

# LOST CONNECTION

Danny Wilcox Frazier's award winning images are a reflection of a world which is seldom seen but close to his own personal journey as **Sean Samuels** discovered when speaking with him.

Watching the wild horse race, youth rodeo, Oglala, Pine Ridge Reservation, 2011.



The images you see here should come with a warning. Immediately provocative, they may haunt you long after you have stopped looking at them. Thrown into a line-up of other documentary photographers' work, they are recognisable straightaway. Lyrical, engaging and foreboding all at once, they are a triumph of reportage and command me to find out more. The photographer has served his purpose. He has got me hooked and his obsession has become mine.

And it is an obsession. Look at the images again. Can you think of any other way the creator Danny Wilcox Frazier could capture such heartfelt intensity? Coming straight off the back of an all-night edit for a book he is working on, Frazier is proud to tell me that this vanishing world is where he is from. He left it once but soon returned, as the place was in his blood. "I spent my teenage years in a small town with just one desire – escape; which my wife and I eventually did when we moved to Nairobi for our undergraduate studies," he recalls. "We spent a year there; it turned out to be the most important thing I have done professionally. The journey woke me up to everything going on around me and how little I knew about myself, the world and my own community. It made me so much more aware of what we were surrounded by.

"When we moved back to the States and to Iowa, I had a better understanding of the place I was from and the issues in my home. I realised I didn't have to fly halfway around the world to better understand the condition of others, and I knew I would always be connected to the culture of the Midwest."

This understanding developed into what is now a long-term project for Frazier, who continues to travel the United States, spending extended periods of time with his subjects from marginalised communities, comprising people left in the wake of mass migrations who are struggling to maintain their way of life.

The previous night's edit was for a book required by the Aftermath Project for a grant he won in 2010. The grant is considered to be one of the most respected in America and is offered to

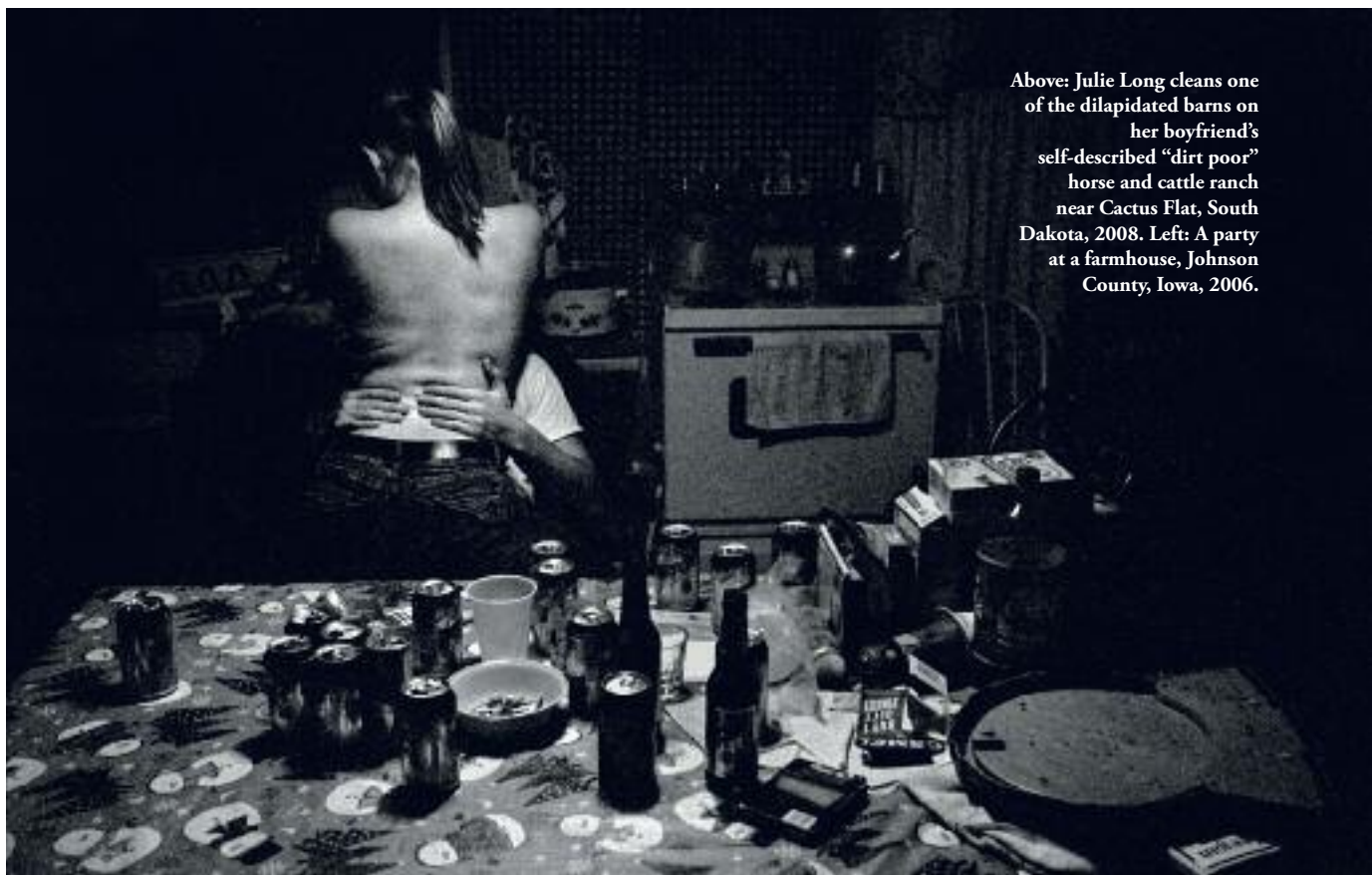
photographers by the non-profit group for stories on the effects of war. Every year the group publishes a book featuring the winning and final-place work. Frazier won the grant for the work he shot on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, which he states is the poorest region in the United States and the second poorest in the western hemisphere, behind Haiti.

