

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

“

Yvette

I'm an
urbanist.
I'm a
futurist.

Simpson

”

The Cincinnati Project

Archiving Activism

Growing up in Lincoln Heights, Yvette Simpson faced many challenges that could have easily quashed her relentless enthusiasm. Raised by her grandmother in public housing, her family struggled to make ends meet. After graduating from Princeton High School, she became the first in her family to graduate college, at Miami University. She later received her J.D. from the University of Cincinnati College of Law and M.B.A. from Xavier University. In 2005, she was recognized as one of the Business Courier's Forty under 40 and a YWCA Rising Star. In 2014, she was honored as one of the YWCA's Career Women of Achievement, and in every year since 2014, she has been named an Ohio SuperLawyer Rising Star. Yvette was elected to the Cincinnati City Council in 2011 and re-elected in 2013. While on Council, Yvette focused on developing and expanding Cincinnati small businesses, empowering Cincinnati youth, and providing tools for our neighborhoods to become more vibrant places to live and work. In 2016, Yvette launched a campaign for Cincinnati Mayor. Though unsuccessful, she made history, becoming the first Black woman to win a Mayoral primary in the city's more than 200-year history, winning by 11 points. Yvette remains committed to her beloved Cincinnati, serving as a mentor, advisor, and board member for many individuals and organizations.

Yvette

"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 Yvette Simpson on March 21, 2018. The following are excerpts from their conversation.

Village Love and Community Keepers

Simpson

Simpson → When people hear me speak, they hear me talk about growing up in a village on a street named "Love," and [how] that was God's way of showing me that I had everything I needed. I grew up on Love Court in the Village of Lincoln Heights. ... We didn't have a lot; we had very little. And [our] community was suffering from a lot of issues [like the crack epidemic and the loss of our tax base]. ... I-75 being built through the middle of Lincoln Heights really destroyed what was a very strong Black neighborhood in the region.

A lot of the individuals I grew up with didn't have a whole lot, but it was the spirit of sharing your time, your talent, your stories, the little that you had. ... And for me, that's where I get my strong sense of community, my strong sense of the ability of people. In my work as an elected leader and in my current work, I use the phrase, "The Power of We." That phrase is simply the belief that the people working together that make the change even when institutions, traditional pillars of power, fail you; that individuals collectively together can make a difference.

I was raised by my grandmother. There were a lot of grandmothers that, collectively, raised the children of our community. So despite the challenges that we faced, I very much felt loved and supported. I felt very comforted and safe and because in that environment there are a lot of people who really care you and take care of you.

She was the matriarch of our family and our community, Ms. Pearl. Our house was very much a landing point for members of the fami-

ly who struggled. She raised the four of us, me and my sister and two of my cousins, after raising eight children. There were times when my aunts would come back with their families and move in because they needed help. She would give her last dollar for anybody who needed her. She was a matriarch in every sense of the word. For that reason, she's my hero.

I think women in general, but certainly, Black women tend to be the ones who hold families and communities together, in that way. And it's an important part of the identity of Black women, strong Black women, especially older Black women. ... It's an important role because it nurtures that next generation to be free and to do what they need to do; she did that for us. But you also wonder what her life could have been if she hadn't done that. You know, that sacrifices that she made.

From
Lincoln Heights
to
the West End

Simpson → [I graduated from] Miami University [and] ... took a job and moved to L.A. for a year. I thought I'd go to law school in California [but it] ... wasn't the best place for me. ... After law school [at the University of Cincinnati], I started to build my life and thought about where I wanted to live. ... I bought [my first] house in the West End.

What attracted me to the West End was what I loved about Lincoln Heights. It's a community with history, predominately African American ... [that] was destroyed by I-75. The neighborhood was literally torn apart.

I was a lawyer and I made pretty good money, six figures. I could have moved to Hyde Park. ... I could have moved to Oakley. I intentionally want to live in West End because of the fact that I want to be a part of the community that has that history and to be a part of its future.

I wanted to be in a community where I can see kids going to school and say, "Hey, stay in school." "Hey, do your work." And for them to see somebody that looks like me, that they can touch and see, and to know that we live in the same place. I want to be a part of the leadership of the community, about how we grow without sacrificing what we know, making sure we have an inclusive neighborhood.

