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THE POLITICAL SPACES OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE CITY:  
IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND THE FLOW OF SOCIAL CAPITAL  
IN NEWARK, NJ

by

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Professor Mary E. Hawkesworth

and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Identity, Agency and the Flow of Social Capital in Newark N.J.

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This project explores U.S. Black women’s participation in social networks that enable political mobilizations in Newark, NJ. These networks include religious and social clubs, service clubs, neighborhood associations, indigenous cultural organizations, women’s ethnic organizations, labor unions and other types of voluntary organizations that facilitate the creation, flow, and utilization of social capital. These networks transcend allegiance to local, state or national centers of government and often pursue politics that seek to blur or defy well-defined scalar structures. Often they seek to connect politics to larger racialized national trends in political economy while seeking to make social and political change at the local level. Using an interpretivist approach to data collection and analysis, I explore the discursive strategies of politicization, including the positive actions that U.S. Black women take to create and maintain political spaces that can be used to pursue their political objectives in Newark, NJ. This research suggests that in cases when Black women’s political agency contributes to Black cultural production, the political support and cultivation of social capital to support Black women’s political agency can be expected to flourish. When Black women politically challenge hegemonic

elements of Black cultural production—specifically when they have challenged singular, masculinist conceptions of both Blackness and community—the flow of social capital in support of that agency will be stifled, resulting in the lack of social transformation at the local level.

## Table of Contents

Abstract		i
Acknowledgements		iv
Chapter 1:	Locating Black Women’s Political Activism	1
Chapter 2:	Reconceptualizing Politics	20
Chapter 3:	Newark Cityscapes: The Making of a Marginal Community	43
Chapter 4:	Black Female Political Subjectivity and Politics in Newark’s Habitus	80
Chapter 5:	Mobilizing against Murder: The Politics of the Life and Death of Sakia Gunn	122
Chapter 6:	Gender, Power, and Social Capital in the National Hip Hop Political Convention	159
Chapter 7	Social Capital, Black Women’s Political Space and Black Cultural Production	202
Appendix A	Newark Cityscapes	226
Appendix B	Education, Age, and Occupation of Selected “Political” Women	231
Appendix C	Active Organizational Membership/Civic Participation of Black Women Activists in Newark	232
Bibliography		233
Curriculum Vitae		248

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## ***Chapter 1***

### **Locating Black Women's Activism**

Historians have long documented African American women's steadfast adherence to democratic principles, including their protracted struggle for opportunities to participate in formal democratic political processes (Giddings 1984, Barkely-Brown 1997). When they were barred from political participation by law and through violence and intimidation, Black women found other ways to get their voices heard. They spoke publicly, they wrote editorials and organized campaigns, they formed civic and cultural organizations and associations, they registered and educated voters, they marched, boycotted and demonstrated (Payne 1995, Giddings 1994, Terbog-Penn 1998, Gray-White 1999, Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001). Despite persistent adversity, Black women have found ways to transform their social capital into concrete political action. Here, social capital refers to those features of communities that facilitate trust, reciprocity, shared norms, cooperation, and the easy flow of information and communication within and between social networks and scalar structures (Bourdieu 1980, Putnam 1993, Portes 2000).

In the contemporary United States, Black women continue to create indigenous organizations, community based institutions, and grassroots collectives to politicize the issues that are central to the survival of their families and communities. These issues include but are not limited to public health and wellness, self-esteem, child care, domestic violence, police brutality, Black-on-Black violence, substance abuse, public safety, education, corporate accountability, reproductive freedom, HIV/AIDS, poverty relief and

environmental justice (Springer 1999, Cohen Jones and Tronto 1997). Despite generations of such activism, scholars know little about how Black women go about politicizing these core social issues. Although there has been some recent work by historians on Black women's political activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social scientists have devoted little attention to Black women's contemporary political activism, particularly the activism generated within local social networks. What are the institutional origins of contemporary Black women's political agency? Within what social networks does Black women's political agency emerge? When and why do U.S. Black women mobilize for political actions in urban communities? These are the central questions explored in this dissertation.

Black women continue to participate in social networks that enable political mobilizations in urban communities in the United States. Religious and social clubs, service clubs, neighborhood associations, indigenous cultural organizations, health clubs, women's or ethnic organizations, labor unions and other types of voluntary organizations facilitate the exchange of political ideas and provide spaces in which Black women's political agency is cultivated and manifested (Springer 2005). These networks transcend allegiance to local, state or national centers of government and involve dimensions of politics that blur or defy well-defined scalar structures. Operating at the local level, these networks are often connected to larger international and/or global trends in political economy. Through interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic research in Newark, New Jersey, I explore how, when and why Black women's social networks spring into action to enable political mobilizations in urban communities.

This project extends research developed under the rubric of “Black feminist studies” and “Black feminist thought” (Collins 1991, Guy-Sheftall and Hammonds 1997, Mullings 1997, Collins 1998, Radford-Hill 2000, Springer 2002); but it also uses concepts and methods drawn from American politics, women’s studies/feminist studies, African American studies, political geography and urban ethnography to illuminate the the political lives of U.S. Black women in urban areas. Through intensive examination of Black women’s understandings of politics, identity, agency, and political spaces, I will contest and reformulate dominant conceptions of these concepts.

The political lives of U.S. Black women are no longer shrouded in obscurity, but the theoretical insights made possible through the study of these women’s lives have yet to be fully acknowledged in the social sciences. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) along with other prominent Black feminist theorists and historians (Scott and Smith 1982, Giddings 1984, Guy-Sheftall 1990, Terbog-Penn 1998, White 1999, James 1999) have done a thorough job establishing the parameters of Black women’s political agency. They have identified the central institutional forces that have shaped Black women’s political resistance, heavily stressing the impact of slavery and low-wage work in determining the life options and decisions of the female descendants of North American and Caribbean slave trade (hooks 1984, Davis 1983). Black feminist thinkers have also initiated intense discussions about the personal and political ramifications of the joint experience of class, sexual and racial exploitation and discrimination, and have argued that resistance to each has required Black women to articulate a commitment to the eradication of all forms oppression (Smith 1983, Davis 1983, hooks 1984, Collins 1991). Black feminist theorists and historians, using the methods of excavation, have rescued iconic figures like Frances

E.W. Watkins, Maria Stewart, and Anna Julia Cooper from the depths intellectual oblivion in their efforts to give voice to a distinct group of women whose life histories have been smothered by the interests and priorities of Eurocentric academic disciplines (Guy Sheftall 1984, Mullings 1997, Collins 1998). Indeed, Black feminist scholars have created a new epistemological and ontological perspective to bring the lives of Black women into focus. They have opened up for social sciences an entirely new terrain of knowledge about Black women and have demonstrated the centrality of critical discourse in establishing the theoretical justification for the inclusion of the prototypical “other” to produce knowledge about the social world. Black feminist theorists have constructed a conceptual framework upon which to build a body of research for and about the political lives of Black women in the United States.

Prominent historians have documented the central role of Black women in movement organizations of the twentieth century (Springer 2005, Payne 1995, Giddings 1984). They have recently gone even further to develop the political history of Black women’s organizations whose resources and access to grassroots community networks helped to spark and maintain movement activities during the heights of the civil rights and Black power movements (Springer 2005, Giddings 1984, Terbog-Penn 1998, White 1999). Perhaps the greatest contribution of historians’ efforts to excavate the political history of Black women is their solid consensus that Black women’s activism has historically been realized through strong coalitions and alliances of women of color organizing around the everyday issues that directly impact their lives. It is this unique characteristic that has given rise to a form of activism that has transcended class, race and sexual boundaries (Johnson-Reagon 1983, Cohen 1997 and Cohen 1999).

The discipline of political science has been slow to realize the theoretical implications that Black women's political history has for the study of politics. In studies of American politics, some political scientists have demonstrated that social networks matter for political participation (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995, Verba and Nie 1972, Rosenstone and Hansen 1994), but mainstream scholars have not considered the role of social networks in *sparkling* contemporary political action. To correct this oversight, I will show how these social networks matter, how these networks function, and when and under what conditions these networks spring into action to mobilize significant political actions in urban communities. Mainstream political scientists have missed three major political mobilizations in the past decade: the Million Man March in 1995, the Million Women March in 1998, and the Million Youth March in 2000 (Smooth and Tucker 1999). Each of these marches turned out massive numbers of African American and Caribbean American citizens. Like their historical forebears in civil rights and Black power movements, Black women, working through social networks, were central to the success of these mobilizations. Through detailed examination of several recent mobilizations in Newark, I will examine dimensions of Black women's political activism overlooked by mainstream scholarship.

My goal is to provide new understanding of Black women's "political agency," "political activism" and "political participation." Although I will use these terms interchangeably, each emerges within a distinct academic discipline and carries particular connotations. "Agency" is a term used in women's studies to signify women taking action to control their lives, often through subtle acts of resistance against forms of social domination. Agency can refer to something as simple as women helping each other

accomplish daily tasks on the job or to something as grand as participating in a demonstration against police brutality. “Political agency,” as I am using it here, encompasses all affirmative acts by women to express their own ideas about how to empower themselves and their communities. Political agency in this sense can range from writing an editorial about a local issue of concern to articulating strongly held political views to friends, families, co-workers and peers.

Since the denouement of the civil rights movement, a large majority of African Americans have lived in major American cities including Los Angeles, St. Louis, Detroit, Cleveland and Newark. Each of these cities has experienced a unique set of opportunities and challenges related in part to the political gains of the civil rights movement, particularly the surge in Black male elected officials in municipal government (Gilliam 1996). In addition, white residential flight, the overall decline in manufacturing jobs and decent wage-earning opportunities for unskilled workers, (Cohen and Dawson 1995, Wilson 1996, Massey and Denton 1993 and O’Conner et al 2001), and the erosion of urban property tax bases have created an environment of deep social and economic deprivation, social alienation and political corruption in what social scientists now self-consciously call “ghettos.”

Many policy analysts have concluded that public institutions located in most of these urban communities simply do not work. Welfare offices, police departments, school boards, city councils, and mayors’ offices share a well-deserved reputation for being inefficient and poorly administrated at best. At worst, these public institutions run counter to the “public good.” Among the most disadvantaged, these institutions are widely perceived as free spending accounts for politicians whose interests are

diametrically opposed to those of “the people” (Marable 1985, 1991). Within these urban spaces characterized by severe deprivation and alienation, much of Black women’s political agency is manifested. Within these adverse structures and institutional arrangements, Black women create the social capital that enables the politicization of relevant social issues at the local level—issues that continue to be ignored, minimized and ridiculed by national Black (mostly male) leaders, who establish the parameters of the “Black community’s” political agenda (Cohen 1999). My goal is to make this political work visible.

### *Questions and Contexts*

In this dissertation I investigate the following questions:

- (1) How are Black women’s social networks created, maintained, and reproduced?
- (2) How are local Black women’s “politics” connected to trends in political economy, particularly the decline of local markets, and translocal shifts in identity and culture, and the raced and gendered dimension of institutional power?<sup>1</sup>
- (3) What strategies of politicization are characteristic of Black women’s social networks?
- (4) Why and how are U.S. Black women’s social networks mobilized for large-scale political action in communities of color?

To pursue these questions I study the Central Ward of Newark, New Jersey. Taking an intersectional approach to the study of political mobilizations in this urban community, I trace how the dynamics of class, race, gender and sexuality shape

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai (1995) defines translocality as a situation in which the relations of power that produce locality are fundamentally imbricated in extra-local national and international relationships. These relations are typically created through ongoing interactions between locally-based and circulating populations. My usage of the term attends specifically to the ways in which the deployment of culture reproduces hegemonic interpretations of Blackness and Black politics that circulate among local, national and international Black political “leaders.”

participation in particular mobilizations and help explain why and how Black women participate in politics. In this dissertation mobilization is defined as the process through which “political” Black women induce others to participate “politics,” as they are defined by activist Black women themselves.<sup>2</sup> By mapping the political biographies of particular Black women in Newark and exploring the mobilizations they have participated in, I will demonstrate forms of women’s agency within local political and economic contexts that other social scientists have missed.

While conventionally some local political mobilizations have been analyzed under the social movement literature, I contend that this categorization is insufficient. Social movement activism is typically tied to efforts to influence governmental institutions or social policies. The ways that many U.S. Black women exert their “politics” at the local level, however, is not directly related to influencing local government. Rather, it is aimed at expanding the consciousness of Black and brown youth through creating and maintaining political spaces where dialogue can occur and enhanced “political” efficacy be developed. “Politics” of this genre occur independently on a daily basis in the non-profit sector and in voluntary organizations and periodically surge to enable significant mobilizations to take place—mobilizations that are often mistakenly attributed to the presumed leadership of socially and politically prominent elites.

These political spaces are not bound by conventional political ideologies (liberal or conservative or progressive), nor do they conform to long-standing assumptions about

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<sup>2</sup> Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) define mobilization as “the process by which candidates, parties, activists and groups induce other people to participate. We say that one of these actors has *mobilized* when they have increased the likelihood of her participation.” My usage of the term mobilization extends to increasing the likelihood of transformative social action that *both* includes and exceeds formal means of electoral, state-centric modes of political participation.



class or socio-economic status. The participants in these politics are socially diverse political actors who come from various ethnic, class and social backgrounds and their activism is not limited to adversarial politics such as electoral contests or competition over scarce social, political, and economic resources. Black women's politics within these urban spaces include forms of artistic expression, the creation of mechanisms to bring different kinds of people together under broad paradigm of "social change," civic engagement, creative expression, protest, relationship building, and personal transformation. These spaces include community centers and organizations that address violence, drug addiction, self-esteem, youth leadership development, and other social issues. Activism that conventional political scientists relegate to the sphere of voluntarism lies at the heart of U.S. Black women's politics. Yet it is precisely this kind of political activism that Black women understand to be "politics." I will argue that it is through their engagement in these kinds of activities that Black women are able to organize successful political mobilizations in their communities.

U.S. Black women are the focus of my study, but this category itself is contentious. The term, *U.S. Black women*, consciously includes all women of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, yet the inclusion of lesbian and transgender concerns within the study necessarily complicates any simple definition of "women" (Hall 1996, Simpson 1998, Waters 1999, Cohen 1999, Twine and Warren 2000). To demonstrate how U.S. Black women's discursive "politics" are racialized and/or de-racialized, gendered or "non-gendered" in specific contexts, I will examine the dynamics of coalition building around cross-cutting issues and the creation and utilization of social capital within and across different kinds of social networks (Rodriguez, 2003). While the category of

woman will be deployed in order to draw attention to the commonality and connectedness among African American women, the deployment coexists with a strong commitment to explore the role of social structures and institutions in producing and obstructing meaningful identifications among diverse women (Mohanty 2003). To this extent, I am also interested in the interaction of women, men, gay, transgendered and transsexual individuals within certain political spaces and how these interactions play out in defining questions concerning community interests. The point of this study is *not* to focus on spaces that are exclusive to African American women, but to locate the spaces where Black women's "politics" are cultivated and allowed to flourish.

### *Methodology*

To excavate alternative meanings of politics within the Central Ward of Newark, I interviewed twenty-nine activists—women who have been or continue to be engaged in political activism who were selected through the process of community nomination. I recruited activists to participate in the study from four communities of practice in Newark's Central Ward: electoral politics, grassroots activism, cultural nationalism and identity politics, and issue-oriented activist communities. I consulted gatekeepers from each community of practice to identify potential interviewees. These gatekeepers were relatively prominent members of various community-based organizations (including anti-violence, lesbian, gay and transsexual, HIV/AIDS, and cultural nationalist organizations) or were substantially involved in the formal political process. For example, one gatekeeper was a staffer and campaign manager for a local elected official, another was a well known Black LGBT activist, while even another was the executive director of a black cultural nationalist organization. All of the gatekeepers had extensive political,

cultural and/or work related histories inside of Newark. Each informant was knowledgeable about the city's history as well as the various spheres of influence that shaped the contemporary political landscape of the city. Each gatekeeper was asked to refer me to a "very political" Black woman in the Central Ward. When the gatekeeper inevitably inquired into what I meant by "political," I simply asked them to think about who came to mind when I asked them this question, then asked them to explain what they meant by "political" themselves. Through these initial discussions with gatekeepers, forty-two Black women were identified as "political" activists; twenty-nine agreed to participate in this study. I conducted semi-structured interviews with these women activists. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and provide the data for this analysis.<sup>3</sup>

The women participating in the study are diverse in terms of their socio-economic status, levels of educational attainment, and age. Six (21%) of the women interviewed were under forty years of age, with the youngest being twenty-four years old. Twelve women (41%) were between forty and fifty years of age. The remaining women eleven women (38%) were fifty years or older; the oldest being seventy-nine. All of the women interviewed had completed high-school and sixteen (55%) had completed an undergraduate college degree. Of those who had completed college, five had gone on to pursue a professional graduate degree.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psuedonyms have been selected to conceal the identity of the subjects featured in this study.

<sup>4</sup> For specific details about the age and socio-economic status of the respondents please see Appendix C, Figure 1.

### *Why Newark?*

The city of Newark shares a distinctive history with other predominantly African American cities such as Detroit, St. Louis, Cleveland and Gary. Each of these cities had bustling economies that experienced deep economic decline after either urban insurgency, white-flight and/or the shutdown or relocation of factories. Similarly, these cities have also experienced long periods of incumbency by Black male mayors supported by the local Democratic Party machinery. Newark is also a city that has a relatively diverse ethnic population with a substantial Afro-Caribbean immigrant presence that is usually subsumed under the racial category, “Black.”

In many ways, Newark exemplifies the socioeconomic conditions and challenges of urban America. Newark experienced a robust period of industrialization from the antebellum period through the Great Depression, while simultaneously experiencing massive waves of European immigration through the mid 1900’s (Jacobson 1998, Portes and Rumbaut 1996, Curvin 1975, Cunningham 1988, Hayden 1967, Ralph 1978). Newark also experienced a dramatic post World War II boost in employment, including a dramatic surge in white female workforce participation due the war-time draft. Characteristic of other large cities in the United States during the twentieth century, Newark experienced a dramatic influx of cheap labor from abroad and from southern U.S. states while simultaneously experiencing a decreased demand for low-skilled labor (Marable 1991, Wilson 1996). Like other large metropolitan areas in the United States, Newark also experienced highly racialized housing patterns, employment segregation, and discrimination resulting in openly hostile social and political relations between Blacks and whites (Hayden 1967, Massey and Denton 1993, Woodard 1997, O’Conner et

al. 2001). Social relations between whites and Blacks were often aggravated by patterns of police brutality and racist law enforcement practices that directed blatant violence and intimidation toward Black men which, when combined with declining educational and employment opportunities, sparked race riots, youth rebellion, frenzied white flight, an eroded tax base, and widespread social discontent (Woodward 1999, and Marable 1991, Cunningham 1988, Winters 1978, Parenti 1970, Hayden 1967). Finally, Newark shares a living history of continued high Black male unemployment, the relegation of generations of Black women to low-wage, service sector jobs and/or public welfare, large pockets of poverty and joblessness, and patterns of gentrification that present tempting economic opportunities for young urban professionals while depleting local communities of much needed social capital.

Newark's history encapsulates the standard narrative of major, predominantly Black inner cities in the United States. This depressing narrative of "urban decay," developed by sociologists, political scientists and urban scholars alike, portrays an unending, vicious cycle of hopelessness and despair. This grim narrative is typically supplemented by daily reports of Black and brown self-inflicted violence. Yet the scholars who study these urban centers, typically focus their investigations on unemployed Black men or Black male "saviors," who manage to capture mayoral seats with tenure but fail to deliver electoral promises due to "structural forces" that inhibit the realization of visionary political leadership. Women surface in these narratives as nameless, grief-stricken Black mothers, who wonder through their tears why "it was my baby" being carted away in hand cuffs or a body bag. This nihilist narrative, recounted over and over again by media pundits, politicians and social scientists alike, offers little

more than indifferent, opportunistic, and sometimes openly hostile prescriptions for how to deal with the “conditions of our cities.”

The Central Ward of Newark embodies all the elements of this stock narrative: high levels of concentrated, neighborhood poverty that co-exists with gentrification and political corruption (Cohen and Dawson, 1996, Wilson 1995). With over 56,000 inhabitants, 71% of whom are African American, the Central Ward is also the most heavily populated ward in Newark. Forty-one percent of residents of the Central Ward live at or below the poverty level. The average per capita income for employed adults in this ward is \$11,610.<sup>5</sup>

Newark has an alternative narrative to present to the world, however, a narrative that contests and disrupts the familiar story presented above. Newark is a city comprising men and women who have created immense stores of social capital in the midst of joblessness, poverty and political turmoil. Men and women have created and maintained community development corporations, rites of passage programs, community centers and programming, drug awareness and prevention centers, domestic violence and rape counseling centers, open and progressive spaces of worship and spiritual development within and across different classes. Within Newark, men and women have explicitly challenged the extant conditions that post-industrial, globalized U.S. cities have imposed upon their Black and brown residents. Black women’s activism lies at the heart of Newark’s alternative narrative. By placing their activism at the center of analysis, this

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<sup>5</sup>Source: 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder. The Central Ward consist of census tracts 9, 10, 11, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 38, 39, 62, 64, 66, 67, 81, 82, 85, 86, 87, 88, 90, 227, 228 in Essex County, New Jersey. In some census tracts there is some overlap between the South, North and East Wards of Newark.

dissertation will demonstrate how women have fostered relationships within and through networks of associations that enable political mobilization.

The purpose of this study is not to document large-scale patterns of social inequality (racial segregation, unemployment, racial attitudes), but rather to examine the nature of politics and the political spaces that emerge in urban areas plagued with such well-documented social ills. Another major aim is to explain the political agency of those who have remained in spite of the harsh social conditions, and have attempted to resist and transform structures that reproduce such stark social inequalities.

This research has an explicitly political objective—to produce a body of knowledge that enhances the ability of women of color to challenge and transform elements of oppression and social inequality that circumscribe their lives (Cohen, Jones and Tronto 1997, Mullings 1998). It seeks to convey multiple layers of meanings about race and gender, sex and sexuality, racism and sexism, and class hierarchy by systematically engaging the contradictions of Black women's politics. Toward that end, my analysis illuminates how Black women validate particular experiences of oppression, while deploying various tactics to transform social consciousness and devising collective strategies to challenge oppression in its multiple and highly mutable forms (Collins 1997, Mullings 1998).

### *Case Selection*

To explore answers to the questions discussed earlier, I analyzed two political mobilizations that occurred in Newark: the mobilizations that occurred after the murder of fifteen year old black lesbian, Sakia Gunn in 2003, and the community organizing

efforts that occurred in the months leading up to the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention. Each mobilization was named as among the most “significant political mobilizations in Newark in the last ten years” by local community activists in preliminary interviews. Other political mobilizations that were mentioned yet excluded here from systematic analysis include: Cory Booker’s 2002 bid for mayor, the 1995 New Jersey Department of Education takeover of the Newark Public School District, and the community mobilizations that occurred in the months leading up to the Million Man March of 1995. The decision to concentrate analysis on the two cases selected was motivated by a normative desire rooted in black feminist theorizing: that is, to apply an intersectional framework that could showcase how the politicization of marginal identities create opportunities to witness how multiple convergences of power across scalar structures produce black women as political subjects.

In this dissertation, the complex theorizations of power developed by black feminists in the 1980’s and 1990’s are illustrated using real-life political responses by black female political activists in Newark. In particular, this research has sought to uncover elements of black female political agency that have been neglected in writings on black politics, and in various (inter)disciplinary engagements of women of color activists in the United States. For example, rather than attempt to understand the political behavior of the “average African American woman,” this research seeks to understand the activism of Black women whose activism routinely destabilize stereotypic images of “blackness,” “femaleness” and “politics.” In this way, interpretative struggles around issues of blackness become highly relevant, as well as the internal discursive wars that occurred when black feminist activists strategically deployed



“hip hop” as an organizing tool in their respective communities. Ultimately, this project showcases the agency of non-traditional participants in the political process: African American women who are young, sexually transgressive, and/or highly critical of the local appendages of the American racial state.

### *Outline of Chapters*

In Chapter 2, “Reconceptualizing Politics” I present an inventory of disciplinary conceptions of “the political” that have emerged in studies of American political behavior, feminist studies, history, and political geography. I discuss how varying conceptions of politics interact with largely unacknowledged disciplinary predispositions toward scale—determining if, when, and how Black women get constituted as political subjects. Drawing upon ideas developed by feminist geographers, I argue that a more fluid conception of scale is necessary to develop an understanding of Black women’s politics that is divested from ideological conflicts rooted in academic disciplinarity.

In Chapter 3, “Newark Cityscapes” I present an overview of the political history of Newark’s racialized cityscapes, illuminating a view of the city that is shaped by gendered processes of racialization which have structured the city’s political economy since Newark was established as a British colony in 1694. This chapter goes on to examine Newark’s contemporary political economy in light of processes of deindustrialization, urban revolt, and the rise of black male political leadership. This chapter also introduces the voices of Black women activists in the Central Ward who, throughout their lifetimes, have witnessed the political and economic transformations the city has undergone in the past thirty to forty years.

Chapter 5, “Mobilizing After Murder: The Politics of the Life and Death of Sakia Gunn,” reconstructs the creation of the Newark Pride Alliance, a Newark based Black LGBT coalition that mobilized around the death of Sakia Gunn. This chapter also provides an overview of the spaces that female LGBT activists use to politicize homophobic violence and social marginality directed toward Black gays, lesbians and transgendered youth in Newark Public Schools. Using an intersectional framework, this chapter analyzes the interpretative struggles that occurred in NPA coalition-building attempts by local anti-violence and civil rights organizations, local black churches and other predominantly African American intervening institutions. I go on to show how contemporary manifestations of black patriarchy and heterosexism systematically exacerbate the social vulnerability and marginality of Black LGBT youth in Newark.

In Chapter 6, “Gender, Power and Social Capital in the National Hip Hop Political Convention,” I examine how NHHPC of 2004 served as a translocal political space for black women to organize the elements of the Black community against sexism and homophobia, as well as establish themselves an integral part of the narrative of National Black Political Convention Movement. I argue that the NHHPC served as a stage for deeply gendered contestations for visibility, access and public influence among young African American office-seekers, public intellectuals, and activists. This chapter also provides an in-depth analysis of struggles of the Progressive Women’s Caucus, a renegade group of black feminist intellectual and activists’ effort to politicize a black feminist agenda within the context of the National Hip Hop Convention.

Drawing insights from the two case studies of Black women’s political activism, in the final chapter “Social Capital, Black Women’s Political Space and Black Cultural

Production,” I argue that the success of U.S. black women’s political activism continues to rely heavily on activists’ ability to reinforce conventional scripts of black political power. I specifically argue that Black women’s oppositional politics are likely to be curtailed by local intervening institutions that are unduly influenced by Black political elites who are whetted to liberal, bourgeois conceptions of politics. These, I argue, are likely to reinforce narrowly tailored, masculinist, state-centric approaches to Black political empowerment through the seemingly benign trope of Black cultural production. I conclude that Black women’s political agency and subjectivity in Newark can be fully understood in relation to their own positionality with respect to various manifestations of Black cultural production (i.e. black nationalism, black liberalism, and black (radical) feminism.

## *Chapter 2*

### **Reconceptualizing Politics**

The politics of African American women are typically discussed in relation to their historical interventions, their contemporary “political behavior,” or their political agency. Each of these approaches arises within a particular disciplinary niche and each enables and constrains research about the “politics” of Black women in the United States in determinate ways. Disciplinary conceptions of “the political” have significant bearing on how Black women get constituted as “political” subjects, yet they remain at great remove from Black women’s own understandings of the political. In this chapter I explore the limitations of three disciplinary-based conceptions of Black women’s politics. I argue that social networks created by Black women provide a better vantage point for understanding how Black women themselves define the “political,” a vantage point that can enhance knowledge about the scope of the “political” as well as knowledge of Black women.

#### *Disciplinary Frames within American Politics*

In the sub-field of American politics within the discipline of political science, the dominant conceptualization of the “political” is understood in relation to electoral politics and decision-making within the official institutions of governance (Dahl 1956, Downs 1957). While the pluralist framework links the “political” to processes of contestation, negotiation, and decision-making within the realm of governing institutions like

Congress, the bureaucracy and the presidency (Dahl 1971, Olson, 1965), scholars working within this tradition attend to decisions made by “political” actors within their respective governing institutions. Utilizing this framework, political scientists investigate how members of Congress decide whether or not to support proposed legislation (Fenno 1978); how interest groups build electoral coalitions to get bills passed into law (Hall 1993), and how bureaucratic agencies make or fail to make decisions that facilitate the implementation of public policy (Wilson 1973, Moe 1956). Given the small number who have served in the official institutions of states, African American women remain largely invisible within these discussions.

Working with the behavioralist tradition, other political scientists seek to explain and predict voting behavior in the two-party, winner-take-all electoral system (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Markus and Converse 1979, Tate 1993). This research investigates the determinants of enfranchised citizens votes, party preferences, and (if they are likely to vote), how citizens use information disseminated by political elites to make their vote choice (Zaller 1992, Dawson 1994, Stimson 1999). Within this register, political scientists attempt to explain and predict election outcomes and their consequences for governance. Political science discourse constitutes its primary subject as the “average American,” who is supposedly gender, class and race neutral. However, by drawing a rigid line of demarcation between “political” and non-political behavior, this approach too renders invisible the politics of U.S. women of color.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) [hereafter referred to as VSB] have developed one of the broadest conceptualizations of political behavior that the discipline

of political science has embraced as part of its canon. In their analysis, political participation encompasses all activities that citizens engage in to express their needs, preferences and interests with the purpose of influencing their government—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 38). Within their model of participation the political scientist's gaze extends from mere decision-making to the dialogues that occur between citizens and their elected or appointed policy makers. The investigators operationalized political participation to include a long strand of variables such as voting, donating money, campaigning for an elected official, protesting, contacting elected officials, attending board or community meetings, or formally affiliating with a political organization.

