to begin with.

Conversely, as Norbert Trenkle points out, working-class masculinity had been so closely tied to the image of the manual, industrial, heroic worker that deindustrialization and the loss and outsourcing of the majority of such male-associated jobs to the global south led to a crisis of masculinity.[31] The rise in informal activities, sub-contracting, and part-time and home-based work – derogatively termed the "feminization of labor" – reflects

a change in employment, as "irregular conditions once thought to be the hallmark of women's 'secondary' employment have become widespread for both sexes."[32] The image of the working-class male deteriorates into that of unemployment, redundancy, or "social surplus," intensifying "anxieties about gender norms."[33] The feminization of the (former) working class is thus twofold, juxtaposing the ostensible impossibility of working-class femininity: on the one hand, the working conditions of the low-paid jobs which replaced union tariff contracts are increasingly precarious and thus "feminized"; on the other hand, and arguably as a result of the first point, the image of this (former) working class is also feminized, as the manual labor that characterized working-class masculinity is supplanted by domesticity and/or chronic illness as a result of their hard work. In the following, I will look at how the socio-economic impact of deindustrialization on gender performance is reflected in the work of Richard Billingham and LaToya Ruby Frazier.

Class and gender in Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* and Frazier's *The Notion of the Family*

Even though *Ray's a Laugh* and *The Notion of the Family* deal with similar topics, the two series have never been discussed in the same context.[34] Both Frazier and Billingham come from working-class backgrounds, growing up in social housing in cities once defined by industrial production, photographing their communities and even their own families. One has to acknowledge that Billingham is a white man taking pictures of his white family, while Frazier is photographing a majority-black community. Still,

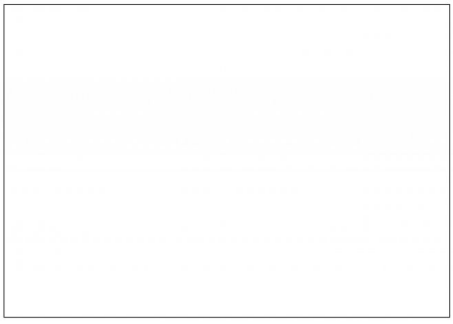

Fig. 4: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom Relaxing My Hair*, 2005, gelatin silver print. Gallery/artist declined request to publish, but see HERE.

in their comparative analysis of Frazier's and Chris Killip's work, Walter Benn Michaels and Daniel Zamora make an important point that is also applicable here:

> Of course, both Britain and the United States are racialized societies, and although Killip's white people are obviously not the beneficiaries of white racism, Frazier's black people are certainly among its victims. So why doesn't the difference matter? Because what both the aesthetics and the politics of these pictures are trying to capture is the political economy of deindustrialization—not the distinctive pathos that attaches to those relegated to the bottom rungs of the class structure but the structure itself.[35]

Like Frazier and Killip, Billingham's photographs deal with the effects of deindustrialization on his community. His and Frazier's work does not follow the neoliberal politics of "poverty porn." Looking at the immediate context of their work, created through exhibitions, photobooks, and interviews, Frazier and Billingham demonstrate that the living conditions of the communities they photograph – i.e. their own communities – are not a vague tragedy but the direct result of structural inequalities caused by global capitalism. They do not portray human suffering; their subject is class. Hence, the black and the white communities in Frazier's and Billingham's work are united in their experience of deindustrialization and subsequent development – from working-class communities to becoming members of the working poor. This is not to say that there are no crucial differences between the US and the UK in this regard, or that the issues such communities face are not intersectional and therefore always also questions of racism, but only that these will not be the main focus of this specific paper.

In *Ray's a Laugh*, Billingham captures the life of his family in their high-rise council flat in Birmingham, into which they had to move after his father, Ray, was made redundant from his job as a machinist. Not having applied for unemployment benefits, the

family soon ran out of money and had to sell their terraced house before being rehoused by the council in a tower block estate. Once a prestigious location for car manufacturers, Birmingham went through the same notorious downward spiral of deindustrialization and privatization that many industrial cities in the north of England went through in the 1980s.[36] Over the twentieth century, many council towers were densely built in Birmingham's city center, replacing its industrial slums. Once the wealth of industry had disappeared, factories were abandoned, and wealthier families moved to the suburbs. The inner city came to be characterized by urban blight and the brutalist high-rises that housed the now-redundant working class. Today, things seem to be looking up in Birmingham. Intense regeneration (or rather gentrification) programs aim to turn the city into a new hub for knowledge-based services and hi-tech engineering; nevertheless, the "skills gap among its large, redundant industrial workforce that hampers its renewed enterprise culture"[37] remains.

