

# February 2021 Newsletter



## Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

### Graduate Student Spotlight: Rory Barron



#### ***How did you hear about the WGSS MA program?***

I was scouting for potential graduate programs to apply to when I was finishing my undergraduate degree at the University of Cincinnati. I attended the National Women's Studies Association conference and went to their graduate fair, and UC's WGSS program had a table there.

#### ***What has been your experience as a TA?***

I've had a TAship for all 4 semesters of the MA program, and even got to teach two of my own classes. I love teaching and knew going into graduate school that I wanted to teach. These opportunities have certainly been a learning experience (especially teaching during a pandemic as a first-time instructor). I love seeing the connections made for students and their engagement with the class topics. It reminds me of those "ah ha" moments I had in undergrad not too long ago. I feel like I get to pass on some of my favorite professors' passion to my students.

#### ***Who are your favorite theorists?***

Sara Ahmed, Jasbir Puar, Lauren Berlant, and Elizabeth Freeman are some of my favorite theorists. I come back to them over and over again in my papers.

#### ***What excites you about the field of WGSS?***

So much excites me about the field of WGSS. I love the freedom interdisciplinarity offers, and by freedom, I mean the interdisciplinarity of WGSS allows us to cover more perspectives and topics with nuance rather than a strict set of perspectives/questions/etc. As such, there are many things WGSS scholars cover that many other disciplines don't consider. I also love that WGSS blends the past with the present moment, so that we are able to draw upon historical contexts but also talk about issues that are very much affected the communities we research in the present moment.

#### ***What are your plans after graduating this spring?***

I'm hoping to continue my graduate education by working towards a PhD.

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## My work (past, present, future)

I often introduce myself as a sociologist by training and Black feminist by circumstance. All of my work is informed by a Black feminist lens and a sociological understanding of structural inequalities. My research is simultaneously intersectional and interdisciplinary. My work is also glocal (global and local) – especially my work on Black feminism(s). I earned two Bachelor's degrees from LSU – one in French, the other in Sociology. I earned an MA in Liberal Arts with a concentration in African and African American Studies and PhD degree in Sociology with a concentration in comparative international development studies and demography. As an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the Université de Montréal (pre-doc) in African Demography, I was able to marry all of my interests and training to do research to advance women's "empowerment," health, and well-being in Ghana and later in Cameroon. In 2013, I turned my attention to Cincinnati – the community where I work. I began my ethnographic work looking at Black women's lived experiences at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and space. Since my first urban ethnographic study, which commenced in 2013, I've gone on to collect nearly 100 in-depth interviews with Black women reside in Cincinnati.



My most recent projects include a Reproductive Justice study (2017-2020) for the Ohio Policy Evaluation Network (OPEN). Using Community Based Participatory Research Methods (CBPR), I led a study focused on what reproductive justice looks like for Black women in Cincinnati. An essential part of this project was building and sustaining a Community Advisory Board (CAB). The CAB was constituted at the onset of the study and continues to play an important role at all stages of the research. The CAB helped with the interview guide, recruiting sample, and data coding and will be assisting in writing peer-reviewed publications.

In December 2020, I began working on a new study focused on Black women and economic mobility funded by the Greater Cincinnati Women's Fund. Black Cincinnati has a rich and proud history but one mired in discrimination, exclusion, and segregation. While there are many stories of success and thriving in spite of the momentous challenges white supremacy presents, there are many more stories (some known, others buried) that reveals institutional barriers that maintain a racial status quo that keep African Americans and Black women (in particular) in poverty. This study aims to understand the intergenerational challenges and successes of Black women's mobility in Cincinnati.

My next research study turns my attention inward. With a College of Arts and Science Innovation Grant, I will conduct a study on Black graduate student experiences. The grant will cover a Research Assistantship for a graduate student and provide an enriching mentoring experience grounded in research. As a part of inclusive diversity initiatives, this study strives to understand the climatic challenges Black graduate students encounter in A&S disciplinary programs. We intend to conduct qualitative interviews with past and present matriculating graduate students about their experiences in their programs. We also intend to assess program strategies for recruiting and retaining Black graduate students; what is working and what isn't? How inclusive are curricula, and how diverse are staff, faculty, and students in different departments? And finally, we aim to track and evaluate the changing enrollment of A&S Black graduate students over time.

## New Publications

This year, I have two publications that will be in print. The first is a peer-reviewed journal article, accepted for publication in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. My paper "Misrepresenting Reproductive Justice: A Black Feminist Critique of 'Protecting Black Life' analyzes the antifeminist, antiabortion rhetorical reframing of "Black Lives Matter." I analyze the Cincinnati "Protecting Black life" billboard campaign, YouTube videoblogs, newsletters, television programming, and other media publications. The study finds that the feminist rhetoric of reproductive justice and Black Lives Matter is misrepresented by antichoice, antifeminist movements that present abortion as a population issue (as successful eugenics and attempted genocide), a civil rights issue (a discourse that promotes comparisons between the fetus and the slave), and the Black community as a "target" Planned Parenthood and a Black man's issue (a threat to Black patriarchy). In this reframing, Black women are portrayed as unwitting victims of Planned Parenthood and/or uniformly misrepresented as sexually irresponsible "welfare queens" who exploit the state for support.

A second publication scheduled to be in print this year is a book chapter in Zakiya Luna (incidentally the 2021 WGSS Taft Distinguish Lecturer) and Whitney Pirtle's (eds) *Black Feminist Sociology: Perspectives and Praxis* (Routledge). I wrote a chapter titled "New Directions in Black Feminist Sociology: The Politic of Space at the Intersection of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality." As the title suggests, the chapter explores the importance of spatiality within the conceptual framework of intersectionality.

## Program Building

In my second year as WGSS Assistant Department Head, I've been working hard as the new Director of the Social Justice Program. In my first year, I created an advisory board of social justice oriented UC scholars from diverse disciplines. I've had the distinct pleasure working with Professors Brandi Blessett (Political Science), Anjali Dutt (Psychology), Kristin Kalsem (College of Law), Shailaja Paik (History), and Ashley Currier (WGSS). With this dynamic team, I worked to move the Social Justice certificate to a new BIS major, which commenced Fall 2020. This academic year (my second year), we will continue to advance our efforts to move the BIS major to a stand-alone BA degree in Social Justice. We anticipate offering a new BA degree in social justice in Fall 2021.