

What Is
and What Can Be

Women of Color
and the Struggle for Justice
in Cincinnati

What is

home

community

ours

fair

action

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www.thecincyproject.org/whatis

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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.

“

Black
history
is
everyday.

Mazloomi

”

Dr. Carolyn

The Cincinnati Project

Archiving Activism

Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She completed her Ph.D. in aerospace engineering from the University of Southern California in 1984. In 1985 she founded the Women of Color Quilters Network, a non-profit organization created to foster and preserve quilting among women of color. Dr. Mazloomi is currently curating “Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations,” which visually surveys 400 years of African American history, and is the largest travel exhibit of African American quilts ever mounted. Dr. Mazloomi received the 2003 Ohio Heritage Fellowship Award. In 2014, she was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts, the highest award given in the United States for traditional art. In 2016, she was inducted to the Quilters Hall of Fame Museum. Though she travels regularly, she has lived in the Cincinnati region for about three decades, and currently lives with her husband in West Chester, Ohio.

“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 Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi in February 2018. The following are excerpts from their conversation.

Dr.

Growing
Up

“Carolyn

Dutt → I know you’re born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I wanted to know if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood and what life was like growing up in that area.

Mazloomi → Well, it was during segregation, it was hard; it was very difficult. I have a small family, and life was a struggle because of the era that we were living in. I was very fortunate. I was a good student and got a scholarship to school, but I always said when I left I would never come back, and I didn’t. So that kinda paints the whole picture of how that life was during that time.

Dutt → Were your parents interested, or any family members, interested in art, or anything along those lines?

Mazloomi → No. My mother was a librarian. My father was an engineer. And, no. People rather look at art as being frivolous. You couldn’t say, “Oh, I’m gonna be an artist.” People are gonna say, “Well, just how do you think you’re gonna take care of yourself?” You know, so that wasn’t viable at that time. So, anyway, no.

Dutt → Well, so you eventually got your Ph.D. in aerospace engineering. What led you to want to get that degree?

Mazloomi → I have always been interested in flight since I was a small child, fascinated by airplanes and anything that could fly. And I always knew I would be involved, somehow, in aviation. That was my dream.

Dutt → What was it like to be an African American woman studying aerospace engineering at that time?

Mazloomi → Well, at the time I went to school, onto grad school at Northrop University in Los Angeles; they never had an African American attend that school. They never had a woman attend that school. And it was difficult because most of the men in that field at the school were ex-military men, and mostly from the South. So, it was a very interesting scenario at that time, being the only woman. Actually, most of the men were very chauvinistic, and they looked at me as being totally helpless. Anyway, I enjoyed being the only woman on campus, so it was interesting. But one of the things, it propels you really to do your best, because you’re a woman and people aren’t expecting that you can do that job. So you have to work a little bit harder.

Mazloomi

**Inspiration
for
the Work**

Dutt → You’ve covered so many different topics in your quilts. ... Can you talk about what inspires you, or how you come to focus on a particular theme any moment in time?

Mazloomi → I'm interested in the status of women and children, and because we lived around the world, I see myself as a global citizen. So when you see people hurting around the world, that concerns me. ... Most of the world’s immigrants and displaced immigrants are women and children. And when you see that, it’s heartbreaking. So, these things haunt me; they bother me. ... Most [Americans] don’t think of themselves as global citizens, and they don’t know what’s happening in the world. ... So all the pieces are lessons; they’re history lessons, about what’s happening today; what’s happened in the past; and the hope that we don’t commit the same mistake again.

Dutt → Were there any experiences that catalyzed you into viewing yourself as an activist? Or is it something that emerged more slowly?

Mazloomi → The integration of schools in my community in Baton Rouge was rather traumatic. My father signed my brother and me up to go to Lee High, which is a white high school in our community. We were among the first African Americans to go to that school. It was traumatizing, you know, and that made an impact. But also during that era, there were a lot of Civil Rights marches, I remember. The most memorable of those marches is when African Americans marched from Selma to Montgom-

ery. The first day of that march, they tried to march across the Pettus Bridge in Selma; they were beaten. That was like my first memory of seeing those civil rights marches on television. That was my first time, as a young person, that I can vividly recall seeing one of those marches. And I remember, as a young person, there was this one young man in the forefront of the march ... his hair was bloodied, and they kept beating him; the dogs were gnawing at his body. I never forgot that. I did not know until I was an adult that, that man was John Lewis; I didn’t know that. I’ll never forget, too, when Emmett Till was murdered. Traumatizing.