Frazier's work, *The Notion of the Family*, is set in her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock suffered the same fate as most Rust Belt cities, such as Detroit or Flint, Michigan. The town was the location of Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, and just as in Flint, the population not only lost their jobs because of deindustrialization, but are still suffering the long-term effects of air and water pollution. While Braddock's steel mill is still in operation, white flight, urban blight, and a vicious cycle of public and private disinvestment have dismantled a community of over 20,000 in the 1930s down to just 2,000 today. Braddock's only hospital – one of the biggest employers in the

Fig. 5: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom After Surgery*, 2009, gelatin silver print. Gallery/artist declined request to publish, but see HERE (1:50). Also, in a similar vein, see LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom's Spine Surgery*, 2008

city – was privatized in 2010. When it was deemed ostensibly unprofitable soon after, it was demolished and forced to make way for new real estate projects.[38] *The Notion of the Family* focuses on the Frazier's "nuclear family, anchored through three generations of black Braddock women: her Grandmother Ruby, who witnessed Braddock's prosperous years in the 1930s; her mother, who witnessed its decline in the 1960s; and Frazier herself, who grew up in the 1980-90s in an economically depressed and largely forgotten town."[39]

It is essential to understand the contexts of these projects: both series have been predominantly received through their publication as photobooks, but while *Ray's a Laugh* consists purely of Billingham's pictures of his family, intersected only by images of their pets and the birds outside, Frazier contextualizes the portraits of her family with lyrical texts intertwining her own story with that of Braddock's, along with photographs of the town – some resembling those of the abandoned buildings for which Detroit has become famous. Billingham's decidedly more "spontaneous" and colorful pictures, which had initially been intended as studies for paintings, were "an attempt to comprehend myself and them [his family] more fully."[40] In contrast, Frazier's more somber black-and-white compositions appear more deliberately staged, intended to document and shed light on the history of her community. Frazier's subjects actively face the camera; they are aware of being photographed. In Billingham's images, however, the presence of the photographer is almost undetectable. The pictures seem to be incredibly "candid" and "intimate," providing the insight that only a family member would have. Yet Billingham neither hands control of the camera to his family, nor appears in any of the pictures. This essential self-distancing from the scene, in my opinion, reinforces the narrative that underlies *Ray's a Laugh*: a young man who wanted to get out of that council flat. Billingham's desire to leave behind his family's precarious

working conditions is reflected in the photographs of birds and views through a window, which interlude the family photographs and attest to a sense of longing. Frazier, on the other hand, acts in a highly collaborative manner, with her and her mother taking turns to photograph one another. She not only puts herself in her work but also recognizes her mother as an artist. The prerogative of the photographs and the narrative of her book are decidedly activist, with the aim of combating stereotypes of people like her and her mother, "who are often depicted in the media in the most dehumanizing way as poor, worthless, or on welfare. We [Frazier and her mother] find a way to deal with these types of problems on our own through photographing each other."[41]

Since femininity is understood in this essay as a middle-class construct, the artist's intention and class background and the photographs' reception among the public and art critics must be considered. As Frances Hatherley points out, reviews of Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* use particularly deprecating vocabulary to describe depictions of his mother as loud and tacky, therefore "becoming moral judgements around who deserves to be seen and exist publicly."[42] This reveals that the reception of these photographs focuses solely on classist, negative stereotypes of the lower classes, constructing them as tasteless, excessive, and lacking control, resulting in utter disgust toward "fat working-class femininity."[43] Even if not authored exclusively by members of the middle class, this disgust produces a middle-class art history, taking middle-class identity (and, in this particular case, middle-class femininity) as the standard. As Hatherley notes:

> To see a photograph of a woman who is not young, neither conventionally beautiful nor feminine, without perfect makeup, is rare in art and visual culture. A photograph of a working-class woman exposing her socially defined flaws in public in the media, however, is not rare, but ordinarily, it

