

A Case of Gentrification: Over-the-Rhine

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“The environment, for us, is where we live, where we work, and where we play.”

The above words were spoken by Dana Alston at the first national People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 (Gottlieb, 2005, p. 34). Alston, a trailblazing Environmental Justice advocate, stood before a crowd of 650 attendees. The four-day Summit gave attendees the chance to hear from a variety of advocates and witness the subsequent formation of a nationally recognized Environmental Justice movement. According to scholars Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, the Summit created a space wherein “participants made conceptual linkages between seemingly different struggles, identifying common themes of racism and economic exploitation of people and land” (Cole & Foster, 2001, p. 32).

This paper aims to similarly draw conceptual linkages. Via the exploration of the neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati, Ohio, this paper will make the case that gentrification and Environmental Justice are intrinsically linked. This paper will begin by outlining the complex, storied history of Over-the-Rhine. It will then consider the characteristics of Over-the-Rhine that qualify the neighborhood as a gentrified area. These characteristics will be expounded upon through a variety of Environmental Justice conceptual frameworks, including the green paradox, food

accessibility, and slow violence. The hope is that these components will successfully shape Over-the-Rhine’s gentrification story as one where a population’s ability to live, work, and play is being threatened.

As much of Over-the-Rhine’s gentrification has taken place under the guise of historical preservation, it is important to begin with a recount of events from the neighborhood’s past. The area north of the Miami & Erie Canal became a haven for German immigrants beginning in the 1830s (OTR History – Over-the-Rhine Foundation, n.d.). These German immigrants began establishing semi-skilled industries in the area, such as cooking, tailoring, and printing (OTR Cincinnati Was Booming Before Now, but Many Don’t Remember., 2021). The area was soon transformed into a bustling community with so much German influence that street signs and town codes were written in both English and German. The German influence is also evidenced by the neighborhood’s name itself. One of the main ways people entered the neighborhood was via a bridge. As an ode to their place of origin, the German immigrants would say they were “going over the Rhine” as they made this journey over the Canal (OTR History – Over-the-Rhine Foundation, n.d.). Today, the neighborhood is typically shorted to simply “OTR” in colloquial dialogue and will continue to be referred to as such for the rest of the paper.

Figure 1: Cincinnati, 1879



Note. Historical map of Cincinnati from 1879.

OTR's history, however, does not begin and end with the many German people who called it home. Starting in the 1880s, large swaths of Black Americans were leaving the South and migrating to northern urban centers (OTR Cincinnati Was Booming Before Now, but Many Don't Remember., 2021). One such northern urban center became OTR, as many saw an opportunity in the area's semi-skilled industries. While southern Black Americans found jobs in these industries, there were still large hurdles to overcome to make the lives they were leading in OTR better than the ones they had left behind. According to a local 1880s Cincinnati newspaper, the "color-line [was] everywhere" (McDaniels-Wilson et al., 2012, p. 27). Cincinnati's Black population may have worked in OTR during this time, but they largely resided in the city's West End, the neighborhood adjoining OTR. Even further, the repealing of the Black Code Laws in the 1880s did little in terms of ethnic integration (McDaniels-Wilson et al., 2012, p. 27). Black Americans calling Cincinnati home were still effectively barred from

"hotels, restaurants, theaters, and amusement parks" until the post-World War II era (McDaniels-Wilson et al., 2012, p. 27). While sanctioned segregation began to dissolve, the degree of separation between Cincinnati's Black and White populations was still felt.

Flash forwarding to the 2000s, OTR, still an enclave of Black Cincinnatians, underwent immense turmoil and civil unrest. The downtown community was rocked by the killing of 17-year-old Black teen Timothy Thomas by a White Cincinnati police officer (Childs & Spence, 2018). This was not an isolated incident. Between 1995 and 2001, fifteen Black men died while in the custody of the Cincinnati Police Department (Childs & Spence, 2018). Worn thin by the continued police brutality, a significant number of OTR's Black residents engaged in a six-day period of burning, vandalism, and violence. In the aftermath of the riot, Cincinnati gained national attention. Something needed to be done to rectify the continued years of violence and brutality in the historic OTR neighborhood. The proposed solution: the Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan of 2002.