While the civic voluntarism model of political participation extends the political scientist's analytic gaze beyond the act of voting, many of the activities specified in the model are circumscribed to activities that take place within the electoral sphere, which is inherently exclusive. First, this model effectively excludes the activism and claims making between citizens and non-citizens. For example, sustained efforts of South Asian, Latin American, Arab and Caribbean second or third generation immigrants to create and sustain both local and transnational social networks that provide refuge and resources for new immigrants are summarily excluded as potentially political activities (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). Second-generation immigrant women's efforts to challenge cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality and violence which married immigrant women are especially vulnerable to are also excluded from politics under such a conceptual framework (Shukla 1997, Crenshaw 1995). Similarly, transnational political activism

among citizens who target the policies of non-governmental organizations such as the World Trade Union, the World Bank, and United Nations, and the activities of citizens who target the labor practices and policies of corporations are also effectively excluded from “political” participation. Such omissions are produced by political scientists’ adherence to a state-centric epistemology, which has viewed political sovereignty and territoriality (i.e. nation-state) as the spatial container in which “politics” take place (Brenner 1999) and continued attachment to the pluralist assumption that all actor’s have comparable means to use formal governance structures (i.e. elected officials, bureaucracies and forums) to meet their “political” objectives<sup>6</sup>.

The VSB approach to the study of “politics” also seems to be symptomatic of political scientists’ fixation on politics as an *effect* rather than politics as *process*. Political scientists have focused on the quality and content of received political voices yet still have tended to minimize the importance of the processes that are implicated in achieving a coherent voice that can then be used to articulate grievances, make claims and possibly achieve social change. A re-conceptualization of politics as process, rather than politics as “political effects” may open up for analysis the social constraints and opportunities that enable politics to happen and bring to light the limitations of making the wide *a priori* assumption that individuals, social groups and social classes have equal standing within the political system (Frazer 1997, Cohen, Jones and Tronto, 1997).

Implicit in this assumption is that all citizens are equally protected, and are not

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<sup>6</sup> Versions of this critique of pluralist conceptions of democracy have had remarkable longevity in political science, however this critique has failed to be institutionalized within the canon of the discipline, particularly its adherence to a behaviorist methodology which has dictated how the discipline has produced (and failed to produce) knowledge about “politics” and specific kinds of political subjects. See for instance (Walton 1985 and 1995), Parenti (1971), Mansbridge (1980), Flemming (1996), Hawkesworth (1998), and Cohen (2004), among many other lesser known political scientists.

substantially hampered by social forces (permanent group membership) that systematically preclude or undermine their participation in established political processes. For example, Cohen (2002) argues that given the historical and cultural isolation that women of color have experienced *vis a vis* mainstream political institutions this focus on political effects easily makes the politics of women of color invisible (Cohen in Carroll ed., 2002). Also excluded under the VSB rubric of “political” participation are analyses of the “production of politics.” Such an approach may lead scholars to inquire about *where* and *how* “politics” are produced and how the “politics” that emerge within particular social locations correspond with or vary from “politics” that emerged in other locations. From this perspective, scholars might ask about how “politics” emerging from different social (spatial and temporal) locations come together to achieve some mutually beneficial outcomes in such way that does not pre-conceive of space as a static container but rather as dynamic, shifting and contingent. This would enable the “politics” of coalition building within and across distinctive kinds of social networks on the ground to become a new focal point of scholarship, allowing us to address new questions about how particular spaces enable or constrain certain kinds of political productions. This may lead political scientists toward a revitalized discussion of politics and thereby extend the relevance of scholars’ findings to new audiences.

Very recently the “Black politics” literature of the Americanist subfield of political science have utilized deliberative theories of democracy to explore the discursive politics that arise in what has been deemed “the Black public sphere,” or more its more contemporary form of a “Black counter publics” (Harris-Lacewell 2004, Hancock 2004, Reed 2000). However, such applications of deliberative theories of



democracy have generally ignored radical feminist, post-modern, post-structural and post-colonial critiques of the “political” which insist that “politics” (deliberative or otherwise) is a concept that is necessarily deeply implicated in historical and contemporary structures of social, economic, and political inequality (Spivak 1988, Spivak in Harasym ed. 1990, Nicholson 1999, Yeatman 1994). For example, Harris-Lacewell provides a case study of spaces that she argues composes the Black public sphere to examine the implications of everyday talk on the development of African American political ideologies. Using Dawson’s (2001) four categories of Black political ideologies: Black nationalism, Black feminism, Black integrationism and Black conservatism which are argued to create distinct narratives for the persistence of racial inequality in the United States, Harris-Lacewell sketches the relevance of these categories in the everyday talk of African Americans in enclosed spaces. These spaces include barbershops, Black media outlets and the church. While her study is successfully making the case for the relevance of deliberative theories of democracies for understanding and explaining Black public opinion, her study (following Dawson) recapitulates the political scientist’s tendency to situate the relevance of race to that of persistent social inequalities between the races, which are primarily measured at the level of the individual. While her project aims to understand Black political ideology she does so by imposing the ideological lens of Anglo-American middle class liberalism, normalizing a singular narrative of “everyday Blackness” and everyday “Black talk”. While Harris-Lacewell notes that the politics within these spaces are contested, in general the oppositional politics that take place in the radical counter-publics to those of “ordinary Black people” which actively resist the exclusionary, stereotypic and hedonist nature of mainstream

media, and resist the sexist, misogynist, homophobic and unitary politics that emerge from Protestant Black churches, essentially get ignored (Collins 2004, Cole & Guy-Sheftall 2003, Bates 2002, James 1999). This leads Harris-Lacewell to replace the “average American” with the “average African American” whose politics *in only pre-specified ways* contributes the flourishing (or lack thereof) of liberal democratic political practices in the United States. With this said, Harris-Lacewell (2004) makes significant theoretical and conceptual contributions to the study of American politics and African American politics that my own works seeks to build upon and expand. Specifically, Harris-Lacewell underscores the importance of discursive spaces to the development of Black “political” ideology, and thus the emergence of Black “political” behavior, presenting a fruitful opportunity to explore the relevance of space in the production and practice of politics.

*Theoretical Contributions of Political Geographers: The Relevance of “Political Space”*

In recent years, theoretical innovations in the field of political geography have enabled researchers to re-think the scalar division of labor that has characterized approaches of “politics” in several disciplinary sub-fields including political geography, political sociology, international relations, political psychology, and even political science *per se* (Delaney 1997, Cox 1998, Jones 1998, Marston 2000). Typically, scholars of politics have relied upon the discrete, ontological categories of scale (local, regional, national, global, etc) that presume that politics always happen within the nested hierarchies of enclosed jurisdictions (i.e. local politics=local centers of governance). This approach has made case studies of local “politics” in their myriad forms less than

desirable due to the peculiarity of local governance structures that inhibit the generalizability of observed phenomenon, including the theoretical constructs produced to make sense of politics at the local level (i.e. King, Keohane and Verba 1994). The ontological status of scale as a fixed category of analysis for scholars of political studies has been heavily contested on many levels. First, as Cox (1998) reveals, local political agents and governing institutions actively shape how and whether or not issues will be understood as “local,” “national” or even “global” by framing discourse to meet the political exigencies that exist in particular moments in time and space. Rather, the significance of scale for political agents is often closely tied to conceptions of localness, mobility and identity. Second, the creation and mobilization of networks of association frequently require that political agents “jump scales” from “local” to “state” to “national” to “global” or vice versa. The politics of scale involved the “politics of interests and of consciousness, and their connections” suggesting the deployment of scale by both researchers and political actors alike functions through the mechanisms of ideology (language/power/practice) (Delaney and Leitner 1998).<sup>7</sup> Third, while geographers with social theory interests have managed to situate the phenomenon of urbanization with capitalist production and consumption from a global perspective, case studies of local politics have generally failed to make similar connections across scale due to the pre-established desire to fixate on agents attempts to influence local governing institutions (city council, state legislators, county commissions, etc) (Marston 2000, Taylor 1999).

Political geographers have responded to these critiques by denying the ontological status of scale, which prescribes a rather blunt delimitation on the kind of questions that

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<sup>7</sup> The Americanist subfield of political science’s primary fixation on *national* public opinion and *national* voting behavior stands as case in point.

observers can ask and methodologically pursue within a bounded arena (town-city-neighborhood-state) in favor of “spaces of dependence” and “spaces of engagement.” These new ways of thinking about scale need not make an *a priori* assumption that “politics” emerge and are resolved at the same scale (neighborhood, city, local, state, national or global), but that local political actors who emerge from spaces of dependence may need to strategically pursue their politics in “spaces of engagement” which may or may not be confined to local governance arenas. Greater insight may be produced, then by studying how “networks of association” traverse spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement. Jones (1998) clarifies Cox’s theoretical move by arguing that actors within these networks of association actually use representational strategies to discursively represent their political objectives in ways that work to their unique advantage. Political spaces (spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement) can then be grasped through tracing the representational strategies of local “networks of association” and linking the local circumstances in which these “political spaces” emerge and wane with the overlapping national, and even global political economy. Scale then, becomes less of a pre-established frame of reference for the researcher and more of an ideologically derived category that gets deployed (or not) by political observers and scholarly researchers alike. Similarly, human geographers’ recent nod toward the importance of networks of association may provide a useful theoretical framework in which to make sense of the “political” agency of U.S. Black women in the twentieth century (McMaster and Sheppard 2004, Cox 1998, Taylor 1999, and Leitner 1999).

*What History Tells Us: U.S. Black Women's "Politics"*

Much of what social scientists know about Black women in "politics" has been gleaned from a historical perspective, and ironically methodological shifts in the study of social movements have created the conceptual space needed to tap into Black women's historical movement activism. In the past two decades, historical and sociological studies of social movements have experienced a significant paradigm shift in methodological approaches to the study of movement dynamics, particularly studies of the American civil rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's. Prior to the pioneering work of Aldon Morris (1984) nearly all prominent studies of the civil rights movement employed a top-down approach, with primary emphasis placed on documenting the movement activities through highly visible political leadership. Scholarly attention was drawn toward prominent national civil rights organizations and mass political demonstrations which had telling impacts at the national level (Payne 1995). This incited a discourse that was highly focused on documenting the origins and impact of the charismatic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, the internal organizational strategies and tactics of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This discourse signified "important" movement phenomenon with juridical and legislative, or "political," civil rights victories. Written out of this top-down discourse were the rural, grassroots organizations and social networks that may *not* have organized within the ideological confines of conventional "civil rights," though these same networks may have enabled insurgency in the rural south (Kelley 1994, Payne 1995). This discourse also excluded the important role of women who participated in

indigenous organizations within Southern communities including church boards and the domestic workplace, all of which many contemporary historical studies have been found to be critical in disseminating information about civil rights meetings, demonstrations and boycotts (Springer 2005).

Contemporary historians argue that these organizations and social networks enhanced the local legitimacy of national civil rights leadership and increased the possibility of sustainable, mass protest, including the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and others (Crawford 2001). Finally, also written out of conventional historical studies of civil rights movement was the criticality of local Black women's organizations, such as the Women's Political Caucus in Mississippi, in foregrounding national campaigns. Organizations such as these agitated for voting rights by developing a wide-reaching network of Black women who were both ideologically and logistically prepared to support, exceed and, even precede national calls for action (Springer 2005, Terbog-Penn 1998, Payne 1995 and Morris 1984).

The shift in scholarly attention toward community focused historical studies of the civil rights movement resulted in the documentation of the activities and dynamics of local actors and local organizations, as well as a whole new range of questions focusing on the emergence and sustainability of local activist networks. New attention paid to affective bonds, spirituality and the role of interpersonal relationships in fomenting trust made it easier for disparate organizations to build, coordinate, and nurture the coalitions required to successfully execute oppositional tactics (Chong 1991). These revelations sparked a more serious interest in narratives and analyses of women activists like Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash and Ella Baker. This discourse has recently been acknowledged

as central to understanding to the civil rights movement in particular but has also instigated new considerations of what “politics” are in general (Ransby 2001, Bynoe 2004). Barbara Ransby writes in a biographic sketch of Ella Baker, “For Ella Baker, politics were not impersonal, academic or abstract. Politics were immediate and measured in flesh and blood realities. She followed up with local people after the smoke of battle had cleared. Her view is that you have to love the people around you, and those struggling right next to you, as much as the anonymous and amorphous mass of humanity” (Ransby 2001).

In many ways, this paradigmatic shift in historical movement analyses led to a blossoming discourse on the centrality of Black women activists to Black social justice organizations in the pre-civil rights, civil rights and post-civil rights era. This includes gendered analyses of inter- and intra-organizational power struggles that historians and Black feminist writers argue had serious implications on the effectiveness of these movements (Matthews 2001, Robnett 1997, Payne 1995, hooks 1981 and Wallace 1982). I have tried to show how analyses of civil rights movement “politics” have revealed a great deal about the role of pre-existing social networks that existed in rural spaces that enabled mass mobilizations during the civil rights era. Nevertheless, within this framework scholars have privileged analyses of Black women only in regard to their relevance to the broad-based civil rights movement, further neglecting the specific issues that Black women’s organizations, associations and social networks were concerned about *before* the culmination of the movement, including the strategies they employed to rally support around these issues.

Historical studies of Black women's associationalism provide insight into the array of issues that Black women's organizations have prioritized. Deborah Gray White (1999) developed an impressive study of a range of Black women's "community work" and "racial uplift" programs that their local organizations and associations mobilized other women on behalf of. Much of this work revolved around developing the intellectual ability of club members through heavy emphasis on education and poverty relief. Gray-White's analysis places much of Black clubwomen's "race work" within the confines of civil society, following the prominent ideological discussions of race between W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington. This debate had the impact of club women creating their own discourse focused on improving home, community and the individual through self-help and the acquisition and personification of bourgeois, middle-class values and lifestyle.

Much of Black women's early associationalism intentionally avoided the divisive partisan electoral "politics" of the era, which was widely regarded as corrupt. Fannie Williams asks, "Must we begin our political duties with no better or higher conception of our citizenship than shown by our men when they were first enfranchised? Are we to bring any refinement of individuality to the ballot box? Shall we learn our politics from spoilsmen and bigot partisans or shall we learn it from the school of patriotism and an enlightened self-interest (in Gray White 1999, 52)?" This intentional distancing from mainstream political parties is understandable considering their complicity in the use of all-white primaries and other institutional devices that disenfranchised large segments of Black citizenry across the country (Walton 1984).

Historical studies of Black women's associationalism make the following points:



1. Black women's organizations prioritized "race" issues like education, poverty-relief, employment and employment training, substance abuse, voting rights, child welfare and public health.
2. Though much of these associations' work was self-circumscribed to the "civic" sphere, the cultivation of women's political leadership was explicitly prioritized, as it was viewed as an important strategy of uplifting the race.
3. While many associations limited their membership and outreach to middle-class Black women, most of these organizations privileged building coalitions across race and gender lines, especially in their efforts to secure voting rights for Blacks and women.
4. Fourth, throughout the twentieth century, Black women's associations were a central component of mass mobilizations in Black communities (Hanson 2003, Gray-White 1999, Terborg Penn 1998, Gilkes 1994, and Giddings 1984).
5. Finally, only very recently has much of Black women's historical activism within these associations been explicitly understood to be "political" (Collins 1991).

Historical analyses of Black women's activism in historical social movements may provide much needed direction as to where to find Black women's contemporary activism, however the discipline of history has not been able to establish an explicit conceptual connection between social (which is sometimes called "political") activism and "politics." The inability to establish an explicit connection has as much to do with historians tendency to juxtapose activism against electoral participation—something which Black women's historical exclusion from has formed the basis of much of their "politics." Much historical analyses (because it is historical) must rely heavily upon official documentation of organizations and associations as well as public speeches, newsletters, articles and events that were probably designed with the intent of leaving a permanent mark on "history."

It would be an anomaly for historians to signify certain actions as "political" when the subjects themselves described these same actions as "non-political." This is

especially so considering that both parties used access to electoral politics as the litmus test to determine what constitutes the “political.” Here, we see historical methods of knowledge production tend to reproduce the binary between “political” and non-political behavior—such as that reified by political scientists. I argue that this tendency seriously restrains capacity of scholars to interrogate elements of social action as “political” processes in and of themselves. The field of women’s studies has been helpful in destabilizing this binary by pursuing a commitment to investigate women’s activism from a contemporary perspective, and incorporating a fluid, and almost ubiquitous conceptualization of the “political.” Here the “political” signifies different elements of social action and engagement at different sites of resistance. This entails nearly any contestations against exclusionary social relations and social practices (Yeatman 1994).

*“Politics” from Interdisciplinary, Feminist Perspectives*

At least five conceptions of politics that have been used in feminist writings since the second wave to deal directly with women as subjects, these include: personal politics, identity politics, politics of empowerment, politics of transformation and transnational politics. In this section, I will attempt to analyze these conceptions with the intent of assessing how well they have facilitated the production of knowledge about U.S. women of color, in general, and Black women in “politics” specifically. The selection of works for analysis have been confined to major feminist anthologies that have taken care to work through a nuanced conception of “politics,” and have displayed a commitment to assemble accounts of women of color, in the United States and/or abroad.

Feminist conceptions of “politics,” at least since the 1970’s consciousness raising groups, are deeply attuned to elements of space and scale. In other words, “politics” is viewed as deeply contextual, situational and locational. In fact, the admittedly, narrow typology of feminist politics that I have use in this section is arguably based upon a scale which, begins with the individual (personal is political), extends outward toward smaller groups and communities (identity politics), then moves to larger sites with the intent of social transformation and change (changing existing socio-political structures, creating spaces for new social action) and, then finally, building linkages between local sites of contestation to global macro-structures that connect women globally.

The terminology of the “politics of identity” emerged to describe Black feminists’ activism against the hypothesized interlocking systems of racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression in the now famous manifesto of The Combahee River Collective. This document articulates the particularistic struggles of radical Black feminist lesbians while simultaneously issuing a pointed analysis of the politics of the larger, Anglicized women’s movement. In many ways, the “politics of identity” expanded white feminists’ conception of the “personal is political,” which was based upon challenging the stark public/private divide that both masked and hampered white women’s political voices. The idea of “personal is political” operated upon a uni-dimensional gendered analysis of politics that sought to disrupt and challenge white male chauvinism against white women. The Combahee River Collective extended the frame of analysis to challenge the multiple oppressions that faced Black feminist lesbians by explicitly politicizing selected aspects of their individual identities.

These new politics emerged from a theme that has re-emerged throughout accounts of Black women's activism in social movements—their individual and collective efforts to build coalitions with other seemingly progressive organizations and movements to get their voices heard. Within its original formulation, the “politics” of identity entails a process of affirming aspects of self-identity that are denigrated by society, a willingness to build a “political” community around aspects of self-identity that are shared with others, the commitment to use elements of identity to critique and transform structures of race, sex, class and homophobia; and finally, the willingness to build coalitions with other progressive organizations that also sought to critique these interlocking structures of oppression.

These “politics” differ substantially from the paradigm of “personal is political,” which sought to politicize individual aspects of white women's experiences through consciousness-raising. This politics, having deep roots in the socialist feminist projects of the 1960's, emerged from feminist dialogues with the New Left (Grant 1993). Socialist feminists' efforts to challenge sexism within the Left, as well as their effort to conceptualize women as a distinctive, more basic form of class in their critiques of Marx, sparked an explosion of feminist theorizing around experiential aspects of women's material lives. Of particular importance, was the development of various formulations of women's and feminist standpoint theories whose most basic premises relied upon the unproblematic, “generic” category of woman. In practice though, “personal is politics” did not requisite individual or collective acts of resistance to transform society, rather the intent was to raise women's awareness about the role of sexism and patriarchy in suppressing women's ability to realize their own potential (Grant 1993). This meant

confronting physical and emotional abuse within the domestic sphere, interrogating women's individual decisions to neglect their professional aspirations in order to get married and raise children, and finally, examining women's own complicity in their unhappiness, particularly in regard to their (repressed) sexuality. While this mode of theorizing the "political" generated the rising tide of what many have called second wave feminism, these experiential "politics" privileged the narratives of and, consequently, the experiences of white middle class women. This framework also neglected critical analyses of other forces that determined the life chances of women, and thereby reproduced elements of racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, individualism, and white middle class elitism. Critiques of the problematics of the "personal is politics" from practitioners of lesbian feminist and Black lesbian feminist identity politics formed the basis of what is frequently labeled third wave feminism.

There are two other closely related, yet distinctive conceptualizations that feminists have used to capture the politics of women. Within both of these frameworks narratives of Black women's politics have emerged often. Closely following the "personal is political" framework developed by socialist feminists is the concept of "politics of empowerment." Bookman and Morgen (1988) define these politics as a "process aimed at consolidating, maintaining or changing the nature and distribution of power in a particular cultural context. Within Bookman and Morgan's edited volume there appear two extraordinary essays on Black women's politics, each stressing the centrality of *process* in Black women's grassroots organizing and "community work." Karen Sacks (1998) conducted a study of working class Black women's union leadership, analyzing the role of kinship and affinity networks in transforming the workplace into a

political force to be waged on behalf of women. She found that familial ties and language (physical and fictive) in the workplace created a cultural context that enabled the militant mobilization of the workers (in Bookman and Morgen 1988, 92). Similarly Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1988) firmly situates work in community organizations as the premiere political space for Black women, providing them with the autonomy and flexibility to respond to the articulated and interpreted demands of their respective communities. She writes, “community workers argue, obstruct, organize, teach, lecture, demonstrate, sue and write letters” and create their own “political” spaces by forming their own organizations as a strategy of resistance (Gilkes 1994, quoted in Grayson 1999).

The conception of the “politics of transformation” advanced by Cohen, Jones and Tronto (1997) emerges from an explicitly materialist analysis of social phenomena. For these scholars, “the study of women in politics is the study of changing politics and the politics of change.” These “politics” function through self-conscious collective social movements and through the culmination of individual acts of resistance in multiple political arenas. The methodology of these “politics of transformation” intentionally blurs the distinction between the subjects of study and the normative intentions of researching subject(s). In this way, the act of investigating and assembling accounts of these “politics of transformation” is an element of these “politics,” in and of itself. In other words, Cohen Jones and Tronto did not embark upon their study for the sake of providing accounts that could have a potentially positive impact on women, but, importantly they assembled this collection to transform the study of “politics” within the discipline of political science. While Cohen, Jones and Tronto hold on to conventional

understandings of the political, they expand it to include movement-building, cultural politics and grassroots organizing. They also introduce the concept of diaspora to link the study and politics of women to both local and global contexts. In many ways, the “politics of transformation” serves as normative springboard promoting accounts of progressive, oppositional political action taken on by women in their efforts to challenge, gender, racial, sexual, age, national, ethnic and other forms of oppression. Within this broad conceptualization of “politics” studies of identity politics, transnational politics, and explicitly feminist politics (whatever those may be) are invoked to encourage engagement with oppositional politics from both practice-oriented and academic perspectives. From this perspective, accounts of the activism of women of color becomes highly relevant, insofar as accounts of Black women’s activism challenge and undermine the institutions and social structures that support and reinforce social inequalities.

Academic feminisms’ interdisciplinary conceptions of “politics” have been remarkably useful in establishing a new terrain upon which to study Black women’s politics. However, few of these studies have established clear linkages between Black women’s political practices with the explicit structural and contextual constraints that have enabled their activism. In other words, from this review of the literature we have been able to locate Black women’s politics in community-based organizations and associations, however there hasn’t emerged a coherent narrative on exactly *how* elements of local (formal and informal) social structures have established the conditions for Black women’s “political” activity. The answer to this question has been treated by many scholars across disciplines as self-evident, given Black women’s historical alienation

from mainstream legislative and juridical institutions, however, as I will show this is only a small part of the story.

*Reconsidering the Relationship between Structure and Agency, Linking Process to Context*

In the past few years, some of the most innovative feminist studies of the “politics” of women of color have been conducted within the framework of “transnational” or “global” feminist politics. This literature has sought to link women’s local “politics” with inter- and transnational political and economic institutions that extend their reach globally (Labaten & Martin 2004, Naples and Desai, 2002, Hernandez & Rehman 2002). These collections have done a excellent job of identifying how interactions between local women’s organizations, transnational NGO’s and local and international configurations of power enable and constrain women’s agency, however it is important to note that within this framework, more attention has been given to immigrant women and their efforts to extend their activism across political borders. With this said, most studies of the politics of women of color have not specified or elaborated upon the local configurations of power that enable and constrain U.S. Black women’s activism and how these are connected to larger, transnational circuits of power. Rather in these texts the most significant act of agency has been the act of writing resistance, with scant attention being given to Black women’s effort to resist circuits of power collectively, at the grassroots level. It is imperative that these connections must be made to have a richer, more complex understanding of Black women in “politics” in the United States, particularly if we are to have a more in depth understanding of how raced and gendered dimensions of institutional power shape the “political” spaces of Black women in different geographic and cultural locales (Hawkesworth 2003, Walton 1995).



Geographers have opened the methodological and theoretical space required to tap into the political spaces at the local level, a move that has enabled the elaboration of the linkages between global political economy, governance structures at the state and local level with aspects of political agency that confound conventional (static) notions of scale. One strategy has been to scrutinize the creation and mobilization of social networks that frequently “jump scales.” Kevin Cox has termed these “networks of associations” which emerge from “spaces of dependence” (localized structures) but may pursue their politics (including coalition-building and contestation) in what he has coined “spaces of engagement” (Cox 1998, Jones 1998). Feminist geographers have sought to extend these analyses of political spaces to even smaller scalar structures in order to extend the geographer’s analytic purview of the political geography to the household and even the body itself (Hyndman 2004, Dowler and Sharp 2001, Marston and Smith, 2001 and Marston 2000). Critiquing radical geographers work emerging from a Lefebvrian understanding of scale (which requisites attention to the relational processes that shape and constitute social practices through historical-materialist analyses of capitalist political and economic development) Marston (2000) argues that reproduction of capitalist relations has been systematically overlooked by political geographers due their continued tendency to rely solely on scalar politics within and between states.<sup>8</sup> She argues further that the result has been a lack of scholarly attention to how the micro-level processes impact relations of production that co-occur on variegated and often contested scales. These micro-level process impact identity formation, levels of consumption and broader patterns of industrialization, urbanization and globalization (Marston 2000, Taylor 1999).

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<sup>8</sup> This includes states intervention and responses to globalization including “re-territorialization”, “de-territorialization”, and “de-nationalization” through the development and participatory regulatory systems such as the European Union and NAFTA. See for instance Brenner (1999),

Jennifer Hyndman (2004) goes further to argue that feminist geography should strive to achieve an embodied theoretical and epistemic framework which destabilizes the subject position of the researcher through interrogating his/her own positionality within larger cartographies of mobility, war, violence and security. Writing to address the recent overlapping, yet under-acknowledged similarities in contemporary studies by feminist geographers and political geographers, Hyndman argues that geopolitics become a fertile ground upon which to investigate how gender and race construct political spaces that transcend formal systems of governance. Pushing critical geo-politicians beyond their efforts to expose and unravel the layers of power that are embedded in dominant geopolitical narratives, Hyndman hopes to develop feminist methods of knowledge production techniques. In particular, she re-emphasizes the need for situated, self-reflexive, *embodied* ethnographies that challenge realist geopolitical narratives and practices and, similarly, reveal the everyday ways that subjects (especially women) exert agency to challenge and resist larger geopolitical structures (local, national, supranational, and global) in their everyday lives (Hyndman 2004, Dowler and Sharp 2001).

The next chapter provides a historical sketch of raced and gendered processes of racialization and de-industrialization that have shaped the contemporary political geography of Newark. The next chapter provides both the historical, cultural, and geographic backdrop of the political agency and subjectivity of Black women's activism in the city of Newark.

### Chapter 3

#### Newark Cityscapes: The Making of a Marginal Community

*“After coming to a stop light after exiting 280 East, a young woman approaches my car. Her permanently straightened hair is gelled back into a tight ponytail. Her stomach seemed uncharacteristically large for a woman with such a small frame. I roll the window down. ‘Can I have dollar?’ she asks, ‘I’m eight months pregnant and need to buy some food for me and my baby.’ I’m shocked. I look into the young woman’s face and see all the telltale signs: the dark crusted lips, the ashen brown skin, the anxious desperation. . . I pull out all the change in my door—probably a dollar, maybe a little bit more--and dump it into her can. I maneuver my Black Nissan through the McCarter Highway construction traffic. In my rear-view mirror I see the young woman solicit the car behind me. I speed the past the famed New Jersey Performing Arts Center dodging pedestrians, and turn into the parking lot of my apartment building. I’m stunned, I’m pissed and I’m speechless. What can I say? What is there to say?” (Field notes)*

Cities have long captured the imagination of social scientists, especially urban planners, anthropologists, geographers and sociologists. Cities have not, however, figured prominently in feminist studies of the social processes and structures that enable or constrain women’s agency. In recent years, feminists have investigated questions of time, space and place in relation to the formation of women’s identities, paying particular attention to the gendered reproduction of capitalist relations, levels and patterns of production and cultural consumption, and fluidities of scale (Hyndman 2004, Barad 2001, Marston 2000). Yet there has been far less attention paid to the role of American cities in the production of activist identities. Within gender studies, scholarship addressing the relation of city life to the agency of U.S. Black women is recent and has generally been limited to historical analysis (Orleck 2005, Williams 2004). This study breaks new ground, exploring Black women’s contemporary political activism in the city of Newark, New Jersey.

