

What Is
and What Can Be

**Women of Color
and the Struggle for Justice
in Cincinnati**

What is

home

community

ours

fair

action

?

Women of color provide important leadership in the city of Cincinnati, working in all sectors and volunteering their time for a better Cincinnati. Yet, as a group, they face a multitude of challenges, including an alarmingly high poverty rate, elevated rates of health problems, and other inequities.

The exhibition centers the voices and experiences of women of color in Cincinnati, sharing their visions of and hopes for the future. It draws on community-driven research coordinated by The Cincinnati Project at the University of Cincinnati.

www.thecincyproject.org/whatis

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PRESS / SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

“

Heyra

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a Brown woman,
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I use that as
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Avila

The Cincinnati Project

Archiving Activism

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Heyra Avila was born in Veracruz, Mexico. She moved with her family to Northern Kentucky when she was four years old. She studied in the Philosophy, Politics, and the Public Honors program at Xavier University. She is a DACA recipient, and has been involved in activism in support of immigrants, the undocumented community, and women since she was a young adolescent. She has been an invited speaker sharing her story and discussing the importance of immigrant rights at numerous events throughout Cincinnati. She runs a blog and YouTube channel, and is actively involved in YES: Youth Educating Society, a program of the Inter-community Justice and Peace Center intended to support and empower immigrant youth.

Avila

“Archiving Activism” is an ongoing project led by Dr. J.T. Roane, Assistant Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Dr. Anjali Dutt, Assistant Professor of Psychology, both at the University of Cincinnati. The project seeks to emphasize, amplify, and digitally archive the oral histories of Black and Latinx women activists, organizers, and artists currently working in the

Cincinnati region, as well as veteran activists and organizers who have played roles in anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ struggles, efforts around housing, food, and healthcare, and work around mass incarceration. Dr. Dutt interviewed Heyra Avila on March 2, 2018. The following are excerpts from their conversation.

Early Life



Dutt → Could you talk about where you were born and a little bit about your early years as much as you remember?

Avila → I was the firstborn of my parents. My mom came from a little village [and] my dad lived in the city of Veracruz. ... When my mom found out that she was pregnant with me, they ... had a lot of trouble. My dad didn’t have a stable job and my mom ... couldn’t go back to where she was working at, the hair salon.... Since there weren’t enough funds to really live on their own ... we were kind of homeless. I remember my mom telling me that, we just kind of picked a plot of land and made a makeshift house. The floor was just dirt; our roof would sometimes fly off. We didn’t have running water; we didn’t have electricity. My parents decided that that’s not the life they wanted to live. That’s why my dad first decided to come to the United States, so he crossed the border without inspection. He found work in Texas, in Saint Louis; he went to Chicago, and then finally he ended up in northern Kentucky because of construction opportunities. So that’s why we’re here.

Since my dad saw there were opportunities there, my mom joined him. My mom crossed the border without inspection and joined him in northern Kentucky, and they were both working. They decided that they wanted to

Heyra

bring me with them, so they went back to Mexico, and we crossed the border as a family around the year 2000. I was just four years old when I crossed the border without inspection, and after that, we went straight to northern Kentucky.

Dutt → When your parents both crossed the border, who was taking care of you? Do you remember anything about your life, when they were here, and you were there?

Avila → I remember I was between my two grandparents’ houses. Sometimes I would spend some time in my mom’s village and sometimes I would spend some time with my other grandma in the city. And I don’t remember much of that, but I do remember when I saw my parents for the first time after so long that they’ve been in the United States, I recognized my mom, but I didn’t recognize my dad. Because he had been gone for longer than her. I really didn’t know what was going on, but they said that we were moving and so that’s, that’s about all I remember.

No Tenemos Papeles

Dutt → Did you and your family have conversations about being undocumented, or about your experiences moving into the US or anything along those lines, or perhaps conversation that was intended to make you safer?

