

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

EDITORIAL / STEPHANIE SADRE-ORAFI
DESIGN / MATT WIZINSKY & MUNAZZA AIJAZ
PRESS / SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

“

We need
to center
the
margins.

Brown

”

Christina

The Cincinnati Project

Archiving Activism

Christina D. Brown, a self-described unapologetically Black aspiring scholar-activist, uses her voice to promote racial equity and social justice through activism and community education. A first generation college student, she studied Political Science and Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati. After graduation she joined AmeriCorps and then spent five years building community with marginalized groups and exploring methods to eliminate bias and prejudice at the Office of Human Relations. She recently joined the Cincinnati Union Co-op Initiative and is working to identify methods to bring financial sustainability and racial equity to the early childhood education sector. She serves on multiple boards, including the Martin Luther King Coalition, Cincinnati Young Black Professionals, Affordable Housing Advocates, and the Walnut Hills Redevelopment Foundation, where she was elected President of the Board of Trustees at age 27. In 2014 she co-founded Black Lives Matter Cincinnati to address state violence and racial inequality. Brown is currently finishing her Master's coursework in Transformative Education at Miami University and hopes to pursue her Ph.D. in the near future.

"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. Roane interviewed Christina D. Brown with student research assistant Ariel Shaw on March 9, 2018. The following are excerpts from their conversation.

College

Brown

“

Brown → So, I went to a not so great high school. I'm the daughter of a single mother. ... My mom works for the federal government, so I always thought like, "Oh, my mom makes a decent amount of money; she was able to raise us." I always thought I would graduate high school and go work for the federal government because that's what she did. She did alright. But one day, a friend was like, "You want to go on this college tour?" I was like, "I don't think I'm gonna go to college, but sure." It ended up being a historically Black college and university [HBCU] tour, and I decided that, oh I would go to college, and probably go to a Black school.

A friend of mine, who was an upperclassman, ended up coming to UC for a program called Images of Color, which was specifically designed to recruit students of color. ... I came down, and it was a good Black-ass time. I thought UC was a HBCU based on that visit. That's literally how I interpreted campus. We got off the shuttle; we were greeted by Black or Brown students and Black and Brown professors. They took you to whatever school you thought you would study in. ... We closed out the day with like something similar to Akwaba where you get to see all the different social organizations and a step show. It was just a really amazing time. So when I had the chance to figure out where I was going to school, it was between Clark Atlanta, Alabama A&M, and UC. I was too afraid to move too far down south, and I know that Alabama A&M was super remote; Clark Atlanta was in Atlanta. I was like, "I don't know if that would be too much for me, too overwhelming." UC happens to be close enough to Columbus for me to be able to go home and far enough for me to be independent.

Christina

Cincinnati

vs.

Columbus

Roane → What struck you about the sort of differences between Columbus and Cincinnati? Was it striking?

Brown → Yeah. So my first couple years here were like incredible insulated. ... My mom drove me down for orientation [and] ... she told me when she picked me up she drove the wrong way and ended up going down Vine Street. This was in 2005. ... It was really Black. She said it was not clean. And there were people everywhere. So I got an interesting insight and reflection to like class dynamics and how my mom perceives things. Like, we didn't grow up staunchly middle class, but she does have

a strong air of respectability politics associated with her. So it was really disturbing, and it gave her a bad impression of like, what my life is gonna be like outside of campus and what my safety would be. It was interesting because I can think about like, me not having to negotiate where I would go in Columbus and how safe she thinks I would be because she's familiar with the area.

There's less of a visible presence of a Black middle class in Cincinnati; I would say it's more visible in Columbus, but people are usually segregated by neighborhoods. If there are more Black middle-class folks in your immediate, I say it's less likely to think about poverty. So I think those are interesting just the fascination with neighborhoods and high schools; it's very different from Columbus. Columbus also has a huge Somali population, second in the nation, so there is more of a visible diaspora of Black people in Columbus.