Cities are more than highly specialized centers of political economy. They are built spaces that are central to communicating meaning. The built spaces in cities structure meaning as they organize the pattern, flows, and interpretations of both basic and complex human actions and interactions—including political action (Yanow 2006). They are sites of social and cultural production structured by complex matrices of race, gender and class domination (Collins 1991). As sites of social and cultural production, cities are constituted not only by the larger historical processes of capitalism (Harvey 2001, Zukin 1991, Lefebvre 1974) but *also* by gendered processes of racialization and race formation (Mullings 1987, Omi and Winant 1989; Goldberg 1993; Goldberg 2001, Haymes 1995, Wacquant 1997). As a discursive realm in which Black women's experiences, practices and identities are produced and reproduced, urban space is richly in need of sustained investigation. To explore the complex ways in which Black women's political agency is shaped and constrained, this study takes an anthropological approach to Newark, examining the social organization of space, and how specific cultural values give meaning to a cityscape that molds the experiences, identities, practices and agency of Black women in their everyday lives. Mapping the racialized cityscape, a view of the city that is shaped by gendered processes of race and racialization as well as the economic and political processes that structure them, is an important first step in illuminating contemporary Black women's political subjectivity. Considering how political identities are spatially constituted within the contours of the city—not only by one's location in space, but also in agentic efforts to both imagine and create new places in which to be agentic—sheds new light on experiences that have heretofore been presumed as uninteresting and unimportant in larger disciplinary frames.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more discussion on this usage of cityscapes, see *Feminist (Re)visions of the Subject: Landscapes*,

Situated, self-reflexive, *embodied* ethnographies can challenge realist geopolitical narratives and practices that routinely construct Black women as apolitical, revealing the everyday ways that Black women exert agency to challenge and resist larger geopolitical structures within Newark (Hyndman 2004, Dowler and Sharp 2001).

Newark is a city in transition. In June 2006, Newark voters bid farewell to five-term incumbent Mayor Sharpe James, electing ambitious, young, African American, Ivy League attorney Cory Booker to this critical leadership post. Other favored contenders for highly coveted seats in the municipal halls of power include the well known native sons of Newark such as Ras Baraka (son of renowned poet, Black cultural nationalist and political agitator Amiri Baraka), Ron Rice Jr (son of Senator Ron Rice, representing Newark in the New Jersey State Legislature), Donald Payne, Jr. (son of nine-term incumbent U.S. Congressman from New Jersey, Donald Payne) and Oscar James Jr. Enthusiasts are hopeful that Newark is finally experiencing its long anticipated renaissance from the ashes of the riots in the summer of 1967. This *New-Ark* symbolizes the rise of the phoenix from over sixty years of blight, de-industrialization and urban decay.

Emblematic of this new Newark are newly formed institutions such as the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the controversial new hockey arena for the New Jersey “Devils” and over ten thousand new housing units for “middle and low income” families constructed in the past two years. These new attractions are designed to foster urban homesteading by the tens of thousands of suburban administrators and managers who

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*Ethnoscapes and Theoryscapes* (2001) ed. by Gail Curry and Celia Rothenberg, and “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology” by Arjun Appadurai in *Recapturing Anthropology* (1991) ed. R. Fox. Also see “How Built Spaces Mean: A Semiotics of Space” by Dvora Yanow in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretative Turn* (2006) edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea.

have for several decades enjoyed secure salaried positions in the downtown corporate offices of IDT, Prudential, Wachovia, Rutgers University, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and The New Jersey Institute of Technology. The new sites of cultural consumption are also meant to attract those millions of New Jersey commuters who use Newark Penn Station and Newark “Liberty” (since 9-11) International Airport, encouraging them to stop, spend and consume within the political boundaries of the city.

These optimistic imaginings of Newark’s renaissance must be considered in the context of the lives of 28.4% of the city’s residents who currently live at or below the poverty level. Poverty is not evenly distributed across Newark. On the contrary, it is concentrated in areas adjacent to the spaces in which “urban renewal” is playing out. In the predominantly African American sections of the city like the Central Ward, for example, poverty levels and unemployment rates soar to over forty percent. These somber empirical facts give pause to even the most animated young office-seekers. They also provide the impetus for much the political activism of the Black women who are the focus of this study. The processes of racialization and social alienation accompanying de-industrialization in Newark, which have mired the lives of so many African Americans in despair, also provide opportunities for agency, resistance and social transformation by the Black women whose political lives are the subjects of this narrative.

The Central Ward of Newark reflects racial dynamics central to American culture, dynamics that transform Black majority spaces into perceived sites of danger and decay. Newark has a long and vibrant Black urban culture. Although Newark lacks the caché of “Black Meccas” such as Harlem or Atlanta, Georgia, it has a long history of Black political activism, cultural work, and cultural expression, a history that has been elided by

images of “racial-ethnic wars” and political corruption. In marked contrast to a Black Mecca, John L. Jackson (2001) has suggested that cities like Newark exist as “blackened” spaces, due in part to the effects on the white public imagination of the intensity of Black urban insurgency in the Newark riots of 1967. The Central Ward, previously known as the Third Ward, played a critical role in this blackening. Against the backdrop of “urban blight”—poverty, overcrowding, deteriorated landscapes and public housing scandals—the 1967 riots ignited the historic Third Ward, triggered by the infamous police beating of John Smith. Several other factors contribute the image of Newark as an axiomatic “Black space.” The recurrent electoral victories of two consecutive African American mayors who have held Newark’s mayoral seat for the past thirty-eight years, and the well-established history of Black nationalist organization and agitation within the city further consolidate negative images of Newark in the American public imagination.

The Central Ward is the poorest section of Newark. Poverty and rates of unemployment top sixty-percent in some census tracts. In 2000, 71% of the 56,738 people living in the Central Ward identified as African American. Among the 36,931 African American residents in the Central Ward, 41.6% live at or below the poverty level. The average per capita income of all adults living in the Central Ward was only \$11,610 dollars. According the U.S. Census Bureau, of the 12,712 African American males over age 16 in the Central Ward, only 5919 (46.5%) are in the labor force; while 29% (1, 719) are unemployed. Of the 16,732 African American women over age 16, only 7843 (47.6%) are in the labor force; 23% (1823) are unemployed. Although African Americans constitute just over seventy percent of the population in the Central Ward,

they own only 1,882 (10.5%) of the 19,685 occupied housing units. The remaining 12,793 African American-headed households occupy rental units.<sup>10</sup>

The consequences of poverty and unemployment in this “blackened” enclave are vividly depicted in the mystery novels by acclaimed author Valerie Wilson Welsey. Gang violence, drug trafficking, political corruption and police corruption provide the context for African American private detective Tamara Hayle’s investigations of Newark’s unsolved murders. Born and raised in Newark, protagonist Tamara Hayle uses her local contacts to solve murder cases that the Newark police department never bothers to investigate. Hayle’s clients are financially strained, but they are unwilling to resign themselves to the view that the murders of their loved ones are unworthy of investigation. Instead of resignation, they turn to Tamara Hayle, whose hard-nosed personality enables her to overcome the difficulties of being single, Black and female in Newark, and to succeed in navigating the streets and bureaucracies of Newark to solve her mysteries. These fictional accounts map a cityscape in which intersecting histories and institutions—Black and white—constrain and enable Black women’s agency. Some attention to the intersecting histories of Black and white residents and institutions in Newark help contextualize the creation and current condition of the Central Ward, where my research subjects undertake their political activism.

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<sup>10</sup> Source: 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder. The Central Ward consist of census tracts 9, 10, 11, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 38, 39, 62, 64, 66, 67, 81, 82, 85, 86, 87, 88, 90, 227, 228 in Essex County, New Jersey. In some census tracts there is some overlap between the South, North and East Wards of Newark.



*Racism, Racialization and the Production of Newark as a “Blackened” Space*

Blacks have lived in the area that was to become Newark since the founding of the British colony, New Jersey; but not on the same terms as the British or Dutch settlers. From the earliest days of settlement, the presence of Blacks was manipulated to promote the interests of Whites. Indeed, in 1694, the document that established the terms of British settlement, Sir George Carteret’s benevolent “Concessions,” granted every colonist coming with the first governor seventy-five acres of land for every slave held.<sup>11</sup> These generous economic incentives tied the first distribution of wealth in the colony to slave holding and enabled the slave economy of New Jersey to flourish, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the state including Bergen, Essex, Hunterdon and Monmouth, Morris, and Sussex Counties.

Exploitation of slave labor contributed not only to the wealth of individual slave owners and to the agricultural economy. One of the earliest records pertaining to Blacks in the Newark area documents the use of enslaved Blacks as a form of currency, donated to assist the educational opportunities of white children. In 1794, the Board of Officers and Standing Committee of the Newark Academy “resolved that the Rev. Mr. Ogden be empowered to sell the negro man James, given by Mr. Watts as a donation to the Academy, for as much money as he will sell for.”<sup>12</sup> Reverend Ogden eventually sold James for forty pounds, in a two-month installment plan with interest, using the proceeds to support the Academy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Report of a Survey by the Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work. *The Negro in New Jersey*. New York: Negro University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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The fragmentary documents of Black life in New Jersey suggest that anxieties about the presence of Blacks began to increase as the status of Blacks changed from enslaved to free. The earliest records of manumission date to 1737. By the eve of the Revolutionary War, free Blacks while not common, were increasingly found among the population of New Jersey. As the number of enslaved and free Blacks increased, so did the efforts to restrict the citizenship claims of Blacks. In 1774, a group of white citizens in Perth Amboy wrote in a letter to Governor William Franklin that bespeaks the larger racial climate during this time: “they are A Very Dangerous People to have general providence in his majesties Dominions...and that they are the most Barbarous inhuman masters to those under them of any People in the world we presume will not be denied by any who have had any opportunity of seeing them in that state.”<sup>14</sup> The construction of free Blacks as a danger took time. Before this racist construction took hold in the public imagination, some Blacks who had amassed sufficient property (fifty pounds) to meet the voting requirements were allowed to exercise the franchise. In 1807, Governor Pennington was said to have “gallantly escorted ‘a strapping negress to the polls where he later ‘joined her in the ballot,’” a highly racialized and sexualized portrayal of a Black women utilizing the franchise in Newark before being banned altogether from formal electoral participation on these same basis.<sup>15</sup> Later this year, voters passed legislation introduced by Essex County legislature Bill Condit that read, “From and after the passage of this act no person shall vote in any state or county election for officers in the government of the United States, or of this state, unless such a person be a free white male citizen of this state” (McGoldrich and Crocco 1993), effectively excluding all

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Atkinson, Joseph. *A History of Newark, New Jersey: A Narrative of Its Rise and Progress*, page 143.

Blacks and women from full participation in New Jersey elections for nearly sixty additional years.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to note that attitudes toward Black citizenship changed over time. Small opportunities afforded, were later rescinded as processes of racialization gained momentum. In 1804, New Jersey became the last Northern state to move toward the emancipation of slaves, when the Assembly granted freedom to all children of slaves born after that year.<sup>17</sup> The gradual abolition of the slave economy as the adults held in bondage eventually died, precipitated an extenuated history of state and local efforts to restrict the citizenship claims of Blacks, with efforts going as far as to propose removing free Blacks from the state wholesale. In 1824, white citizens formed “A Society in the State of New Jersey to Cooperate with the American Colonization Society.” In its founding meeting, the reasons for the creation of the Society were clearly elaborated:

“I Rise, Sir, to move, that the Constitution just read be adopted; and I cannot suffer the opportunity to pass without expressing my warmest approbation of the plan embracing in it many manifest and important to our State and Country.

We all agree too, that we owe much to the children of Africa in the way of remuneration or recompense. The adoption of this plan will help us pay what we owe. You already perceive that the view which I take of this subject has regard, as much to our own interest as to the interest of the Blacks.

What a mass of ignorance, misery and depravity is here mingled with every portion of our population, and threatening the whole with a moral and political pestilence. My answer then to the state of New-Jersey is, that this enormous mass of revolting wretchedness and deadly pollution will, it is believed, be ultimately

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<sup>16</sup> In 1844, following the era of Jacksonian reform, New Jersey revised its constitution to include the words “white” and “males” to formally exclude Blacks and women from voting. For further discussion see *Reclaiming Lost Ground: The Struggle for Woman Suffrage in New Jersey* by Neale McGoldrick and Margaret Crocco (1993) and, “Negro Suffrage in New Jersey in 1776-1875” in *Journal of Negro History* 33 (1948) by Marion Thompson Wright.

<sup>17</sup> “Freedom Papers: The Manumission of Slaves in Burlington County New Jersey, 1776-1781” with an introduction by Clement Alexander Price. Burlington County, NJ: Burlington County Historical Society, 1984.

taken out of her territory, if the plan of the Colonization Society be adopted. This is the special concern—and who will say it is not a most interesting concern—which the state of New-Jersey has in this great national affair.”<sup>18</sup>

The rationale exemplifies the mendacious rationales of nineteenth-century modes of racialization. The pretense of gratitude for the “services” of slaves and action in the “interests” of Blacks is combined with the racist depiction of Blacks as a “deadly pollution” and “moral pestilence.” Through such discursive mechanisms, white Christians could convince themselves of their own moral rectitude as they enacted an abusive project to curtail the life prospects of Black Americans.

New Jersey continued its tradition of stringently contesting the belonging of African Americans within its boundaries through juridical-politico measures, creating an especially hostile racial climate. In 1852, the New Jersey legislature appropriated state funds to the New Jersey Colonization Society to transport free people of color to Liberia or “other places on the West Coast of Africa,” to build temporary settlement houses, and to cover other costs associated with re-locating Blacks to Liberia. Ten years later in 1862, legislation was introduced that sought to deem all “Negroes or Mulattos” coming into the state of New Jersey and remaining over ten days guilty of a misdemeanor, for which they could be deported to Liberia or the West Indies as penalty. Although this legislation was ultimately defeated, it demonstrates the sheer tenacity of white racists’ efforts to purge the state of free Black bodies. Rather than recognizing free Blacks as citizens, many white residents constructed Blacks as a moral threat, and a hindrance to the “natural” economic and social progression of the state of New Jersey. In contrast to notions that racism was a uniquely Southern problem in the United States, these

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<sup>18</sup> “Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Princeton, New-Jersey, July 14, 1824, To Form a Society in the State of New-Jersey, to Cooperate with the American Colonization Society (Princeton, N.J., 1824), pp. 12-20 reprinted in *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro Americans in New Jersey*.

discourses demonstrate how African Americans were constructed as a threat to the social and economic security of this “free” Northern state. Deportation may have been an extreme strategy to recreate New Jersey as an Anglicized state, but it was far from the only racist policy considered in mid-nineteenth century. During the Civil War, repeated efforts were made to ban Blacks from service in the New Jersey regiments of the Union Army. Legislation was introduced in the New Jersey Assembly to outlaw miscegenation. In 1865 the New Jersey legislature voted against the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude. In 1875, New Jersey became the *last* Northern state to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted Black men the right to vote.<sup>19</sup>

White policymakers’ explicit efforts to circumscribe the civil rights of African Americans in New Jersey did not go unchallenged. Black churches, literary societies and associations, and Black schools mounted sustained resistance against such racist policies. These relatively autonomous institutions fostered a positive sense of racial identity, and offered spaces for protest against manifestations of white racism. Strategies of resistance within these sites were mostly congenial, as individual letters, editorials and petition constituted the preferred form of protest. Despite the concerted efforts of these Black organizations, the political and economic progress of free Blacks in New Jersey were severely stunted as stereotypes of Blacks as “lazy,” “uncivilized,” “lawless,” and unfit for citizenship gained currency, accompanied by the adoption of numerous practices and

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion see *The Negro in New Jersey* published by the Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work (1932), *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey* by Clement Price (1980), “Negro Suffrage in New Jersey in 1776-1875” in *Journal of Negro History* 33 (1948) by Marion Thompson Wright and *The History of Newark, New Jersey* by Joseph Atkinson (1848).

formal policies to discourage Blacks from fully integrating into the social fabric of the state.<sup>20</sup>

By 1910, Blacks from southern states began migrating to Newark in more substantial numbers in search of jobs and relief from the economic and social violence of the Jim Crow South. This migration was encouraged by white business elites, who advertised Newark as a “city of opportunity” in an effort to satisfy the demand for cheap labor. The jobs available for most Black migrants, however, were limited to unskilled, menial positions due to job discrimination by white ethnic employers and trade unions (Price 1975; Cunningham 1988). Most Blacks were barred from the skilled crafts occupations that flourished during the late nineteenth century in Newark, managing only to secure positions as carpenters, waiters, day laborers, porters, and doormen. Black women were largely confined to domestic service and laundries.<sup>21</sup> The Census of 1920 reported no Black streetcar or rail transit workers, engineers, sales agents, firemen, or city or county officials. Of the 3500 Black men employed in Newark, only three were policemen, ten were apprentices in the manufacturing sector, eleven were physicians, five were dentists and three were attorneys. Black workers were barred from the ranks of skilled and semi-skilled craft workers because white master craftsmen, who controlled access to these positions, refused to accept Blacks as apprentices. Failure to attain an apprenticeship excluded Black workers from union membership, even in those few unions that did not exclude Black workers as a matter of policy.<sup>22</sup> In 1930, ten unions

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<sup>20</sup> Atkinson, Joseph. *The History of Newark New Jersey: Narrative of its Rise and Progress*. Newark: William Guild Press (1878)

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion see “The Black Experience in Newark” by Kenneth T. and Barbara Jackson in *New Jersey Since 1860: New Findings and Interpretations* published by the New Jersey Historical Commission (1971).

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, Kenneth T. and Barbara B. “The Black Experience in Newark: The Growth of the Ghetto, 1870-1970 (1971).

within the American Federation of Labor and fourteen unions outside the Federation barred Blacks by “constitutional and ritualist provisions.” Employers also utilized collective “closed shop” bargaining agreements to effectively exclude Blacks from union jobs.<sup>23</sup>

As a consequence of such pervasive racial discrimination, the most effective way for an African American to move up the social ladder was to own an independent Black business. In Newark, the most typical Black business entrepreneurs were in the service sector. Numbering thirty nine, hairdressing and beauty shops topped the list of Black businesses, followed closely by express trucking enterprises. Nearly half of all Black professionals in Newark were full-time or part-time ministers, indicating the importance of the Black Church to the creation of a Black middle-class in the city.

As the city became more racially and ethnically diverse, rigid patterns of housing segregation developed. White ethnic groups lived in particular neighborhoods, shaping the political and economic terrain of the city. African Americans, regardless of class, also were confined within particular geographic locations. The segregated housing practices restricted Blacks to a few neighborhoods in the central city, where the housing stock was typically poor and/or substandard. Despite the dilapidated condition of the housing, African Americans were forced to pay exorbitant rents to occupy housing owned by whites (Price 1975).

Prior to World War I, there was little or no overt racial violence directed toward African Americans in Newark. Yet during this time of “congenial” race relations, Blacks were routinely excluded from hospitals and clinics, segregated in neighborhoods where

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page 49.

housing stock was not well-maintained by the white landlords, and consistently excluded from jobs that afforded decent incomes. Between 1920 and 1930, Newark's Black population soared from 16, 977 to 38,880, an increase of 129%.<sup>24</sup> Media representations of Blacks in the city's newspapers shifted from portrayals of comic icons of southern backwardness to a nearly exclusive portrayal of Blacks as criminals (Price 1975). Increased visibility of Blacks in the city coincided with a worsening economic and social situation. As the most economically vulnerable population of the city before the stock market collapse of 1929, living in Newark became particularly harsh for most Blacks residents. As part of Newark's surplus labor force, the overwhelming majority were relegated to jobs requiring few skills and receiving the least pay. Systematically excluded from trade unions, Black workers were the first to lose their jobs when the depression hit, and the last workers to benefit from recovery efforts (Price 1975).

Between 1929 and 1940, the heretofore bridled racism of white powerbrokers in the city was manifested in increasingly pernicious policies. During the depression the best funded private relief agencies in the city, including the Salvation Army, Goodwill, and the Red Cross, refused to assist Black families. Although the public welfare roles did offer limited, temporary assistance to Black families, they did so grudgingly, frequently articulating a fear that offering public relief to Blacks would encourage more impoverished Blacks from other (mostly southern) cities to travel to Newark. In 1932, the Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work issued a report documenting systemic racial bias in the provision of relief. Many of the semiprivate hospitals and relief agencies either refused to provide any services to Blacks, or only provided them on a restricted basis. Those few organizations that would provide medical

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



care and relief to Blacks did so only on a thoroughly segregated basis. Although the Interracial Committee was relentless in documenting the discriminatory practices of the relief agencies, they provided the information in a way that protected the identities of organizations involved, describing the organizations as “Hospital A” or Agency “B.” In 1971 Kenneth and Barbara Jackson (1971) speculated that the Goodwill Mission, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army were among the major culprits. This speculation was later confirmed by historian Clement Price through private interviews with William Ashby and Harold Lett of the Negro Welfare League and the New Jersey Urban League respectively (Price 1975).

At the same time that African Americans were denied access to many forms of relief, they were blamed for imposing costs upon local taxpayers. Indeed, Essex county commissioners developed a scheme to relocate recent Black migrants back to Southern states in order to cut relief costs. In spite of the fact that 75% of the public relief cases were white families, and less than two percent of Black families receiving assistance had migrated to Newark within two years of the depression, some Newark leaders thought out-migration of Blacks would be an appropriate policy response to these economic hard times (Price 1975). In 1932, Owen Malady, Essex County Commissioner, requested that Thomas Puryear, the secretary of New Jersey’s Urban League, use the League to persuade Black families to accept payment to return to the South. Puryear suggested that the Urban League’s relationship to Black churches would enable them to disseminate the message that financial incentives were available to return south. The *Newark Evening News* reported: “Action will be taken by Puryear through his own organization and through the church of his people, he said. The Urban League is distributing Red Cross

food to Negro families—and he will begin today talking to Negroes who come for flour seeking those who want to go south and have families and friends who want to go.

Puryear called attention to the importance of starting immediately so that the first to arrive in the South will spread the word that Newark is unable to care for more Negroes and others will be discouraged from coming here in the hope of finding work.”

The links between the Urban League and racist efforts to remove Blacks from New Jersey had long lasting effects. In 1944, Alice Haines, a white suburbanite from Englewood, New Jersey, wrote a “sympathetic” letter to the Urban league explaining her smaller annual contribution:

“With a lowered income we are finding it hard to keep up with the contributions of other years, yet there are constant appeals from other sources that we feel are very important: this Negro question in our town is one of them. I enclose my check for \$2.00 which is all that we can promise at this time. During the depression and after the first World War, Negroes from other places—including those from southern states –came to Englewood because their relatives and friends reported that they were well cared for here. Since then the Negro population has so increased that it has become a real menace.”<sup>25</sup>

In reaction to the blatantly racist policies enacted by both the city of Newark and city and so-called philanthropic organizations during the Depression years, there also emerged leadership, organization, and strategic resistance in Black communities. Many Black institutions including storefront churches, new independent journals, and civic organizations of Black businesses became more prominent and began taking confrontational stands against Newark segregationists. Gradually interracial organizations like the New Jersey Urban League (formally the Negro Welfare League) began to conservatively challenge the discriminatory social policies of both public and private relief agencies (Cunningham 1988, Price 1975, Woodard 1997). Blacks with

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<sup>25</sup> “Correspondence Folder” of Ray E. Norris, Labor Secretary of the Newark Urban League held on permanent reserve in the New Jersey Information Center of the Main Branch of the Newark Public Library.

working class consciousness organized Newark's first rent strike in 1939. Small Black nationalist resistance groups emerged, including the House of Israel, and the Allah Temple of Islam, which rejected the ideological tenets of integration. On September 28, 1936, the *Newark Evening News* reported that 5000 followers of Father Divine demonstrated in Newark, speculating that this organization had at least 10,000 followers in Newark alone. Not unlike other nationalist organizations, Father Divine's group, favored a strategy of nurturing independent Black businesses, schools and apartment communities. In keeping with this Black nationalist agenda, his organization went on to purchase one of Newark leading hotels, The Rivera.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the organized resistance was initiated by Newark's small, yet burgeoning Black middle class. This resistance was fueled by complex motivations, including a desire for opportunities to enhance its visibility, establish a rapport with the larger white political community, and ensure more equitable quality of life for their offspring. Although, Black responses to the discrimination experienced during the Depression suggests unified Black resistance against white racism, fissures between the interests and priorities of Black middle class professionals and impoverished Blacks were emerging. The more affluent sectors of the Black community operated small business such as barbershops, small professional practices, and salons that catered to and depended upon African Americans. But impoverished Blacks, who were struggling to establish an economic base for themselves, were too poor to patronize regularly these Black businesses and were not in a position to benefit instantly from the priorities of middle-class Black leadership. These class fissures have continued to grow throughout Newark's history. The emerging crisis of public housing stands as case in point.

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<sup>26</sup> *Newark News*, Sept. 28, 1936

The economic crisis of the 1930's created an overwhelming demand for public housing in urban communities. The Newark Housing Authority began constructing public housing, building large high rise, low-income apartment buildings in what would become the Central Ward. Nearly all of these public housing residents in the Central Ward (95%) were of Black and/or Spanish speaking origins (Curvin 1975), while housing projects in other wards were over ninety-five percent white.<sup>27</sup> Massive white middle class exodus from Newark began during World War II and continued through the 1960's. War time prosperity provided economic incentives for businesses and their patrons to relocate into the suburbs, while providing temporary manufacturing jobs for otherwise underemployed Black men and women. However, the end of the war also ushered in widespread lay-offs of Black workers, and renewed attention to the unresolved economic and racial tensions that racked the city.

In 1946, Curtis Lucas published a grisly novel set in the Third Ward during the denouement of World War II. The protagonist, a twenty-one year old woman named Wonnie Smith, is tormented by the memories of witnessing the murder of her best friend, Mildred, for refusing two white men sex. The storyline unfolds against the familiar backdrop of poverty, rampant housing discrimination, and the devaluation of Black life by Newark police who routinely failed to thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding Mildred's untimely death. One the killers, Ernie Mihie, who owned a Third Ward nightclub that relied on prostitution as a major source of revenue, became disgruntled by the dwindling profits of Black female sex workers, during the war years due to the temporarily availability of manufacturing jobs for Black women. He became

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<sup>27</sup> *Public Housing in Newark's Central Ward: A Report by the New Jersey State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, April 1968.

crazed with anxiety when Wonnie recognized him as the murderer, and directly confronted him in the *Gin Mill*. Lucas' fictional account attests to limited employment opportunities of impoverished Black girls, and how white men's sense of entitlement to Black female bodies during 1940's was enough to incite them to terrible fits of murderous rage, particularly if they were denied full enjoyment of Black women's sexual charms. Ultimately, Wonnie's refusal to have a drink with a newly returning white soldier results in a brawl—the perfect distraction Ernie needs to take Wonnie's life in a chaotic public place and thereby avoid arrest and prosecution for the Black girl's life he had taken five years earlier. Lucas's novel elucidates Black women's vulnerability to sexual violence by white men, and the failure of both white and Black men to protect them in a city plagued with social inequalities driven by white racism and decades of Black urban poverty.

The period after World War II ushered in the final processes of de-industrialization that began earlier in the twentieth century. Between 1950 and 1960 two hundred fifty manufacturers left Newark; by 1970 over 1300 manufacturers had either closed or relocated (Curvin 1975). While the concentration of Blacks in the Central Ward became the basis of enhanced political power, it was also consolidated into a ghetto characterized by entrenched unemployment, strict racial apartheid, blight and various forms of social, political and economic violence (Curvin 1975). White ethnic groups, especially Italians, in other parts of the city maintained overwhelming political control of the mayoral seat and the city council, and regularly resorted to covert decision making practices to exclude Blacks from knowledge about and participation in issues of

particular relevance to their communities (Cunningham 1988, Curvin 1975, Hayden 1967).

Excavating Black women's agency during this time requires close inquiry into the biographies of pioneering African American women published either during their retirement or following their deaths. Many of their biographies read in similar fashion to those of the contemporary women whose political lives are the subject of this study. As early as 1920, the Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work reports that "fifteen Negro women" traveled to Newark from the south to do volunteer relief work in impoverished areas of the Third Ward in cooperation with local Black ministers. Though the names of these women remain unknown, prominent African American women like Alma Flagg, Alene Lett, Bessie Lanier Smith, Anna Lee Williams, Pansy Borders, Evelyn Timmons Inge, and Grace Baxter Fenderson were trained social workers or school teachers who exerted considerable leadership within Newark chapters of organizations like the Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They went on to create and join organizations like the Negro Women's Republican Club, the Colored Democratic Women's Division, the League of Women's Voters and smaller community based antipoverty organizations. While African American women were active in a wide variety of organizations and social clubs, they also engaged in social activism directly aimed at confronting racial discrimination and/or the widespread poverty that plagued the Third Ward.<sup>28</sup>

Concentrated poverty and overcrowding in segregated Third Ward housing projects, such as Stella Wright and Hayes Homes, made them vulnerable to loitering,

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<sup>28</sup> See for instance *Newark News*, Feb. 11, 1964; *Newark News*, Dec. 19, 1967; *Newark News*, June 18, 1966; *Star Ledger*, Aug. 1, 1962; *Newark News*, Dec. 12, 1967; and *Newark News*, Feb. 26, 1967.

crime and unexplained and unaccounted for acts of violence. Public housing projects also became premier sites of racial discrimination and other forms of social despotism. The Newark Housing Authority routinely dispatched housing officials and maintenance staff to the homes of residents without advance notice. The elevators frequently broke down, and the stairways were viewed by residents as unsanitary and unlighted. The executive director of the Housing Authority, Louis Danzig, routinely denied charges of segregation, and argued that tenants were placed in apartments where they wanted to live. He did, however, publicly admit that he did not offer white people apartments in the Central Ward unless they requested them: “To the extent that suitable vacancies permit, the applicant is assigned to the project of his choice.” It was, he explained, “natural” for immigrants and in-migrants to live among the same racial or nationality group, “The Germans and the Jews preceded the Negroes in the Central Ward did the same thing.” It just so happened that the most of the housing projects in the Central Ward were dangerous, over-populated and over ninety percent Black.<sup>29</sup>

The failure of the Newark police department to patrol these communities and to thoroughly investigate criminal activity left most of public housing residents feeling unsafe. Scudder Homes resident, Mrs. Patricia Dessau, remarked, “the police don’t seem to care what happens in the projects.”<sup>30</sup> The president of the Scudder Homes Tenant Association, charged “The locks on the doors are very inadequate. The average [number of] break-in[s] is eight per month.” While the police seemingly failed to protect housing residents from criminal activity, they were also widely known to brutalize and otherwise harass young Black men for doing nothing more than standing on street corners. The

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, page 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, page 7

climate of fear, anger, resentment and despair pervaded predominantly Black housing projects in Newark. These housing projects provide the starkest example of how processes of racialization materialized in the dilapidated living conditions of poor Blacks the Central Ward in the period between 1945 and 1967.

