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Race, Photography, and the Fight for Fountain Square in Cincinnati

Shortly after its creation in 1970, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched an ambitious photojournalism project called DOCUMERICA. Inspired by earlier landmark government initiatives such as the Works Progress Administration-funded photography projects of the 1930s and 1940s, DOCUMERICA helped to establish a "visual baseline" for EPA programming during the 1970s by drawing attention to the nation's intersecting environmental crises.[1] Between 1972 and 1977, the EPA commissioned assignments from close to one hundred freelance photographers, who produced tens of thousands of images focusing on every state in the union and most major cities. Environmental issues such as water and air pollution were central to DOCUMERICA's remit and featured prominently in the images produced by its photographers. However, through their assignments, DOCUMERICA's eclectic band of photojournalists did far more than create a visual record of environmental concerns to complement the EPA's developing-policy initiatives. They also produced a vibrant snapshot of American society during the 1970s and the ways that everyday citizens interacted with the world around them.[2]

Among the many talented photojournalists hired for DOCUMERICA was Tom Hubbard, a white staff photographer at the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, who shot his assignment during the Spring and Summer of 1973. Tasked with documenting "a pleasant urban environment" in the Queen City, Hubbard focused his lens on Fountain Square, a civic square located on Fifth Street between Walnut and Vine Streets.[3] Long celebrated as the "heart" of Cincinnati, Fountain Square's redevelopment several years prior to the start of Hubbard's assignment had reconfirmed its importance as "the focal point of downtown." More broadly, its revitalization was highlighted by local and national media

outlets as further evidence of its strong record in city planning, and in particular the success of Cincinnati's postwar urban renewal campaigns. From this perspective, the "new" Fountain Square was a symbol of the "new" Cincinnati, a forward-thinking and ambitious Midwestern city whose "urban renaissance" contrasted with the apparent "social, economic and cultural deterioration" of other Midwestern metropolises such as Detroit and St. Louis.[4]

This short essay reflects on one aspect of the "new" Cincinnati captured through Hubbard's photographs: the city's increasing racial diversity. In particular, it focuses on the growing visibility of its African American community. Like so many Midwestern cities, Cincinnati was transformed by the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South during the first seven decades of the twentieth century. Hubbard's assignment documented Black Cincinnatians enjoying Fountain Square in a variety of ways, ranging from social breaks and quiet reflection to involvement in major public events such as "D'aug Days," a month-long arts festival that took in place in the square during 1973.[5] Many of Hubbard's photographs projected an image of multiracial inclusion, celebrating Fountain Square's potential as a racially unifying space that, by extension, was a stand-in for the "slow but steady economic and political gains" Cincinnati's Black residents had made during the decades since World War II.[6] More importantly, they documented how Black Cincinnatians sought to actively participate in Fountain Square's civic and public cultures; asserting, in the formulation of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, their "right to the city."[7]

Yet at the same time, Hubbard's DOCUMERICA assignment reveals longstanding fault lines of race and space that continued to shape Cincinnati during the early 1970s. Over the century since Fountain Square first opened in 1871, African American residents were funneled into crowded and substandard tenement housing, first in the historic West End neighborhood, and then after World War II, into Avondale and other neighborhoods to the east of downtown. By the early 1960s, even as political analysts and local newspapers reported that Cincinnati was on its way to becoming a majority-Black city, Fountain Square had effectively become a bridge between what Charles Casey-Leininger describes as Cincinnati's "first Black ghetto" in the West End and a "burgeoning second ghetto" on the east side.[8] Concurrently, lingering frustrations over poor housing, police harassment, and other issues underpinned a series of "race riots" that rocked the city during the second half of the 1960s. Read through this lens, the visibility of African Americans in Hubbard's photographs speaks to broader tensions regarding the shifting

demographics of Cincinnati, the efforts of Black Cincinnatians to make space for themselves, and deeply-rooted white concerns regarding the presence of Black people—particularly young, Black men—in public space.