So it's so funny the full circle nature of that. West End feels a lot like a village. There are matriarchs of that community, and they have parts of the community that still have many struggles and parts of the community that are coming along, I think in a way that Lincoln Heights will someday. There are families; there are young people; there are old people; there are white people; there are Black people. But it's still predominantly African American. And it's a community that still believes and holds onto the village mentality.

I support a group of kids called the "Q-Kidz" that are from the West End. They're a dance troupe. Watching the community rally to send these kids to tournaments, to cheer them on, to watch them dance—that reminds me when I was a kid, the entire community supported the team; they still have that. So yeah, it's a village in a lot of ways. It really is.

The History
of
Displacement
in
Cincinnati

Roane → You mentioned I-75 in relation to both your prior home of Lincoln Heights and your current home. How do you see the history of those kinds of infrastructure projects in relation to Black communities in Cincinnati?

Simpson → [I-75] impacted communities like Lincoln Heights, West End, Evanston, Avondale, [and] Bond Hill, splitting the communities into two, essentially. That's what I-75 and I-71 did. And it came through, south-to-north [and] north-to-south; it came through communities predominantly of color that may not have had the power structures to be able to reject it, to say, "No, you'll not tear apart our communities."

Tens of thousands of people were displaced in the West End as a result of what they called the "Kenyon-Barr Project," which was an orchestrated effort by the government of the time to displace people—Black people—in the West End and move them to other places so they can build the highway. And they took a lot more houses than they needed and left the community in disrepair. ... Promises were not kept and [houses] weren't rebuilt.

Lincoln Heights had the same issue and even more so. ... Folks, like my grandfather, had a deep connection to General Electric, [which] was part of the city of Lincoln Heights, so their tax base benefited the community. A lot of people worked there. ... When 75 came through, it divided the community. Evendale fought with Lincoln Heights and won the right to have that tax base, which elevated Evendale and left Lincoln Heights where it is now; it had to be downgraded to a village. And people blame, in part and rightfully so, the destruction of Lincoln Heights on that. Because a lot of it, again, came right through the neighborhood, a lot of the houses destroyed, the community fabric destroyed, and the connection to GE and the tax base that came with that really, really affected Lincoln Heights.

When Kenyon-Barr happened and back when the destruction of Lincoln Heights happened, they were the few places in our city, in our region, where Black people could even live, which meant that you didn't get a choice if you got a notice that your house was being taken. So you're displaced to other places [like Over-the-Rhine]. ... Fast forward, [those places] are now places that are "right" for development. Those same families are being displaced again. It's like we haven't learned from our history.

Inclusive Development

Simpson → I'm an urbanist. I'm a futurist. I believe in redevelopment. I believe that if communities don't grow, they die.

I'm a huge, huge, passionate proponent of Cincinnati being a city of choice, dealing with the issues that divide us, which are racism, classism, [and] sexism. ... I want to be a bridge builder and a leader. ... I want to be a person from the inside to say, "Stop. We can't continue this. We have to do this differently."

[I advocate for] development that is inclusive and anti-displacement, that allows people to be able to stay and have improved facilities, improved living conditions, improved amenities just like the rest of the community. It's a challenge though. I went back and participated briefly for a couple years on the redevelopment corporations for Lincoln Heights when the Jackson Street Project was done and the Valley Homes Project—two projects that needed to be redone. And just trying to convince people that we were gonna let them stay was difficult, and in some cases, impossible. And I think part of the reason why I was brought back was that I was a resident of Lincoln Heights when I was a kid and people trusted me. But they still, they were like, "Oh no." And I'm like, "You'll get to come back." And if you go through Valley Homes now, you see new housing and people were able to come back and [are] not living in what was essentially substandard housing that they shouldn't be living in in the first place. We're gonna battle [that] there with the West End, too. We're preparing ourselves for that battle to make sure that when housing is redeveloped in the West

End, when housing is redeveloped in Walnut Hills, when housing is redeveloped in Avondale [and] Bond Hill, that people are not displaced as part of that.

A lot of cities are going through "renewal" [and] "redevelopment" are doing it the wrong way. They're allowing the market to drive the decisions, and actually incentivizing and supporting the market in doing that rather than making sure the communities that have inhabited—that have lived in—those places are protected and are part of the development that's happening.