> would be displayed in order to shame the woman for 'letting herself go', for looking a mess in public or for ageing badly, etc.[44]

In my opinion, Hatherley is generalizing too much here. Considering the work of Spence and Frazier – to name just two artists – photographs of women in art and visual culture that go against norms do exist. What is more important to point out here is the framing of such images in an art context instead of "the media." The work of Billingham, Frazier, Spence, and others contributes an image of women to the discourse contrary to the bourgeois feminine ideal, giving working-class women representation in visual culture. However, they do so in the "safe space" of the art world. Out of context, these images could easily be instrumentalized in order to class-shame their subjects.

Figs 6-7: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Epilepsy Test, from the *Landscape of the Body* series, 2011, gelatin silver print. Gallery/artist declined request to publish, but see HERE

However, using an auto-ethnographic approach, Hatherley argues that Billingham's portraits of his mother are empowering because they show a woman who is neither trying nor aspiring to adhere to middle-class, bourgeois standards of femininity.[45] I do not wish to undermine Hatherley's very personal approach, so while I agree that such photographs, if presented in a class-conscious context, can aim to subvert a feminine ideal, this is, in my opinion, a problematic assumption. I would argue that not aspiring to the middle-class feminine ideal would almost entail freeing oneself from the patriarchal hegemonic pressure innate in the feminine ideal. I find it highly debatable whether this is as easily done as Hatherley makes it seem, considering the pressure women experience regarding their appearance is deeply rooted in the "profound discipline and regulation" of patriarchal domination, entrapping "women in narrow and restrictive norms

of femininity, [thus contributing] to their subjugation."[46] I would suggest that *even* Billingham's mother Liz's performance of working-class femininity is indebted to a bourgeois notion of the feminine ideal – her gold rings, her smudged makeup, the décor, the floral prints of both her dress and the wallpaper – but that she lacks the cultural capital to "pull them off" and have this performance read as middle-class feminine. In *Untitled (NRAL 2)* (1994) [Fig. 1], the contrast becomes particularly apparent in the eyes of a viewer with cultural capital, who might see Liz's pose as an allusion to the iconography of the reclining Venus. Still, the depiction of non-middle-class women is valuable in its own right. While certain contexts may well lead to Liz being judged negatively, in the "right" context these photographs have the potential to not only reveal the constructed-ness of the feminine ideal but also to showcase alternative expressions of feminine identity.

Billingham's mother not only breaks with the upper-class definition of femininity that is equated with universal expectations of women, but even breaks with concepts of working-class femininity, which are predominantly based on submissiveness to a husband. In opposition to clichéd narratives of working-class women, Liz is not submissive to Ray – on the contrary, Billingham repeatedly notes that she was physically abusive and violent toward Ray, reversing the stereotype of the abusive husband, as multiple pictures in *Ray's a Laugh* show both her and Ray with bloody noses [Fig. 2]. In *Untitled (RAL 11)* (1994), Liz is waving her fist [Fig. 3], her large frame overpowering Ray's skinny body, the meticulously placed porcelain figurines glistening in the background contrasting with the brutal scene in the foreground.

The idiosyncrasy of working-class women is also apparent in Frazier's *The Notion of the Family*. Here, however, the non-adherence to middle-class femininity and beauty is complicated, as Frazier and her family are Black and therefore already

excluded from bourgeois femininity, characterized as white. Multiple photographs show mother and daughter "relaxing" (chemically straightening) their hair or wearing wigs to hide its natural texture [Fig. 4]. Apart from this very obvious non-adherence to standards of beauty, which, as in Billingham's pictures, is also apparent in décor and clothing, the question of femininity in Frazier's work can also be examined in the legacy of works such as Spence's, which broach the issue of society's gaze on the sick, "abject" female, making her "culturally unacceptable body visible."[47]

Linking the story of familial illness to her hometown's industrial past, Frazier connects sickness directly to post-industrial precarity, conservative politics, and the dismantling of the New Deal welfare state. All the women in Frazier's family, herself included, have suffered from the long-term effects of the air and water pollution caused by the steel industry in Braddock: her mother and grandmother both had cancer, while Frazier herself suffers from lupus. In *The Notion of the Family*, Frazier portrays her and her mother's sick bodies. *Mom After Surgery* (2009) [Fig. 5] shows the artist's mother leaning over the bathroom sink, her bra pushed down to expose bruises and scars. She looks exhausted, and tears have smudged her eye makeup. Marked by illness, her body does not adhere to any middle-class standards of beauty; however, Frazier also stresses their sickness not just as human suffering but as a result of pollution, resulting from systemic discrimination and disregard for the consequences of treating people as a disposable resource.