Two years ago, I won the National Heritage Award, and I had to go to Washington. ... I had made this quilt called “Ain’t nobody gonna turn me around.” I always said that was my dream, one day I was going to give that quilt to John Lewis. I never thought I’d meet John Lewis, but I just said that. ... So I took my family, and we went to his office. He was so gracious. ... That was quite memorable, giving that quilt to him. And I gave a quilt also to Nelson Mandela.

**Purpose
of
Creating the Work**

Mazloomi → In the creation of this work, too, about the Civil Rights Era, you know, it’s strange how young people, especially young African Americans, they don’t really know that history. I realized that when I curated the show, “And Still We Rise,” which is a visual survey of African American history from 1619 to the present day. And it was at the Freedom Center for six months. Sometimes on the weekends, I would go to the Freedom Center and just sit on the bench at the main gallery; I would see these African American grandparents or parents bring their children. They would go up to the pieces, and they were astonished: “I didn’t know this!” They didn’t know about Emmett Till; they didn’t know Henrietta Lacks. So much history they didn’t know about.

This is the purpose of creating work. You know, creating some certain work to start a conversation about race in the safe place. What can be safer than talking about that in the museum? Talking about it in a space where you have African Americans and white people, and just, you know, all races, and people. There in the museum and you see this work, and you can talk about it, without fear of any kind of reprise. That was one of the purposes of that show: to create that conversation, to start that conversation, in the safe place—a conversation about race in this country.

The show talks about the contributions of African Americans to this country. That’s another positive thing, I think. Well, white people don’t know us. We, as Black folks, when we go to school, we have to study history. That history is not our history. It’s not. So, we know about white folks, but white folks don’t know our history, because it’s not necessarily taught at school. When they come to the show, they find out about all sorts of things that are just wondrous to them that they didn’t know. I think, hopefully, they leave with the knowledge that changes how they view African Americans in this country. They know a little more about the contributions we made to help this country, to make this country as great as it is: contributions in every sector. That’s reflected in that show: science, education, sports, medicine. It’s in that show. So when they leave, they are awakened. And that’s a good thing. As a curator, as an artist, I feel that my job is done. If somebody leaves and they’ve been impacted; they’ve been affected by what they’ve seen. The purpose for me as an artist, creating art, is to affect how people think about certain issues. I’m not doing it because it necessarily looks cute. That’s not the purpose.

Dutt → Well, I wanted to ask you about creating the Women of Color Quilters Network. What led you to develop that network?

Mazloomi → I started the network to educate African Americans about the historical significance of quilts in our culture as well as the monetary value. Because it was at a time when African American quilts were discovered by collectors; they were scooping them up for nothing. And quilters didn't know the value of them. They didn't know the historical significance. I deal mostly with people from the South; they didn't know. So I started this organization to help educate them about the cultural significance and the monetary value. That was thirty-five years ago. We're about preservation as well as education, and we have a lot of economic development programs, not only in this country, but around the world.

Dutt → Can you talk a little bit about how it evolved? Because I imagined it started with just a few of them.

Mazloomi → Nine women. I put an ad in the quilt magazine because I would travel the country ... and never saw an African American at quilt shows. There was a popular quilt magazine, *Quilters Newsletter*, and I put an ad in asking if there were any African Americans reading the newsletter, please contact me. And nine people did. Just by word of mouth over the years, the organization grew. We're very close. A lot of—so many women have died, passed away. We're like a family. My children

know these women as their aunts, their grandmothers. And we have men, their uncles. We're very close, and we share so much. ... They're part of my family. They're like my real family, yeah. We're very close.

Dutt → How many members are there now?

Mazloomi → We started out with about 1,700, and now we're down to 600 and some. The average age is 74 to 105.

Dutt → Within the network, how did you decide what kind of projects you'd be working on? Because you were talking about development and supporting women globally.