Avila → Yeah, definitely. I was always a very curious child. I would ask questions; I would always be talking. And so I do remember my mom would say, “*no tenemos papeles*”—we don’t have papers, and that we don’t have Social Security numbers. At the time I just knew I didn’t have a Social Security number, but I didn’t even know how many digits Social Security numbers had. I just knew I didn’t have it. I knew that we were different, in that sense. I didn’t know what papers meant; I didn’t fully understand it. But I took it upon myself to ask more questions and learn more. We would watch the news. My parents would have the news on, and we would hear about immigration news in the news. So I kind of started putting pieces together. It was especially a topic when my parents and I would talk about higher education. And they would always stress education and saying that “We’re in this country for you to get a better education, for you to further your education.” I never knew if I was going to be able to go to college; I didn’t know what was going to happen. I just knew I had to get an education because that’s why my parents are here and they kind of instilled that. I think that’s something a lot of immigrant parents do to their kids. And especially being the oldest child, because then after that my family started growing.

The Only One

Dutt → Do you remember if there were lots of other Latino kids in your classes?

Avila → There were not. Not at all. I think there were maybe a couple in the whole school at Florence; I know there was maybe one other one. And then at Ockerman, there were very few. Since immigrants were just starting to come into the city, there weren’t resources. ... I had to learn English completely on my own in school. ... [In high school,] I was usually always the only Latino in my classes. Because I would take advanced AP and honors classes and the other Hispanic/Latino kids wouldn’t. And I was involved a lot academically: I was in the speech and debate team, I was on the academic team. ... Whenever I would see someone different, even an Asian, I would be so excited. I’d be so excited to know that there were other Brown kids that were doing the things that I was doing.

Dutt → Did you feel like you had a community at all with other Latino youth when you were younger?

Avila → I did. When I would get home from school, all the kids would play in the cul-de-sac in the trailer park that I lived in. They were mainly all younger than me. And so I was usually the older one. I did play with the kids, and I had that community after school. But in school, it just wasn’t there.

Applying to College

Avila → I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t know how ... and especially because we didn’t have the money to go. I remembered when I was very open about my legal status in high school. Even in middle school I would talk about it but sort like jokingly. ... I started talking to my teachers, and I had a good relationship with the principal, my counselor. I remember going into her office, and I said, “This is my situation. What can I do?” She didn’t know what to do. Because there had been other undocumented youths who had graduated, but no one had brought up the issue.

I knew I didn’t want to go to NKU. Because the few [undocumented students] that [my guidance counselor] knows that were going to college, they all went to NKU. And I told myself, “I don’t want to go to NKU because I felt like that’s the only choice—I want to be able to have a choice.” So I applied to [Questbridge Scholars] program for lower income, high-achieving students that was recommended to me by my junior year English teacher. ... I actually interviewed with Yale. I moved to the next level, and they saw me as a potential candidate. And I got waitlisted at The University of Chicago—I really wanted to go to Chicago, [but] I knew none of that was guaranteed. I was online and applied to the school that didn’t have an application fee, which happened to be Xavier. ... I had been accepted into Xavier, and I had gotten a pretty good scholarship. Then I had already been applying to other smaller scholarships. Essentially that’s why I was at Xavier. It was the only school I applied to besides the QuestBridge Scholars schools. So that was kind of by chance, and it was only because of their application was free.

Resistance and Empowerment

Avila → I think that when most people think about being undocumented or the term “illegal,” which I don’t like, they just think that it’s people from Mexico that cross the border ille-

we’re your lawyers, and we’re your doctors. ... We also take care of your children, clean your restaurants.”... A lot of times, it’s just ignorance—people just think of immigrants as peo-

Yes, we’re your lawyers, and your doctors... we also take care of your children.

gally. In reality, you can become undocumented in other ways. You could overstay your visa; you could have been rejected refugee or asylum status, and just, be stuck. I kind of fit the stereotype. Yes, I’m Brown. Yes, I’m Mexican. Yes, I crossed the border. When people would say, “Oh you crossed the border, didn’t you?” “Yes, I did.” So I was kind of like, reaffirming those stereotypes, which I used as empowerment for myself. It’s like, “Yes, so what?”