Space on Campus

Brown → I started UC at 2005. That's four years after the 2001 uprising after Timothy Thomas was killed. The way I saw campus was completely different. I'm not sure if there's a direct association, but there was less commercial development in this area. The entire block of Calhoun was actually gutted. That was all like, empty fast food establishments. It was a vastly different campus. There was also the Center for Access and Transition, which is a program designed to provide access for students who are on the border from getting into particular programs, to allow them access to the main campus. So you can matriculate and live on campus while taking "remedial courses" to prepare you to enter into your particular program. I was in a remedial course on algebra, and there was more public school Black student life you see from Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, like, very represented on campus, which helped me stay more culturally into the greater Cincinnati community.

[At this time] there was a very parallel struggle between the white LGBTQ community on campus and the Black students on campus because the LGBTQ community was fighting for a space to recognize their full humanity and the AACRC was fighting to remain an autonomous entity on campus. There was this idea around the time to put all marginalized folks in one big space, and "You all shut up, and we'll give you access to whatever resources you need." But the Center was a demand that was designed to be autonomous, and the LGBTQ students kept getting pushed to the side, "Go to the Women's Center." And they're

like, "Our politics might be similar, but they're different. And you owe us space on this campus." So all of those things are happening at the same time.

Once I graduated, I did Public Allies. We were walking through this language more and more. A person identifies as gender queer in my class, and I was like, "What the hell is that?" So we're on the same team, I'm learning from their experiences on not finding a space to go to the bathroom, for being misgendered. First time I met that person I called them "him" and I learned how hurtful that was. So I started to pick up on things like pronouns and language. Although I can't really articulate like, why that's important, I have frames of references that I can point to that aren't scholastic.

Kendall Hampton

Brown → I told you about Kendall Hampton, who is a gender non-conforming individual [that was] shot and killed in my neighborhood in, I believe, 2014. They were identified explicitly, in the newspaper as like, “he,” “him.” And the word “transvestite” was used. ... They were Black. And the person who murdered

So when I see Kendall was killed and I see “he,” “him,” there is this like, almost like, an aura of deceptiveness, right? Like, “Kendall was killed because Kendall was being deceptive to this person who had a violent reaction to Kendall’s behavior.” I’m like, I know this isn’t right. So I don’t know what to do at

**I see the same white supremacist,
capitalist, sexist, economic violence
in all of the above.**

Kendall said transphobic things to Kendall, and homophobic things. It was like a hate crime, so the family was fighting to get the hate crime, but the prosecutor refused to.

At that point, I don’t live on campus, I live in a poor Black neighborhood that people say, “Oh, you live there?” “Oh, you feel safe there?” And I’m like, “yeah.” So I’m picking up on all of the larger cues on how segregation works and class politics.

that point, but I did like write some info at WCPO. No one ever responded. But it wasn’t until Leelah Alcorn that I was like, that’s what that was. Like, that was the white cissexist classist, because Kendall also had a criminal record, right? Kendall’s mugshot was not a picture of Kendall with their kids, but Kendall’s mugshot. Kendall had face tattoos. So I was like, that’s what that was. Leelah Alcorn gets her full humanity shown, and “we gotta do something different, because Leelah is gone.” Another Black person killed Kendall, so both of them were disposable. At that point, I was like, that’s what it was. I felt my politics, and my race analysis evolves.

Public Allies

Roane → Why did you stick around? You came here from Columbus. Like, what kept you in Cincinnati?

Brown → That’s a good question. I’ve been able to find like family in spaces like I never really thought about. My relationship with Cincinnati was very transactional when I first got here. I came here to get a degree, did that. It took a year longer than I expected, but yeah. It was a valuable experience. Once I graduated in 2010, I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do with my life. My original plan was to go to law school like I said earlier. But after having a tutoring position at Walnut Hills and just seeing how my students were systematically being failed. I thought it was just the education, but I learned it was deeper than that. I wanted to learn how I could impact their lives outside of teaching because I should be nobody’s teacher. So I applied for Public Allies. ... That program, which was intentionally designed to create leadership development for 20-30 year-olds with an equity lens, it created a new family for me here.