Generational Shifts in Leadership and Activism

Roane → Do you see your work as in line with other [anti-displacement] activists, or leaders that are trying to push for change?

Simpson → There is a new generation of leaders that come from a place where their background naturally is more diverse, and understanding the importance of representing communities, especially underserved communities and communities of color. But they're in a position to be able to lead and they want their cities to be cities of choice. ... We're all trying to change the conversation.

And then there are cities that don't have that kind of leadership, right? They would say things like, "We're just happy to have any development. We don't want to put constraints on development because we're afraid that we won't have it, and we have to have it." But then there are those of us who are saying, "No, all development is not good development." And we hold the line and we provide support for the type of development we want to see. Like, you know, I led the effort in Council to create an affordable housing trust fund, making sure that when we give incentives, we give them with strings, making sure that we're not just subsidizing \$3,000 [and] \$2,000 per month condos; we're making sure that as we build, we build in an inclusive way.

I think it's a generational thing. I think my generation of leaders, my contemporaries that are coming into leadership positions, are really championing that. And maybe it's because of the way we were raised. It's also, I think, a salute to making sure that you have strong di-

verse leadership that would have that conversation. And it's a brave conversation. And not all of us, some of us don't make it because we have that conversation, right? We're the sacrificial lambs sometimes. But that doesn't mean the conversation isn't important; we have to be a part of that.

I'm not a millennial. I respect millennials and their power and ability to really make changes because they don't see institutions as boundaries the way that maybe people in my generation or the generation before me did. They really believe in independent thought. Although I think they support the collective for sure. They work together, but they believe in independent thought. They can look at a building that's rising up and say, "Why is it that way? What if we just turn that thing upside down?" Gotta love that spirit of a millennial. ... I see myself as a bridge, and really trying to inspire the boomer generation, which is ahead of me, not to leave completely. Because their wisdom is important; their strength is important; their understanding of history, which repeats itself, is important, and encouraging them not to reject millennials because they don't speak the same language.

Problems with Policing

Roane → I want to switch gears and talk about policing in Cincinnati. How does this shape the way you think redevelopment should, could, or would look like?

During the DuBose trial, I was pretty visible in a lot of ways, because at the time I was the Black woman on Council, one of the few more liberal Black people on Council. I did not

It's not complicated, but it's not easy.

Simpson → Cincinnati is one of the most segregated cities in the country. It's also one of the most unequal based on race of all the cities in the country, one of the worst. ... When I talk to people about it I say, "It's not complicated, but it's not easy." That means it's not complex; it's not a puzzle or an equation that we can't solve. We understand exactly what it is. But it's hard work to get past, to get through, to get over to change ourselves in a way to allow us to get through it. Give me a simple problem that's hard any day, right? We can do that. You can say that problems are too complex and I can't figure it out. Don't give me one where we know exactly what the source is and we know what the challenge is and we refuse to, or we don't have the will to change it. And what it is; it's racism—plain and simple. It's inequity. It's superiority. It's a power structure that does not, and does not feel like it needs to, respond to the very people that they work for, that they're responsible to protect and serve.

want to see a repeat of 2001. I really wanted us to get it right this time, meaning the power structure to understand that, people shouldn't have to turn things over and light things up or whatever you see across the country for you to get it right. Something's wrong, very wrong. And it's us [the power structure]. We're the problem.

It's not okay that being Black in Cincinnati means you have to be afraid of the police. I remember saying if I don't know the officer and I get pulled over, I would be scared. And the conservative voices saying, 'Well, she's a city leader. How can she be scared of the police?' I'm a Black woman. Sandra Bland. That could have been me. I know my rights. I can be the first one to tell you, "You don't have reasonable suspicion to pull me over. I know my rights." That could have totally been me, any day of the week. Of course, that scares me.

Power of the Collective

Simpson → I look back on my time as a political leader with pride. I feel good about the work I did. I feel like there's so much more that needs to be written and that I might not be the author of that work, not directly. I might be in a supporting role, as a citizen activist, as a change agent, somebody that people come to as a resource. But I welcome the perspective that I got. I got to see every part of the city, every part. There were few people that I didn't meet, institutions I wasn't invited to, or organizations I didn't work with. It's a beautiful thing, particularly for somebody like me. I'm driven to make real, sustained change.