Cincinnati has long held a particular significance for African Americans. During the antebellum era, the city was one of the first northern stops on the Underground Railroad, the clandestine network of secret routes and safe ports that helped African Americans escape from slavery in the South. The city's centrality to emancipation networks was codified through the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, which opened in downtown Cincinnati in 2004.[9] More broadly, Cincinnati's transformation "from a village to a booming city" during the first half of the nineteenth century created new opportunities for African Americans drawn by "hopes of social and economic freedom." By 1850 Cincinnati was the sixth-largest city in the country and was home to one of the ten largest free Black communities in antebellum America.[10]

The end of the American Civil War brought a fresh wave of African Americans to Cincinnati, contributing to the development of a distinct Black enclave in the city's West End and the founding of important new institutions such as Gaines High School, one of the first public high schools for African Americans in Ohio. Gaines opened in 1866 in a building on West Court Street between John and Mound Streets, five years prior to the opening of Fountain Square some half-a-mile southeast.[11] Despite enduring challenges, a small but vibrant Black middle class emerged in Cincinnati during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, exemplified by figures such as Robert Gordon, a former slave who made his fortune in the coal business before investing heavily in Cincinnati real estate.[12]

The onset of the first wave of the Great Migration in the early 1900s sparked another population boom, as African Americans left the South to seek out new lives in Cincinnati and other cities across the Northeast and Midwest.[13] In 1900, there were around 14,500 African Americans living in Cincinnati. By 1940, this number had leapt to more than 55,000, with more than two-thirds of Black residents living in the West End neighborhood. The expansion of Cincinnati's Black community reflected the city's broader growth, with Cincinnati doubling in population between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. In 1925 Cincinnati became the first American city to have a comprehensive city plan approved by its city council, which sought to establish a modern transportation infrastructure and to control the development of new subdivisions and zoning regulations. Pioneering American urban planner George B. Ford, one of the plan's architects, championed it as a means to make the

city "a much more convenient, delightful and effective place to live."[14] Just as Cincinnati's Black community had become well established by the publication of Cincinnati's 1925 city plan, so too had Fountain Square established its own reputation as the civic center of the Queen City. This was noted in *Cincinnati: A Guide to the Queen City and its Neighbors*, which was published in 1943. Compiled by writers affiliated with the Works Progress Administration, this guide celebrated Fountain Square's importance as the "heart" of Cincinnati and "the core of [its] civic, social, and commercial life."[15]

Two complementary ambitions—to preserve and expand the civic function of public spaces such as Fountain Square, and to respond to new and existing urban challenges—continued to shape the ambitions of Cincinnati's planning commission into the postwar era. These ambitions were formalized through the 1948 Cincinnati Metropolitan Master Plan, which established an ambitious blueprint for urban renewal and the revival of downtown as a place of "vibrance, diversity, and excitement," and further clarified through the 1964 "Plan for Downtown Cincinnati," which led to more than $140 million of federal, city, and private funding being earmarked for redevelopment.[16] A facelift for Fountain Square was a central plank of these modernization initiatives, with the *Enquirer* reiterating the square's place "among the premier municipal landmarks in the nation."[17] Following its reopening, *Cincinnati* magazine described the transformation of a "decaying Fountain Square" as the catalyst for "a revitalization process that brought life and excitement" back to downtown.[18]

Fountain Square's importance as a civic hub made it a logical point of focus for Hubbard's DOCUMERICA assignment, and his photographs emphasize the site's multifunctionality. Shooting at different times of day allowed Hubbard to capture the myriad ways that Cincinnati's residents and tourists engaged with the space—from early morning bench sitters and lunchtime office workers to afternoon chess players and evening people watchers. Some of Hubbard's images provide quiet character portraits, for example a young college-age woman sitting alone holding a white flower.[19] Others emphasized the square's popularity and the scale of public events, with Hubbard using wide angle shots and downward facing images captured from some of the tall buildings to document the large crowds attending public events such as performances by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.[20]