So I ended up like in a thirty-five mixed raced group of folks who are like, help me find jobs, try to help me figure out if I want to go to grad school. And that turned into a fellowship. And after my fellowship, it led me to a job. In the meantime, there’s still stuff happening. So during Public Allies, Trayvon Martin was killed. And I think Trayvon’s murder was sort of like the precursor to the Black Lives Matter. Well, it was. There’s a direct correlation between Trayvon’s murder—that’s where the sentiments of Black Lives Matter came from. But there wasn’t an immediate, continuous galvanization prior to Mike Brown. So all of that. The families I was building here, and the national horror that’s happening around us kept me grounded here. Everette Howard was also killed here. He was an 18-year-old high school student who was murdered by a UC police officer with a taser. So there were things happening to me interpersonally and politically as I continued to understand about my place in the world and how fucked up stuff is.

Investment

Brown → When I think about like, people can actually say, “Over 24,000 people were displaced because of the destruction and the placement of the highway in this particular area.” And decades later, we’re talking about putting a stadium there, a soccer stadium, in the West End. And we’re talking about destroying a public school’s stadium that’s named after the first Black man to integrate UC’s football team, Willard Stargel. Like that is a violence of Cincinnati. And then when you say, “No, we don’t want this.” They say you’re backward, right? It’s another way of calling you savage, or inhumane like you don’t understand how you’re supposed to make your own progress. You don’t understand how you got here, either. It wasn’t the destruction of your facilities by us that put you in a place where you have this high concentration of poverty, this mass incarceration. It’s actually you and your refusal to participate in a democratic way. So that is the violence of Cincinnati. It is the gaslighting, it’s the segregation, and it’s the complaint, “Now that I want to come to you, how dare you not invite me with open arms, or accuse me of gentrifying when I’m actually trying to economically uplift your Black ass.” That’s Cincinnati. Not just Cincinnati, but that’s Cincinnati right now. And that pisses me off. Because you have people who use the righteous fear that people have in neighborhoods, you weaponize that against them, to divest from improving their quality of life, just in general, right? “Because you don’t want a stadium, you

don’t want no job; you don’t want no grocery store; you don’t want no pharmacy; you don’t want no school that your kids could walk to and be safe. We try to give you a stadium. You don’t want that. Clearly, you have no interest in advancing yourself or your community, so fuck y’all until we just move you out.” That is, to me, the most frustrating part about Cincinnati. In that, there’s a history of spaces being under attack. The spaces that people know about, yet they ignore it until it’s time to prove that we’ve advanced from that, right? So, Over-the-Rhine was able to revive itself despite the 2001 uprising. Not because of it, right? Like, it’s just very interesting. My relationship with Cincinnati is like, complicated at best. Because I see the possibility, but I see the same white supremacist, capitalist, sexist, economic violence in all of the above.

UC has been super complicit if not the major reason for gentrification in Clifton in particular. I can explicitly remember during undergrad, when President Zimpher was in office, probably around 2007, she started a Proudly Cincinnati campaign in the launch. There was a development plan that’s called “Great University Needs Great Neighborhoods.” And I kinda looked at that, but I didn’t, you know? I was probably a sophomore at that point. I didn’t pay too much attention to it. Almost twelve years later, seeing the resurgence of investments here, I’m like, “Oh, that’s what that was.” It was like a very intentional step-by-step way to change the aesthetics of the surrounding

area because it was a huge barrier for people who were interested in the university itself but were too afraid to send their kids here. But it’s also, a larger tactic that other cities are using.

So I’m from Columbus. People who don’t know Columbus, know Ohio State. And if you’re from Columbus, you know Ohio State. You know Ohio State and the Short North. The Short North is a very Black neighborhood. When I return home now, I’m seeing sort of the same subtle pattern: places will be occupied, then they’ll be vacated, then they’ll be boarded up, and they will be “coming soon.” As you just go north, especially during the daytime, you can see people. You see this very public poverty and disinvestment, and it suddenly leads to a walkable business district with an array of eateries and the option to use transit. So you definitely see that as a larger trend, specifically in university areas. But especially nationwide, we know that rents are astronomical in places like the Bay Area where again, you have these communities of color who have been, I don’t wanna say isolated or abandoned, but had to invest in their own communities to get the basic necessities, are being zoned out—that’s an interesting tactic when people use zoning code against you—and priced out. Whether it’s because of the rising taxes because you’ve owned your home for so long, now, yes, your house is worth more, but you can’t pay your