I always talk about the differences between those things on the list we like to talk about, like being one of the "top 10 cities for young professionals," one of the "best places to raise a family," and [that there is] this other list that we don't want to talk about, that we have to talk about, and that we have to work through, and get through, and change, and improve: "second worst in childhood poverty"; infant mortality rates [that] look like third world countries; communities of color that don't have economic empowerment development and that have been suffering for way too long; the segregation issue that we continue to have in our neighborhoods; the inequity; the imbalance of power that exists in our city based on race and class. These are all things that are true about Cincinnati just as the other stuff is true.

Sometimes being the person that speaks truth to power puts you in situations where the power structure can affect your ability to be able to have a life, a good life. We [still] haven't figured out the power of the collective. There are a lot of different factions that are working ... [but] really, the collective needs to come together and push together.

I'm inspired by the next generation of activists, too. They really are doing a good job. There are accidental activists I'm excited about, too. And the people that are pushing within their organizations, [but] I just don't see, right now, us moving in the same direction. And it's a challenge because you won't see the kind of change that we need without that, without that collective push.



Vision
for
the Future

Roane → If you were able to actualize a full vision for the future of Cincinnati yourself, what would that look like?

Simpson → I want Cincinnati to be a city where anybody can be the best. That has been my story. I'm really fortunate to grow up in this region, a poor child who's elevated by a leader in this community, a force in this community. Everyone should have that opportunity. I want it to be a growing city but one that doesn't leave people behind. And I want it to be a city that works for everyone. In my mind, in my heart, it's hard, but it's not complicated. We can do it. I really feel inspired by that. And we must do it. I want Cincinnati to get this right. I think it'll be our redemption, considering our history. We can figure out a way to be a city that's inclusive where everybody feels welcome, a city where people are taken care of and are positioned to be better.

Growth requires tension. It requires friction. It requires a challenge. And part of Cincinnati's challenge with growing is that those voices are often pushed down, so our growth doesn't happen. When we talk about some of the most beautiful things—like pearls come from oysters and its reaction to its own pain or irritation. Really beautiful things come from pain, often. And Cincinnati has to go through that. My hope is that it happens. My hope is that we'll see a much more diverse leadership. I was the only African American woman on Council, only the fifth Black woman ever to serve in that role in our city's history. That's it. We still haven't had a Black woman mayor. I was the first Black woman to win the primary in the mayoral race in over 200 years. I hope somebody breaks through that ceiling. I hope we see that diversity. I hope we see diversity across of all our power structures, and not just in some and representation in those. The real dream I have for our city is starting to come to fruition.



Resources



.....

GREATER CINCINNATI URBAN LEAGUE

The Greater Cincinnati Urban League (GCUL) is a civil rights organization dedicated to economic empowerment. We train people for jobs, teach personal finance, work with start-ups and entrepreneurs and advocate for positive change in our communities. The GCUL carries out its mission in three primary ways – 1) promoting an inclusive community; 2) workforce development; and 3) business development & entrepreneurship. www.ulgso.org

.....

YWCA GREATER CINCINNATI

The YWCA USA is on a mission to eliminate racism, empower women, stand up for social justice, help families, and strengthen communities. They are one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the nation, serving over 2 million women, girls, and their families. Their local association serves approximately 34,000 women, men, girls and their families annually. YWCA Greater Cincinnati is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. www.ywcacincinnati.org

.....

CIVIC GARDEN CENTER

The Civic Garden Center (CGC) is a nationally recognized nonprofit model for building resilient communities through gardening, education, and environmental stewardship. Located in Cincinnati's urban core, CGC delivers a robust array of high-quality, hands-on education programs and services to students and adults, while supporting the development and success of more than 50 community gardens and over 75 school gardens across greater Cincinnati. Our platinum LEED certified Green Learning Station strives to remain on the cutting edge of sustainable technology while providing environmental education programs and research opportunities for students, professionals, and the public. Their two-acre facility includes a horticultural library and several outdoor gardens for visitors to enjoy free of charge. www.civicgardencenter.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.