Mazloomi → Those are the things I want to do, and I was fortunate that there were women in the network that were interested in the same things I'm interested in. So, they helped me along the way. We have a common interest; the group has a common interest in social and economic development on a global level.

Dutt → How has the network been viewed by other quilt artists or other art communities?

Mazloomi → Well, okay, now you're getting into a long scholarly question. There's a lot of scholarly brouhaha about what an African American quilt is, because it doesn't necessarily look like a traditional American quilt. Because of that, African Americans tend not to join quilt guilds. There are quilt guilds all over America. Quilting is a three billion dollar a

year business in America; it's very popular. But we're a fraction of one percent of the quilt population. They're not joiners; they don't join quilt guilds because their works look different than traditional quilts, traditional American quilts. So they are kind of like isolated. When you talk about how we're viewed, that's very complex.

our little groupings. Actually, they're capable of doing all types of quilts, you know. But we get into our things. And we love narrative quilts, and those narrative quilts deal with us. That in itself stands out. Because there are stories unique to our culture, so there's a divide. As I said again, most African American quilters are

The group has a common interest in social and economic development on a global level.

Dutt → I'm interested.

Mazloomi → We're kind of viewed as outsiders because the work looks different.

Dutt → Do you think the unique history is part of why the work looks different?

Mazloomi → Sure. We didn't have access to, you know, the best fabric; we were using scraps. ... This is not a European aesthetic; it's an African aesthetic. So our stylistic sensibilities are different; our color palette is so totally different. When people look at African American quilts—the average quiltmaker, they might think, “Oh God, those wild colors. Asymmetrical piecing, haphazard piecing, they look quite thrown together.” Yeah, totally different aesthetics. That doesn't say that all Black quilters quilt like that, okay? But, you know, we have

not joiners. They don't join quilt guilds. They like keeping to themselves and working with people that do work like them, that they can understand each other. They want to be where they're comfortable, because this is like home. All styles are acceptable. We accept everything. We don't have any criteria as to how the quilts should look. It's whatever you want it to. American quilting—its criteria are very rigid, you know. Every line, every angle should meet the color palette, it needs to be very harmonious. And small neat stitches: precision. And we're not into that.

Dutt → That comes from a history of probably having access to machines.

Mazloomi → That's true. That's very true.

Dutt → An inequitable history is woven into styles.

There's

Dutt → I'm curious, have you ever received pushback for your work?

Mazloomi → Oh, please, I'm still getting hate mails. Oh, please! (laugh) I'm glad you said that. I've gotten a lot of pushback over the years. I'm still getting hate mails from the Obama show I did several years ago. I did a show to commemorate the election of the first African American president. Geez, it was really sad, those letters and emails that I got. ... He was hated; white folks hated him. But it was so crazy. Now I'm loving this. ... BBC just wrote an article about the discord in the American quilt community. Quilting is a very communal art form. But now it's all busted up because you have, you know, there's a group called Alt-Right Quilters, there's a group called Quilters for Trump. And you know, so now the quilters are fighting each other. We're not in the mix; Black folks are not in the mix. These are white folks fighting each other. There's a quilt show—what is it, I can't think of the name of it—but it's an anti-Trump show. And those quilters that made quilts for the anti-Trump show, they got such pushback from the supporters of Trump that are quilters. ... The fighting was so bad that they had to get restraining orders against folks. Geez. Now somebody else is getting pushback, for something else. It's been interesting.

Dutt → Do you think that quilting has the capacity to bring in a more communal spirit in the future? Do you have any hope for that?

Mazloomi → There's always hope. We can't live without hope—I can't, anyway. We always hope that there's going to be a better future. We hope that people will get along better. You know, we want that for our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren. That's always everybody's hope. So, you know, you want to see this art form pull in people, and it should. When you think about it, this is cloth we're dealing with, okay? Every human being on the planet practically can relate to the cloth. It's the first thing we're swaddled in at birth; it's the last thing that touches us when we die, when we're buried. So we as human beings have a life-long affair with the cloth. This is why quilts are such an easy fix to tell a story, because people are familiar with the cloth. So it's an easy vehicle to use that cloth to tell a story. People can relate.