In *Landscape of the Body* (*Epilepsy Test)* (2011) [Figs. 6–7], the artist juxtaposes a picture of her mother undergoing medical testing with a photograph of the demolished Braddock Hospital. The hospital gown exposes her mother's back; a bunch of wires attached to her head hang down the side of her body. They mirror the exposed wires and rebars of the torn-down hospital, conflating the clinic – demolished due to red-lining, profit-

oriented management, and insufficient investment in the post-industrial impoverished community – with her mother's ill body, which is also the product of a defunded welfare state and capital investment more concerned with profit than people's health.[48]

Apart from this complicated, precarious, feminine identity, what also becomes apparent in both series is the conflict between masculinity and femininity which the post-worker environment of the social housing estate presents. Even though their residents' real-life experiences may differ individually, such housing complexes are not predominantly perceived as a communal space but as "one of confinement."[49] As the domestic is generally perceived as feminine space – even though predominantly designed by men – this feminine connotation inevitably stands in contrast to the post-industrial male worker: in these images, the former epitome of masculinity and the working-class is depicted as having been made redundant and thus dependent on welfare, confined to the social housing flat as an unemployed person. Suppose we thus acknowledge that globalization and post-industrialization in the US and UK have led to the collapse of working-class masculinity, which becomes confined to the feminine domestic domain of the social housing estate. In that case, as Trenkle has argued, one recognizes the identity of working-class men to be in crisis. Frazier encapsulated this in her commentary on *The Notion of Family*: "Our husbands, brothers, sons, and boyfriends were relegated to menial wage jobs, underemployment, or layoffs.

Fig. 8: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (RAL 16)*, 1990, colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 105 x 158cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Undermined by the mainstream economy, social isolation kept them company."[50]

A second photograph [Fig. 9], taken a year later, after Liz and Ray had reunited, shows Billingham's father in front of a decorative cabinet in Liz's new flat, a decidedly feminine space which Liz had created for herself: her gray cat almost blends in with the little dolls, as the porcelain figurines on the shelves mix into the lavishly decorated wallpaper. All in all, the kind of kitsch, excessive decoration rendered as tasteless and decidedly working-class feminine. Ray is looking away from the camera, wearing a gray suit jacket, whose connotation with modern masculinity contrasts with his post-worker identity on the one hand and the feminine floral ornaments on the other. He seems lost and out of place both in the jacket and this overwhelmingly feminine domestic space, unsure of what to do with himself. Angela Dimitrakaki's analysis of Anu Pennanen and Stéphane Querrec's *Stand! Debout!* (2013) can also be applied more broadly to the images of post-industrial masculinity discussed here: "the post-worker, exists in a *mise en scène* of stark desolation where the past masculinity of collective struggle has generated a singularity, [the post-worker], unable to join a new collective identity – there is, virtually, none in sight."[53]

Fig. 9: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (RAL 50)*, 1994, colour photograph mounted on aluminium, 80 x 120 cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

This isolated post-worker is captured in Billingham's photographs of his father Ray, who, when made redundant from his job as a machinist, started drinking heavily. Billingham's portraits of his father convey a strong sense of fragility. Billingham recounts how, once his parents had separated, Ray only drank and slept, neither leaving the flat nor even his room. In visual culture, this kind of confinement to the home is usually

attributed to women. The photographs, which "draw our attention to the edge of the domestic space, but instead of offering a view of outside deliberately frustrate it,"[51] reflect this confinement. In *Untitled* [Fig. 8], Ray is sitting on the side of his bed, staring at a bottle of homebrew on the floor, with the picture's focus lying solely on the rough texture of his sweater and a silver key on the wooden dressing table, right next to a pile of toast which someone must have placed there in the hope that he would eat it. As in most of the pictures, he seems drained, his gray hair tousled as if he had just woken up. Newbury notes that this representation of the post-worker in the domestic sphere is particularly striking because it stands in such stark contrast to the image of working-class masculinity, which was always symbolized by physical work.[52] The image of former working-class masculinity thus stands out for its omission of work. Newbury notes this only briefly, but it is evident that the domesticated post-worker embodies the void which deindustrialization and globalization have left – a social surplus.