A lot of the times when I met with opposition, it’s because they don’t know. They genuinely don’t know. They’re ignorant to the fact that yes, we do pay taxes; yes, there is a wide spectrum of immigrants: we do have valedictorians; we have people who work in construction and work in lawn care—there’s a wide range. And I’m always kind of going back and forth so, taking to people saying, “Yes,

ple who go across the border illegally, committing crimes, and they box us off very quickly. So I’ve always had to like, explore that wide range. Especially now, with the Dream Act and the Dreamers. ... Not all Dreamers have the opportunity to go to college. Not all Dreamers have the same aspiration to be doctors, to be lawyers—those are huge aspirations to have. And the fact that we’re expecting a large group of undocumented youth, immigrant youth to strive for that perfection is also harming the narrative. So whenever I speak, I always want to make sure that I talk about that wide range.

Avila → I haven’t been met with racist remarks at speeches I’ve given, besides when we were outside of US Arena when Trump was in town. That was a whole different game. ... But, a lot of times they would say ignorant things, being racist but not meaning to be, I mean it’s still wrong, but just because of their ignorance. It’s a lot of educating and saying that we’re not criminals. We crossed the border without inspection but let’s look at why also. Immigration is such a huge topic, and people can only handle it in little bits because it’s so much—there’s so much going on.

Being a woman, a Brown woman, having a microphone, making white men uncomfortable, making people in general uncomfortable—I use that as empowerment. A lot of the times, women and Brown women aren’t giving a voice; they aren’t given a seat at the table; they’re not passed the mic. It’s been empowering for me to know that I have the ability to do that. But I always make sure that I touch on the other immigrants that aren’t there. Lately, I’ve been touching a lot on undocumented mothers, because a lot of times their struggles aren’t talked about. And one of my heroes is my mom; I learned a lot from her. Just like how I mentioned that I’m the only Latino, sometimes I would be the only girl. I always knew that it mattered, and I wanted more girls and more girls of color to join me. I never want to be the only one, so I always try to get inclusion, and try to tell those little girls that “Yes, you can do this! You can do more!” It’s been really important to me because a lot of times girls think that they’re not good enough, or not smart enough, or just that narrative—I think it’s changing now.

Activist Origins

Dutt → So you've been alluding to your activism all along, but I'm curious if you could share what exactly prompted your activist work?

Avila → When I was in middle school, my parents ... went to the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center. They would talk about the unfair treatment of workers, about unfair wages, about people not getting paid. ... A lot of the adults were talking about how to uplift the community, how to help the Latino community, and I would be in the corner coloring with my sister. So I was always around, but I didn't really get involved. ... I remember at a very young age ... we would drive up to a church where I would give my speech, and sometimes my parents would be there, and sometimes they wouldn't. At first, it was kind of in spurts, and that was a conversation I had with my parents: your underage daughter is sharing her undocumented status and why. They didn't understand. Maybe I didn't understand fully—the gravity of publicly saying it. I was fourteen. But at that point, I was no longer ashamed of it. ... That's kind of what inspired me and fueled my fire—that and my passion for public speaking. Even then my speeches were about immigration most of the time. But yeah, it was because of Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center. My parents are no longer attending the meetings in Cincinnati; we can't always drive. But it was really that. ... The Peaslee Neighborhood Center and YES [Youth Educating Society, part of the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center] are probably like my second home. That's where the community is, for me.

IJPC, Peaslee Neighborhood Center, that's where a lot of my feelings come from. Just the IJPC staff in general, too. I know I can go in there and work on whatever I need to work on in their space. I can call them and say, "Hey, this is an idea I have!" Or something like that. It's where I talked to "A", who's the director of IJPC now. I talked to her about starting a blog, she kind of encouraged me and talked me through that. I talked to "S" about starting a YouTube channel, and she encouraged me to do that. They reaffirmed what I want to do, and sometimes I just need a little push. So definitely, the community there is just wonderful and I know that. When I go there, I'm met with smiley faces.

Successes

Avila → Xavier has already made great strides. When I started out as a freshman, I talked about immigration I wasn't met with as much excitement as now. There was actually an undocu-week last year, the last semester. There was the whole week that Xavier, different groups at Xavier, the SGA, which is where the kids mostly get all the fun stuff from, had an undocu-week. So seeing that from my freshman year when no one was really wanting to talk about it to last semester having an undocu-week, and having that space for people to get educated, raise awareness and feel uncomfortable, to be presented with the topic, was just great to me.