Hope

Dutt → Before we started recording, you were talking a lot about how you're interested in supporting women, in particular, women and children. Can you talk a little bit about anything that specifically caused you to be interested in the plight of women and children?

Mazloomi → First of all, I'm a mother. That changes your world. Because, as I said, women are first teachers of their children; we're the guardians, and that's our charge to raise decent human beings. Women have to be 100% okay, and within any culture they're in, to do whatever it takes to get that job done to raise those children. That's important. That's why education for women is so important. Women should be educated before men. They should. Because they have to teach the children that they birth. So being a mother has been the impetus to do many things, especially to teach, teach other women as well because we have to be prepared to raise our children and do the best that we can do.

Dutt → How have your experiences and your worldview shaped the way you raised your sons?

Mazloomi → Well, when you raise your children, you raise them in the image that you own. So, yeah, they very much have the same worldview, and they've been exposed to our cultures. Their father's Iranian; they married Iranian. One's married to an Iranian; one's married to a Korean-African American woman. They have experienced racism. But I would like to think as a mother I prepared them for that. From a young person, they've been prepared and they kind of know or knew somewhat how to handle it. They've all had the talk: what to do when the cop stops you, you know? This is part of our job as Black mothers—especially if you have sons—to prepare your sons for this white world they're living in. You want to protect them and teach them how to protect themselves.

Always

Mazloomi → We go back to the status of women. You know women need services: they need education services; they need medical services, you know, they need equitable pay. They need so much. My focus will always be on women and women's needs, because of the importance of their jobs as mothers and first teachers. That always will be the empha-

Dutt → What advice do you have for younger activists, or younger people, who are interested in getting involved in contributing to social change?

Mazloomi → Well, first of all, getting involved. That's the first thing, getting involved. Not just sitting on the sidelines, looking and say-

We can't sit. Especially now.
You can't sit.

sis of my creative work; it'll always be the emphasis of many social works that I do within the Women of Color Quilters Network. That's inseparable from my life, the status of women. I'm always thinking about that.

ing, "Geez, I wished I should have." Don't wish, just jump in. Find out about whatever subjects you're interested in and be a joiner. Join organizations that have a focus for your interest, and don't be afraid to join; don't be afraid to do, and don't be lazy and sit on the sidelines and not do anything. Don't think, "Oh, I'm going to leave it to somebody else." You know, you can't leave it to somebody else. That's the easy way: let somebody else do it. We can't sit. Especially now. You can't sit.

Resources



THE WOMEN OF COLOR QUILTERS NETWORK

The Women of Color Quilters Network is a non-profit organization founded in 1985 by Carolyn L. Mazloomi, a nationally-acclaimed quilt artist and lecturer, to foster and preserve the art of quilting among women of color. It supports its membership through presentations, providing venues for sharing technical information, grant writing, and other services. It offers quilts and fiber art to museums for exhibition, and researches and documents African American quilting. In recent years, the Network has showcased the work of its members before national and international audiences. An important component of the network's activity is its use of quilting in social and economic development projects. Educational projects and workshops foster exposure to the arts, creative development, and improved self-esteem. These programs present the benefits of quilting to audiences of all ages, income levels, ethnic backgrounds, and learning abilities. www.wcqn.org

HEARTFELT TIDBITS

Southwest Ohio is home to over 40,000 refugees who have resettled in the US since the 1980s. After refugees arrive to the US, they are supported by a local representative of one of the nine official refugee resettlement agencies, which provides government-mandated services such as housing and school registration for a period of up to 90 days. However, in many cases this transition can take much longer than 90 days, and may last many years. Heartfelt Tidbits provides the "long welcome" to clients who have arrived in the Cincinnati area. Today, Heartfelt Tidbits enhances refugee and recent immigrant integration through a variety of programs. Much of their work focuses on women who are particularly vulnerable due to limited language skills and isolation. Their mission is to positively impact client's mental wellbeing, which is incredibly pertinent to women who are marginalized and face isolation through various circumstances. They believe their organization allows women from a variety of cultures to come together and share their experiences, in a space that provides support and refuge. www.heartfelttidbits.com

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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