White people's persistent refusals to appoint qualified Blacks to leadership positions within Newark city administration and the proposed displacement of 40,000 Third Ward residents to construct the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey fueled even more animosity among Blacks toward the city of Newark and its police department. When cabdriver John Smith suffered "caved ribs, a busted hernia and a hole in my head" at the hands of seven white officers while in police custody, the building tension finally exploded into the 1967 Newark Rebellion.<sup>31</sup> The insurrection of 1967 ravaged the city of Newark. Thousands of looters, protesters, and Central Ward community members took to the streets. The revolt took the form of looting, massive destruction of private property (especially white-owned retail stores), non-violent civil disobedience, and vivid expressions of contempt for whites traveling through in the riot-impacted areas. Law enforcement agencies retaliated with the targeted beating and slaying of young Black men, *all* of whom were suspected of looting. Other aggressive displays of force by the Newark Police Department, the New Jersey National Guard and the New Jersey State Troopers—including vengeance attacks on Black-owned businesses—transformed the area into an enemy occupied battle zone. More than 3000 National Guard troops were activated from surrounding suburbs and nearly 500 New Jersey State Troopers were called in to patrol the streets of Newark. At least twenty-two

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<sup>31</sup> Hayden, Tom. *Rebellion in Newark: Official Violence and Ghetto Response*. New York: Random House, 1967.



African Americans were killed by police gunfire during the week of riots. Six were African American women who were killed inside their homes or on their front porches. Hundreds more were brutalized, arrested and/or charged with petty crimes (Hayden 1967, Winters 1978, Cunningham 1988). The Newark rebellion magnified the hostile conditions that many Blacks had to survive in American cities during that time. They also symbolized the widespread social discontent produced by generations of racial domination, social alienation and marginality. The exodus of whites from the city of Newark was illustrative of the intensity of their fear, intolerance, and base indifference to the horrendous social conditions that produced the riots in the first place (Sugrue 1996, Jackson 1985).

The intensifying militancy by both the Newark police department and socially alienated Blacks created an environment where Black nationalist sentiment in Newark would flourish. In 1970, Amiri Baraka's cultural nationalist organization, Committee for a United Newark (CFUN) rose to prominence by helping politically mobilizing Black and Puerto Ricans to elect Newark's first Black mayor, Kenneth Gibson. CFUN organized under the tenets of cultural nationalism which entailed a commitment to Black nation building through the cultivation of a distinct "Black African" identity, the cultivation of autonomous Black, community-based businesses, organizations and institutions and through a concerted effort to elect Black elected officials in majority Black political districts (Curvin 1978, Woodard 1999). CFUN, while clinging to many patriarchal assumptions made by Black nationalists at the time, also provided fruitful opportunities for Black women's political organization and leadership. The Women's Division of CFUN created exclusively female study groups, established independent schools that

taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic using Black cultural nationalist symbols and the incorporation of Swahili dance, drumming and rhythmic storytelling techniques into their community programming efforts. The Women's Division of CFUN became the largest section of the organization, and generally assumed many of the day to day operations of the organization (Woodard 1999).

The rise of cultural nationalism in the city of Newark provided a unique opportunity for young women to become involved in community-based efforts to organize the poor Black and brown communities of Newark. While CFUN initially attempted to recruit its male membership to prominent leadership positions within the organization, for most of its existence the majority of its members were Black women (Woodard 1999). Presented with a unique opportunity to build working relationships with other women in CFUN and having shared experiences of exclusion and/or tokenistic inclusion, these women, lead by Amina Baraka, also saw CFUN as fertile space in which to expand their politics to include consideration of the impact of sexism on their communities. This also included a specialized analysis of how imperialism, colonialism and racism effected the lives of Black and Puerto Rican women (Woodard 1999). While CFUN maintained a cadre of highly visible Black male leadership who regularly engaged electoral politics, much of the "nation-building" that provided much of the ideological meat which constituted Black cultural nationalism was both designed and implemented by CFUN highly committed, multi-talented female activists within the organization (Woodard 1999).

At the local level, women's organizing efforts with CFUN bridged several communities simultaneously. Their creative effort to provide community-based

programming attracted young visual and performing artists and teachers. The women's division needed to secure resources to implement these initiatives. They reached out to middle class Black professionals and college students in the cities surrounding Newark although CFUN's ideological commitment to enhance the formation of a Black political consciousness in Newark required the organization focus its energy on a population that was predominantly poor and uneducated. The women's division of CFUN was able to forge relationships and establish much needed rapport with Newark's youth, the mothers of these youth and many of the teachers who taught them in the public schools. These relationships budded into a new organization, Black Women's United Front (BWUF), which eventually merged into a national network of Black women activists, artists and educators who had close community ties, helping to boost the legitimacy of CFUN, as well as the Newark Black Convention Movement.

### *Post-Industrial Newark*

Newark became one of the ten cities with the largest increase in the number of the "ghetto poor" from 1970 to 1980 (Jencks and Peterson 1991). By the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the United States faced its worse economic crisis since the Great Depression. During the 1980's, Newark loss over 81,000 manufacturing jobs (Anyon 1997). The remaining blue-collar manufacturing jobs that public school students in urban areas were being trained to fill eventually disappeared (Harris 1998, Anyon 1997). In their absence were condemned industrial fortresses (abandoned factories, workshops and warehouses) shielded from demolition by the likelihood of emission of dioxins and other dangerous toxins into the air and waterways (as well as the prohibitive

cost of clean-up). Most whites moved away from Newark's inner city, settling in suburban areas. They also carried away the tax base of the municipal budget. As conservatism swept the nation, social programs and social investments dwindled (Jackson 1985, Sugrue 1996). The remaining whites, including Italians and white Hispanics (Spanish and Portuguese American immigrants and citizens) settled into the North and East Wards of Newark

In 1990, New Jersey public schools were among the most segregated in the nation. Newark's public school system exemplified this trend, with over 70% of its students identifying as Black and 27% as Hispanic (Anyon 1997). In a state that regularly boasts that it has one of the five best educational system in the United States, Newark public schools performed dismally on standardized testing, high school retention rates and other evaluative measures of school performance.

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in New Jersey compounds the pernicious social conditions that face Black people in Newark. In 2005, Newark ranked fifth in the nation for new cases of HIV/AIDS. Over half (55%) of all people known to be living with HIV/AIDS in the state of New Jersey are non-Hispanic Blacks. Sixty-four percent of women in the state of New Jersey living with the illness are Black women, comprising 41% of all African Americans living with the virus. In the city of Newark, 1 out of 31 (4,634) Blacks are known to be infected with HIV, with Newark topping the list of ten identified "Impacted Cities" in the state of New Jersey.<sup>32</sup> Given the severity of these social indicators, it is difficult to overstate the social and economic crisis facing African Americans as a distinctly racialized group of people in Newark.

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<sup>32</sup> Department of Health and Senior Services. 2005 *New Jersey HIV/AIDS Report* compiled by the Division of HIV/AIDS Services.

*Contemporary Cultural Productions of Blackness*

Spatially, Newark exists as a racially and ethnically segregated city shaped by de-industrialization and a longstanding hope for revitalization. Newark's urban landscape, however, is not merely shaped by physical structures, but also by the movement of people within and between those structures including the amorphous spaces that are created to fulfill the specific everyday needs of the people who occupy them. The satisfaction of these needs, as well as the needs of themselves, are simultaneously economic, social, cultural and political. The tropes through which these needs are understood, negotiated, realized or eventually abandoned are constrained by time, place and the meanings attributed to both Newark as a place and Newark as a space (see for instance, Harvey 2001, Lefebvre 1991 and Foucault 1967).

In contrast to meta-narratives that situate Newark solely in terms of larger historical processes, Newark is also a “home” in which the everyday lives and experiences of “political” Black women unfold. Rather than being a source of shame or indignation, Newark is a place of belonging and nostalgia, a place where struggles are waged, history is lived, and hopeful tomorrows are embraced. Through their activities—as vendors, commuters, small business owners, students, hustlers, old people, street people, homeless people, and activists—Black subjects breathe life into Newark and claim the landscapes as their own.

Conceptions of Blackness are deeply contested in Newark, along with the gendered implications of its enacted or performed symbolism. For example, across from “Mecca Café” a mural invokes a more contemporary representation of urban

“Blackness.” In an effort to attract male consumers, Dr. Jay’s, a retailer specializing in sneakers, blue jeans, and sportswear, depicts scenes of young Black men in the act of laying down tracks on a keyboard, playing basketball and gawking at two hypersexualized images of two light-skinned women of color (See Appendix A, Figure 3). Alongside the numerous African hair braiding salons which routinely braid synthetic hair into the heads of Black women, are wig shops, exotic leather retailers, tattoo parlors, and even “All Brother Liquor (See Appendix A, Figures 4 and 5).”

While the cultural production of Blackness is a resonant element of Newark’s visual economy, gentrification has permeated Newark’s streets and neighborhoods. Over the past seven years, gentrification has brought international retailers like Old Navy, Home Depot and Starbucks to the Central Ward. Myriads of single level parking lots are sprawled across Newark’s downtown district, evidencing availability of cheap downtown space—easily sold to the most mediocre of bidders. It also demonstrates who the vast majority of beneficiaries of Newark’s inner-city employment opportunities are not. By six o’clock the thousands of commuters leave the streets mostly bare, the except being weeknights when Newark’s local baseball team is playing and/or when there are weekend performances at NJPAC. Local Black politicians and businessmen use the Robert Treat Hotel and the Ironbound’s satellite restaurants and lounges as exclusive retreats from the busy hustle of late afternoon downtown traffic.

Politically, gentrification in Newark seems to also depend on efforts to attract young African American professional families and consumers from the surrounding suburbs of Montclair, Bloomfield, Hillside, Maplewood, away from the sprawling malls and shopping centers of Wayne, Clarke and Union and the mass appeal of highway retail

strips of Routes, 3, 10, 22 and 46 as well as from New York City itself. However, local political efforts to further solidify and expand the majority Black political base are challenged by the rapidly increasing Spanish and Latino population in the city. While many of the retailers featured in this section of Newark's cityscapes have managed to survive and even capitalize on efforts to gentrify Newark, Newark is becoming increasingly non-Black. The increasing population of Latinos in the East and North Wards of Newark and the corresponding concentration of political power among Latinos problematizes any romantic envisioning of Newark as a "Black Mecca." Indeed the current political climate requires adjusting the Black political rhetoric of "the community" to "Black and Latino communities."

In spite of the new semantics, the extenuated history of racialization of African Americans in Newark, and the extant conditions that many Blacks experience today as a result of that history, make Newark an appealing symbolic "home" for the Black women activists who are featured in this study. In fact, one strategy of resisting the conditions that anti-Black racism and Black racialization has produced is to claim blackness as a rich and desirable cultural commodity, as well as way of situating one's own community work within a history of Black political, cultural and economic resistance to white racism. Claiming blackness as an identity in Newark entails much more than the voluntary enactment of any uni-dimensional politics of identity. Rather, claiming blackness by activist women entails creating a space of nostalgia, belonging and hope for young Black people whose potential they perceive as being constrained and repressed by persistent social, political and economic violence. Situating Newark as emotionally significant place of belonging makes Newark a "home" worth fighting for. This loving sentiment for

Newark's cityscapes transforms Newark into a fierce site of resistance rather than merely a blighted city marred by poverty, inequality, racism and social despair. This sentiment marks Newark as place where Black female political agency can thrive.

*Culturally Producing Blackness: Claiming the Dynamism of Newark Streets*

The cultural production of blackness is one of the more powerful visual markers of the Central Ward. Newark cityscapes immediately convey the historical process of racialization that have shape Newark's political economy as well as the contemporary fissures that exist between working and middle-class African Americans, and the thousands of unemployed and impoverished Blacks who reside in the city. Central to the negotiation of economic inequality that exist between residents and patrons of the Central Ward are manifold Black and African owned business that seem to regulate the boundaries of Blackness in the city. One block west of Broad Street, Newark's major thoroughfare, one encounters a multitude of businesses that utilize Black/African cultural signifiers. A walk down the historic corridor of Halsey Street immediately eclipses the impersonal crowds of students, commuters, street people and suites that crowd Broad Street. Whether it is a bold mural for "Afrique Hall" a rental hall for weddings and other social events, Sahara International Trading, "Mecca Café," a small red, Black and green lunch truck catering to street venders selling oils and incense of frankincense, Egyptian Musk and sandalwood, and "Nature's Blessings," one immediately senses the presence of a strong, intact and culturally vibrant Black community (See Appendix A, Figure 2). Black Muslim retailers along Branford Street play an invaluable role of showcasing the potential longevity of autonomously owned Black businesses, providing an alternative



model of professional Black prosperity and respectability than those represented by the Black politicians, bureaucrats, municipal and corporate officers who work on and travel through Broad Street. Hamidah's Café and Body Shop sells homemade lotions soaps and a variety of bath and body products beside handmade imported West African jewelry and fabrics, vegan juices, smoothies, sandwiches and bean pies. The Black Muslim mother and daughter team who own and operate Hamidah's are reminiscent of a distant past when Black African women owned and controlled local markets on the coast of West Africa and well defined, though certainly not Western, gender roles contributed to a bustling, relatively autonomous Black economy.

In the Central Ward the contemporary story of U.S. Black people tied to American cities is told. One is inundated by the visual markers of Black poverty and social alienation, as well as Black cultural agency and resistance. Downtown, one is immediately aware of how larger economic forces of capitalism including gentrification, cultural commoditization and globalization shape the cityscapes. In Newark it is common to see young women, sometimes even pregnant women, panhandling in front of the esteemed New Jersey Performing Arts Center. My own earliest memories of Newark place me at the corner of Market and Mulberry, right in the heart of the downtown district. The street corners are crowded with businessmen, students, working class Black and Latino women, all coming and going seemingly oblivious to each other. In the morning and afternoon hours, the streets are congested with cars accelerating quickly just to come to a complete stop twenty feet down the road. Busses wheeze in and between lanes to avoid double parked cars and curiously brave pedestrians jay-walked to avoid a forty-five second wait at the traffic light. There are fresh seafood markets, roasted nuts

stands, West African grocers, fast food restaurants and Dunkin Donuts for passersby.

Walking along Market Street one passes countless young Black men standing in front of Army/Navy surplus stores, electronic repair shops, discount clothiers, hat and wig shops and music retail stores selling a variety of small products including skull caps, sun glass, t-shirts, tank tops, belts, purses and sometimes elicit items like colored contact lenses, bootleg CD's and DVD's—and just about anything else you could possibly want. The Starbuck's Coffee Shop built to accommodate the conspicuous (and mostly white) white collar professionals of Prudential, IDT, and Wachovia, and (mostly Black) Newark city bureaucrats.

Away from the downtown hustle and bustle of the Central Ward, one suddenly confronts the inherent truth of social analyst's jargon, "social alienation" and "marginality." Middle-aged, and seemingly unemployed, Black men stand in front of food pantries and shelters, sit on broken porches on streets strewn with garbage. Young Black women walk to the corner grocers with young children in tow to pick up bread, milk, and a quick meal. The streets are sparsely populated on city blocks that at first sight seem abandoned. It takes a few seconds for one to notice that in between the boarded up flats and the vacant overgrown lots and liquor stores that people actually *live* in these communities. In the public housing projects the scene is even worse. At Baxton Terrace Homes school aged children play in filthy parking lots surrounded by apartments that are either boarded up with plywood, or have windows that gape open in an effort to find minimal relief from the summer heat. As they play, the children seem not to notice the shattered glass, the food wrappers, the bare chicken bones, or the cars that pull up to exchange money for drugs with the young men who seem to patrol the entire scene.

In the Central Ward, there are few of could be called “authentic” Black working class communities. Rather, there are blocks that have managed to preserve the pre-1960’s landscape of lush elms lining narrow streets, sprawling porches, and the more modest well-kept multi-family flats. These rare blocks, while attractive, are still vulnerable to the drugs, gang violence, and high unemployment rates among both Black women and men. Midday, this is evidenced by those walking down the street, hanging out on the street corners, the constant sight of cruising police cars, and the steady flow of costumers in and out of the corner markets. It is precisely within these small oases of Black working class urban culture that one finds women who are determined to change the conditions, and create venues in which young men and women are given the opportunities to learn, grow and assert their own leadership capacity. Within these neighborhoods Black “political” women exert their agency to improve their communities by creating and utilizing their own stores of social capital.

*Newark as Home: Voice, Agency and the Creation of Social Capital*

The portrait of Newark created by local Black female political subjects resists the dismal caricature that emerges in the dominant social science discourse focusing solely on urban social, economic and political decay (Ralph 1978; Winters 1977; Hayden 1967). Similarly, it complicates discourses that are focused exclusively on stories of racial marginality, although the social and economic marginality of African American youth are foregrounded in many of their stories. While an assortment of facts about Newark’s history of racial domination and marginality entered into our discussion during semi-structured interviews, the history of Black resistance to white racism was the most

powerful theme that emerged from our dialogues about Newark. In fact, one of the most prominent themes that emerged from our discussions were the women's insistence to create a counter-narrative rooted in transforming the entrenched social problems produced by decades of racial exclusion and economic marginality. Newark's history of survival enables Black women to embrace the city as a desirable and much beloved "home." Their optimistic endeavor of "home improvement" emphasizes Newark's history of Black cultural resistance to racial marginality as one of the most important elements of their "political" lives.

Education was one of the most frequently invoked issues linking contemporary social ills to the long history of racial domination. Although formal education was viewed as one of the most pressing problems the city faces, "education" through formal means was *not* viewed as a panacea for Newark's problems. Rather, children were viewed as lacking an education about the structural forces that drive the city, especially in terms of race, political economy, and the Black cultural resources contained within Newark's borders. As dismal as Newark public schools were perceived to be, the lack of knowledge about Newark's rich cultural history of Black resistance was seen as more problematic by local activists. To combat the hopelessness and despair engulfing Newark's school system, this form of education was perceived to be crucial for the city's collective social and economic revitalization. In the words of Malika Wilcox, executive director of Women in Support of the Million Man March:

You know, the state took over ten or fifteen years ago, the state took over the education and its gotten worse, naturally because New Jersey is the last state that abolished slavery, and so they are in charge of the education of our children. This is why we strive. Three times—twice we were denied for charter school, and the third time we were approved. I think that we as African people are the only ones who can remedy our plight. We must educate our own children. This country banned us from reading, banned

us from an education, legally. Banned us from marriage. So we have to educate our own people and our own selves. And from that education will come the economics that we need and the self-sufficiency that we need. We have to do it our selves. Black folks doing for Black folks, that's how it going to look when it happens. It's happening [now]. Creating the first African American cultural center in the history of this state...this is how you begin to make it happen.

For activists like Malika, collective opportunities to learn and value the role that African Americans had played in shaping Newark's history were understood to be just as important to individual opportunities of young African Americans to prosper socially and economically within the borders of the city. Formal education itself was not viewed as simply a means for individual advancement, but rather as a way of increasing awareness about the history of Black racialization in order to confront contemporary state-sponsored efforts to curtail the social, political and economic empowerment of African Americans in Newark. For women like Malika, a sixty-two year old Muslim mother, grandmother and real estate agent, Newark symbolizes a unique Black urban culture of endurance, tenacity and a resilience which had its roots in the southern United States. For other lifelong residents, Newark symbolized a "home" away from the imagined home of "down South" which presented unique set opportunities for Black female political agency, agency that emphasized the creation and maintenance of community based organizations/institutions that address many of Newark's mostly deeply entrenched social problems including poverty, poor housing, and manifold strategies of resistance to racial domination. Loyalty to both activism and residency within the Central Ward of Newark were tied to the activist's sense of self and place as a way to connect the temporal dimensions of Newark's cityscape, linking personal intimacy with the "old Newark" of their parents to the "enduring Newark" of the present and to a vision of "New-ark" for the

future. This form of agency fueled decisions to remain in Newark and “talk back,” articulating a larger narrative of transcendence and resurrection for a city that was left for dead in the larger American public imagination. Malika Wilcox, who also founded New Jersey’s African American Cultural Center in 2005, says it best as she explains why she made the choice of spending her entire life in Newark:

I love this town. I love the people in this town, even the rawness of it. I love the, uh..the energy, the survival ...mechanisms... and the will of the people to survive and to thrive and to keep on, keeping on regardless... I love that energy here. And then seeing it from the sixties and the fifties and seeing it now in 2006 is amazing. It’s amazing to be able to see it from say...forty, fifty years of transition.

The image of an enduring, symbolic Newark during coexists with keen awareness of the socio-economic crisis that faces many Black Newarkers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, manifested in the joint crisis of Newark’s public school system and the perceived disintegration of the “Black family.” Both the failure of Newark’s public institutions to provide a quality education to African American youth and the inability of public service organizations including social welfare and law enforcement agencies to support the growth and development of the Black family provide powerful causes around which Black women activists mobilize.

### *Knowledge, Power and Narrating Newark’s Cityscapes*

The plight of African Americans, like that of all Black and brown people who spend a substantial portion of their daily lives in Newark, is tied to a political history that is plagued with stark economic, racial and ethnic inequalities, as well as some of the most pernicious and socially detrimental political practices known to scholars of American politics. These practices include corporate looting of public coffers, white flight,

gentrification, and a municipal governance structure that is fraught with corruption, incompetence, and patronage. These practices benefited two tremendously powerful mayoral machines that managed to maintain their offices for a combined total of thirty six years. This form of patriarchy in Black community politics at the local level has also played a critical role in shaping Black women activists' conceptions of "politics" and their exercise of political agency.

To capture these alternative understandings of politics, the next chapter examines oral narratives of Black women activists who continue to engage the political and social problems facing Newark residents, as mothers raising children and grandchildren in Newark, as social activists concerned with diverse issues and as elected officials who are enthusiastic about the exciting possibilities that Newark has to offer. Oral narratives reveal the political and personal histories of Black female subjects, illuminating the subjugated knowledge of Black women's political lives, as well as their strategies of resistance (Collins 1991, Etter-Lewis 1993, Etter-Lewis 1996, Vaz 1997). Through these personal testimonies, I explore local Black women's reflections on the significance of their own "political" strategies to resist various forms of social, political and economic marginality. These narratives are drawn from women who are not well-known poets, scholars, activists or artists. Indeed, these women are not well known outside of the city of Newark. Their lives are not likely subjects for scholarly or journalistic scrutiny. Yet the significance and impact of their political work is too important to be neglected. For this reason, I undertake systematic excavation and analysis of the political voices of Newark's Black women activists.

## Chapter 4

### Black Female Political Subjectivity and Politics in Newark's Habitus

*"I understand the quest for a better life for your children, but why deny a part of your history, a part of your past that is a part of you? I always looked at Newark as a place that had a really rich, cultural history. A history that I could be a part of."*

--Aminata Obadele, Twenty-nine year old office manager, free-lance journalist, political prisoner activist, and single mother of two.

*"I'm from public housing, I went to public schools. My father always told me that you didn't have to move to become what you wanted to become, that you could actually create what you wanted to create where you were."*

--Roxanne Hampton, Thirty-nine year old school board member, and candidate for Central Ward Council Seat, and self-identified lesbian woman.

#### Introduction

Historical research has documented the extensive work of African American women as community activists, cultural workers, and "racial uplift" in nineteenth and twentieth centuries (White 1999, Terbogge-Penn 1998, and Giddings 1984). Within contemporary urban communities, community activism, cultural preservation and "race work" embody forms of "political" agency explicitly understood as "politics." In marked contrast to conceptions of politics construed in terms of conventional forms of political participation, this chapter investigates the meanings of politics to Black women in Newark who are immersed in a full spectrum of community programming, community activism and cultural work, who consider themselves to be "political," and who are recognized within their communities as political actors. Electoral participation is not the litmus test for political engagement within these communities. "Speaking up," "telling



the truth,” “educating the community,” and various forms of “mother-work” (Collins 1990, 2006) resonate with political salience far more than the conventional modes of political behavior routinely studied by political scientists.

### *Additional Notes on Methodology*

This chapter sketches a portrait of Newark through the voices of Black women activists. The testimonials presented in this chapter go beyond accounts of Newark that are framed in terms of racialization, de-industrialization and ghettoization, although the everyday challenges associated with these historical processes are an important element of the stories the women tell about the city. Newark is a culturally rich and attractive “home,” as well as a fertile site of resistance to racism and other forms of social injustice. From the standpoint of the activists, Newark is a place where Black women’s stores of social capital can be pulled together to create unique spaces of resistance.

To capture how the activists themselves conceived of the “political,” I first asked them to speak candidly about their own community work, their perceptions of how other’s perceived their community work *and* finally, their assessments of other “political” actors they mentioned during the interview. It is important to note that the word “political” surfaced in many different questions during the interviews, referring to political events/mobilizations, political leadership, and politically involvement more generally. The activists responded to various questions by developing more nuanced meanings to the word. For example, questions concerning personal assessments of political leadership or the political establishment generally invoked rather colorful claims about the current municipal regime. Asking subjects to name “the most significant

political mobilizations” over the last ten years, generated references to The Million Man March, the National Hip Hop Political Convention, and to Cory Booker’s multiple efforts to unseat the mayoral incumbent Sharpe James in two consecutive races. When asked if the participants agreed with another person’s assessment of their work as “political” and whether or not they considered their own work to be “political,” affirmative answers typically involved unsolicited efforts to link their work to a larger imagined “Black community,” “Black youth” or “Black family.”

The complexity of these women’s lives was inspiring and deeply disturbing. Their stories were inspiring in the sense that they provided me with living, breathing, and talking examples of women who had come from working class and/or working poor backgrounds and managed to create fulfilling lives for themselves doing what they loved. The interviews were disturbing in the sense that stories provided such an intense human face to the dire social and economic circumstances surrounding Newark’s African-American youth. For example, after taking part in a workshop of Black youth leadership I had invited to attend by an activist a tenth-grade girl came up to me afterward and told me that in the past two years at Central High School, ten of her friends or acquaintances had been killed in street or in gang related violence. After revealing this conversation to the subject of interest, she rather remarked sullenly, “Yeah, this is what we deal with everyday.” Many activists emphasized the failure of at least two generations of political leadership to improve the quality of education for Black Newarkers, to create stable employment or other means of social advancement in the Central Ward. The activists’ responses reflect fundamental tensions inherent in the politics to Black urban areas. The subjects themselves are privileged compared to those toward whom their political

activism is directed. Yet to transform the geographic, social, political, and economic marginality of their communities, these activists politicize particular identities (youth, Blackness, poorness). But the immediate benefits of this politicization accrue more to the activists. Their privilege is enhanced by winning electoral office, gaining stature in the community, or becoming more influential “political” actors in the community. My respondents are aware of these tensions and sought to engage such dilemmas by pursuing a politics that aims to chip away at the silence, apathy, anger and discontent of subaltern communities, by creating and preserving autonomous spaces that foster hope, leadership capacity and a strong and stable sense of identity, place and community. Even as the contours and boundaries of identity, place and community shift and are contested, these activists seek to build a home for “my grandchild, or my neighbor’s child, or my cousin’s child, or that child standing over there on that corner,” a home that is culturally and politically relevant, even as they acknowledge that home may be a dangerous place to be.

### *The Politics of Home-Making*

For women living within political borders of the Central Ward of Newark, race and Black cultural affinities are the primary reasons to reside in Newark. They proudly situated themselves and their families within Newark’s political history. Many activists understood their willingness to live in the city as a means of subverting dominant historical and popular discourses that characterize Newark as a slum. Being a willing participant in the unfolding of Newark’s contemporary history was understood as a form of agency. This point became especially salient in the evolution and historicity of the women’s narrations of their own political biography. For example, Aminata Obadele, a

twenty-nine year old office manager at a local community economic development organization explains why she moved to Newark,

“My extended family is here. My grandmother lived here. My sister was here, my cousins were here. My mother lived in South Jersey, but I really didn’t feel that was the best place for job opportunities and transportation. She [her mother] had a lot of bad experiences here as a child, and a part of me felt like we were trying to be middle class, but we were really from another environment that we didn’t acknowledge any more and tried to suppress. And I guess, I really didn’t understand why. Like I understand the quest for a better life for your children, but why deny a part of your history, a part of your past that is a part of you? I always looked at Newark as a place that had a really rich, cultural history. You know, with Amiri Baraka and the Baraka family here and their influence. The Black Power movement and the Black and Puerto Rican convention here.”

For Aminata, a single mother of two school aged boys, attaining a “middle class” lifestyle was linked to a conscious choice to turn away from Newark’s predominantly Black cityscapes and toward an ahistorical suburban existence. In Aminata’s view, the suburban environment that she was raised in suppressed the significance of Black cultural in exchange for a “better life.” She consciously tied her parents’ decision to move away from Newark to moving away from her extended family as well as turn away from contemporary Black history. Aminata’s decision to make Newark a home for herself and her two sons signified an intentional effort to return to a “place that had a really rich cultural history.” For Aminata, Black culture itself as an attractive commodity that seemed to outweigh other quality of life issues that could have made suburban New Jersey a “better place” to raise her two young sons, who were enrolled in Newark’s public school system. For Aminata, taking advantage of Newark’s location as a transportation hub was tantamount to giving Newark a chance to fulfill its historical legacy.