property tax, so where does that leave you? There’s no abatement for you, right? So that’s definitely indicative of larger patterns. Because we’re also seeing the suburbanization of poverty, the consequences of a lack of infrastructure. So yeah, absolutely. And it’s hard for me as a Black middle class-ish person to understand my role in that as well, which has also been eye-opening and it’s something I’m still trying to reckon with.

Gentrification

Using History to Create a Call to Action

Brown → So I think right now, in my neighborhood, like this tug between investment—how investment leads to displacement, and gentrification. [It] is something we're processing out loud right now. So there's the economic aspect of displacement, right? Like, you literally can't afford to live here or the economic industry being created is no longer accessible to you. That requires specific economic solutions. So I see fewer possibilities in the economy of dealing with gentrification right now just because poverty is so generational in this city. So it's hard for me to imagine that. But what I do imagine, like very publicly and in a more accessible way, because like, it's hard for me to get beyond the reality of implementation, I see there being huge possibilities for Black neighborhoods in particular, Black communities to reclaim their narrative, and to place their narrative in public in a way that hopefully triggers some like, resources, some reallocation of resources, to actually create, people are using the word, racially and economically integrated neighborhood. So, for example, in Walnut Hills, I mentioned that Frederick Douglass School was one of the first Black public schools in the city. We also have the Black business district on Lincoln and Gilbert. So there's a lot of oral history about like, what used to be there. And like, "Oh, we should always remember what was there." But it's like, "No, let's put that back, in some sort of way." So we're trying to figure out how we can aesthetically honor that history, and then intentionally put that history in public to create more interesting. There was not always a legacy ... of course, there were

threads of oppression throughout all marginalized communities' history. But to be like, "Yo, we got a Black pharmacist here. Why we can't have Black pharmacists now? I know a group of Black pharmacists." So hopefully, knowing that these neighborhoods had the things that people say they're trying to recreate, "Oh, we want this neighborhood to be walkable." It can be walkable and it can be owned by the people that historically resided here; it can be accessible to the same people that have resided here. So I see that being a huge possibility, to extract that history and to place that history in public, and to use that history to create a call to action. Like, there's no reason why there can't be another Black grocery store on Walnut Hills. That should not be such a radical idea. Or, something that's like so far-fetched. Because it existed. So that's where I see the possibility. The more I learn about the rich history of the city, the more I continue to name it in public and continue to fight for what still should be there had white supremacy not destroyed it.

Resources



PUBLIC ALLIES CINCINNATI

Public Allies is a national movement committed to advancing social justice and equity by engaging and activating the leadership of all young people. AmeriCorps Allies are individuals from our communities who are committed to making a difference through service, and who are looking for an opportunity to build skills and a network of emerging grassroots leaders. The AmeriCorps Ally program, which generally lasts 10 months and is a paid opportunity with benefits, is available to all, without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, criminal record, political affiliation, marital or parental status, military service, community, or social affiliations. Anyone over 17 years with a high school diploma or GED, and who is a U.S. citizen or has permanent residency, is welcome to apply.

www.publicallies.org/cincinnati

CINCINNATI UNION CO-OP INITIATIVE

Cincinnati Union Co-op Initiative (CUCI) is a non-profit that partners with individuals and organizations to create worker-owned businesses that sustain families. CUCI emerged from the historic partnership between Mondragon, the world's most successful network of worker-cooperatives, and the United Steelworkers in October of 2009.

www.cincinnatiunioncoop.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

"What Is and What Can Be: Women of Color and the Struggle for Justice in Cincinnati" is funded in part by grants from The Greater Cincinnati Foundation, The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. / U.S. Bank Foundation, The Murray and Agnes Seasongood Good Government Foundation, and College of Arts and Sciences, University of Cincinnati.