Perhaps most significantly, Hubbard's DOCUMERICA assignment emphasized the demographic diversity of Fountain Square's inhabitants, with a mix

Fig. 1. "Historical Photos and Images," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed Aug. 20, 2024, https://www.epa.gov/history/historical-photos-and-images.

of ages, genders, races and classes represented. This included many images featuring members of Cincinnati's Black community, which had swollen to more than 125,000—nearly 27 percent of the city's total population—by the square's reopening in 1969. Photographs such as the one below, featuring two Black youths listening to a transistor radio, supported Hubbard's contention that Fountain Square was a site "that works for the city and its people in a myriad of ways."[21] This positive sentiment was echoed by politician Theodore Berry, who was sworn in as the Queen City's first Black mayor in 1972. In his acceptance speech, Berry celebrated his electoral victory as evidence of Cincinnati's growth "in maturity and civic spirit," and the acceptance of its Black community as "a full and responsible partner in the Governance of our city."[22]

Hubbard's representation of Fountain Square as a democratic and inclusive space was perhaps best articulated through his photographs of D'aug Days, a public festival which took place during the summer of 1973. Sponsored by the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, the festival featured a range of performances, exhibits and events on Fountain Square "designed to bring people together in the city center."[23] Shooting from the perspective of both performers and audience members, Hubbard's coverage of D'aug Days and other public events documented racially integrated crowds dancing and enjoying

Fig. 2. “Historical Photos and Images,” *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed Aug. 20, 2024, https://www.epa.gov/history/historical-photos-and-images.

the festivities in Cincinnati's "immensely popular public plaza."[24] The image below is a joyous example: two African American men described by Hubbard as "far-out style setters" grooving to music by a Fountain Square band.[25]

Photographs such as the two included above arguably helped to convey an image of Fountain Square as a welcoming and inclusive space, complementing Berry's contention that African Americans were now an important and valued part of the Queen City's community. However, there is another story to be told through Hubbard's DOCUMERICA assignment; one that speaks to longstanding fissures separating Cincinnatians along the lines of race, class, and space. From the city's settlement in 1788, African Americans had found that the promise of social and economic freedom in Cincinnati was routinely left unfulfilled. The denial of Black suffrage was written into Ohio's first constitutional convention in 1802, and the passage of subsequent "Black Laws" withheld basic rights such as access to education and equal legal representation.[26] As Cincinnati's Black community gradually expanded during the nineteenth century, racial tensions sporadically flared into anti-Black riots. In 1829, attacks by white mobs prompted more than half of Cincinnati's Black residents to leave the city. Seven years later, anti-Black violence led to the destruction of an abolitionist newspaper and the burning of Black homes and businesses.[27]

Following the end of the Civil War, the persistent threat of anti-black violence was compounded by growing residential segregation. As Henry Louis Taylor notes, although white prejudice "infiltrated every aspect of life" in antebellum Cincinnati, Black residents "did not live in homogenous, racially segregated neighborhoods."[28] However, as both Cincinnati and its Black community expanded, this quickly changed. Wealthier white residents moved to hilltop neighborhoods such as Walnut Hills and Avondale, which were annexed by the city during the decades following the end of the Civil War.[29] Low incomes and restrictive housing covenants limited many African Americans to deteriorating neighborhoods in the "basin," which became poorer and Blacker. The onset of the Great Migration during the early twentieth century consolidated the emergence of the West End as Cincinnati's "first Black ghetto."[30]

Through their pursuit of modern public facilities, safer streets, better public transit, and other amenities that were articulated in the city's 1925 and 1948 metropolitan plans, Cincinnati's planners sought to create "the kind of communities and neighborhoods . . . we want."[31] However, the continued

marginalization and neglect of Black Cincinnatians called into question who the "we" in this formulation included. The desire of Cincinnati's political and planning elite to "eliminate our slums" disproportionately impacted West End residents, with slum clearance and highway construction decimating the neighborhood during the decades following World War II. The displacement of African Americans from the West End, coupled with an influx of new Black migrants during the second wave of the Great Migration, contributed to the creation of a "second Black ghetto" in Avondale and other neighborhoods to the east of downtown Cincinnati.