Aminata first became interested in “politics” when she joined the Black Student Union during her second year at a local community college. This organization had recently taken on a more nationalist identity, and renamed itself “The Black Freedom Society.” Aminata was exposed to nationalist and Pan-Africanist interpretations of Black history by attending community gatherings, Kwanzaa ceremonies and participating in study groups where she, “met a lot of elders. They shared information with me that I had never really been exposed to before, but I felt like I knew it. And once I heard it I wanted to learn more.” From this point on, Aminata participated in the organizing activities of many community-based nationalist organizations including the People’s Organization for Progress, the New Black Panther Party and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement—all of which she felt did work that had a positive impact on her community. She defined her community as, “a combination of people—young people, seniors, mothers, workers, everybody from the top down. Even the quote, ‘undesirables.’ The drug addicts, uneducated mothers on welfare who can’t get a job, juvenile delinquents, unemployed men.”

Over the last several years, in spite of being a young single mother (having lost one of her children’s fathers to gang violence), Aminata played a central role in the local organizing efforts of the Million Woman March (1997), the Million Youth March (1998) and the National Hip Hop Political Convention (2004). For Aminata, being a local organizer for these national mobilization efforts was a way for her to personally extend the historical trajectory of Black radicalism in Newark. Although Aminata occasionally participated in more mainstream political activities like voter mobilization and education, her desire to articulate a message that reflected the needs of the “undesirables” of Newark

in national conference venues provided a special meaning to her political work. This what she felt made her work relevant to the struggles of Black people in Newark.

In contrast to those who chose to return to Newark as a political act, lifelong residents of Newark also articulated a sense of responsibility to take part in the transformation of the city and to recreate the vibrancy that many activists envisioned as central to Newark's past, present and future. Roxanne Hampton, a forty year old school board member and aspiring city council member explained, "I'm from public housing, I went to public schools. My father always told me that you didn't have to move to become what you wanted to become, that you could actually create what you wanted to create where you were." For Roxanne, surviving public housing, one the most politically maligned institutions in the city, was viewed as a source of strength and pride. She understood her own life as living testimony to the resilience of the city. She expressed an inherent need to be part of the "fight" to improve the conditions of the city.

I was a young person who saw the fight. It was at the end of the riots when I was born. So it was that whole Black power, that movement for the change in our economic, and our social services. So I had to see us fight, and I got to see the results of the fight.

It was very different for me. I'm one who understands that no matter what you endure, the good times will come, because I benefited from that. There was a time when we didn't have anything, but after fighting we had something. [My] Dad always encouraged me that it can get better, no matter how hard it gets. That's what helped me to stay.

For Roxanne, Newark represented a home that was worth staying and fighting for. She admitted that sometimes she felt that she could do "better than Newark," especially when she saw the opportunities of friends who finished college and moved away to other cities or suburbs; however, she also saw the many more people who were left behind and

not afforded opportunities and/or resources to leave. This sentiment was intensified when she noticed the inadequate leadership of the people who were in office.

“I was running out [out my house] going to Virginia. A neighbor of mine who was an alcoholic came to my door and knocked on my door, and he asked me to sign this petition for school board. And, I sort of laughed... because I was looking at this individual. . .and, he was telling me who was supporting him and everything. And I’m saying...this is incredible that this individual would be able to run for the most important seat.

The school board is the most important local election that you can participate in. And I was telling my friends on my way down to Virginia. And they said, ‘Roxanne, we’re so sick of you talking about all this, why don’t you do something about it?’ So when I got back, I picked up my petitions. That was on a Tuesday, they [the petitions] were due that Thursday. And only ten names [were] required, ten registered voters.

When confronted with the reality of who might possibly be representing her neighborhood on the school board, Roxanne was also confronted her own complicity in perpetuating the problem of poor leadership if she allowed her own leadership capacity to go unutilized. From Roxanne’s perspective, even though she had very little experience in public service as an adult, she was certain that she could offer much more to Newark families than the inebriated man who came knocking on her door. She felt a sense of responsibility to put action behind the vividly articulated arguments that she usually reserved for family and close friends. Her “political” life was initiated when she realized her own leadership potential.

Roxanne went on to win the school board seat and, in spring of 2006, became the councilwoman for the Central Ward. While Roxanne came from a civically involved family, and was outspoken on a variety of political issues among her peers, she was essentially politicized after she became an elected official. While she grew up in a

household that advocated for “poor people,” she became intimate with the severity of the problems facing Newarkers through her participation on the school board. Roxanne, who graduated from Arts High School and had only completed two years of community college, was troubled to learn that most students currently graduating from Newark public schools could not pass the New Jersey State Exit Exam. She was even more troubled to learn that many recent high school “graduates” could not read or write at even the eighth grade level and that school board administrators felt that this was acceptable. What was most enraging was that she saw that most of the parents (mostly single mothers) were either too intimidated or lacked necessary information to publicly challenge these conditions. Inundated with statistics that revealed the vulnerability of Black students and severity of the institutionalized problems that faced them in her home town, Roxanne felt as if she had no choice but to try to offer them something better through public service. Candidly telling the truth of how the school system was failing, and how school and district level administration was complicit in this failure, became the brunt of the “political work” that Roxanne did as a Newark school board member.

The more senior activists interviewed lamented the loss of Newark’s rich cultural legacy through lack of education about the history of Black cultural agency and resistance in Newark. Poet and singer Fatima Muhammad, who was born and raised in Newark, was quick to remind me that Black artistic expression in the form of jazz, R&B and blues found a home in Newark’s numerous nightclubs and bars. This, combined with the heavy inflow of southern Black culture, made Newark a home away from the imaginary home of “down South.” Fatima’s mother and grandfather were two of the first Black union organizers in Newark during the 1940’s. As a child, Fatima’s three-bedroom



flat became a home-place for the neighborhood because of her grandmother's willingness to mother other people's children. She wanted to make certain that her grandmother's legacy of community-building was specifically linked to her own political activism.

“She made clothes for the community. She made clothes, chair covers, darlies. She was a kind person, my grandmother. People in the community called her “ma” because she was always cooking, she would take kids off the street and tell them the need to come and take a bath. She would give em a bath and wash their hair.”

Fatima's family was also musically gifted. Her grandfather and grandmother played the guitar and the harmonica, and her grandmother used played blues tunes on the piano. These musical talents were often put on display in their many house-parties and at local Newark nightclubs. She understood this cultural production as “work.”

“Culture workers, the work they did was in culture and actually was their second job like when they came home from work on the weekends. We would have these parties. We had these pokers parties, and they would see dinners and little shots of liquor (which was illegal). But they had their means of doing so. We were supposed to be in bed, but it was too much fun to miss!”

These remembrances invoked more than the individualized pleasures of childhood, but also served as social commentary on the importance of artistic production for her understanding of family and community. These gatherings showcased the deep respect and admiration that communities members had for her parents as both activists and artists who were deeply committed to providing venues for Newark's Black social life—a life which was molded by her family's attachment to southern Black cultural mores. Newark was the closest thing to the “Carolina” that her grandmother often reminisced about. A life long resident of Newark, Fatima was self-educated and a self-acclaimed “cultural worker.” As the daughter and granddaughter of Black union

organizers, she sought to continue her family tradition of mobilizing Black workers. Throughout adulthood, Fatima pursued efforts to develop strong linkages between the labor movement and Black cultural agency. Later as the wife of an early founder of the Black arts movement, she continued to forge these bonds between her family and the larger Black working-class community as her “political work.” She understood that Newark was the place where her “political” work was rooted and was essential to the nourishment of these cultural bonds.

Even as tragedy struck the core of her existence, Fatima continued to direct her politics toward community activism. In 2003, after the murder of her lesbian-identified daughter, Fatima co-founded the Newark chapter of PFLAG (Parents and Families of Lesbian and Gays). Her deceased daughter, who worked as a girl’s basketball coach in Newark public schools, was killed when trying to help her sister leave her abusive husband. While Fatima continued to emphasize the importance of Black working class culture and activism—she eventually extended her political work to include gender-based violence and homophobia in the Black community. Even after experiencing such a heart-wrenching tragedy, Fatima viewed Newark as a place to be cherished, not a place to be condemned.

I didn’t chose it [Newark], my parents did. As an adult, I chose to stay because I like Newark. To this day, if I’m gone two weeks, I’m coming back home. I do not stay away too long. It’s a part of me. I miss the way the people are here, because Newark is a very Southern town. Most of the people here are from the south.

Fatima understood herself to be a “cultural worker,” and considered this one of the most important aspects of her “political” work. This consisted largely of sharing Newark’s Black cultural history through reading and performing poetry, volunteering in

after-school programs, and organizing and participating community meetings, cultural programs and/or rallies and demonstrations for a variety of issues specific to Black youth. All of these together comprised Fatima's "political work." Throughout her lifetime, she struggled to create many autonomous spaces where Black people's cultural and political activities could flourish, such as the African Free School, the Black Women's United Front, Community for a United Newark and other cultural nationalist, and/or socialist organizations. Despite these organizational efforts, for Fatima the most important component of all of her "political work" was telling the story of Black political and cultural resistance. The streets of the Central Ward represented a distant past that gave birth to musical legends who went on to inspire new genres of Black cultural artistry and musical expression. While the same bars on the same streets today might be viewed as isolated, dangerous eyesores for those passing through, for Fatima these were abandoned sites of Black cultural productivity and resistance. They represented unrealized potential for young Black Newarkers who were largely ignorant of the city's rich history. Thus Fatima continues to speak out and serve as community griot, telling the story of Newark Black cultural agency to all who were willing to listen.

For most of the activists interviewed, Newark was a "home" that was worth the individual sacrifices of extraordinary stores of time, energy and resources. The painful history of racial discrimination and violence was not as important as the myriad forms of Black political resistance. Much of the initial agency exhibited by these political activists had explicitly to do with offering a counter-narrative to empirical accounts, and a reality check to politicians who manage only to dwell upon Newark's strengths while ignoring the city's failure to provide some the basic amenities of a "liberal" society (employment

and opportunities for social and economic advancement). These women used their lives as testimony to both the hardships and resilience of the city. Growing up in Newark's public housing was not viewed a source of shame or embarrassment for Roxanne Hampton, rather it was viewed as source of pride because it concretely linked her existence to an earlier history of Black political resistance and empowerment. Living inside of Newark's geopolitical boundaries was, in a sense, being a part of the living history of the cityscapes by participating in contemporary "politics" by keeping the memory of African American's struggle for political power in Newark alive. For Fatima, who was born and raised in the city, Newark was a repository of Black cultural expression. The old bars that played jazz and the schools that birthed legends like Sarah Vaughan, Gloria Gaynor, and even contemporary hip hop and R & B legends like Queen Latifah, and Whitney Houston *as well as* the National Black and Latino Political Convention Movements made Newark's cityscape a much beloved "home" that she couldn't stand to be away from. In Aminata's, case it meant consciously foregoing the niceties of middle-class, suburban life to actively participate the cultural production of Blackness in a city that has arguably survived both the best and worse of urban American Black culture and politics.

### *Newark as a Site of Resistance*

The political subjectivity of Black women activists derives from a *habitus*, which shapes their agency, defines their "political work," and structures the spaces in which they enact their political practices (Bourdieu 1980).<sup>33</sup> "Political work," understood as

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<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu describes *habitus* as "the conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence which produce systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function

voluntary activity performed in the Central Ward, is rooted in patterns of racism, racialization, de-industrialization, and a yet-to-be revitalized political economy.

Although all of women featured in this study have spent a substantial amount of time in the Central Ward of Newark, some of them did not actually live in Newark. Some activists viewed the political boundaries of Newark as porous, expanding the informal political composition of the city to surrounding towns of East Orange, Irvington, Hillside and Maplewood. Affectively tied to Newark, some women activists sought housing elsewhere to ensure a better quality of life for their immediate families, particularly their children.

To capture the intensity of the affective ties mooring Black women activists in Newark, it is important to demystify notions of who is a “real” or “true” Newarker. Although territorialism can be fierce when politics is construed in terms of elections and local offices of governance, politics beyond the electoral sphere mutes the relevance of residence as an indicator of the “true” or “authentic” Newarker. The social, political and economic challenges confronting Newark are not confined to the geographic boundaries of the city. Moreover, some of the activists who have devoted their lives to addressing problems that directly impact Newark’s residents were born and raised in Newark, attended and graduated from Newark schools, but currently reside in adjacent

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as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu 1980, 53).” He goes on to clarify, “The *habitus*—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate presence. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensure the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within the world (Bourdieu 1980, 56).

communities. Although no longer residents within the city limits, these activist are deeply invested in Newark politics.

Deonna Williams, for example, is the founder and director of the Pillars of Peace Youth Ministry in Newark. Founded in 1995, Pillars of Peace provides mentoring to young people as strategy to prevent gang violence in Newark. Deonna was born in Newark in 1960, completed Sacred Earth Elementary School, graduated from Irvington High School and earned her bachelor's degree from Montclair State University. Deonna currently works as a property manager for a Newark Housing Authority apartment complex. When asked why she decided to make East Orange her home Deonna explained:

Well, because my husband was living there at the time. Move back to Newark...? Honestly, I have no desire to at this time. If something changes, I don't know. But at this time, I don't have a desire to actually move back to Newark, although I work very hard to improve Newark. Since I lived in Newark all my life, throughout my childhood, I just feel like since I work in Newark, because I come to church in Newark, and because most of my interactions are in Newark, my social activities are in Newark...but, I have not yet found that my social group of people have moved to the level I want to be at.

Deonna understood working in Newark and founding an anti-violence organization as an extension of her own personal history that began as a child growing up in Newark. She was wary of living in Newark because she did not feel that there were many people in the city who had comparable opportunities to those she had had. For Deonna, it was depressing to see so many of her friends and classmates “not making anything of themselves” because they were struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. Deonna was also reluctant to live amidst the violence and poverty that seemed to strip adults of the capacity to envision a different life for themselves. Yet Deonna wanted to

instill a different mindset in the young people with whom she interacted in apartment complex. Thus she launched her anti-violence organizing efforts. Living in East Orange provided a respite from the intensity of Newark, although this satellite town suffered similar problems with drugs and gang violence.

Jennifer Wells, a forty-two year old environmental organizer, was born in Newark, graduated from Weequahic High School, attended Rutgers University-Newark, and currently resides in the bordering town of Irvington. Her explanation of her residence choice exemplifies the emotional complexity of decisions about whether or not to reside in Newark. Jennifer grappled with attachment to primary and extended family and the community at large, and the desire to provide better quality public education for her children.

Currently, I live in Irvington, New Jersey which is right next door to the city of Newark. I moved there two years ago. The reason why I stayed in Newark so long was not only because of my political activism, but also because it was a safe place. I was a widow at thirty, well twenty nine. He [her husband] had cancer, and one of the things I realized was that my mother also lived in Newark.

As opposed to uprooting myself and moving out, we lived in a community where our families were. I realized a lot of my friends who went on to college decided "I'm not coming back to Newark." It didn't matter to them about family ties. But at that particular time I felt it was necessary to stay there with my mother. I think all that energy that I put into the city was good for me, but it was not a place where you can raise a family now and have your children be successful...

The educational system is very, very bad. You have more kids who drop out than are in school. Instead of creating the future leaders and making education a priority in the city, you're allowing our children to be functional illiterates and putting them in the streets to survive, knowing that they won't survive.

Knowing that the only alternative is to latch on to drugs and the crime and the gangs. So it's just not a place that I think my kids could make it. Definitely not.

Jennifer has an extensive portfolio of sustained civic and political work in the Central Ward. She served two terms on the Newark Board of Education, was a campaign manager of the first African American woman ever elected to the Newark City Council, and was one of the first local activists who organized around the issue of HIV/AIDS. She had first-hand experience with the ravages of the disease that plagued Newark's African American community. Three of her siblings died from AIDS. She managed to transform her personal pain into a strong motivation to do community work in the Central Ward.

Two of my brothers and my sisters died of AIDS. One got it heterosexually, my older brother was gay and he caught it from one of his friends. My sister was on drugs as well. Drug related. That had a tremendous [impact] on what my role was, and the support that I had to have for my mother. And again, that just lead to the activism and trying to educate the community about... you know, they're so many ills that our society—AIDS just run through our community. And, we really didn't hear much outcry from the community. At that particular time they wanted us to die. This was... '91, '92, and '89. Folks didn't want to talk about the AIDS and how it was destroying our community

As a result of these personal experiences with AIDS, Jennifer joined a newly formed organization called BLACK UP which consisted primarily of local Black leaders and remained an active member for over two years. Being part of BLACK UP grew out of a long career of activism, which began early in her high school years and continued throughout college into her adulthood. She persisted in various activist efforts, although some like BLACK UP were not particularly successful. "It was all about getting federal dollars for programs, but not coming up with some real solutions. But when you're going



through this stuff and your dealing with the hurt, you want to make sure that at least you're attaching yourself to something...to say, you know we need to stop this madness."

Throughout the 1990's Jennifer was heavily engaged in supporting the efforts of Black women to win office including Councilwomen Mildred Crump and Gayle Chaneyfeild Jenkins. Jennifer's "political work" consisted of developing campaign strategies, fundraising and mobilizing GOTV ("get out the vote") activities on behalf of her candidates. For Jennifer, it was important that she support the leadership efforts and political aspirations of other African American women, including herself. She eventually won a term on Newark's school board. After being defeated in her second reelection bid, caring for her ailing mother, adopting her deceased sister's daughter, surviving the death of her husband *and* caring for her own three school-aged children, Jennifer moved to Irvington to get away from the increasingly dangerous Central Ward neighborhoods. Jennifer understood that moving to another town would prevent her from seeking office in Newark, yet she still actively entertained a broader notion of political involvement in Newark.

I tell folks when they approach me, "why you not runnin' for office again?" [I answer] Because I don't need to any longer. That need for me to be an elected official in this city...I don't have that desire. And some of the reasons I don't have it is because I saw the current elected officials wanted to have you to conform to what they wanted a leader to be.

Family tragedy and a quest for personal well-being inclined Jennifer to move outside the city. This move also enabled her to challenge Newark's problems on a new front—community based, non-profit organizing. When she accepted the position as executive director of a Montclair-based environmental justice organization, it was on the

condition that confronting environmental racism would be a primary mandate for the organization during her tenure. This allowed her activism to remain connected to the lives of Black people in Newark and other urban areas throughout the state of New Jersey. In addition to environmental activism, Jennifer also served as the head of the local chapter of the National Black Women's Congress, which identifies and trains African American women to be community leaders, in both electoral and non-electoral political spheres. Her current political work links the prevalence of cancer in African American communities like Newark to the proliferation of air and water pollutants, the consumption of pesticides, and other dangerous chemicals contained in household cleaning products.

It's my responsibility to begin to engage the African American community. There's a disconnect among African Americans because crime is such an important issue, and trying to keep a job is important. But we tend to think the environment is going to last forever. It was easy for me, because I had the credibility of being a fighter. I collaborate with community organizations, churches and elected officials to get them to see the importance of the environment. So now when I come to the door and I'm talking about environmental issues that work to my advantage.

Jennifer's desire to make issues relevant to the larger African American community and to politicize connections between issues like public health, poverty and the environment were echoed by many of the activists interviewed. In fact, both the articulation of the interconnected of varying social issues and the complicity of local Black political elites in exacerbating these issues were emphasized. From the perspective of these activists, City Hall was an institution that frequently stood in the way of addressing the complexity of the issues they organized around. Indeed, the mayor and other elected and appointed officials were seen as obstacles to their own organizing efforts.

City hall, although controlled by a male African American majority, was not a place where Black women political activists were recruited, nurtured or otherwise supported. City Hall was perceived as a place where they might be able to wage a “fight” or struggle for the communities they envisioned as their own. For a select few, this fight was waged as an elected official, but more often it was waged by outsider activists grappling with larger social forces negatively impacting their families and the communities in which they lived, worked and organized. These activist women sought to educate a larger poor Black community in Newark about the conditions in which they existed, which were not of their own making, but could be alleviated by collective action. Imparting knowledge about the interconnectedness of various social issues and a sense of hope that change was possible was a major aspect of their “political work.”

#### *Assessing Newark’s Political Establishment*

Black women activists had negative perceptions of Newark’s political establishment. Most of the women interviewed suggested that the city’s local governance structure was non-democratic, hostile toward women, and ultimately non-responsive to the needs and demands of poor Black people in the city. During the time of this study, Sharpe James had been mayor for nearly twenty years. He ran the city council and municipal bureaucracy with an iron fist. Many of the women characterized the operation of City Hall as despotic, and even as a contemporary vestige of slavery. Three activists who had worked for the city of Newark made references to the Mayor coercing them to buying fundraising tickets by attaching them to city paychecks, and creating an environment that enforced a zero-tolerance policy toward challenges to the status quo.

When activists were asked to describe the political environment in Newark, one of the most powerful themes to emerge from their responses was that that “city hall” (conceived as an overwhelmingly powerful singular entity) actively curtailed community-based leadership of the post-civil rights generation. While the activists were knowledgeable about the complexities of municipal government and were aware of the varying competing interests vying for power within the city, what was unacceptable for them was the fact that in the end, it was always the poor people in Newark whose interests were neglected.

Many of the Black women activists both publicly supported and publicly criticized the incumbents. This was particularly true of those who served on the city council or were appointed to office by Mayor James. Jennifer Wells, who was elected to Newark’s school board during the heyday of its showdown with the New Jersey Department of Education, characterized City Hall as “a hostile environment. Let me see if I can get a better word. It’s...ah...it’s slavery but unfortunately the chains aren’t visible. But it’s outright slavery. You got a controlling population that’s just...it’s unbelievable. Until you’re in it and you know it...it’s *slavery*. Yeah, that’s the word I would use to describe it.”

Roxanne Hampton linked the political hierarchy in city governance to corruption.

“Non-democratic! Non-democratic. I would say that because, because of a lack of capacity to compete. I’m talking about M-O-N-E-Y. Money capacity. Money capacity--by way of you need money to do politics in Newark. You ain’t doing politics in here without no money. Period. The person with the most money usually wins, and it ain’t usually the best person.”

Renita Wiley, retired bus driver and co-founder of Newark Pride Alliance, a Newark based organization that challenges homophobia and heterosexism in Newark, had similarly negative impressions.

“In a word? In a word, the political environment in Newark... Hmph! I have *some* words: sad, cutthroat, poor leadership, hypocritical. Those are the words that come to mind. I don’t care that I say that. I want people to know what people are thinking out there about them. I want them to know they’re not getting a free pass.”

Olivia Taylor and Melanie Hendricks, both of whom had managed to win public office described the political environment somewhat differently.

Fifty-three year old legislator, Olivia Taylor explains:

“I call it fiefdoms, and everybody has their own individual or personal fiefdom. And everyone wants to perpetuate and maintain their own kingdom, and that gets to be more important than what is of communal benefit. I think that has a great deal to do with it. And I think that’s pretty much what is happening. Not subjugating what is most important for everyone collectively versus what is important to ME.”

Melanie Hendricks elaborates a similar theme:

“There are a lot of different power bases in Newark. I think the one nice thing about Newark is that you have a lot of folks who’ve been able to navigate the system. However, they’ve only navigated it for individual success instead of collective success.”

Words like “slavery,” “fiefdom,” “acquiescent” and “non-democratic” suggest that the women viewed themselves in opposition to the official political establishment, and that, in many ways, they felt intentionally and systematically excluded from power. Charlie Ann Grant, the first Black woman ever elected to Newark’s City Council and

long time volunteer and board member of the Integrity House Drug Rehabilitation Center, explained how even those working on the inside felt like outsiders.

“You have to understand my background. I have never been a part of the political structure. I’ve always been a maverick, that’s why they don’t like me. It’s okay with me because the things they do, I don’t do. So for me to describe...and this is not true of everyone, but it’s true of ninety-five percent of the political leadership in Newark has no interest in the people. Ninety five percent have no interest in the people.”

Grant’s observation that the Newark’s city government had “no interest” in the people was shared by most of the women interviewed.

The failure of the James Administration to develop and support leadership opportunities for Newark’s younger generation was the preeminent reason for such derogatory characterizations of the city. Nearly all of the women interviewed felt like they had been intentionally blocked from exercising leadership in the city. As a result, leadership training, development and recruitment were seen as critical to improving the city, and its Black population. Jennifer Wells explains:

The leadership isn’t committed to passing the baton to younger generations to allow them to be leaders. The major drawback in the city now, I and I feel like I’m apart of it, is that they didn’t want to accept young leaders coming back into the city. I mean, when I graduated there was a whole host of teachers that said, “you know, what remember where you came from.”

I believed in that so I came back to make a difference. [But] they didn’t want you to be a person who understood that we share responsibilities as elected official, and we need to advocate for policies that empower and assist residents of the city as opposed to you cutting deals that is beneficial to you and your family but at the expense of the future of the city.”

In Jennifer’s assessment, the James Administration had systematically wiped out the possibilities of nearly two generations of young leaders—not only because they had

prevented younger generations from developing and exercising leadership skills, but because under their leadership the public school system had more or less failed to sufficiently educate significant numbers of youth born and raised in Newark who could compete for public office. For many of these activists, there was a clear connection between the stunted progress of their own “political” aspirations and the overall plight of young African Americans who lived in the city.

Another theme consistently developed by the activists was that the political establishment harbored an attitude that was adverse to the interests and well-being of Newark’s predominantly African American population. Fatima Muhammad remarks:

“They should stop putting the burden back on the people. Well,” (she says mocking an imagined council person), “we got this program but nobody will come to it, we’re doing this and nobody knows about it.” Well, that’s your job, that’s *your* job. They [city council] don’t even let the people speak. We’re still fighting for the right to speak.”

Fatima, a leader of the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), which had assisted both Mayors Kenneth Gibson and Sharpe James throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s in their bids for the mayoral seat, expressed pure regret for CFUN’s role in generating the initial widespread Black community support for their candidacies. In her opinion, CFUN was ultimately betrayed because they had used the rhetorical strategy of Black unity to secure Black electoral victories, yet once in office, Black elected officials pursued political agendas that eroded Black community autonomy and failed to support community-based initiatives that CFUN had designed to improve the lives of poor Black people. While in the late sixties and seventies, community members were able to use the city council to press community agendas, in the 1980’s the council enacted strict time

limits and other rules, that prevented the larger community to use the city hall to force issues to be heard and publicly addressed by the city council. In Fatima's words:

“We knew they were negroes when we were doing it, but we underestimated them. Period. We thought that because they knew how we labored and how we used all of our contacts and all of our powers that when they got in office they wouldn't shut us out. And some of them wouldn't want to be seen with us in public. Some of that still goes on today. These are the people we put in office. That was our biggest mistake by putting these people in office. We should have run our own people, we should have run our own cadre.

Some of those people have been in office long enough to be trees. They should get out of there and let some of the young people, with new ideas [come in] and become concierges, consultants and resources for them!”

Fatima condemned both Kenneth Gibson and Sharpe James as “negroes” because, in her opinion, their interests slowly began to converge with those of white corporate stakeholders in Newark to the detriment of the larger poor and Black working class that still resided in the city. Drawing rhetoric from the Black nationalism of the late 1960s, Fatima both likened Black elected officials to those in the Black community who would do the bidding of the white masters and suggested that a contemporary return to a previous era of race relations when Black political unity was more or less non-existent, and white (and mostly Italian) politicians controlled the city's economic resources.

Few of the women described the political environment as explicitly patriarchal, yet their use of the metaphor of slavery suggests that the local governing regime was overtly complicit with white, racist patriarchal discourses and strategies that politically positioned Newarkers as “slaves” (i.e. having little or no autonomous political or economic power outside of the beneficence of liberal whites). The Black political elites who wielded power in Newark were either unwilling or unable to cultivate subsequent



generations of Black political leaders, even among their own. From Fatima's perspective, it was precisely the quest for middle-class Black respectability, embodied in the public personas of Mayor's Sharpe James and Kenneth Gibson, which ushered in a hegemonic local Black political machinery that eroded the opportunities for advancement for the majority of African Americans who continued to live in Newark in the generations after the riots. In the process "negroes" were transformed into *de facto* neo-slaves. CFUN's decision to support "respectable" negroes over more radical nationalists and "revolutionaries" contributed to the creation of a political machine that dismantled the newly developed, cultural nationalist and nationalist social networks and community organizations that had, ironically, catapulted the "negroes" into office.

Roxanne Hampton contrasted the leadership styles of Mayor Gibson and Mayor James in terms of their attitudes toward Black Newarker's, particularly how their disparate approaches shaped the political opportunities for young Black leaders in the city.

"When I was a kid it was about teaching and giving Black people information so that we could be powerful. And then [there's a] separate force of Blackness...don't teach them anything, don't give them anything. Don't let them be as powerful as they are because now, it's us that they're being powerful against.

If I had to distinguish both of them, Gibson would be the empowerment movement and Sharpe would be the oppressive movement. The people they knew, they came out [of] that administration, "we're gonna keep them. But everybody else who don't know, we ain't creatin' no more Black people in Newark who know something, because we're going to govern them. Let the poor stay poor." It became a class issue. By poor, I mean by way of financially poor, by way of educationally poor—by way of education—poor. Poor, by way of information.

And that's how I see it, as a kid whose been in this city for forty years.