Figure 2: Proposed Future Land Use in Over-the-Rhine

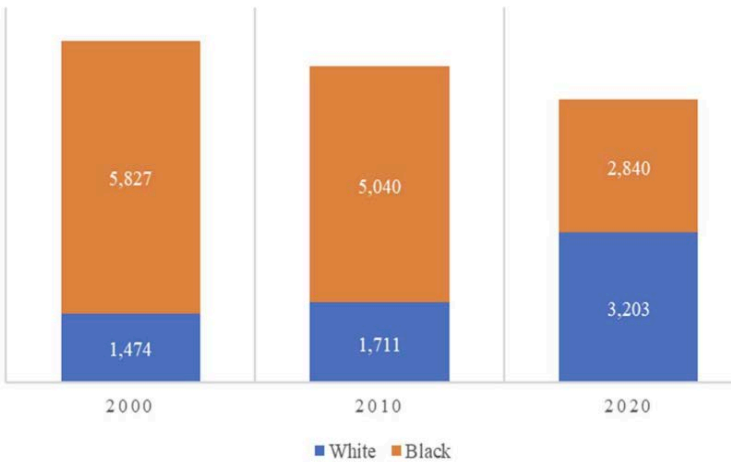


Figure 2: Proposed Plan Map

Note. Proposed Land Use Plan Map from the Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan of 2002.

renter-occupied residences decreased by 33.3% (Pearson, 2022, p. 32). The lack of rental properties is a huge blow to the lower-income population's ability to afford housing. In 2000, 96% of OTR residents lived in rentals (OTR Comprehensive Plan, 2002, p. 38). The OTR Comprehensive Plan wrongly prioritized home ownership over the provision of well-structured, affordable rentals. Bearing this in mind, these demographic changes were not a result of the city meeting its original goal of "an economically and racially diverse community" (OTR Comprehensive Plan, 2002, p. 1). Quite the opposite, actually.

Figure 4: Racial Composition in Over-the-Rhine, 2000-2020



Note. The Population Difference Between OTR's White and Black Residents.

Environmental Justice can help explain just how deeply this idea of community diversification has failed and why gentrification has prevailed. The first Environmental Justice concept to help make this case is a term known as the green space paradox. The green space paradox describes the phenomenon in which the bringing of green spaces to locations that historically lack them leads to rising costs and displacement (Vasudevan, 2023). The idea is that, while well-intentioned, green spaces end up catering to the wealthier populace. The National Institute of Health found that, when placed within 100 meters

of a home, an urban green space has the capacity to raise residential prices by 3-4% (Chen et al., 2022).

A prominent instance of the green space paradox is currently afoot in Denver, Colorado. In December 2023, construction of a four-acre park atop North Denver's portion of Interstate 70 was completed (Vasudevan, 2023). The Elyria-Swansea cover park is lined with over 160 trees, an amphitheater, splash park, and soccer fields. The hope was that this park could reconnect a neighborhood that was historically severed via the construction of I-70. However, the predominantly Latino community is not entirely seeing or believing this hope of reconnection. Rather, these community members are facing the potential of a forced exit from the area. Realtors are already lauding the Globeville-Elyria-Swansea Neighborhood as "Denver's next hottest neighborhood" (Vasudevan, 2023). Residents fear that this title will only encourage higher costs of living and gentrify the area.

North Denver's new cover park echoes the development of OTR's Washington Park. OTR's main real estate investor, 3CDC, was again in charge of the transformation of Washington Park. The \$48 million renovation was completed in 2012 and expanded the park "from 6 acres to an 8-acre urban sanctuary" (Washington Park | 3CDC, 2012). The conversation of the park's paradoxical implications can begin with answering the following question: Where did the park's additional two acres come from? The answer: the demolition of Washington Park Elementary School. Washington Park Elementary School, a school with a 97% Black student body, served the community for 49 years (Washington Park Elementary School Profile, 2007). In 2007, the school was closed, demolished, and gifted from the Cincinnati Board of Education to the Cincinnati Park Board. Little information can be found regarding where the school's nearly 300 students went after the demolition.

Figure 5: Demolition of Washington Park Elementary School, 2007



Note. A student of Washington Park Elementary School Looks on as Demolition Begins.

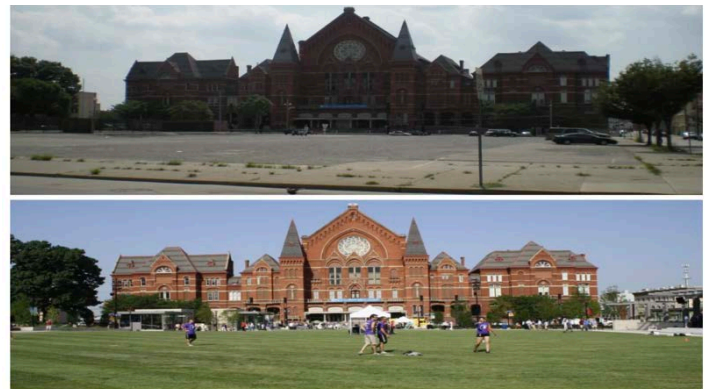
The demolition of the school perfectly encapsulates the idea of “development that privileges the interests of new residents over those of existing ones” (Diskin & Dutton, 2006, p. 2). In 3CDC’s description of the Washington Park Project, it states the park will “continue to attract more homeowners, business owners and visitors to the Over-the-Rhine from throughout the city, the region and the nation” (Washington Park| 3CDC, 2012). There is little to no mention of what services the park provides to the area’s preexisting residents. Many of OTR’s longstanding residents share similar sentiments of North Denver’s GES community. A 27-year-old resident of the GES neighborhood, Alfonso Espino, describes the feeling of “looking around and not being able to place [himself]” (Vasudevan, 2023).