Accordingly, by the beginning of the 1960s, downtown Cincinnati, and Fountain Square specifically, had become a de facto bridge between Cincinnati's "first Black ghetto" to the west, and its "burgeoning second ghetto" to the east.[32] With an air of barely concealed anxiety, political analysts and local newspapers reported that Cincinnati was on its way to becoming a majority Black city.[33] The growth of Cincinnati's Black community, and growing demands for equal rights, manifested at Fountain Square, which became a popular staging ground for civil rights protests and marches. In October 1963, an estimated 16,000 people gathered in Fountain Square to hear Clyde Vinegar, the chairman of the Cincinnati branch of the Congress of Racial Equality, contend that "we intend to have full equality. We shall get it or we will die in the streets of Cincinnati getting it."[34] Several years later, frustrations over persistent racial inequality fed into a series of "race riots" in 1967 and 1968, where marauding Negro gangs" were reported to have fanned out from Avondale across the city, "setting fires, looting and shooting at National Guardsmen."[35]

Such hysterical media coverage downplayed the deeply rooted historical causes of Black unrest and the racial inequities that continued to govern life in the Queen City. As noted in the 1967 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, two in every five Black families continued to live on or below the poverty line, one in every eight Black Cincinnatians was unemployed, and the city had continued to drag its heels on implementing federally mandated school segregation.[36] Nevertheless, for many white Cincinnatians, the growing visibility of Black people in Cincinnati—seen most dramatically through forms of organized protest and violent resistance—was linked to broader anxieties about the city's changing demographics and the willingness and ability of Black people to claim their "right to the city." Subsequent work by the Urban Research Group based at the University of Cincin-

nati demonstrated how even the more quotidian use of Fountain Square by Black residents could be interpreted as either a challenge or a threat, with the presence of Black "territorial groups" in Fountain Square, particularly during the afternoon and evening, becoming a matter of pronounced concern for some white Cincinnatians by the second half of the 1970s.[37]

Reading Hubbard's photographs of Fountain Square through this lens complicates its representation as a harmonious and racially inclusive space. From this perspective, media reports of "guerrilla-type bands" of Black youths who "prowled" Cincinnati's streets, and images of young Black men and teenagers enjoying Fountain Square, can be understood as two sides to the same coin of white spatial anxiety.[38] Whether manifested through more direct confrontations, such as the rebellions of 1967 and 1968, or through the racial and spatial tensions that characterized the everyday use of Fountain Square by Cincinnati residents, these anxieties and contestations speak to the broader significance of the city's shifting demographics, and the enduring legacy of racial segregation and the fraught politics of public space in the Queen City.

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NOTES

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3. "Documerica Focuses on Environment," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 15, 1975, 114.

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5. August Brings the 'D'aug Days,'" Aug. 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10789.

6. "Cincinnati," *Ebony*, Oct. 1982, 39.

7. Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 5.

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12. "Merchants, Money, Markets," *Ebony*, Nov. 1973, 82.

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15. *Cincinnati: A Guide to the Queen City and its Neighbors* (Cincinnati, OH: Wiesen-Hart Press, 1943), 225.

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17. "Fountain Square Needs Public Consideration," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sept. 19, 1970, 4.

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20. Fountain Square, September 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10859; Fountain Square, Sept. 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10865.

21. Listening to Transistor, June 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10758.

22. "Berry: From Poverty to Power," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Oct. 19, 2000, 14.

23. "Art for the Square," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 8, 1973, 95.

24. Fountain Square, August 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10816.

25. Far-Out Style Setters, June 1973, U.S. National Archives, 412-DA-10751.

26. Henry Louis Taylor, "Preface," in *Race and the City*, xiii.

27. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 112.

28. Taylor, "Introduction," in *Race and the City*, 3.

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30. Casey-Leininger, "Making the Second Ghetto," 233.

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