Roxanne, who remembers the sense of possibilities that permeated Newark when Kenneth Gibson was initially elected to office, perceived each mayor as an embodiment of a larger strategy of Black political power and empowerment. From her perspective, the first strategy (what she calls “empowerment movement”) adopted by Kenneth Gibson consisted of a concerted effort to train and recruit Black leadership to secure positions of power within the city. The second strategy practiced by Sharpe James consisted of consolidating and conserving power for incumbent Black political elites, while intentionally neglecting to develop the leadership capacity of the subsequent generations of poor Blacks whose families did not or could not tangibly benefit from the ascension of Black elected officials and bureaucrats in the city. As a result, the huge fissure between the Black middle class and poor and working class Blacks in Newark was directly related to the lack of economic and political opportunity afforded to younger generations of African Americans by the older civil rights generation who had managed to secure political power.

For women like Roxanne Hampton, this was evidenced both in the failure to train and recruit new leaders to compete in electoral politics, as well as the failure of the city’s public institutions to secure educational, employment and other opportunities for social and economic advancement. The institutions most frequently mentioned throughout the interviews included the public school system, social service agencies, public housing authorities, and other municipal offices. Each of these were viewed as institutions that the city’s Black political elite wielded tremendous power over. As Tamara Brown, forty-four year old property manager for the housing complex, and member of the Essex County Anti-Violence Coalition, explains:

“I’ve seen where people are in positions of power to help make change, those attitudes have changed from ‘I really want to help’ to ‘I really want a paycheck.’ I’ve seen attitudes like that in the social service areas, and employment areas where the average low income person will have to go for some services. We stifle our own people and the residents of Newark. So when we have our attitudes set like that, you start finding a breakdown in all the systems like DYFS, the court system and all the major systems that should help the city grow.’

Jennifer Wells supported the 1995 New Jersey take over of Newark’s public school system for related reasons.

“When you look at the school system and have 47,000 students and you know that [so many of] these who have and will drop out. You have to support something other than what you have. If you are a true advocate for children, a true advocate for what is best for the community, then you can’t continue to look at this system and know that that it doesn’t work and say ‘I support the public school system.’ You can’t support it because by supporting it you’re hurting the whole community.”

Although the activists’ views varied widely about the validity of local control of public schools, *all* pointed toward the Newark school system as a failed institution—controlled by the city—that systematically eroded the leadership potential of many (if not most) Black youth who matriculated through it. It is clear from these responses that these activists wanted to make the power differentials between Newark’s political establishment and the larger Newark population explicit. Their testimony emphasized that the larger Black community in Newark was not adequately represented just because the political leadership was predominantly African American. In fact, many argued that the political establishment itself made decisions that systematically hampered the possibility that young people would have a vested interest in the city. The predominantly African American governance structure was viewed as a corrupt handmaiden for wealthy

white interests that resided outside of the city. Referring to Mayor Sharpe James, Charlie Ann Grant asked “How many people you know go into office as a high school basketball coach and leave a multi-millionaire?” To demonstrate how the James Administration served the interests of affluent whites, Grant cited the city’s “redevelopment” plan, which highlighted the economic vulnerability and relative powerlessness of Black Newarkers.

I’m sure you’ve been reading about this [hockey] arena. All you have to do is look at the Bear’s Stadium. That stadium was supposed to solve the economic and employment problems of Newark. There were going to be jobs, jobs, jobs for Newarkers. Ninety percent of the jobs! And I testify, 90 percent of the jobs for Newarkers were sweeping the floors. Ninety percent were cleaning the toilets, Ninety percent selling the hot dogs. We don’t own the naming rights, the concessions, the ticket sales. So what’s ninety percent of menial positions?

Activists described the process of revitalization as “selling the city to white folks” or “giving the city away” because developers, as well as the largest economic institutions in the city, were given tax breaks and/or did not provide any real economic relief to Newark’s poorly skilled workforce. Similarly, many activists reasoned that most Black Newarkers were not able to participate in the consumption of Newark’s “cultural renaissance” because they simply could not afford to. The activists sought to create public awareness about this through their own respective organizations, by attending community meetings, raising these issues in church, telling their stories about Newark in national and international conferences venues that they themselves helped to organize, and by plainly talking to Newark’s youth in a variety of settings.

In contrast to corrupt local government officials, these women used their personal organizational contacts, social networks, and travels to educate people about the extant conditions among poor Black in Newark, their “community.” Their narratives criticized

elected officials as local appendages of a racial state that constrained political opportunities. Identifying and contesting these constraints became a hallmark of their political agency. Indeed, much of their “political work” involved creating social capital that could be used to contest the existing power hierarchy. They sought to create “political spaces” where their stories about the city could be told and where alternative forms of political agency could be actualized. While many of the women interviewed held ambitions for public office, they insisted that they sought office as a means to empower economically and socially disadvantaged Black families.

*Gendered Manifestations of Contemporary Black Nationalism and Black Women’s Political Agency*

Some of themes that have emerged from this discussion of Black female political agency in Newark are strongly reminiscent of what Collins (2006) has called the “civil religion” of Afrocentricity. Indeed, many of the “political” women featured in this chapter had undergone key personal “conversion” processes which are indicative of Black nationalists “rites of passage” for community activists. Both Aminata and Fatima had changed their names after intensive political education about U.S. Black political experience in Black nationalist organizations. Both women had sacrificed considerable personal resources to organize or implement prominent Black nationalist programs. For Fatima this process occurred in the early 1960’s. For Aminata, this process occurred a full thirty years later. Both women refrained from exclusively labeling themselves as nationalist, however. As Aminata explains:

I don’t identify myself as “nationalist” even though that is also part of my education, my understanding of who I am. I started out very nationalist, and I still care about those issues, but I’ve been forced to examine the day-to-day issues more and more. Not

that police brutality doesn't affect people, but there has been an obvious shift to me, in what I identify. In urban situations, education and drugs and mental well being are a concern. Not just in Newark but throughout the country and wherever there are Black people!

Although her activism to secure the release of former Black Panther/Black Liberation Army political prisoners Sundiata Acoli and Assata Shakur is suggestive of a politics deeply influenced by the most radical tenets of revolutionary Black nationalism, Aminata still refuses to place her politics "in a box." Part of her discontent with Black nationalist organizations for which she had organized numerous public campaigns, was the failure to assume a more 'holistic' approach to community healing and transformation. "Softer" issues like drug addiction, gender-based violence and the emotional and mental health of the "Black family" were deemed apolitical and/or "impossible to organize around" by Aminata's male comrades in the New Black Panther Party. Aminata, like other women interviewed, still utilized elements of Black nationalism to make sense of contemporary power relations within the Black community; nonetheless, they also acknowledged the limitations of Black nationalism to address the everyday needs of Black Newarkers in contemporary times—especially the need to build solidarity among other people of color in urban communities in order to challenge extant racial hierarchies.

When asked whether or not she considered herself a nationalist, Fatima Muhammad candidly responded:

"No. I was one and didn't like it. It was too narrow. Any nationalist program always ends up in a very small place. And I love freedom and I like the whole world, and that's why I—I don't want to be restricted. Maya [Angelou] talks about "I know why the caged bird sings, a sweet and soulful song." I don't want to be the caged bird. Nationalists, that's what they do. They don't even have

Latinos around, and no Asians nowhere (*God forbid!*), and won't speak of white women who are progressive. You can't move. You can't do anything except live in this little narrow place."

Fatima's critique of nationalism was complicated by her adamant position on the need to build community-controlled institutions in predominantly Black political space. This sentiment was particularly evident in her fierce argument in support of community-control of Newark public schools. Although Fatima had started an independent African Free School nearly twenty years earlier, she eventually gave up this enterprise. The Free School's mission was to educate predominantly working class and increasingly economically vulnerable Black families in Newark, yet it also had to rely on this same population as a means of financial support. This, combined with the questionable loyalty of Black political elites in the James Administration, made the Free School increasingly untenable as an institution to educate a large number of Black children. When presented with the decision to cultivate an increasingly exclusive institution that relied upon patronage from middle and upper-class Blacks or to use her social and political capital to support the public school system, Fatima supported the latter. Newark public schools became a critical site of resistance. Fatima waged campaigns to have Swahili taught in the public school system; she also waged successful campaigns to change names of the schools to reflect history. Robert Treat School became Marcus E. Garvey School. Others schools were named after figures like Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman. These actions, she hoped, would ensure that Newark's role in Black cultural production was preserved and passed on from generation to generation. The rhetoric of "community control" while reminiscent of earlier articulations of Black nationalism, was actually intended to convey the idea of poor *and* Black, rather than exclusively Black, political solidarity and

empowerment. In Fatima's mind, the best way to secure an education for poor Black youth was through the guarantee of free, public education. The struggle for poor Black political empowerment was therefore a fight for progressive Black people to transform the public school curriculum in Newark into one that empowered Black children with a positive sense of self, through Black cultural education and affinity. This strategy, however, should not be mistaken as an essentialist position.

“I’m really getting a little fed up with people who now are almost sounding like they’re like they come from Africa, like their “pure.” You’re beginning to sound like someone else who people don’t like [Black folks]. I think these are conservative Blacks, they’re conservative Blacks who believe that they would rather go back to Africa, rather than stay here in fight for justice. They would rather go worship kings and queens, rather than fight for justice in the United States. “My *queen* (she laughs, mocking another woman)! I told a woman the other day, I don’t want to be your queen, but I’ll be your friend.”

For Fatima, contemporary vestiges of Black cultural nationalism was actually more likely to exacerbate class and cultural divisions among African Americans rather than deliver a liberatory alternative to Black social, cultural marginality in Black urban centers. The cultural production of Blackness was linked to social justice work rather than uni-dimensional nationalist symbolism. Social justice and equality for all people, especially socially alienated Black youth, was of utmost importance to her political subjectivity.

Gendered power differentials surfaced in the narratives offered by the women activists as a source of discontent and aggravation, rather than as a source of disempowerment. For these activists, it made much more sense to target “the establishment,” “city hall” “the mayor” or “the men” rather than personify any particular Black male (other than the mayor) as an oppressor. One of the major obstacles that



activists faced in attempting to transform the specific problems that they experienced “as Black women” into “issues” that the community needed to address, however, was gendered power relations in predominantly Black political spaces. Even issues like breast cancer, child care, and domestic and gender-based violence were difficult to construct as “community” issues. Fatima discussed her hesitance to address what she called “women’s rights” and “gay and lesbian rights” in the years before her daughter was murdered in 2003,

“They wouldn’t touch women’s rights, and gay and lesbian rights because they come under attack. And the attack is, “how you gone talk about women, what about the war, and what about this” I say, what about it? You got women in the armed forces now. They’re dying as well. You know, and it’s always been that way. If you look at the history of slavery, if you go to slavery to as we fight today. Even as we talk about Coretta King. They never give women the credit that they’re actually due in the context of any organization or even any movement really. They have to be dead or they have to be old.”

This problem was the same for grassroots activists, potential office seekers and elected officials. The issues that they felt most passionate about were often rendered invisible in the context of larger “issues facing the community.” This was particularly true concerning the issue of cultivating autonomous Black female political power. While few of the activists described themselves as being invisible, many of their comments emphasized the hegemony of exclusive “Black community” political agenda dictated by powerful Black male political elites.

Although she had been included in predominantly Black male organizations, Aminata still felt tokenized and marginal when it came to decision-making and establishing the direction of the political programs in which she participated. Describing her experiences with the New Black Panther Party, she explains.

“I think they gave me the position of Minister of Education because I was a woman. I think they did feel like it was a position that I could do justice to, but they kind of put on the pedestal the fact that I was a woman, “we have *woman* [her emphasis] as our minister of education.” But it wasn’t really a position of power or influence. It was more for just like show. At the same time when I would try to interject points about how the organization should consider different directions or ideas they were beyond resistant. They just totally ignored me. Or they would just give me the shrug off.”

Organizing the National Hip Hop Political Convention, she felt similarly marginal, but at least she had room to raise the point of subtle gender inequities.

“During the National Hip Hop Political Convention, I definitely, I did feel it in certain cases, but the difference is [that] I felt it I addressed it. They could deny it, but I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t excluded. Initially my goal in reaching out to become a part of the National Hip Hop Convention was to become a part of the New Jersey Local organizing committee, but someone told me that the convention was going on, you know.

I asked about the meetings and he said, the next meeting is on such and such a date, and the day before I planned to go the meeting I got a phone call and the person said, “We really could use your help, I don’t know why I didn’t call you before, but I really do think you could help organize the workshops for the convention.” I said, “oh that’s so funny because I was actually about to come down to the New Jersey organizing committee meeting tomorrow.” And the person said, “Oh you don’t have to worry about that. That’s nothing, let’s get together next week and I’ll bring you some information about it.” And that, that’s I didn’t know how to feel about that.”

Although these feelings of exclusion nagged Aminata, generally she was satisfied with having a role to play. She felt that these problems were not sufficiently important to deter her from being involved in the convention, which would afford her the opportunity to meet and work with numerous progressive Black young activists and students. In order to be part of a larger struggle for racial and economic justice, she believed she had to be

willing to engage in intra-racial political debates. For Aminata, walking away was a cop out.

“I’m of the position, if you don’t like how something is going, you stay and you fight for your inclusion until you’re happy. I think we have to dissect that [gender inequality], I think we have to talk more, we have to be able to have that discussion. And not just have that discussion, but to make a commitment. To make sure that things are equal, this is the way we have to do things. I don’t think that folks should point fingers and say, well you should have did it this way, or you should have ... I think we just have to make commitments and promises to each other.”

From Aminata’s perspective, it was important to stay and fight, and not walk away, because in all likelihood the convention would have happened regardless of her participation but in a limited fashion. She connected the struggle for gender equality within the convention as a larger part of the struggle for Black self-determination. The decision to stay and fight was linked to her own struggle to create integrity where it was found lacking. Her sense of commitment to the convention, and the need to be able to create a space where Black men and women could make and fulfill promises to each other, was resonant element of political subjectivity, and she realized, an increasingly important component to her political work.

Within predominantly African American urban communities like Newark, Afrocentric community centers like the one founded by Malika Wilcox, executive director of Women in Support of the Million Man March, serve as an oasis for an often romanticized, but still crucial element of Black cultural identity. In Malika’s center, founded and administrated by Black women, after school programs, African dance and drumming, “African Ball,” the annual trip back to Africa serve as more than heteronormative cultural symbols. They provide a space where the concept of Black self-

expression, achievement and the possibilities of mutual accountability and self-respect between Blacks could be considered. Black gays and lesbians also made use of these spaces to feel a sense of connectedness to Black culture, often fully participating in some aspects of the programming. Women like Aminata, Malika, and Fatima were all attached to the Black aesthetic celebrated by Black cultural nationalism and Afrocentrism, however the scope of these women's "politics" surpassed the narrow frames of a patriarchal nationalist programs that rose to prominence in the 1960's and 70's, and resurged in the 1990's. In fact, one of the most important elements of these activists' subjectivity was their ability to seize the more effective components of Black cultural agency while transcending its limitations. Each of these woman articulated a need for personal integrity and transcendence among Black men, women and children, which required that they not simply walk away because of the obvious inequalities in power between Black men and women. Yet these commitments to working within Black communities, coexist with gender relations that prevent the full realization of Black women's politics in those communities. These activists "politics" are often invisible precisely because it is impossible for them to be translated into "sound policy." In this sense, Black patriarchy, is still well and alive and proves to be extremely detrimental to the larger Black community—especially poor Blacks who are most likely to benefit from a politics not solely restricted to political agendas that are dictated by Black male elites. Black women's efforts to contest exclusionary gender dynamics including sexist attitudes, tokenism and women's marginality within intra-race political forums then must be understood as political behavior. They are not trying to influence the government, but because they are actively seeking to transform oppressive gender attitudes and practices

within the African American community. These women activists are known as “political” within the Central Ward of Newark, not only because they challenge extant race-based inequalities in urban communities, but because they also challenge intra-racial exclusionary practices. They struggle on multiple fronts.

In 2000, Sheila Radford-Hill argued that Black female involvement in community-based organizations had declined. I beg to differ. This analysis suggests that Black female political involvement in communities continues to be vibrant, but it is overshadowed by the platforms and agendas of Black male political elites, upon whom they must rely to support their organizations in predominantly African American cities. While many of the activists interviewed were not necessarily eager to seize the spotlight, they played integral roles in organizations that held considerable influence in their communities. Both the presence and contributions of these activists boosted the legitimacy of Black male elected officials and their perceived ties to a larger Black public sphere. I asked Charlie Ann Grant, a founder and board member of Integrity House Drug Rehabilitation Center, what strategies she uses in her own political work and she responded,

“Well I would have a Sunday morning dates with a certain politician. I would visit some Black churches with him almost every Sunday, give or take one or two. So we coined the phrase, I was his Sunday morning date. This is why he did so well in his election because I took him by hand to these churches. I don’t go to these churches just during election time, I tell people I need to go to church everyday. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to St. James, there’s a noonday service, but it’s a powerhouse!”

Grant viewed this as an important political strategy that demonstrated her support for certain politicians, even as she struggled against sexist attitudes directed toward her by other Black male elites. While challenging some sexist practices in Newark

community politics, she also actively supported both young Black men and women who were eager to lead, by providing opportunities to interact with political elites. This was only one aspect of her community work. Grant frequently used her position as a board member of Integrity House to do various forms of outreach for community members, especially young mothers struggling with addiction. Integrity served as a space where a variety of other kinds of community initiatives with partnering organizations and local activists. Of particular importance for Charlie Ann, was her ability to use her contacts and relationship to improve the self-esteem and employment prospects of recovering addicts by sponsoring trips to conferences, collecting clothing donations from professional women that can be used for interviews for women seeking employment, and even hosting sleepover at her home. The point of this work for Grant, was to improve women's self-esteem by exposing them to "Black women just like them" who had gone on to be successful. "It gives you confidence, class. You know things, like this."

Whether or not they had ever identified as a nationalist, all twenty-nine women interviewed reported feeling "marginalized, tokenized, alienated, or undermined" when going about their political work. It should be emphasized however, that almost all these women rejected the idea that they were "victimized," nor did specifically identify Black male politicians as their oppressors. Importantly, activists frequently reported instance of being intentionally shut out of key decision-making by not being told the time and locations of important meetings or being assigned tasks that made it virtually impossible to directly challenge political agendas. As Jennifer Wells, who ran the campaign for Councilwoman Mildred Crump in 1986 explained:

We were always undermined. I mean, I saw it more so in the campaign when Crump ran for mayor against Sharpe, and

that's when I ran at large [for city council]. Particularly in that race, she was undermined when she ran in the mayor's race four years later. And people didn't . . . they just weren't ready for a female to be the mayor. That was it. You had people in positions. . . like the young democrats gave a forum. The guy who was heading the young democrats worked for the mayor. These people wouldn't tell us where the forum was. So now Crump is a candidate for mayor [and] he's disrespectful to her. The rules change for Sharpe. He talks longer. I mean, it was just crazy.

Even after many embarrassing instances of being shut out by male elites, Jennifer Wells continued her efforts to train, recruit and support local Black women politicians. During Mildred Crump's campaign, she also targeted young Black men to take part, and tried her best to include them in the campaign. In her opinion, they were just as much a victim of the patriarchy represented by Mayor James as were politically disenfranchised Black women.

“There were predominantly women who came out to support her [Crump]. But we had men in key positions. And all of the police officers, and we made sure they were young African American men, because again, you want to send another kind of message. That we need the young men engaged in this political process. But as you know, the forms, I made sure she had young Black men driving her around taking her to forums. But I wanted people to see that there was this generational difference, and that there was a group of young folks who wanted her in this position. So all of our upfront team, all of them were young and most of them were male.”

The national press has portrayed Cory Booker's successful bid for the Mayor's office as the beginning of a new era in Newark. Keisha Simpson, a twenty-seven year old community organizer who focuses on issues of community economic development and affordable housing, has questioned whether this change will usher in a new era in gender relations. Her experiences working on the 2004 and 2005 community operations campaign for Cory Booker suggest the persistence of gendered power imbalances.

“When I was working with Cory’s last campaign, they had mainly men at the top. They would approach building the campaign base very differently, than most of the women I interacted with. They were interested in having all these meetings with people sitting around the room talking about how many registration forms we would have to bring in at any given time.

How many bodies we would need to have at the next event? How many turkeys we would have to give out? How many toys would we have to give out at Christmas? In my mind, you do that when you’re in a position of power. You do that because you think, ‘I’m sitting at the top of the hill. Let me throw down these little biscuits to the folks down the hill. It’s a total different orientation than when you’re looking at it from the bottom.’”

Keisha expressed reservations that political mobilizations concerned solely by instrumental outcomes would bring forth systemic change. For her, community mobilizations were more than a demonstration of political power. They should be viewed as a signifier of shifting consciousnesses, shifting thought patterns and different behaviors for a specified group of people. Because Black women were “at the bottom and trying to work our way up,” Keisha believed they approached politics differently.

“For me, it’s like, let me make sure that the contact that I made with this person is a lasting contact. I don’t care about getting fifty, because those fifty might be superficial and false. I would much rather have the ten that I know will actually show up, and that I can actually bring along to do other things. So, if I was to hand out toys, let me be sure that the toys get to the kids who actually need them, so that people will associate the effort with the campaign. Not so I can say, ‘I gave out such and such numbers of toys.’ You know, what’s the lasting impact?”

Like the other activists interviewed, Keisha emphasizes the importance of cultivating lasting relationships with community members that can be used at later dates to further mobilize targeted communities. Political interaction with members of the community is designed to cultivate social capital that will play a long term role in



community organizing. Rather than identifying “supporters,” the politics of the women interviewed seemed geared toward identifying and cultivating the leadership potential of others. Whether operating on the terrain of Black cultural production, civic and electoral participation, or in the oppositional counter culture of “hip hop,” Black women activists sought to initiate community programs that foster the actualization of leadership potential within the community, especially among young people from economic and socially marginal urban communities.

Black women’s political agency can be used to reinforce and consolidate the power of Black political elites or to challenge that power and the underlying gender ideology that supports it. To explore the agency of women who explicitly attempt to challenge hegemonic Black gender ideology embodied by Black male political elites by advocating for anti-racist, anti-sexist alternatives, the next two chapters investigate Black women activists’ role in two political mobilizations in Newark: the mobilizations that took place after the violent death of Sakia Gunn in March of 2003 and the mobilizations that took place during the National Hip Hop Political Convention in June of 2004. Tracking the cultivation and flow of Black women’s social capital, I examine the conditions under which Black women’s social capital is activated and allowed to flourish and the conditions that stifle social capital. I am particularly interested in the role that scale plays in the enabling and constraining of Black women’s “politics.” Thus I investigate how “hegemonic Black gender ideology” (Collins 2005) effects the distribution, enactment and realization of Black women’s political power at different levels of scale.

## ***Chapter 5***

### **Mobilizing against Murder: The Politics of the Life and Death of Sakia Gunn**

On May 11, 2003 Sakia Gunn was stabbed by a 29 year old Black man named Richard McCollough. Sakia Gunn was a teenage girl who defied the sexual and gender norms of an overwhelming hetero-normative, predominantly Black community in Newark. Not only was Sakia Gunn “out” as a lesbian in her preteen years, but the “ag” (aggressive) presentation of her sexual identity, evidenced by her preference for baggy blue jeans, double XL white t-shirts, and a defiant bandana tied around her closely cropped afro, marked her as a product of Newark’s inner city subculture generally coded as “gang-related.” The outward appearance of bravado did not diminish the vulnerability of a Black girl walking through the Central Ward’s downtown streets after 3:00 a.m. The consequences of the double transgression of publicly acting on same-sex desires and defying the conventional, hetero-normative sexual scripts of Black femininity entailed cat-calls, jeers and, eventually, a deadly encounter with Newark street violence. On the corner of Broad and Market, along the well-trodden path from Penn Station to the bus stop, the unmanned, “24-hour” police booth left Sakia and her girlfriends unprotected. Flatly refusing the advances of the adult men in the car on the otherwise isolated streets resulted in Sakia’s stabbing. She bled to death on the way to the hospital.

Since Sakia’s murder, lesbian and gay activists across the United States have seized her death as an opportunity to politicize the physical threat posed by unchecked homophobia and heterosexism in predominantly African American communities.

Newark's larger community politicized Sakia's death as a hate crime against gays and lesbians. Richard McCollough was the first person in Newark ever to be charged with a "bias crime." The murder of a Black teenage girl in Newark did not galvanize the widespread outpouring of sympathy across white America occasioned by murder of Matthew Shepard (Pearson 2004); nonetheless, many participants in the forums, events, memorials and newly created local organizations that materialized after her death represented this tragedy as a manifestation of bigotry, exacerbated by patriarchal attitudes that permeated Newark's Black community. Politicizing Sakia's death as an act of misogynist violence against a Black girl from Newark's Central Ward was far more difficult within the dominant ideological apparatuses operating in the city. For Black lesbian and gay activists in the Newark, the creation of "safe" spaces for young lesbian, gay and bisexual and transsexual Black people entailed confronting the issues of poverty and marginality that activists argued also characterized the lives of most Black youth in the city. It also meant challenging homophobic attitudes among predominantly African American teachers, administrators, and local municipal officers. In short, Black women's LGBT activism in Newark had to directly confront the prerogatives of the state.

The state, embodied by local governance structures including the Newark's Municipal Council, police department, and public school administration, had to contend with demands of an unlikely group of claims makers: a loosely identified network of African American (and mostly lesbian) LGBT activists and socially ostracized teenagers who fiercely rebuked Black petit bourgeois social norms and mores that dictated the political agenda of the city. This chapter examines the convergence of various social networks including poor Black gay and lesbian teenagers, working and middle class

Black LGBT activists, and LGBT activist clergy to create and use social capital in Newark to confront Black LGBT marginality. The life and the death of Sakia Gunn presents a rare occasion to document how various local, predominantly Black social networks and organizations worked separately and together to make sense of and respond to the fifteen year old girl's murder. Though an analysis of Sakia's death, the local mobilizations and community responses to her death, and the meanings that different local and national LGBT organizations attributed to her death, I explore the politics surrounding this instance of violence directed against a Black girl.

### *Social Capital and Black Women's Political Agency*

Social capital typically refers to those features of social organization that enhance the possibility of cooperation and collective social action (Putnam 1993, 2000). Looking beyond the resources and capacities of individuals, social capital directs attention toward the common resources and capacities of communities made up of complex networks of human relationships. Some basic features of social capital include trust, rapport, and reliable means to interact and demonstrate positive norms of reciprocity with other community members. In principle, the mobilization of sufficient stores of social capital enable community members to share critical information within and across groups with contending interests and worldviews to address relevant social justice issues.

Historical studies of Black women's associations and rights-based activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggest that Black women activists have made considerable use of social capital—across a variety of social networks—to mobilize African American communities to confront the intersecting issues of racism and poverty

in American cities and in the rural south (Terbogg Penn 1998, Gray White 1999, Williams 2004, Collier-Thomas 2001). The mobilizations that occurred in Newark after Sakia Gunn's death provides an opportunity to analyze the contemporary use of social capital in an urban community by African American women—specifically African American female LGBT activists. They also provide an opportunity to examine how larger systems of power at various scalar levels enable and hinder the use and application of communal stores of social capital, particularly in a case that challenges the practices, protocols, and cultural norms and ideologies of local intervening institutions (Cohen 2001). These intervening institutions include but are not limited to local governance structures, churches, and even well established community-based organizations that rigidly adhere to predetermined conceptions of community. A close examination of Black female activists' agency in the face of mutually constitutive structures of power at different levels of scale affords a fuller grasp of how intersectionality shapes African American women's "politics" on the ground.

Critical intersectional sites in this case study include Black male patriarchy within the community, Black women's political practices, and representations of sexuality and victimization. These intersections provide the context for the Black LGBT mobilizations after Sakia's Gunn death, which link the subjectivity of the Newark Black LGBT activists to the poverty and marginality that structure the lives of those in the Central Ward.

Understanding how Sakia's murder was politicized by local activists requires attention to the politics of scale. While some activists sought to mobilize local communities, others tried to garner the attention of a larger, national community of LGBT activists. Local activists deployed different aspects of Sakia's (known) identity to

make her death relevant to disparate political communities: the *local*, predominantly Black communities in Newark and the *regional* and *national*, predominantly white LGBT communities. In mobilizing various social networks to politicize Sakia's death, Black women activists attributed contested meanings to her death. Thus this chapter examines (1) the activists from the Newark Pride Alliance, Liberation in Truth Unity Church and other local organizations who took positive action after her death; (2) Sakia Gunn and the narrative and interpretative struggles about the political meaning of her life that emerged in the wake of her death, (3) the political framework in which key decisions were both made and *not* made by key local intervening institutions. An investigation of the agency exhibited by Newark Pride Alliance, Liberation in Truth Unity Church and a loose-knit coalition of anti-violence activists in Newark will help to elucidate how scale served to boost both the legitimacy and efficacy of Black women's political agency, while it simultaneously impeded the possibilities of social transformation locally.

### *The Politics of Space and Scale*

The Newark Pride Alliance (NPA) was founded by Renita Wiley and James Quedle in June 2003 in the aftermath of Sakia Gunn's murder. The original mission of NPA was straightforward: "NPA seeks to make Newark a city to be proud of and a city to be proud in, a city safe for all it's people: gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian and trans-gendered."<sup>34</sup> One of the original objectives of NPA was to build a community center that catered to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered youth through the creation of an "Ags and Femmes" Sakia Gunn Memorial Fund. In the months following Sakia's death, local activists began lobbying state and local officials for stronger anti-

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<sup>34</sup> Organizational website.

violence measures to protect lesbian, gay and trans-gendered youth in public schools.

NPA also began building community support for the creation of a community center for Black lesbian and gay youth. They were hopeful that such a center could generate awareness about “bigotry, homophobia, hatred and racism” that activists argued permeated Newark’s premiere African American institutions: the public school system, the municipal government, and predominantly Black churches.

Immediately following Sakia’s murder, founding NPA member and longtime activist with the New Jersey Stonewall Democrats Renita Wiley experienced marked differences between the reactions to the murder in the local community and in national and international communities of LGBT activists.