"I never set out saying, 'I am going to cover this issue and spend the next couple of years doing one thing or another,'" he continues. "It was always about the emotional content for me. That is how I connect to a story. When you have that feeling you just work in a place until that emotion's gone and then you are done."

Pine Ridge represents the Great Sioux Nation's longstanding struggle to take back their homeland. A legal battle has been running with the US Government in the region since 1980, after the Supreme Court ruled that the Black Hills area had been taken illegally following the creation of treaties in the middle and latter 19<sup>th</sup> century. The battle still rages on today.

There is no doubt that winning the grant enabled Frazier to document the struggle as he saw it; although it is also highly likely that he would have continued on his own had he not won. Having served as a judge, however, he knows what juries are looking for. "There are a lot of good photographers out there doing amazing work, and winning grants is not easy," he says. "It's a crapshoot in many ways, which makes it even more important to show the judges you are really connected to the story you want to tell. When I have judged grants, if the pitch feels like a fishing expedition then those applications are usually the first to be thrown out. The person doesn't need to have taken any photos yet, but they need to show they are completely invested."

This is not the first time the Pine Ridge Reservation has been the focus of a story. I mention this to Frazier who, already familiar with the work, reveals he also knows the photographer in question, Aaron Huey. "I think the *Honor the Treaties* work that he and the artist Shepard Fairey are doing is great. In fact, I have



Above: Julie Long cleans one of the dilapidated barns on her boyfriend's self-described "dirt poor" horse and cattle ranch near Cactus Flat, South Dakota, 2008. Left: A party at a farmhouse, Johnson County, Iowa, 2006.



John and Julie Neumann along with John's first cousin, Colten Triebwasser (centre), have lunch before returning to work on the Neumann ranch near Cactus Flat, South Dakota, 2011.

one of the posters on the wall next to me right now. It's a great campaign."