Through YES [Youth Educating Society] and IJPC [Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center], we were introduced to more speaking opportunities; we were slowly growing. ... [YES] went from having zero immigrant youth to almost everyone in the YES program being immigrant youth, or really great allies. Since it has grown substantially, the work we've done had always revolved around storytelling, raising awareness, educating and empowering the youth to be able to be comfortable with themselves, with their status; and how to be an ally, then taking it a step further with storytelling training, and planning events. I think that empowering youth is really wonderful. We've done so much, and we want to continue doing so much.



Vision for the Future

Dutt → What would you say this city's most pressing issues, in Cincinnati, or the larger community?

Avila → I think poverty and homelessness, is a big one, and just access to resources. Sometimes the resources are there, but the community doesn't know about it. So building that bridge and connection of how can we not just start these programs to help the community, but how can we make sure the community knows and takes advantage of this program?... We really need to work with the lower income families and break the stigmas around a lot of things, like, higher education, interactions with police or law enforcement. We need to build more bridges, build more connections.

I would love for there to be a neighborhood center for Latinos that is not faith-based. ... My ideal is having a building, an actual physical space. When you walk in, there are different rooms for different activities, and maybe even a multi-level building where kids can go for tutoring and art classes and parents can go and get educated about the college process or high school. There can be sex education; there can be workshops on learning—just, an open space for the community. Like, let's say, Planned Parenthood wants to come in and give a talk; let's say, Xavier wants to come in and give a talk, or hold workshops. Just really a physical space for these groups of people, organizations, which are committed to helping Latinos, to help immigrants, to have a space to go. So let's say someone's having legal trouble, and they walk in and want to talk to a law-

yer. Well, there might not be a lawyer there, but these are the resources we have; these are the partners we work with, and here's who we recommend. That space would be that tunnel where people come in when they need help, and we can funnel them to the resources.

It would be wonderful to have local politicians know that they can do something. The city council can do so much more. I know immigration is a federal issue, but if we start locally in the city, and maybe even move it state-wide. How awesome would it be if all the city council members in Cincinnati and Columbus reach out to Senator Portman and say, "We the cities of Ohio demand this." Having that space that's needed for people to come together and people on the outside can see that it is needed and it is awesome. Like, even touching on the arts, because that's important. Just a space for all of that, and solely for immigrants and Latinos. That's my dream.



Resources

PEASLEE CENTER

Peaslee Neighborhood Center is a peaceful place in Over-the-Rhine where residents create and engage in participatory education to foster creative expression, self-determination and social change. www.peasleecenter.org

YOUTH EDUCATING SOCIETY (YES)

Youth Educating Society (YES) is a leadership program designed for both documented and undocumented immigrants and their friends and allies. They network to learn more about immigration issues and take an active role in the community. Members learn how to share their personal immigration experiences to create a unique and powerful voice advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. YES Program Participants: build personal and professional relationships with others who care about immigrant rights; build a network of student organizations from area colleges and universities and with other young leaders; receive leadership training; and stand courageously and speak out about immigration issues.

www.ijccincinnati.org/programs/immigration/yes-program/

INTERCOMMUNITY JUSTICE AND PEACE CENTER

Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center (IJPC) educates and advocates for peace, challenges unjust local, national, and global systems, and promotes the creation of non-violent society. IJPC's peace program includes non-violence trainings, anti-war organizing, Days of Dialogue and Truth is Recruiting campaign. The immigration program's Loving Our Immigrant Neighbor workshop provides information and answers practical questions. Youth Educating Society (YES) educates about the immigration system, provides leadership training for young adult immigrants and connects immigrant advocates within local universities. IJPC works for the abolition of death penalty in Ohio and beyond. Families that Matter bring together people who have or had loved ones on Ohio's death row for mutual support and advocacy training. Working with Ohioans to Stop Executions (OTSE), IJPC educates around the death penalty, provides petitions asking for clemency and holds prayer witnesses during each execution. www.ijccincinnati.org

Organizations

The Cincinnati Project (TCP) works for economic justice, health equity, racial equity, and improved conditions for women. TCP harnesses the expertise and resources from the University of Cincinnati faculty and students, and from Cincinnati community members, non-profits, governments, and agencies to conduct research that will directly benefit the community. www.thecincyproject.org

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