“She was murdered early Sunday morning. I found out about it on Tuesday. That day I sent an email that went out all around the country and overseas. We got condolences from all around the country and the world, but we didn’t get condolences from right here in this city, from our community. Our community was in crisis then. We suffered and nobody cared. There were some people who cared, but it just wasn’t enough.”

Renita had long been active in conventional and non-conventional Newark politics. In 1992, she was elected leader of the 28<sup>th</sup> district in the Central Ward. As a neighborhood volunteer for the Democratic Party, Renita managed to build important relationships with other local civic activists, but it was only when she began her political work with the Stonewall Democrats that she developed a “passion for politics.” After attending a conference hosted by the National Stonewall Democratic Foundation, she became enthralled by the creativity and excitement of their organizing tactics. “I just loved watching these folks do their thing at these meetings, and the way they took care of business. I was like, ‘wow, this is great!’” Though she had not yet publicly come out as a lesbian, Renita was fascinated by the work that (mostly white) lesbian and gay activists

were doing to bring LGBT issues to the Democratic National Committee's political platform. The Stonewall workshops and the organizing strategies served as a source of inspiration for Renita. With support of her Newark-based male mentor and friend and her newfound community of support, Renita came out to her family and colleagues and spent four years working with the newly formed National Stonewall Democrats. Proving her self an ambitious, hardworking, and charismatic organizer, Renita went on to found the New Jersey chapter of the Stonewall Democrats.

After four years of sustained LGBT activism with Stonewall, Renita resigned her post due to what she perceived as a troubling gap between the Stonewall's rhetoric of multiculturalism and their *de facto* exclusionary political strategies which tended to relegate the issues concerning poor people of color to the bottom of their agenda.

“I gave it up because I had to deal with all the isms—white racism, the sexism, the classism that existed in the white gay and lesbian community. I had to deal with that and...it was not easy. When I turned it over I said, ‘You guys may have a better time at this because the white folks will probably give you money. They wouldn’t give me any money. After awhile I just said, “screw y’all” I’m going to work with my own people. They liked what I was doing, but they did not want to give me any money to help me do what I was doing. And there were a lot of people talking the talk about Black folks being at the table, but they weren’t doing the things [needed] to make it happen.”

From Renita's perspective, Stonewall's verbal pledges of LGBT solidarity was insufficient to address the chronic problems facing Black LGBT population in Newark, the community that she identified as her own. While Renita respected the creative organizing tactics that enabled white lesbian and gay activists to raise money and develop programming nationally, it was much more difficult to use similar tactics locally in Newark. One of the basic problems that Renita confronted was that there was very little money to be raised locally due to the economic vulnerability to her target population.



Moreover, the heavy reliance on the internet and mass mailings to raise money and invite people to meetings was not a viable strategy locally. For Renita, to continue to exert enormous amounts of energy regionally and nationally with Stonewall as a “token Black lesbian in leadership” meant robbing Newark of her considerable political resources.

Renita felt that she was unable to translate her activism with the Stonewall into meaningful community programming for Black gays and lesbians in Newark when most of her personal resources were working to benefit the larger, predominantly white middle class LGBT organization. Renita managed to become a nationally respected Black LGBT activist and a Democratic party activist in northern New Jersey. She also managed to maintain connections with many national LGBT organizations even after she was no longer politically active with Stonewall.

When Renita read about Sakia’s fate in the *Star-Ledger*, she was first inclined to send out mass emails to her regional and national contacts, many of whom belonged to both regional and national LGBT organizations. Renita used her national stature with the Stonewall Democrats to politicize Sakia’s death among national LGBT organizations. This appeal to national organizations proved effective, as several regional LGBT organizations sent their respective representatives to Newark to cover the story, and immediately began publishing information about the circumstances surrounding Sakia’s death on their organizational websites. While Renita was grateful for the initial, predictable displays of support by these organizations, she developed reservations about the sincerity of this support after Sakia’s murder had gained some level of regional and national attention. Renita was particularly concerned that the only reason Sakia’s death mattered to these national organizations was because she was *lesbian*. The other

circumstances surrounding her murder—poverty, poor policing, and the social violence that faced Black lesbian and gay youth, which would eventually become the basis of Black LGBT local organizing efforts—continued to be ignored.

“When I went among white gays and lesbians I saw what they had, I saw how they did things. I wanted what they had here in Newark for my people. But I couldn’t get them to bring that here. It wasn’t until the murder of Sakia Gunn, that they began to say, ‘Oh there is a problem in Newark.’ Had they come when I first asked them to come, Sakia may not have been murdered. That’s one of my issues with them.”

Despite her growing reservations about the racial politics of national LGBT organizations, Renita’s stature within white lesbian and gay organizations played a crucial role in generating initial support for the creation of Newark Pride Alliance. Her influence helped motivate Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to start a local chapter in the aftermath of Sakia’s death. For a while, this predominantly white organization served as a bridge between Black LGBT activists and other community leaders like Aminata Obadele and Amiri Baraka who had recently lost their lesbian daughter in an act of domestic violence.<sup>35</sup> PFLAG’s support was solicited by explicitly framing Sakia’s death as a hate crime against a young Black lesbian. This framing, while effective, reflects only a partial understanding of how local Black LGBT activists understood her death yet, until very recently, this was the only way her death has been discussed.

Renita’s national prominence within LGBT circles, however, did not translate into the social capital needed to politicize Sakia’s death among the local political elites in Newark. The regional and national spaces of LGBT engagement that were used to

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<sup>35</sup> Amina and Amiri Baraka’s daughter Shani was found, along with her girlfriend, shot several times in the head and body in her sister’s home. The double murder was investigated as part of a domestic violence dispute with Shani’s brother-in-law who was later found to be guilty of the double murder.

generate awareness about the violence directed toward poor gay youth did not stimulate the political muscle needed to make changes in local spaces like the municipal council, the school board, and the Mayor's office.

Over twenty-five hundred people attended Sakia's funeral, most of whom were young adults and high school students. Numerous demonstrations and vigils took place in the weeks and month following Sakia's death. The relationships built in that critical period following her death provided a level of solidarity among local Black LGBT activists and supporters and Sakia's family and the young people who were especially traumatized by Sakia's fate. Indeed Renita's close ties with Liberation in Truth Unitarian Church, which offered solace and validated the feelings of outrage and loss among Sakia's friends and family members, resulted in a strong show of Black LGBT solidarity and support in the upcoming months.

The Newark Pride Alliance was founded to serve a specific identity-based community of young Black gays and lesbians in Newark. NPA activists assumed that the lack of Black LGBT recognition within the larger Black community fostered social alienation and marginality of an alarming proportion of Black youth. According to Janet Armstrong, pastor of Liberation in Truth Unity Church, one of the reasons why these young people had to "hang out on street corners or travel into New York City to hang out in bars" was because they didn't "have a place in Newark to simply be." From Janet's vantage point, Black lesbians and gays teenagers were targeted as social deviants by teachers and administrators who propagated bourgeois, heterosexual values in the public schools. Because many "ag" teenage girls dressed in baggy jeans, extra large white t-shirts and cornrows, they couldn't be clearly distinguished from gang members or other

“undesirable” Black youth. Their aesthetic choices made these teenage girls frequent subjects of police harassment and intimidation, and general objects of scorn and derision. While many femme teenagers were leading closeted lives in impoverished communities, “ag” teens suffered the effects of heightened visibility. Ironically, the only places of anonymity where many girls could simply “be” were on the downtown streets and parks of the Central Ward—spaces commonly shared with street hustlers, homeless people, drug addicts and gangsters. As Tia Stewart, a self-acclaimed “aggressive” youth activist who played a key role in the local organizing for the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention noted:

“It hurts. It’s painful to drive down the street and walk down the street and see the hopelessness on people’s faces. It’s like up there on the corner, or over there in the park. To see that on their faces and see young people trying to forge their identities there—and they’re trying to do that, [when] people in fear, not wanting to know who they are, what they are. And I’m talking about people in high places.”

At age 42, Tia conducted weekly technology seminars and photography workshops for teens at a Central Ward Boys and Girls Club. She also organized local seminars for youth who wanted to pursue careers in the entertainment industry. Tia viewed the plight of straight Black youth and Black LGBT youth similarly. In her opinion, young people in Newark suffered equally from lack of resources or lack of knowledge about how to utilize existing community-based resources. From her perspective, they were especially vulnerable to all kinds of social maladies that contributed to what she called, “that blank look of despair.... [young people] don’t look happy. They look depressed.” Most heartbreaking for Tia was that “nobody really seemed to care.” Tia, who had recently adopted her deceased sister’s thirteen year old daughter, was outraged by the frequent instances of fighting and bullying that went on at

her niece's middle school. On one occasion a classmate slapped her niece in the face after school on her short walk home from school. Even though the young boy who assaulted her niece had been suspended from school, she was considerably uneasy about the ability of teachers and administrators to "get a hold on things. I can only imagine what it's like for kids in that school who are gay."

To address the complexity of the social alienation affecting the LGBT youth in Newark public schools, the creation of a "safe space" was frequently cited as an important political objective. To achieve this objective, the newly formed Newark Pride Alliance, forged a close partnership with Liberation in Truth Church, which had been providing just such a safe space for many lesbians and gays in Newark's larger metropolitan area on somewhat different philosophical grounds. Founded in 1995, Liberation in Truth Unity Church (LIT) provided the most solid source of local organizational support for the newly formed Newark Pride Alliance. Liberation in Truth Church is a member of the National Unity Fellowship Church, a religious organization committed to serving the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered communities. Initiated by an out Black lesbian minister, Jacqueline Holland, LIT sought to be a "beacon of light in the city of Newark" by addressing the issues of homelessness, poverty and HIV/AIDs among women of color. LIT's premier social program is the Social Justice Center, a drop-in center serving homeless men and women, drug addicts, and sex-workers, which aims to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases. The Social Justice Center provides showers, laundry services, needle exchange services and condoms free of charge for their target population. While catering to the most vulnerable Black residents of Newark, the Center also provided a critical space for Black LGBT

youth to volunteer and interact with other community members who served as positive out role models.

*Hostile Intervening Institutions: Stifling Social Capital*

Many political elites in Newark, including “city hall” were not as supportive in response to Sakia Gunn’s murder. A seemingly willful ignorance about LGBT issues fostered an inept and intrinsically homophobic response to the demands of LGBT activists. Many elected officials in the city were reluctant to take the issues presented by the activists seriously. Janet Armstrong recalled that the most serious hurdle initially faced by the fledgling Newark Pride Alliance was simply finding a place to hold community meetings, where “out” high school students could meet to discuss what to do in light of Sakia’s murder. When Mayor Sharpe publicly promised to build a community “counseling center” for LGBT youth, activists assumed that the city would also support the autonomous organizing of the youth who wanted to play a role in the creation of such a center. The efforts to secure meeting places at local high schools and other publicly funded places in the city proved futile, however. LIT Church stepped into offer their assistance to what they hoped would be a temporary problem:

“So we offered our center as a space for them to express their feelings. We got a pro bono social worker to deal with them initially, but eventually we took over. What we did was allow them to talk. We were mentors to this particular group of girls, in terms of trying to help. They wanted to organize a group so we helped them do that.”

For Janet Armstrong, simply being able to offer a space to these teenagers, and supporting any leadership efforts that girls proposed, was the most basic “political” act the activists could engage in. The only place that unconditionally supported these traumatized teenagers was the same place that offered services to the homeless and other

socially ostracized elements of the Black population, including drug addicts and illicit sex-workers. Although initially reluctant to engage in the formal political process, Liberation in Truth demonstrated their commitment to assist the Newark Pride Alliance by petitioning city hall for the creation of the community center that Mayor Sharpe James promised to build. From the perspective of many activists, this center represented the most poignant expression of Black LGBT youth solidarity in the immediate aftermath of Sakia's death. Liberation in Truth used the Social Justice Center's non-profit status to assist the girls in pursuing their dream of building a center in Sakia's honor. LIT also assisted NPA in their efforts to informally lobby city council members and bureaucrats to support the requisition of public space that youth could use to meet to flesh out ideas about how to proceed. The city simply refused to act, however. As Janet Armstrong noted:

We followed up with Cathy Cuomo-Cacere as we were directed to at City Hall. I don't remember what her particular title was. But she was the woman designated as the person to talk to for helping us find place for these young people....it never happened. We wrote a letter, we wrote a proposal, we *tried*. They city has not helped to provide anything for those young people.

While ignoring requests from activists to meet, Cathy Cuomo-Cacere made public statements in the *New Jersey Star-Ledger* claiming to have met with "members of the gay community," which further infuriated LGBT advocates and heightened their sense of helplessness and frustration. Such callous indifference on the part of the incumbent political regime intensified the injury of Sakia's death and for many activists, drove home the overt lack of recognition and respect for politicized Black LGBT community members. As Janet Armstrong noted:

They don't care. The whole issue of gays and lesbians is...number one, people just think it's wrong. How do you fix it? Don't be gay or lesbian. Even though those people are in office and don't say these things out loud, they bring all those feelings with them. They don't care. They didn't do anything—I mean they could have done *something small*.

Within the Newark LGBT community, Sakia's death politicized homophobia.

LGBT activists made it a priority to encourage Black political elites to acknowledge the presence of Black lesbians and gays who were already actively participating in many aspects of Newark's Black civil society. In the words of Janet Armstrong:

“The first thing that came out was that there were gays and lesbian people in Newark. You know, we had been having church since 1995, but you would think that no such thing was in Newark. After people came out in the streets after her death, that was when the dialogue opened around the fact that they have young people who identify as gays and lesbians. Before then, none of these kinds of conversations were being had.”

Although Black lesbians and gays had been active in mainstream city politics, they were politically invisible. While it was well known that Black gays and lesbians were highly involved in civic affairs, specific identity-based issues that they wanted to bring to the forefront of the political agenda were either co-opted or ignored. Often their issues were subsumed under “talking points,” which were never openly acknowledged at city hall. Although this situation was dysfunctional for adults, it also produced a potentially volatile social atmosphere for lesbian and gay teenagers in Newark public schools. Many community leaders felt little need to refrain from openly homophobic remarks or from indulging in openly heterosexist rhetoric, which marked Black lesbian and gay youth as deviants and potentially dangerous.



To devise strategies to resist homophobic violence in the Black community, LGBT activists faced the enormous obstacle of patriarchal Black intervening institutions, including the mayor's office, Newark public schools, and prominent Black clergy. The refusal of Black clergy, one of the most diverse and politically influential bodies in the city, to acknowledge the political significance of Black gay and lesbian activism in the city posed a major hurdle to members of NPA. Renita reflected on the frustration she experienced when the newly formed NPA tried to galvanize the considerable political power of Black churches in Newark:

“When people won't even acknowledge letters that you send them or return phone calls when you've left messages for them. It is like them treating you like you don't exist. This is how the Black church looks upon gay and lesbian folks. As a part of the community, they act like we don't exist and we do exist.”

According to Keyana Dunn, a thirty-seven year old returning-student who played a central organizing role for NPA, although NPS sent more than one hundred invitations to predominantly African American churches in Newark, only *five* churches agreed to address the issue of homophobia in Black community after Sakia's death. NPA efforts to build a productive coalition with predominantly African American religious institutions to challenge Black street violence in Newark met with only limited success. LGBT activists could use their social capital within organizations and institutions dominated by Black political elites only on consensus issues that did not threaten the hegemonic Black gender ideology embedded in Black middle-class, heteronormative political, social and religious values.

*Sexuality and the Spatial Negotiation of Urban Black Cultural Production*

As places where young people regularly encountered homophobic attitudes, as well as physical and psychological violence, the city's public high schools were viewed by LGBT activists as critical sites of resistance. According to NPA activist Keyana Dunn, the initial strategy adopted by Newark Pride Alliance was "education, especially educating teachers about thinking about things they say to young people. One time a school teacher said to a young out female student who was dressed hard, "you would be so pretty if you didn't dress like that." According to June, teachers unfamiliar with LGBT youth culture considered gendered presentations of self that challenge conventional Black gender norms as potentially dangerous and blatantly immoral acts. "Ags" often came to school dressed in oversized flannel tunics and jeans, cornrows and construction boots and were openly affectionate and protective of their more conventionally dressed "femme" girlfriends. Ag couples were more likely to elicit homophobic remarks and ridicule from school officials because they preferred a more masculine self-presentation, transgressing conventional gender norms. Similarly, teenage boys, called "homothugs," who dressed in baggy clothes, sported neatly cropped dyed cornrows, faux diamond earrings, "doo-rags," and mascara, often flirted with seemingly straight teenage boys. These highly visible displays of gendered Black youth sexuality emerged in failing schools located in neighborhoods plagued by violence, poverty and social alienation. Rather than being viewed as a particularly vulnerable population, many teachers and administrators treated these youth as delinquent, products of a larger culture

of Black underclass pathology. In the public schools, the initial response to Sakia's death was indifference or hostility to Black LGBT youth.

Although many of the younger members of what Bikhari Kitwana calls the "hip hop generation" were clear about what they were not (i.e. "straight"), many teachers lacked the experience and the contemporary urban lexicon to deal with these youngsters in a respectful and productive manner. In Newark many of these youngsters were public about their sexuality and chose urban, Black hip hop culture as an expression of their identity. "Ags," "homothugs," "femme/aggressives" "studs" and "bi" young Black men and women were just as "rough, tough and dangerous" (RTD) as any other thugged out Black youth in Newark or across the United States. As such, they were subjects of suspicion, distrust and fear by Newark public school officials.<sup>36</sup> The undeniable presence of Black LGBT youth on major boulevards and side corridors of downtown streets contradicted the largely heteronormative symbolism of Black cultural nationalism which marked the cityscapes. The simultaneous hypervisibility/invisiblility of transgendered teenagers, sex-workers, and everyday Newarkers evidenced a clear repudiation of romantic visions of an African diaspora, reinforced by Black Muslim venders, street signs and the hetero-masculinist hegemony of highly visible political figures like then-incumbent Mayor Sharpe James and mayoral contender Cory Booker (captured in the acclaimed documentary *Street Fight* [2004]).

Heavy policing of the downtown streets during the day also placed LGBT teenagers in political-juridico opposition to the city, as the legality of their presence was questioned (truancy, loitering, etc.) because their image was seen as detrimental to the

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<sup>36</sup> The documentary *The Aggressives* produced and directed by Daniel Peddle explores the lifestyle of a subset of New York lesbians, illuminating the how elements of Black cultural expression in hip hop culture produced diverse genders and sexual identities among lesbian women of color.

gentrifying downtown streets. The tendentious relation between the police and LGBT teenagers came to a head in the days immediately following Sakia's murder. Although the Liberation in Truth Church made a concerted effort "bring down the tensions down," the grief of the young people who attended the funeral—many of whom were classmates or close friends of Sakia—was magnified by their anger at the police for failing to protect her in the early morning hours, the time in which LGBT teens were most vulnerable to gendered street violence. Fifty uniformed Newark police officers stood outside the church to provide "security" during the service. Their presence was experienced as hypocritical and potentially threatening by the many of young people in attendance. Janet Armstrong recalls: "We actually formed a human line between the young people who were attending the funeral and the police that were there." For many of the young people present the police were a major source of discontent. Liberation in Truth continued their work of providing a safe mediating zone between newly formed loosely associated LGBT teen networks like "Ags and Femmes" and other public institutions and political elites in the city. Liberation and Truth and the Newark Pride Alliance also worked together with "Ags and Femmes" to build a scholarship fund for lesbian and gays in Sakia's honor.

For Keyana Dunn, a Rutgers University student who had lost custody of her child when her ex-husband's family learned of her sexual identity, Newark Pride Alliance was "a jewel" because it provided young people in the city with alternative cultural settings that affirmed who they were without judgment. June's organizing with Newark Pride Alliance consisted primarily in creating spaces where a Black LGBT youth issue agenda could be developed and tailored to meet the specific needs of these youth—whether it be

challenging homophobia in the schools or providing an alternative to hanging out on the streets or in hostile home environments. June's political work involved "organizing vigils, marches, workshops, parties, gay prom nights, movie nights and a variety of other social and cultural activities that fostered dialogue around LGBT youth issues." This form of indigenous cultural programming was beneficial to all youth in Newark high schools, although it was specifically designed to assist LGBT youth in dealing with their grief over Sakia's death. These cultural events provided a space where young people could express themselves freely and talk openly about the problems they confronted as LGBT youth without fear of being mocked or otherwise socially maligned. These spaces also created an atmosphere where ignorance or false assumptions about the costs of defying gender norms in the Black community could be identified and addressed in a supportive environment.

NPA continued their efforts to build coalitions with other Black organizations, sponsoring community forums where predominantly Black civil rights organizations could familiarize themselves with LGBT activists and develop a level of trust and comfort talking openly about how the intersecting issues of poverty and homophobia hurt the Black community. Discussions of the alarming rates of HIV/AIDS in Newark played a central role in these forums. Talking about HIV/AIDS itself was a part of a larger strategy adopted to fulfill NPA's mission of creating a gay-straight alliance to address the overwhelming alienation faced by LBGT youth in Newark. HIV/AIDS was thought to be an issue that could be a source of solidarity between more conventional Black organizations and community activists and Black LGBT organizations. Achieving a successful alliance proved a formidable undertaking, however, in the face of strong

patriarchal values held by the city's premier Black civil rights organizations. As Renita noted:

“We’ve had different forums and opportunities that deal with this discussion, but the people who needed to be there did not show up....city legislators, city council members, the mayor, many of the Black churches, many of the Black organizations. The NAACP, the Essex County Urban League. *All* these organizations were *not* willing to sit down and have the conversation.”

When asked why she thought that more Black organizations would not participate in public dialogues or otherwise enter into a coalition with Newark Pride Alliance, Renita speculated that many people who already participated in the predominantly Black community organizations were gay and/or lesbian and didn't want to be publicly associated with LGBT politics and activism for fear of retaliation.

“There is an invisible community here in Newark. I see them because we're all out and partying and socializing. I 'un seen 'em all! But they ain't coming out in the public to be seen. There were gays and lesbians there—I know them! They were from other organizations and stuff, but they would not march with the Newark Pride Alliance which is their organization—which represents them. They won't do it because their fear is so deeply rooted and so intense. Their fear of how they're going to be treated by their families, their co-workers, by their neighbor.”

To support this claim she noted how few Black gays and lesbians marched with Newark Pride Alliance during Newark's 2005 annual African American heritage parade. While Renita understood how deeply rooted heterosexism and homophobia was in Black communities, she also firmly believed that part of NPA's mission should be to establish lines of communication and foster a sense of trust and solidarity between LGBT activists and other Black community activists.

“I chose that we do it that way because we are not a separate entity from the Black community. We are an integral part of the Black

community, so I don't think that we should have a separate 'Black pride thing' that is separate and distinct from the Black community. And so we marched in the parade, and a lot of people did not march with us."

Renita is deeply concerned not simply with some Black people's decision to remain closeted, but with a larger reluctance by many people to demonstrate even the most basic forms of support for LGBT people with whom they work, party, and even reside. From her perspective, the homophobic public eye was so powerful in Newark that it regulated basic displays of courtesy and solidarity among African Americans—even among Black lesbians and gays.

Although social networks have been used by Black women to politicize issues and create political space for Black women's community politics, Black lesbian organizers in Newark have been largely shut out of these networks when they tried to explicitly address Black LGBT issues. These rigid social barriers effectively precluded the development of sustained programming for Newark's Black LGBT youth population. Like the majority of Black youth, they are poor, vulnerable to street violence, and HIV/AIDS, but LGBT youth are also subjected to unchecked forms of social derision from teachers, administrators, city officials—including peers and family members.<sup>37</sup>

Even the more responsive "community organizations," Black patriarchy and heterosexism seem to undermine compassion for youth who do not conform to the gender and sexual norms of Black political elites. The principal of West Side High School, Fernand Williams, is reputed to have told the students, "If some choose to live a certain lifestyle, they must pay a certain price." This same principal refused to grant students' request to have a moment of silence in memorial of Sakia's death until over a year after the request was made by Sakia's friends and classmates. It took nearly a year for Newark

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, Lajoya. "Remembering Sakia Gunn." *Q\*News*, (Issue 24).

School Superintendent Marion Bolden to admit, "I didn't know I had 30 to 35 kids living on the street because their parents kicked them out when they came out of the closet....It was a learning curve for me because I didn't know we had such a struggle."<sup>38</sup>

The responses to Sakia's death by Newark Public Schools, Newark Municipal Council and local Black churches demonstrate how deeply homophobia persists in the Black middle class leadership of the city's intervening institutions. Their efforts to sanitize how poverty and sexuality intersect create a dire social climate for young, Black gays and lesbians. These responses also demonstrate how the creation and use of social capital by Black women activists in the city is restricted by the politics of respectability governing local intervening institutions. The adoption of an anti-bullying ordinance proposed by Councilwoman Gayle Chaneyfield-Jenkins in response to Sakia's murder, generated widespread community support in the wake of Sakia's murder. Anti-bullying, however, does not address the complexity of circumstances that produced Sakia's death. From the perspective of LGBT activists, the official response to this tragedy conveniently diverted attention away from the issue of how persistent Black poverty contributes to all forms of violence, including violence directed toward gays and lesbians, and all poor Black people in Newark.

Renita Wiley received a certificate of commendation from Newark's Municipal Council for her efforts in lobbying for the Anti-Bullying ordinance. She also received an award from the National Gay and Lesbian Task. She was far from enthusiastic, however, about the real benefits offered by such symbolic political gestures. "It was nice. I like looking at the award. It helps. But nothing has really changed." After Sakia's death,

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<sup>38</sup> *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, "From loss, a lesson. District mourns loss with a day of tolerance." May 9, 2004.



Renita was invited to speak at several national venues to share her organizing experiences in Newark.

“I went to Washington with Sakia’s mother where she received the Pathfinder award from Glisten—the Gay Lesbian Strait Education Network. And then I was a discussion panelist at the Black gay pride in Los Angeles. I went there. And all these travels, all these places where I went to speak, I saw that the same situation that exists here in Newark exists in every major city across the country. And so my thinking was that we could use the work of the Newark Pride Alliance as a model for all of the cities to follow. Because the issue[s] that the leaders don’t want to deal with are the issues that are at the root of the misery and suffering of our people.”

The accolades afforded to Renita nationally did not translate into material support for Black LGBT organizing in urban communities, nor did it translate into material support for local programming initiatives by the Newark Pride Alliance. While Renita was given access to the national stage of predominantly white LGBT politics, locally the Newark Pride Alliance remained as marginal as ever.

### *The Politics of Scale in a “Perfect Murder”*

Sakia’s murder was politicized differently in disparate political communities. The *local*, predominantly Black community in Newark and the *national*, predominantly white LGBT community interpreted her death differently.

Selected passages from various online journals of local and national organizations that covered the mobilizations in the aftermath of Sakia’s death are juxtaposed in the following chart.

Table I:

National LGBT Activists Reflections	Local Black LGBT Reflections
1a. "Sakia Gunn was murdered because of her sexual preference." <sup>39</sup> (Context: Hate Crimes against Lesbians and Gays)	2a. "We have dealt with gay and lesbian issues during the anti-violence concerns over Sakia Gunn, who was [killed] downtown. They (local LGBT activists) came, and spoke to members of the anti-violence coalition and they asked for our support. And so we definitely accepted and supported. (Context: Violence Against Black Youth) <sup>40</sup>
1b. "If Miss Gunn said she was a lesbian, that doesn't give him (Richard McCollough) the right to do what he did." <sup>41</sup> Context: Hate Crimes	2b. "Sakia's death was symbolic, or emblematic of the psychic and emotional death of so many of our young people. She did not conform to the expectations of how she should behave. For that she was slaughtered." <sup>42</sup> Context: Oppression of Black youth)
1c. "The most important thing that can be learned from this tragedy is that all gay people are vulnerable" <sup>43</sup> (Context: Hate Crimes)	2c. "Because of the Black church, preaching hatred from the pulpit has contributed to homophobia toward Black gays and lesbians, so they have responsibility for Sakia's murder." <sup>44</sup> (Context: Black patriarchy)
1d. "It was a hate crime, but it wasn't covered as [though] it was." <sup>45</sup> (Context: anti sodomy laws)	2d. "The lesbian aspect of her death might have been enflamed. She might have been a 'gonner anyway if she had gotten into any altercation with Black men at three o'clock in the morning. Black females always have to be on the defensive." (Context: Black Patriarchy)
1e. "The media generally doesn't pay attention to hate crimes, so many go unreported. GLAAD is working very hard to get those kinds of crimes the	2e. "When has it been a crime to be out at 3:30? That is no reason for a child to lose her life." <sup>47</sup> (Context: Policing Practices)"

<sup>39</sup> Source: *Youth for Socialist Action* "Sakia Gunn" written by Adam Ritcher.

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with Tamara Brown, 9/20/05.

<sup>41</sup> Quote by Basil Lucas of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Antiviolence Project. Source: *Advocate News and Politics*. "200 attend vigin for slain New Jersey Teen" by Mark Goebel, March 15, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Quote by Cheryl Clarke. "Three years after her murder, few remember Sakia Gunn" by Kim Pearson. *Blocher: Where the Women Are*, May 12, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Quote by Clarence Patton, New York Gay and Lesbian Activist. Source: *Advocate News and Politics*. "200 attend vigin for slain New Jersey Teen" by Mark Goebel, March 15, 2003. .

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview with Renita Wiley, 9/16/05.