Having photographed the reservation for the past six years, Huey teamed up with artists Shepard Fairey and Ernesto Yerena last year to create a poster campaign that would highlight the problems plaguing the people living there today. It has been a successful endeavour. The posters are all sold out and at the time of writing, their strategic placement is well underway across a number of cities in the US.

We also discuss *Out of Sight* by former Magnum photographer, Kent Klich, who created 12 portraits of homeless people asleep in Copenhagen between the autumn of 2007 and the spring of 2008. The images were then exhibited that summer in 12 places around the city, which the homeless subjects were known to frequent prior to their relegation.

"I love the idea of using campaigns to raise awareness," says Frazier. "This is a time of transition for traditional photojournalists and a good time for those who can see beyond the normal. Our audience is ever growing. Young people are so tuned in. They consume so much visual information online that people are drawn to and seek out truly unique work and truly unique voices. It's a great time to be doing what we do.

"It's not fun to be stressing about paying the bills, but this awareness can force you to be always thinking about how you can be working in a way that will draw people's attention to the issues that concern you. When I go to a place, if I connect to it, I want to return. It's then the place takes on a life of its own, which is when I no longer know the direction the project is going to take and my subjects lead me down these different paths that I perhaps hadn't previously thought about."

His human subjects are central to Frazier's imagery. Rather than focus on the changing face of the landscape and architecture so often visually associated with the urbanisation of cultures, he concerns himself with the effect this phenomenon is having on the people that don't want to move, or are unable to move for financial reasons.

"We might gain better access to healthcare, education and the commercial side of modernity,

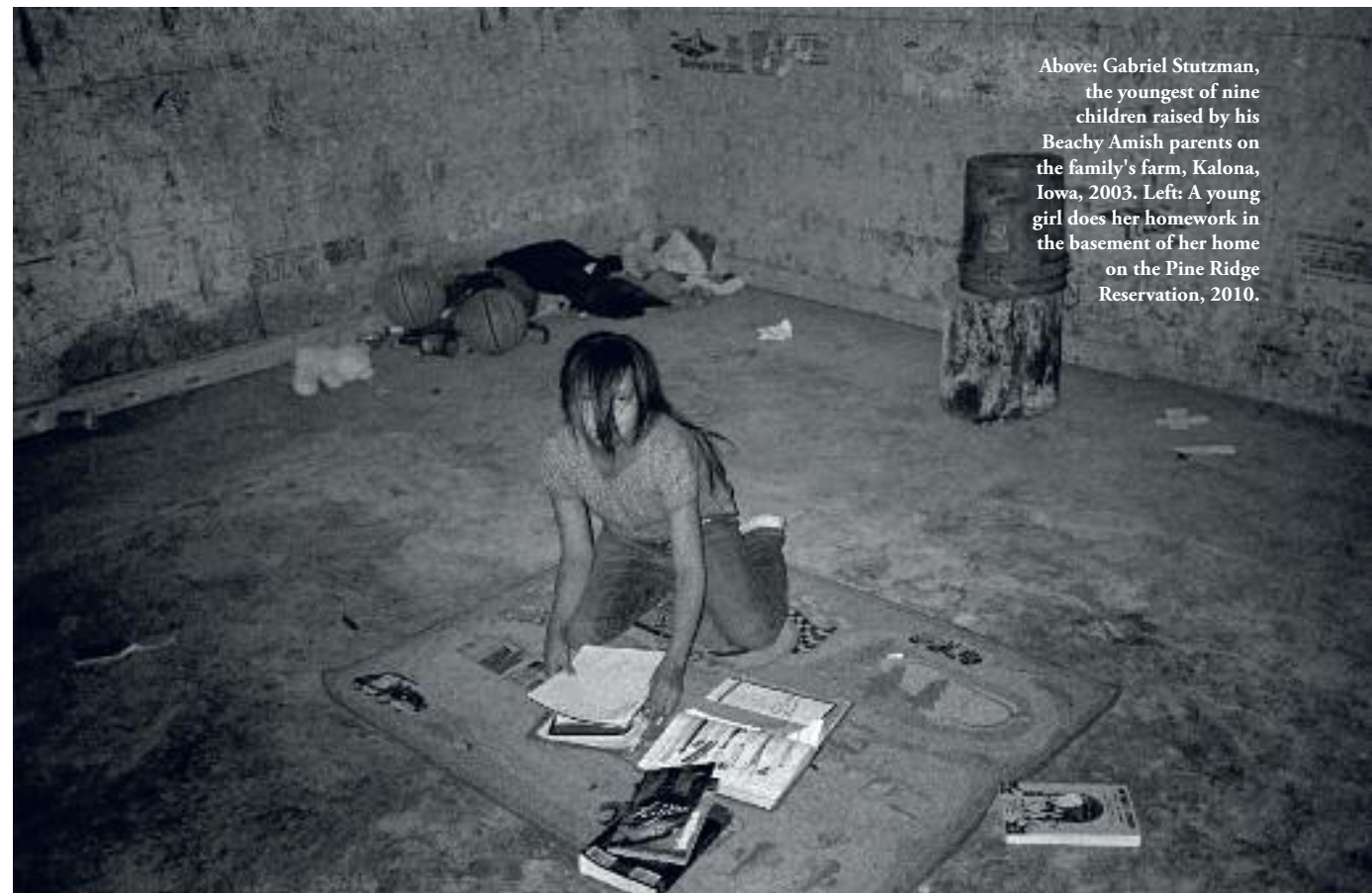
but what do we lose and what about the people left behind?" he questions. "They face a situation where they won't have access to these basic human rights. The census figures just out showed that we have lost four per cent of our population in rural America. We went from 20 per cent in 2000 to 16 per cent in 2010. That is a lot of people. What you see here is my macro view and contribution to this larger story. Are we really happy to leave behind this rural ghetto?"