The predominantly Black population of OTR evidently feels the same sense of not recognizing the place wherein they work, live, and play. Upon breaking ground on the Washington Park transformation project in 2011, 3CDC received much pushback surrounding the removal of the premise’s basketball court and swimming pool. Many believed the removal of the basketball court, where “young African American males like to spend time” and the swimming pool “where children learned to swim” was essential to the

cultural fabric of the area (Deobhakta, 2014, p. 80). This cultural importance, however, was ultimately overshadowed by Washington Park’s widespread reputation as a meeting place for drug use, homelessness, and prostitution. A dog park now lies where the basketball court once stood. The nearby Ziegler Park swimming pool, which did not offer swimming lessons or a swim team at the time of the Washington Park transformation, was offered up as an alternative (High, 2020, p. 58).

All these amenity changes demonstrate the green space paradox. This paradox is typically set into motion by community outsiders seeking to impress their own ideal of what makes a good neighborhood unto preexisting residents. One long term resident of OTR puts it plainly, stating, “3CDC is building up everything down here and we got lost in the shuffle” (Elgazzar, 2011). Ultimately, the desire to beautify or fix an area in the name of the environment, can lead to clear injustices like gentrification.

Figure 6: Washington Park Before and After Transformation



Note. Washington Park Before and After the 2012 3CDC Major Renovation Project

Another concept in Environmental Justice that accentuates OTR’s gentrification is the idea of food inaccessibility. Professor of Anthropology at UT Austin, Ashanté M. Reese, nicely tackles this subject in her book *Black Food Geographies: Race,*

Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C. Reese explores the connection between Blackness and supermarket redlining—the disinvestment of grocery stores in certain communities (Reese, 2019, p. xii). She embraces community nuances and local storytelling to show that environmental racism can manifest itself in food inaccessibility. Even further, she considers the idea of a “built environment” and how food access plays a huge part in shaping an individual’s said environment (Reese, 2019, p. 2). All of this culminates in the idea of “geographies of self-reliance,” a term used to describe both “how residents physically navigate the food landscape—where to shop and how to get there” and ideas of “memory, nostalgia, personal and communal priorities, hope, engagements with history, and racialized responsibility” (Reese, 2019, p. 8). Reese’s ideas of agency and resilience in the foodscape of Black communities have a clear place in OTR’s gentrification story.

The best way to start connecting Black Food Geographies to the gentrification of OTR is via the stories of individuals in the community. One such individual is Bonnie Neumeier. As founder of the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, a place that encourages service learning and community education amongst OTR residents, Neumeier is well-versed in the food access of the area. She has spoken to the discomfort many Black residents feel when in OTR’s southern portion. The community leader says this area of OTR is nothing but “high-end bars and restaurants and gourmet hot dogs” (High, 2020, p. 59). Many Black residents view this area as somewhere only affluent White Cincinnatians go when they want to leave suburbia. Vine Street, in particular, is known as the hotspot for fine dining, with reservations filling up weeks in advance and menu prices that are well beyond two digits.

Again, 3CDC is the company behind this food scene transformation. An OTR resident had

words regarding the company’s takeover of OTR, stating, “3CDC closed down the corner stores where people could buy milk or a bag of chips” as well as “the soft-serve ice cream places” (High, 2020, p. 59). A corner store may have been a place where long-time residents saw familiar faces and used the aisles as a space to catch up. Ice cream shops may have been a place these same residents could go to cool off on a hot summer’s day. While such food establishments might seem like insignificant minutiae of a neighborhood, it is these little parts that form the foundation of the intricate whole. The complete and utter transformation of these spaces speaks to Reese’s idea that many view the residents of these predominantly Black neighborhoods as objects rather than agents (Reese, 2019, p. 131). The individual need of running to the corner store to quickly grab something, or a sweet treat on a summer’s day, has been trumped by the desire of outsiders to experience cool and different dining in an urban environment.