Fig. 10: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Gramps on His Bed, 2003, gelatin silver print. Gallery/artist declined request to publish, but see HERE

The Notion of the Family tells a story of masculinity in old age: Frazier's step-great-grandfather, who retired from his job at Carnegie's steel mill in Braddock in the 1980s.[54] While Frazier does not touch upon whether he suffered from addiction, as Billingham's father did, her photographs still show a fragile older man who endured the long-term effects of exposure to toxic substances at work. His stepdaughter, Frazier's grandmother Ruby, cared for him until his death, taking on the role of head of the family. In *Gramps on His Bed* (2003) [Fig. 10]. Frazier's step-great-grandfather sits slumped on the side of his bed, a somewhat incongruous picture of a semi-nude woman hanging

over his head – perhaps the last remnant of macho masculinity in the room. Unlike Billingham's father Ray, Gramps is looking straight into the camera, his expression endlessly tired, a walker placed in front of him pointing to his immobility, while the nightstand littered with pill bottles suggests the impact that steelwork has had on his health. His precarious health condition and need for care become even more apparent in a second picture from the series, *Grandma Ruby Wiping Gramps* (2003) [Fig. 11], depicting an intimate scene of care as Ruby wipes Gramps's behind. Concerning these photographs, Frazier notes that:

> Gramps always wore his suit and bow tie with a fedora, suspenders and alligator shoes [...] Once he retired, he collected his pension. He always voted Republican. African American men like Gramps worked hard labor in high temperatures, tearing down and rebuilding furnaces, cleaning up spilt metal and slag. Once hard labor consumed his body, it was discarded and thrown away. I couldn't take the pounding and screaming any longer, nor the stench of human decay.[55]

In Gramps's case, his domestic confinement was not caused by job loss resulting from deindustrialization – he had retired before he could have been made redundant. Rather, it is due to the long-term effects of industrial labor, the effect of deindustrialization on the local economy and care system. His immobility and dependency on Ruby are caused by the toll of physical labor on his body, an activity that had defined his identity as masculine now resulting in his weak, dependent,

Fig. 11: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby Wiping Gramps*, 2003, gelatin silver print, Gallery/artist declined request to publish, but see HERE (0:39)

"feminized" state.

It is therefore interesting that while working-class women are denied femininity as a habitual and physical ideal, the disenfranchised working-class end up being touted as feminized not only through the precarization of their working conditions but also through the crisis of working-class masculinity brought about by deindustrialization. This conflict once again reveals how structural issues of sexism are intertwined with classist stereotyping.[56]

Conclusion

The works of Billingham and Frazier offer just two examples of an increasing number of working-class artists photographing their *own* communities,[57] pointing the camera at their *own* social backgrounds, instead of middle-class artists going on poverty safaris, aiming their cameras downward.[58] In both series discussed here, the socio-economic background of the artists has a determining impact on the reception of their work. Even if we argue, as Susan Sontag and Steve Edwards have, that the intention of a photographer is not inherently linked to a picture, and that pictures are easily decontextualized, it is still important to talk about the fact that Frazier and Billingham are (or rather were, prior to becoming successful artists) themselves part of the working poor. As Spence convincingly argues: "The fact that I was born working-class [...] determines my underlying attitudes to everything, including photography."[59] She further suggests photography such as Frazier's and Billingham's is different to the social documentary of the Farm Security Administration or the neoliberal documentary of Sebastião Salgado, because "those who have their roots in a neighbourhood cannot afford to photograph people as mere 'things'. They still have to live with each other after the pictures have been produced"[60] – opposed, of course, to commissioned, "visiting" photographers, who go back to their agencies, clients,

and collectors once a job is finished. Billingham subverts the tradition of the social documentary predominantly through his biographic relation to his subjects and the fly-on-the-wall-style images that result from this intimate connection. Frazier goes even further against this notion – in her highly collaborative practice, she not only includes herself in her work but embraces her mother as an active, creative agent.[61]