It is at this point that the line goes dead and our telephone conversation is cut short. While trying to reconnect I look over Frazier's images again, trying to match the effort up with his biography, which lists freelance clients such as *The Washington Post Magazine* and *TIME*, *Newsweek* and *Der Spiegel* magazines; all of which are respectable, high-profile publications that keep him busy. They are not, however, the outlets for this kind of work they once were. No, Frazier has found acclaim elsewhere.

In 2006, Robert Frank selected his work for the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography and his work was published by the CDS and Duke University Press a year later. Images from the book *Driftless: Photographs from Iowa*, were then exhibited widely; including the European mecca for photojournalists, Visa pour l'Image in Perpignan, France and America's critically-acclaimed festival, LOOK3, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In 2007 and 2008, he was named a finalist for the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography, received prizes from Pictures of The Year International, National Press Photographers Association, Society of Professional Journalists and the China International Press Photo Contest. While all of these renowned festivals and competitions have done wonders for Frazier's profile, I wonder what else could be done to help to raise awareness and, in turn, demand for great reportage.

When at last we reconnect – the internet in his area is always dropping out – I return to innovation in the industry and ask Frazier what he would like to see. "More new ways to tell the stories,"



Above: Gabriel Stutzman, the youngest of nine children raised by his Beachy Amish parents on the family's farm, Kalona, Iowa, 2003. Left: A young girl does her homework in the basement of her home on the Pine Ridge Reservation, 2010.

he replies. “Okay, it’s tough to figure out a commercial model that helps you piece everything together financially, but you know it shouldn’t be easy. If it was easy everyone would be doing it; and you don’t want that. You want the clear and focused voice with clear intent that needs to be heard.

That’s how the great work rises up and has impact.

“Once photographers could rely on traditional mass media outlets to employ them all year long; this is how they derived their income. Today this has become difficult for photographers to maintain. I have never had that formula. I draw revenue from many different places which some traditional photojournalists might not. As long as you can figure out how to make a living then who cares if the traditional outlets aren’t using the stories in the same ways they once did? Why worry about the past? For me, knowing how to communicate the issue is the most important thing. You must figure out how *you* are going to do this and then not care about how anyone else does it.”