Further coinciding with Reese’s view of environmental racism and food access is the case of the Kroger grocery store on Vine Street. The Kroger in the aforementioned southern portion of OTR was demolished in 2019. This grocery store had been operating since 1961, with the closest alternative located five blocks away (Coolidge, 2019). Upon this demolition, the city’s urban core is without a major grocery chain. This directly proves Reese’s point that, in many cases, “food corporations justify pulling out or avoiding Black neighborhoods because of high insurance rates, crimes, and low sales” (Reese, 2019, p. 3). Essentially, all three of these reasons were used as justification for the store’s closure. Kroger executives claimed they feared competition between the Vine Street location and the new, more central Downtown location. The 52,000 square foot Downtown store is a goliath compared to the 11,000 square feet Vine location. The food hall feature of the Downtown

store is widely viewed as a means of catering to the higher-income individuals living and working in the area (Coolidge, 2017). One resident voiced worry for the “elderly” in OTR, wondering, “How are they going to get there?” The “there” in question is the mega Kroger that seemingly wiped out the economic viability of the Vine location (Coolidge, 2017). To make matters worse, 3CDC scooped up the area where the OTR Kroger once stood. The area is now a 103-space surface parking lot, only encouraging a greater influx of the wealthier, White outsiders hoping to come to the urban core for expensive food.

Figure 7: The Location of the Vine Street Kroger



Note. The Parking Lot that Took the Place of the Vine Street Kroger.

This demolition of OTR’s traditional foodscape, paired with the prior discussion of the green space paradox, leads the paper to its final Environmental Justice conceptual link: slow violence. Coined by environmentalist Rob Nixon in the 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, slow violence is a term that encapsulates three basic tenets. First, slow violence is that which occurs incrementally. Secondly, slow violence does not occur within the confines of clear-cut boundaries. Finally, slow violence tends to have an invisible quality to it, making it less attractive to the media outlets who oftentimes prefer more shiny and pithy

stories (Akese & Little, 2018, p. 82). The details and accounts laid out by this paper may not be immediately characterized as violent in nature. Nixon’s idea of slow violence can be applied to the case of gentrification in OTR to show just how dire the situation truly is.

Beginning with the idea of slow violence as incremental, the gentrification of OTR did not occur overnight. The fact that such a large portion of this paper is devoted to getting into the weeds of OTR’s history proves exactly that. The discussion had to begin with the arrival of Black Americans from the South after slavery’s abolition. From there, Black Americans continued to face discrimination and segregation. The Cincinnati Metropolitan Master Plan of 1948 evidenced this continued ostracization of Black Cincinnatians, sanctioning the decimation of the predominantly Black neighborhood of the West End. Then, the construction of I-75 led to further displacement of Black residents, moving many into OTR. It essentially took the deaths of fifteen Black men under Cincinnati police custody in a six-year span to reach a “tipping point.” Under slow violence, the tipping point is accompanied by “shock and bewilderment as what was there all along is suddenly apparent” (Rice, 2016, p. 178). The highly publicized rioting in OTR served as a tipping point in the gentrification of OTR. Shock surrounding this civil unrest led city leaders to draft and implement the Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan of 2002. With its mixed-use real estate designations, this is the very plan that became the most obvious instrument of gentrification.

Speaking to the second criterion of ambiguous boundaries, the issues explored here go well beyond the confines of OTR itself. The gentrification of this area is tightly wound to America’s broader history of racism and the unfair treatment of Black Americans. Many Black Americans originally fled to Cincinnati as a means of escaping the slavery and disenfranchisement rampant in the South

at the time. Further, the true influx of Black Americans into OTR occurred as a direct result of local racist sentiment. The 1950s city planners saw the construction of a highway as having more value than the livelihoods of nearly 40,000 Black residents. The demolition of housing, basketball courts, swimming pools, and food spaces were all repercussions of decades of complex nationwide injustices.

Closing out the slow violence conversation, the gentrification of OTR is largely under the cloak of invisibility. Many Cincinnatians look at OTR and see colorful buildings decorated with murals. They see fine dining spots that would be perfect for a birthday celebration. They see a park that their Goldendoodle would love. What they do not see is the large number of Black residents who are struggling to live, work, and play in the area because of this progress. Furthermore, these boutiques and gourmet hot dog restaurants drive positive media attention for OTR. 3CDC is typically hailed in media spaces as saving the dilapidated and dangerous OTR, returning it back to its historical and vivacious self. Many people fail to ask themselves, “But at what cost?”

This question leads the paper to its natural conclusion. Beyond the billion-dollar investment figure 3CDC boasts, it is so very vital to consider what it really took to get the half-a-million-dollar condos, James-Beard nominated chefs, and dog parks into Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine. Environmental Justice frameworks are crucial lenses through which the gentrification in Over-the-Rhine can be viewed and the question of cost can begin to be answered. The concept of the green space paradox shows how environmental investment can make it so that certain communities cannot partake in beautification and greenery efforts. The concept of geographies of self-reliance emphasizes the importance of the individual, especially when it pertains to food culture and access. Finally, slow

violence can bring more awareness to the devious injustices that may be occurring right before our eyes. All these Environmental Justice linkages go to show that the Black community of Over-the-Rhine may soon not recognize the very place they have lived, worked, and played for hundreds of years.

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