I have argued that there has been a significant shift in photography representing the lower classes, from hard-working blue-collar communities to an image of the undeserving poor, reflecting the precarization of labor in post-industrial neoliberal economies. It has also become clear that such images need to be considered with a high degree of sensitivity, as they can be and have been used by reactionary politics to stigmatize and shame the working poor for allegedly exploiting the welfare state. When contextualized in photobooks and exhibitions, such images – especially when taken by artists who are from the same socio-economic background as their subjects – have the potential not just to unveil human suffering but to reveal structural problems: globalization, gentrification, post-industrialization, and the dismantling of welfare. Even as they exist in an art context, the images discussed here do not necessarily try to evoke the sympathy that Sontag refers to or the disgust Lawler writes about: they provoke frustration or even anger with a system which keeps failing its most vulnerable, therefore depicting class instead of poverty or human struggle.

While Billingham's photographs of his family do depict the impact of deindustrialization and reactionary politics on the physical reality of the working class and its subsequent unravelling into a precariat, his work does not offer or imagine resistance to the forces of neoliberal decline. He does not expect his pictures to directly impact the lives of people living in similar circumstances to his family. Instead of trying to change, shame, or reform such communities, they represent communities

with little to no agency in capitalist hegemony, marginalized even geographically through gentrification and thus confined to tower blocks on the outskirts of the city.[62] While Frazier also shows the disenfranchisement of the working class, her work is decidedly activist, collaborating with a variety of communities with similar industrial histories to combat their dominant image in the media. She proclaims that because "people think that families struggling economically do not add value to society, it became about making a family album of images – day to day – that defies what I see in the media."[63] She also stresses that *The Notion of the Family* is:

> more than an art book or a book of photographs. It is a history book that lends itself to art history; the history of photography; American history; American studies; women, gender, and sexuality studies; comparative literature studies; health studies; social and economic studies; labor studies; race relation studies; and more. It is my testimony for social justice.[64]

The works of both Frazier and Billingham show the decline and precarization of the working class and reflect its impact on gender performance. I have outlined how the feminization (i.e. precarization) of labor becomes visible in the representation of gender in their work. As income insecurity and male domesticity become apparent, the photographs of both artists reveal a conflict between working-class women being denied femininity and the concurrent feminization of working-class masculinity. Thus, this analysis exposes how inherent sexism, intertwined with structural classist discrimination and stigmatization, are present in Frazier's and Billingham's photographs.

While I am of course aware that photographs of the working poor may not be able to overthrow the capitalist class system, they can serve as counter-representations: provoking viewers to scrutinize mainstream assumptions, stereotypes, and images of the lower classes living in social housing communities, and to question the meritocracy ingrained in the representation of these

communities in the media. In the work of artists who are themselves from working-class backgrounds, this disruptive potential is especially powerful. As Frazier so fittingly says: "My mind was totally deceived and deluded with negative images depicted in the media of myself, of my family, and my community. But now my images can change that."[65]

1 LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2008), 153.

2 Darren Newbury, "Photography and the Visualization of Working Class Lives in Britain," *Visual Anthropology Review* vol. 15, no. 1 (1999), 40.

3 Ibid.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1986), 511.

5 Stephanie Lawler, "Heroic Workers and Angry Young Men: Nostalgic Stories of Class in England," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 17, no. 6 (2014), 702–703.

6 Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 162.

7 Guy Standing, "Global Feminization Through Flexible Labor: A Theme Revisited," *World Development* vol. 27, no. 3 (1999), 600.

8 Philip Kleinfeld, "The Slow Death of Council Housing in the UK," *Vice*, March 2, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/gqmab4/philip-kleinfeld-council-housing-planning-bill.

9 John Boughton and Jonn Elledge, "A Short History of Council Housing," June 21, 2019, in: *CityMetric*, produced by Nick Hilton, podcast, MP3 audio, 05:10–22:45, https://www.citymetric.com/skylines/podcast-short-history- council-housing-4655.

10 Aaron Benanav, "Precarity Rising," *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 15, 2015, https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/06/15/precarity-rising/.

11 Standing, "Global Feminization," 583.

12 Ibid., 584.

13 Ibid., 600.

14 See: Standing (1999, op. cit.) for a detailed account of the developments that caused these changes in working conditions.