After meeting Brian Storm, founder of the multimedia production studio MediaStorm, at Visa pour l’Image, Frazier revisited the *Driftless* world; but from a different angle, choosing instead to shoot a film that would give the subjects of the photographs their own voice. “I had made my statement with *Driftless*. I won the First Book Prize from Duke. That was my goal with that body of work,” he recalls. “I had said everything I wanted to say about life in rural Iowa and rural America. It was my experience. But, I thought, why do I have to be done with the project? Shooting a film was a way to give the subjects an opportunity to speak out.”

This documentary, titled *Driftless: Stories from Iowa* – which incorporates stills – premiered in New York in 2009. It was nominated for an Emmy in 2010 and won a Webby for both Frazier and MediaStorm that year. “What I like about filmmaking is the collaborative effort bringing the team together,” says Frazier. “But you do have many other voices that need listening to in the creative process, as opposed to when making a still, when the decision is all yours as to what’s going to be in that frame. That said, moving image

has always influenced my stills work, and as another form of storytelling my aim with it is to find as large an audience as possible without having to give my work over to someone else to do with it as they please.

“For sure, now more than ever, you need a team to go out and get great stories if you want to keep the quality high, because one person cannot do it all. However, if I can maintain control I am doing what I set out to do in the first place; connect the audience to this culture, this place and this time.”

If you’ve turned on a television, computer, tablet or mobile phone to catch up on the news in the past year, no doubt you will have been hit by the wave of citizen journalism. Armed with little more than a mobile phone, witnesses on site at any number of world-changing events of late have become our eyes and ears as an incident unfolds. These ordinary, non-professional reporters have been taking stills, shooting video and tweeting all of this online for the world to see. Now that it is possible to consume and share information whenever we want and from wherever we are, it has become second nature to demand and source up-to-the-minute reports, and to voraciously consume these reports, no matter what the quality. Never has the phrase ‘f/8 and be there’ ever been more true. As a consumer, Frazier welcomes this new species of journalists. “I think it’s great. When it comes to crimes committed by authorities it’s so important to have a record, and it’s great these cell phones can shoot high-resolution images, so why not?”

As a photographer, however, he is all too aware of the effect it is having on his industry. “While I welcome it, it is challenging traditional journalism. That said, we still need trained reporters out there that an audience can trust. The professionals really under attack are the photo editors, who are being laid off. This is a concern because, as social media and the general public become an ever larger part of news gathering, we have to have people able to go through all of that information and find the best work that isn’t manipulated. The journalism industry really needs to look to see they haven’t eliminated so many photo editors that they can’t make sure of the quality and authenticity of



Above: A fashion shoot at the Packard Motor Car Company plant, Detroit, Michigan, 2009

all that new work.”

The age-old concern over image rights also troubles Frazier, who adamantly believes photographers are the only people that can ensure copyright remains with the author, so that person is able to generate revenue on that work at a later date. “In television, when the networks hire a freelance camera operator, they own everything. It’s been a learning curve for me to make sure some outlets realise that as photographers we own our copyright. We have to, because the initial payment isn’t always what is going to allow us to go on and do other socially-concerned work.”

By now it is perhaps no surprise that going forwards Frazier wants to continue to work in the Badlands, photographing the Pine Ridge Reservation. He wants to make a film on the region and develop a new book project called *Lost Nation*. “Those are the well-known stories. From there I am going to Iowa, or Fayette in Mississippi – places that not many people have

heard of – and taking a much bigger look at geographical and economic isolation all across America.”

This admission pleases me enormously. I am happy to hear that there are long-term documentary photographers such as Frazier shooting projects because they must; because they know the subject matter demands it. W. Eugene Smith – perhaps the greatest photographer ever – did it this way; often ignoring the demands of his assignments, much to the dismay of his editors, so he could give the issue before him the respect and gravitas it deserved.

Frazier, who studied the arts, trained in journalism and then filmmaking, is more than prepared for whatever lies ahead. He has the eye, the curiosity and the indomitable spirit to succeed in the New World Order. Perhaps it is he and not his images that should come with a warning.

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