

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

American, born Braddock, PA, 1982

A Message in Nestle Water Bottles from Shea Cobb, Amber Hasan, Macana Roxie and LaToya Ruby Frazier at Sussex Drive and West Pierson Road, Flint MI, 2017

Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches

Gift of Lynne Jacobs, 2018.5

To save money, city officials of Flint, Michigan temporarily switched the city's main water supply from Detroit's water system to the Flint River in April of 2014. This change was implemented without first developing infrastructure for testing and treating the water for hazardous contaminants, and as a result, the health and safety of Flint residents was compromised beyond recognition and repair. Not only is this historical event a glaring manifestation of necropolitics—enactments of power that determine who is “worthy” of life and who is “deserving” of death—it also illuminates the insidious nature of anti-Blackness and [disaster] capitalism, both of which position the marginalized experiences of Black people and working class, poor people outside of society's capacity for empathic concern and response.

In addition to its focus on this public health crisis as a violation against human life, this grayscale image by LaToya Ruby Frazier also highlights how strategic negligence impacts our already-imperiled environment. Produced alongside members of The Sister Tour (a community organization of Flint artists and activists), Frazier's photographic intervention magnifies the fact that millions of single-use plastic water bottles have been distributed to (and purchased by) residents of Flint in the ongoing wake of this catastrophe. In a compelling way, the four women in this photograph deploy this excess of plastic to stage an ironic and multilayered provocation via a commonly-used social media hashtag: #NOFILTER.

The ongoing water crisis in Flint reflects an enduring history of global violence that has structured an antagonistic relationship between Black people and water—the most essential element of our biological existence and our human experience. While the State of Michigan claims to have regulated contamination, residents of Flint continue to rely upon bottled water out of fear that whatever is flowing into their homes remains polluted with lead, fecal bacteria, and other life-threatening substances. Through this image, Frazier inserts incisive critiques of environmentalism into a visual and intellectual discourse that traditionally excludes the concerns and perspectives of Black citizens. Furthermore, she reminds us that public trust is fundamental to successful and ethical governance, with significant implications for the future and sustainability of our environment.

—Nnaemeka Ekwelum '23 PhD, African American Studies