15 Ibid., 584.

16 Boughton and Elledge, "A Short History of Council Housing."

17 Owen Jones, "Farewell, Shameless. Your heirs have work to do," *Independent*, May 24, 2013, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/farewell-shameless-your-heirs-have-work-to-do-8631498.html.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Gillian Brockwell, "She was stereotyped as 'the welfare queen'," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/05/21/she-was-stereotyped-welfare-queen-truth-was-more-disturbing-new-book-says/.

21 Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 162.

22 Lawler, "Heroic Workers and Angry Young Men," 702–703.

23 Ibid., 709.

24 Beverley Skeggs, "The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-recognition," *Women's Studies International Forum* vol. 24, no. 3 (2001), 297.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Derrick Price, "Photographing the Poor and the Working Classes," *Framework* no. 22/23 (1983), 23.

29 Ibid.

30 Jo Spence, "What Did You Do in the War, Mummy?," in: idem, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London: Routledge, 1995), 47; Frances Hatherley, "A Working-class Anti-Pygmalion Aesthetics of the Female Grotesque in the Photographs of Richard Billingham," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* vol. 25, no. 3 (2018), 359–362.

31 Norbert Trenkle, "The Rise and Fall of the Working Man: Toward a Critique of Modern Masculinity," in: *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, eds. Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown (Chicago: M-C-M' Publishing, 2014), 143–144.

32 Nazneen Kanji and Kalyani Menon-Sen, "What Does the Feminisation of Labour Mean for Sustainable Livelihoods?," International Institute for Environment and Development (2001), www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16608.

33 Angela Dimitrakaki, "Masculinity, Art, and Value Extraction," in: *A Companion to Feminist Art*, eds. Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 519; Neil Larsen et al., "Introduction," in: *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, op. cit., xxvi.

34 Karin Bareman, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Photography on the Verge of Catastrophe," *Foam*, July 15, 2015, https://www.foam.org/talent/spotlight/latoya-ruby-frazier-photography-on-the-verge-of-catastrophe.

35 Walter Benn Michaels and Daniel Zamora, "Chris Killip and LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Promise of a Class Aesthetic," *Radical History Review* no. 1 (2018), 25.

36 Anne Power, "How Birmingham got its groove back," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/oct/01/cities.regeneration.birmingham.

37 Ibid.

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40 "Richard Billingham," Saatchi Gallery, last modified May 9, 2019, https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard_billingham.htm.

41 LaToya Ruby Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures. Art21 'New York Close Up'," YouTube video, Art21, February 10, 2012, 02:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7-sB3juDJU&t=408s&ab_channel=Art21.

42 Hatherley, "A Working-class Anti-Pygmalion Aesthetics," 359.

43 Ibid., 363.

44 Ibid., 366.

45 Ibid., 367.

46 Ana Sofia Elias et al. *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 6–7.

47 Helen McGhie, "Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence: Monstrousness, Abjection & Female Identity," PhD diss., University of Sunderland, 2009, 6, 30.

48 Dean Daderko, "Upside Down, Left to Right," in: *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness*, ed. LaToya Ruby Frazier (Houston: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2019), 21.

49 Newbury, "Photography and the Visualization of Working Class Lives in Britain," 36.

50 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 40.

51 Newbury, "Photography and the Visualization of Working Class Lives in Britain," 36.

52 Ibid.

53 Dimitrakaki, "Masculinity, Art, and Value Extraction," 517.

54 Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 31.

55 Ibid.

56 While it is beyond the scope of this brief study, it will be valuable and necessary to further research how racist politics intertwine with these findings.

57 Or should we say that more people from such communities become professionalized artists?

58 Newbury, "Photography and the Visualization of Working Class Lives in Britain," 22.

59 Jo Spence, "Some Questions and Answers," in: *Jo Spence: Work*, eds. Paul Pieroni et al. (London: SPACE, 2012), 36.

60 Jo Spence, "The Politics of Photography," in: *Cultural Sniping*, op. cit., 35.

61 Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures," 00:19.

62 Lawler, "Heroic Workers and Angry Young Men," 709.

63 Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures," 01:53.

64 Frazier, *Notion Family*, 153.

65 Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures," 05:07.

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