<sup>45</sup> "Where is the outrage?" by Paul Schindler. *Gay City News*, May 23, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> Quote by Cathy Renna of Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Source: *Advocate News and Politics*. "200 attend vigin for slain New Jersey Teen" by Mark Goebel, March 15, 2003

media attention they warrant.” <sup>46</sup> (Context: Hate Crimes Against LGBT))	
1f. “To lesbian communities, the tragic death of Sakia Gunn is a painful memory not only because the 15 year old girl was killed, but also because the media largely ignored her story.” <sup>48</sup>	

In the statements made by national organizations, Sakia’s death becomes politically charged by reducing the injury to violence exacted upon Sakia’s body because of her sexual orientation. The most reductionist accounts (cells 1a and 1b) erase all elements of Sakia’ identity—race/ethnicity, socioeconomic/class status, age, and gendered self-presentation except her sexuality to read the tragedy of her death as a hate crime. In this liberal framing, Sakia emerges as a victim of Richard McCollough’s hatred and disgust toward lesbians. This normalizing register equates Sakia’s injury with that of other gays and lesbians who are vulnerable to violence by homophobic individuals. Within this frame, “sexual preference” over-determines her death.

In the first three cells (1a., 1b. and 1c ) Sakia emerges solely as a victim. Her potential for political agency is completely usurped by Richard McCollough, who is portrayed as a violent perpetrator of a “hate crime.” In this framing, the most objectionable aspect of her death is that it was not more widely recognized as a political injury specifically directed toward lesbians. Although the reason that more people did not understand her death as a hate crime is silently questioned (racism), very little attention is given to larger structural inequalities that would enable a more holistic representation of the social implications of both Sakia’s life and death. Sakia is

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<sup>47</sup> Quote by Newark Councilman Hector Corchado. “Marchers seek justice and answers” in *City News* (Vol. 19, No. 32), May 21-May 27, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> “Skeleton in Newark’s Closet” by Gay Mundo. *The Gully, Online Magazine*, June 19, 2003.

strategically reduced to a slain, parenthetically Black, lesbian body whose agency is realized through the recognition by the state as a victim of hate crime. This recognition is enabled solely through ability of the state to prosecute and convict Richard McCollough as a specific kind of criminal—a murderer of a lesbian. The categorical interpellation of Sakia *as a slain lesbian* by state apparatus is the most triumphant outcome envisioned by national LGBT activists who identify the hate crime as the sole injury.

There is a conspicuous silence concerning Sakia's death among national Black and national women's organizations. Nationally, Sakia matters because she is a dead lesbian, not because she is Black, not because she is female, not because she is young, and not because she is poor.

At the local level the significance of Sakia's death is contested. Some emphasis is placed on the contextual (read structural) circumstances that contributed to her erasure as a living Black youth in Newark. Sakia is mourned because she is one of many, rather than because she is an exceptional case. Cell 2a reflects the fleeting possibility of coalition among Black LGBT activists and local antiviolence activists as Sakia is constructed as a victim of Black on Black street violence. In cell 2b, the city of Newark is identified as playing an important role in the producing a questionable "climate" for Black LGBT youth, suggesting that those in power have somehow produced an attitude or general atmosphere of intolerance that magnified the vulnerability of the living. The emphasis is on change, or at least on the facilitation of a new direction that could protect the lives of young Black people. In an attempt to hold some institution accountable, cell 2c explicitly names the Black church as a culprit in her death. As Sakia becomes a symbol of gay and lesbian youth, Black-on-Black violence, gender non-conformity, the consequences of

Black hyper-masculinity, the complex intersections of the living Black girl are continually eclipsed.

*The Unacknowledged Centrality of Patriarchy in Black Community Politics*

In recent years, homophobia and heteronormativity in Black community politics have been challenged (Cohen 1999, McBride 2005), however the centrality of patriarchy in Black community politics and its role in exacerbating heterosexism and homophobia in Black community politics has received less scholarly attention. In contemporary Black feminist studies, scholars have explored how race, sex and class have functioned through the ideologies of white racism, colonialism and liberalism (Hancock 2004) or even Black conservatism, Black liberalism and Black feminism (Dawson 1999). Little sustained attention has been paid, however, to how gendered power dynamics construct social differences between Black women and Black men—especially Black gays and lesbians, although scholars such as Neale (2005), Collins (2004), Awkward (1998), and Cohen (1997) have been noticeable exceptions to this trend.

To make sense of the ideological frameworks informing the activisms emerging in the aftermath of Sakia Gunn's death, earlier articulations of Black feminist thought that systematically theorize the relationship between identity (race, sexuality, class), political economy and social activism are particularly helpful. Sexism has long been identified as a highly destructive force within African American communities, making Black feminist social criticism a relevant and beneficial social justice paradigm. In 1983, Barbara Smith declared: "I am convinced that Black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience." In the intervening years since the publication of her famed introduction to

*Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, however, it is not evident that Black feminist thought has permeated mainstream Black community politics. Patriarchy in the Black community has yet to be directly challenged by the Black community at large.<sup>49</sup> Instead, African Americans in predominantly Black urban areas have time and again elected Black male mayors who use the rhetoric of civil rights inspired anti-racism to seize municipal power, while paying lip service to the thousands of Black women who provide resource-rich organizational support to election campaigns and voter registration drives, and generously donate institutional support from workplace-based social networks (educational, social service, administrative, etc) to their campaigns (Harris 1994). These mayors have routinely established Black patriarchal municipal regimes that serve the interests of white capitalists. As urban Black poverty not only persists but worsens, historical processes of industrialization, de-industrialization and racialization provide powerful camouflage that masks the existence, as well as the personal, social, political and economic repercussions of Black patriarchy. As the foregoing analysis of activist mobilizations and official responses by local government following the murder of Sakia Gunn demonstrate, however, Black feminist critiques by scholars such as Barbara Smith (1983), Cheryl Clarke (1983, 2000), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 2004), Leith Mullings (1997), and Cathy Cohen (1997, 1999) continue to be relevant to the Black community politics in Newark.

Radical Black feminist analyses of Black community politics pays close attention to the significant intersections of race, class, sexuality, age, and violence, shaping Black women's public identities, emergent Black female subject positions and subjectivities,

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<sup>49</sup> The strongest and most incisive critiques of Black patriarchy, such as that articulated by Michelle Wallance in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Black Superwoman* were heavily criticized and even shunned as alien to Black communities.

and Black women's political agency. Radical Black feminisms take gender-based political subordination as a primary feature of patriarchy in Black community politics (Collins 1991, hooks 1984, Smith 1984). Introducing empirical and discursive analyses of interlocking systems of social domination—radical Black feminist intersectional analysis of Black women's lives recognizes the “simultaneity of oppression” along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, class and other forms of difference. Race, gender and *sexual* oppression simultaneously construct the social world and the subject positions of Black women. Black women's identities are lived through intersecting and mutually constitutive ideologies of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, among other socially legislated categories of differentiation and inequality. Various forms of violence directed toward Black female bodies—and the ways such violence is represented, justified, castigated, and politicized—illuminate the dynamics of structural intersectionality that produce Black women as socially marginal subjects in African American communities. As Kimberle Crenshaw (1995, 375) has pointed out:

“Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden interacting with preexisting vulnerability to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.” Whether it is sexual and gender-based violence (i.e. rape, domestic violence or street harassment), social violence (i.e. public ridicule and marginality) or epistemic violence (i.e. the systematic refusal to acknowledge Black women as bearers of truth or producers of knowledge), the discursive frames that are utilized to make sense of, respond to and act on behalf of against Black females who are both victims and survivors of violence reveal how power operates through mutually constitutive, intersecting, ideologies of gender, class, race and

sexuality (Collins 1991, Williams 1991, Crenshaw 1995, Roberts 1997, Hancock 2004, and Fogg-Davis 2006). The political theory of intersectionality emerging from radical Black feminist thought mandates the analysis of sexuality and violence in the context of social domination and oppression, attending to Black female political agency and strategies of resistance to these systems of domination as well as to victimization (Cohen Jones and Tronto, 1997, James 1999).

Theorizing the mutual constitution of race and gender oppression specifically links Black women's sexual oppression to Black patriarchy. As Hall and Smith (1982, xxiv) have noted: "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We find it difficult to separate race from class from sexual oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously." Gender-based political subordination of Black women is also understood to be rooted in the historical processes and ideologies of capitalism, as well as in modes of U.S. Black racialization, including chattel slavery, Jim Crowism, *de facto* racial subjugation via segregation, white supremacy, and what Patricia Hill Collins (2004, 7) has recently called the "the new Racism."<sup>50</sup> Contemporary Black feminist thought identifies patriarchy within Black community politics as a major source of gender-based oppression of Blacks lesbian women and gay men. Analyzing contemporary manifestations of integrationist and nationalist (autonomist) strategies of Black political leadership, Leith Mullings (1997, 154) concluded: "The final product of both visions is a patriarchal model of gender roles in which masculinity is defined as the subordination of women."

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<sup>50</sup> This "new racism" includes contemporary manifestations of age-old racial ideologies facilitated by contemporary processes of globalization, transnational corporate hegemony and the global proliferation of racial ideologies via mass media.



Similarly Cathy Cohen (1999) found that the cross-cutting issues facing poor, lesbians and gays were routinely marginalized by Black political elites, exacerbating the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in the Black community. Defending her lesbian identity politics and poetics during the 1970's, Cheryl Clarke (2000) also emphasized the continuing relevance of Black lesbian feminist social theory: "Black men have still not affirmed their solidarity with Black women—and even Black gay men must continue to check their masculinist tendencies and male privilege. The homophobia of the Black middle class community is still prevalent and the most telling in the lingering silence surrounding AIDS/HIV, except by some of the most conservative policy brokers and faith healers in the country and by diverse under-funded grassroots organizations in urban areas hardest hit by the disease. Straight Black women are still afraid to reject the trappings of conventional heterosexuality and be feminists." Although her remarks are directed toward participants in forums that claim to be anti-racist, queer, and progressive, Clarke considers it imperative to defend a "dated" Black lesbian identity politics. The critiques leveled against identity politics share much in common with critiques of contemporary Black feminism, which complain about Black women "out achieving" Black men academically. Both critiques are divorced from the local political economies that produce such gendered outcomes and are oblivious to how Black patriarchal conceptions of masculinity and femininity are implicated in Black community politics.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>This climate fosters a conservative standpoint built upon the fallacious assumption that just because many Black women are high academic achievers, and many Black men are systematically denied opportunities for social and economic advancement, that patriarchy in Black communities does not exist, and so therefore could not possibly drive Black community politics. The liberalism intrinsic to such an argument envisions Black women and men as fierce competitors in a free marketplace rather than as local subjects of U.S. racialization, in a world driven by global capitalist expansion and corporate hegemony. In fact, such lines of argumentation are exemplary of what Collins (2004) calls "new racism" precisely because it relies on the alibi of Black women's academic advancement as an excuse not to systematically address extant

Despite the relevance of these early articulations of Black feminist theory, their insights have been evaded, ignored, misappropriated and maligned in the Black community, among white queer activists and social theorists, and even by “progressive” observers of contemporary Black politics. These evasions allow Sakia Gunn’s life to be understood solely terms of Black homophobia without specifically linking homophobia to the existence of Black patriarchy. Similarly, these evasions permit Sakia’s death to be understood as a “hate crime against gays and lesbians” rather than as a characteristic example of misogynist sexual violence against a young Black girl. In the absence of radical Black feminist analysis, the narratives circulating on the web-sites of several national and international organizations that politicize Sakia Gunn’s death completely ignore the fact that poor, young, Black people’s lives are grossly undervalued in American cities. The systemic neglect of Black feminist analysis helps explain why it is only *when* Sakia Gunn’s death is framed explicitly as a hate crime against a young Black lesbian that any attention at all is given to her death. In the absence of LGBT activism around hate crimes, Sakia Gunn remains just another nameless, faceless young victim of Newark’s street violence. No story there. While the few national organizations that politicized Sakia’s unfortunate death sought to challenge homophobia in Black communities, these politicized narratives of Sakia’s life stand in stark tension with the testimony of Black feminist lesbian and gay activists who organized locally to commemorate her life and to breathe life into tragedy of her death. While her death was understood as a hate crime indicative of the homophobic climate in Newark, the racialized gender dynamics that produced such violence also shaped both the sites and

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racial, class, and sexual inequalities due to entrenched histories of social, political and economic domination of Black people in the United States.

strategies of contestation and resistance taken up by local Black LGBT activists. In the context of an ideologically “perfect murder,” however, the voices and perspectives of Black feminist politics and activism were the least audible in the politics of representation that emerged in the aftermath of Sakia’s death.

The narrative practices and interpretative struggles over the political symbolism attached to Sakia’s murder reveal how mutually constitutive systems of power converge at multiple scalar levels to silence and marginalize political strategies, which seek to critique and transform dominant social structures. It is far easier to reduce the sexual and gender based violence directed toward Sakia’s Black female “ag” body to the pathology of an individual Black male offender. Richard McCollough’s conviction of manslaughter compounded by the successful application of a recently passed “bias crime” statute may have been considered a small victory in the eyes of white LGBT activists, but very little of the Black women’s activism around this issue focused on discipline and punishment for violating the integrity of Sakia’s Black teenage “ag” body. Their emphasis was on the larger structural inequalities that made all Black bodies in the city vulnerable to varying kinds of physical, political and ontological violence—by Black political elites, police officers, school teachers and administrators, as well as a car full of niggas wilin’ out in the early morning of Newark’s downtown streets. While politicizing Sakia Gunn’s death as a hate crime against lesbian and gays was important for *all* LGBT activists who offered commentary about her life, only Black LGBT activists made a point of connecting her life to the street violence experienced in many predominantly Black communities. Her death was not framed solely within the framework of homophobic hate crime but *also* as demonstrative of other social forces that jeopardize the lives of young

Black people. Kim Pearson (2005) attributes the vast disparity in mainstream coverage of the deaths of Sakia Gunn and Matthew Shepard to vast differences in the class and race of the murder victim, but she fails to note that the *only* reason Sakia's death received any attention at all was because she fit into the politicized trope of a gay and lesbian hate crime. In "Baby-Girl Drama: Remembering Sakia," Mark Anthony Neal (2004) notes: "The fact that so few know her name and the circumstances of her death underscores the reality of how dangerous of a society this is for little Black girls." Yet those who were best positioned to politicize Sakia's death, that is national LGBT activists, failed to acknowledge how Sakia's embodiment (young, Black, poor, female in Newark) was as central to her death as was her sexuality and performance of an out "ag" lesbian identity. These aspects of her life and death are made perceptible within Black feminist standpoint theory and praxis, a perspective manifested by some Black LGBT activists in Newark who attempted unsuccessfully to mobilize major African American political, civic, and religious institutions to act constructively after Sakia's death.

The Newark Pride Alliance recognized Sakia's death as a productive instance in which not only to criticize Black homophobia and heterosexism, but also to build coalitions between Black LGBT activists in the city, the Essex County Anti-violence Coalition, and local Black churches who they hoped would support their cause to challenge hatred and bigotry targeted at socially alienated African American youth in Newark. This complex intersectional form of agency is missing from the majority of representations of Sakia's death circulating in web-space, especially those of predominantly white LGBT organizations that until very recently provided the most extensive repository of information about Sakia's life and death. The narratives of Black

LGBT activists and community members in Newark interpreting the meaning of the death of Sakia are perhaps the most marginal texts circulating in the aftermath of her murder. Their critique of the liberal state—embodied by Black political elites governing many of Newark’s intervening institutions—went far beyond claims making in the liberal sense. While the quest for recognition was undoubtedly a central element of the political work of Black LGBT activists in Newark, their organizing activities had much more to do with the social alienation and marginality associated with being young, poor, dispossessed, Black, and a sexual minority. The reward for identity politics, as evidenced by Renita Wiley’s successful career as a nationally renowned “LGBT activist,” can be readily assimilated into the ideological framework of interest-group liberalism (resolutions, anti-bullying legislation, grants and plaques), these rewards did not trickle down to the target population of her activism. Directed toward rewarding individual efforts, this national acclaim did little to transform the structures of inequality that Renita’s activism was intended to address. The mobilization of social capital across scalar structures was more successful in garnering national recognition for a particular person than securing much needed institutional transformation at the local level. The radical component of identity politics at the local level, envisioned by the Combahee River Collective, was bought out and sold back to the larger LGBT community in the form of a token. Ironically, Black feminist agency on the ground was curtailed by its own success—and everybody except the young “ags and femmes” of Newark’s Central Ward got to look good by claiming to “truly embrace diversity.”

Chicana feminists including Chela Sandoval and Aida Hurtado have developed a more radical theoretical topography for the political agency of women of color. Drawing

from the post-World War II social movements in the United States, they offer important insights that help explain how the spatiality of politics shaped the political agency of Black women activists in Newark. As local activists shifted within and between different currents of power at different levels of scale, they also resisted the finality of any ideological position when it came to trying to improve the conditions facing alienated Black youth, in general, or the social and political marginality of contentious Black LGBT politics in the city in particular. Such strategies may have positive consequences as Chela Sandoval has noted: “When enacted in dialectical relation to one another and not as separated ideologies, each oppositional mode of consciousness, each ideology-praxis, is transformed into tactical weaponry...positing a *tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to de-center and re-center, given the forms of power to be moved (Sandoval 2001, 58.9). While these complex political tactics were certainly apparent in the activism of Black LGBT activists in Newark, what is more apparent is the lack of power that LGBT activists enjoyed in the face of state apparatus that operated at the local level.

## Chapter 6

### Gender, Power, and Social Capital in the National Hip Hop Political Convention

*“The Convention. I think brotha’s—Black men, men of color, need to understand their maleness as well as they understand their ethnicity or race. I don’t think they get it. A lot of brothas don’t feel comfortable sitting parallel to another sister. Even the brothas who are a bit more cognizant of the gender dynamic than most. They don’t quite get it!”*

-- Keisha Simpson, twenty-six year old hip-hop activist.

*The hip hop Convention in my opinion was another significant event, because it was an attempt by the younger generation to reach out to the older generation to help us. We realized very quickly that we still had to make our own mistakes to accomplish that.*

--Melanie Hendricks, twenty-six year old hip hop activist.

Angelica Hernandez, a twenty-three year old substitute teacher in Newark Public Schools who mentored a group of 12-17 year old girls identified through HUD and the Newark Chapter of the Girl Scouts, became an organizer for the New Jersey Local Organizing Committee for the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention (NHHPC). As an outreach coordinator for a performance-based Black and Latino youth organization called “All Stars,” which encouraged the professional development of young people who wanted to perform, Angelica was keenly aware of the rich potential the arts held for inner city youth. “We didn’t want just the best and brightest from Newark, we wanted *any* young person in the community who wanted to work to be on stage—whether singing, acting, or dancing. We helped them do resumes, auditions, interviews and do mandatory performance workshops.” Angelica initially learned about the National Hip Hop Political

Convention on a website constructed by entertainment industry whistle-blower, hip-hop journalist and Convention organizer, Davey-D. She then contacted the New Jersey Local Organizing Chair, Hashim Shomari and began attending meetings three months prior to the Convention. Her commitment to a sustained level of involvement with the hip hop Convention was due in part to her strong sense of identification with the “hip hop generation” as it was defined by local organizers.

It was more than just the music, it was the generation, and knowing that the eighteen to twenty somethings, like myself, *are* interested in the grassroots issues that affect their communities, as a whole. The war was a prominent issue....education and poverty.... What prompted me to get involved was that my friends, most of them couldn't care less, they're interested in making their money. But knowing that there were all these other people coming together for something, that we were going to dialogue, and build something off of what we think as young people.

Angelica quickly registered fifty voters within the Central Ward where she lived with her parents, fulfilling the requirement to become a Convention delegate for the New Jersey Local Organizing Committee. She also served as a volunteer during the four days of the Convention. “I was a like a little errand girl. I did whatever was needed from me.” Angelica did not get involved with the internal politics of the Convention, nor did she serve in any leadership or decision-making capacity at the local organizing committee level. But this limited role did not deter her participation. “People had their ties and their connections already. I tended to shy away from people who weren't that receptive to me. But this didn't bother me. I had a lot of great minds around me, so I wanted to just soak it up.” Inspired by other organizers involved in the Convention, Angelica viewed it as an important learning opportunity to sharpen her own skills in community-based activism.



Indeed, Angelica identified the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention as one of the most “significant political events that took place in Newark within the last ten years.”

This chapter examines how the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention (NHHPC) served as a translocal space for U.S. Black feminists to do anti-racist, anti-sexist political work in Newark. Black feminists’ active participation in the NHHPC was a strategic effort to situate women of color feminisms in the larger historical movement for racial justice in urban communities. Although Black feminists achieved some of their objectives, they also encountered entrenched opposition to their efforts to integrate gender issues in the National Agenda produced at the Convention. Thus the National Hip Hop Political Convention served as a stage for deeply gendered contestations over visibility, access, and public influence, mirroring unresolved Black sexual politics of an earlier era. This chapter analyzes the struggles of the Progressive Women’s Caucus (PWC), a renegade group of Black feminist activists, to politicize a gender specific political agenda within the context of NHHPC. To accomplish their goals, Black women activists activated pre-existing social networks and organizations in their communities to transform the Convention into a political space that was accessible, responsive, and accountable to the needs and concerns of Newark’s young working-class, racial minorities. This manifestation of Black women’s agency and subjectivity within the conceptual space of hip hop was motivated by complex desires to politicize Newark’s youth through a unique form of activism called “hip hop feminism.” The PWC identified “hip-hop” as a critical site in which to challenge and resist systems of interlocking oppressions including racism, sexism, and globalization, particularly as these forces constrained the “hip-hop” generation.” Hip hop feminism deployed the agency of

women (and men) to challenge gender-based inequalities and gender-based violence in hip hop culture. By politicizing the presence of the female body, standpoint, and spectacle within the four elements of hip-hop cultural expression, and by challenging gender based inequalities and violence explicitly within hip hop culture, hip hop feminists took on hip hop as a complex and often contradictory site of social and political resistance.

Newark-based hip hop feminist practitioner, Keisha Simpson describes hip hop feminism this way: “A woman in hip hop has one of two options: she can fall off or she can fight. It’s our position of struggle. For women that fight—by definition—they have to subscribe to some level of hip hop feminism to keep that fight up.” Working in Newark and Paterson as a community economic development activist, Keisha conceives feminism as a “politics”—and as a struggle. For Keisha, hip hop feminism encompasses women’s struggles for recognition, respect, and credibility within the cultural space of hip hop. Scholars, writers, journalists, performance artists and social critics have elaborated hip hop feminism from a variety of standpoints, noting that hip hop feminists identify hip-hop as a source of empowerment for women of color. Through hip hop women are able to boldly and unapologetically lay claim to the male dominated public sphere through the four elements of hip hop--being a female emcee, poet, b-boy/b-girl, dj, or graffiti artist--rocking the mike and moving the crowd (Rose 1994, Keyes 2000). Hip hop feminists aggressively claim hip-hop as a unique space for women to come to voice using the aesthetics of hip-hop, incorporating the lyrics, linguistics, rhythms, body language and attitude that has come to be associated with hip-hop in mainstream culture in their writing and performance styles (Rose 1994, Pough 2004, Perry 2004 ). Hip hop feminists also

express a willingness to read mainstream hip-hop culture as symptomatic of the pain, trauma, distrust and self-hatred that plague Black male and female relationships. In the 1990's, through close analysis of hip-hop icons like Tupac Shakur, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, as well as many others, hip hop feminists illuminate a gendered politics of pain within inner city communities (Hampton 1998, Morgan 1999, Jones 1994, Perry 2004 and Pough 2004).

In its contemporary incarnations, what is now called “hip-hop” far exceeds the four fundamental elements initially associated with it. As hip hop has both engaged and transgressed professional, disciplinary and socio-economic boundaries, it has encompassed phenomena as diverse as hip-hop theatre, hip-hop pedagogy, hip-hop homos, hip-hop politicians, hip hop fiction, and hip-hop as a *bono fide* transnational social movement.<sup>52</sup> Hip-hop has also produced a cultural space in which notions of racial sincerity and authenticity have been ruptured as elements of its aesthetics have been transformed through its spatial, transnational, trans-cultural, and trans-racial social, economic, and/or temporal political mutations.<sup>53</sup> The aesthetically “pure” expressions of hip hop’s earlier political edge, manifested through the original four elements, are now more common among Palestinian, Cuban, and South African hip hop artists whose work circulates transnationally through internet-based media (podcasts, MP3’s) than in what now circulates in predominantly Black and brown U.S. urban communities. In contemporary practice, hip-hop can be thought of as a complex and frequently contested artistic, cultural, and political terrain which reflects more about the political, economic and social location of its producers and practitioners than it does adherence to any unitary

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<sup>52</sup> See for instance, Chang (2007) and Forman and Neale (2004).

<sup>53</sup> See for instance, Tate (2003), Kitwana (2006),

philosophical or ideological standpoint. If there is a core substantive appeal or “flava” which makes hip hop discernible as a unique cultural signifier (or set of signifiers) then that difference would certainly have to do with the particular ways that hip hop historically laid claim to the public sphere and how it historically shattered conventional (especially white and middle class) cultural expectations about how the Black/brown body and voice can be heard, seen, felt, and interpreted in the public sphere (Perry 2004, Rose 1998, Chang 2004). There is something unique about hip-hop’s ability to infuse the (usually urban) space/place that its practitioners temporarily seize with the irony, despair, relative deprivation, marginality and political alienation of the “hood.” Over the past few decades, the eminence of “hip hop” has been dispersed, transfigured, and re-imagined as those who have come of age in the era of hip hop have forged a spectrum of relationships is disparate communities.<sup>54</sup>

The 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention was convened to increase political participation within the “hip hop generation” by (1) developing a political agenda for the “hip-hop generation,” (2) creating a national organizing infrastructure for the hip hop generation, and (3) hosting a Convention whereby by delegates of the local organizing committees from hip hop actually vote, adopt and endorse a “political agenda” for their generation. The idea of “hip-hop generation,” while controversial, was conceived by an early founding organizer of the Convention, Bakari Kitwana. He argued that the hip-hop generation was closely tied to the experiences of African American urban youth, who came of age in an unprecedented era of urban decline. “I have established the birth years 1965-1984 as the age group for the hip-hop generation.

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<sup>54</sup> For more discussion, see Forman (2002), Rose (1994), Medina (2006), Kitwana (2003), Pough (2004) and Craig (2005).

However, those at the end of the civil rights/Black power generation were essentially the ones who gave birth to the hip-hop movement that came to define the hip-hop generation (Kitwana 2002, xiii).” The devastating phenomena associated with urban decline include widespread unemployment, high rates of black male incarceration, the prevalence of gang violence, and widespread practices of police brutality, the characteristic features of urban economics in the 1980’s, which continue to persist today.<sup>55</sup> This particular generation came of age with the explosion of hip-hop as a widely influential mode of Black cultural expression. According to Kitwana (2002, 5), “This worldview first began to be expressed in the insightful mid-to-late 1980’s sociopolitical critiques of rap artists like NWA, KRS-One, Poor Righteous Teachers, Queen Latifah and others. Collectively, hip hop generation writers artists, filmmakers, activists and scholars laid the foundation for our generation’s world view.” Although these claims are contentious, they reflect the rationale underlying the Convention’s effort to politically mobilize the “hip-hop generation.”<sup>56</sup> In fundraising letters and coalition-building efforts with various leftist sects of the Democratic Party, including the Stonewall Democrats, there was a deliberate strategy to cast the Convention as a means to reach out to voters between the ages of 18-35, conveniently employing Kitwana’s argument that the hip-hop generation *could* actually be defined as having been born between 1965 and 1985. This perspective was compelling to prospective donors, especially those who were interested in sponsoring voter registration and voter mobilization efforts in predominantly democratic

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<sup>55</sup> For extended discussions about the impact of how the conservative social and economic policies of the 1980’s (i.e. “Reaganomics”) impacted inner urban youth culture and hip hop cultural production see also Forman (2002), Rose (1994) and Shomari (1995).

<sup>56</sup> Hashim Shomari, Baye Adofu-Wilson, Ras Baraka and Bakari Kitwana conceived of a Hip Hop Political Assembly in 2002, which eventually resulted in the building of two “founding meetings” in Chicago and Newark which was composed of a body of mostly, African American male and female scholars, activists, and community organizers from different regions of the United States. Personal interviews with early co-founder and Newark-based Convention organizers.

neighborhoods and districts. For many organizers, however, this definition effectively excluded an important target audience for the Convention--high school and college students. This younger cohort participated in the Convention as performance artists and constituted the solid majority attending many key public events, including the Intergenerational Dialogue, which was the most well attended, well publicized explicitly political event at the Convention.

The effort to define the “hip hop generation” was deeply connected to resistance to the widespread vilification of Black youth, particularly Black male youth by local law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. An early version of the Vision Statement and Platform reads, “Too many of us have experienced firsthand the trafficking of drugs and violence in our neighborhoods, rampant police violence and corruption, failing public education systems, mass imprisonment, widespread unemployment and economic decay.”<sup>57</sup> This vision statement provided a contemporary spin on an early draft document of the Black Radical Congress of 1998, incorporating language that sought to articulate a clear stance against all forms of oppression, with an emphasis on class, racism, imperialism and homophobia. Theoretically, this document critiques the failures of contemporary liberalism to address the political and economic needs of disadvantaged youth in mostly urban communities under the rubric of “hip hop politics,” yet at the same time remarkably invoked deliberative ideals of democratic participation and responsiveness that would create spaces for more radical and marginal voices to be heard within the larger political sphere.

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<sup>57</sup> Organizing Manual of the 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention assembled by National Co-Chair Baye Adofu Wilson.”

The NHHPC was the product of the efforts of more than two hundred community organizers, activists, artists, professionals, and educators between the ages of 17 and 40 from thirty three state U.S. states, and ten countries. This diverse body of organizers came together because they agreed that hip-hop could be used as an effective organizing tool for social and political change among the “hip-hop generation.” Although Convention co-founder and hip-hop scholar, Bakari Kitwana (2004) conflated the hip hop generation with the post baby-boom generation, his theorization of the hip-hop generation did not go uncontested within the Convention. In fact, as a signifier, “hip-hop” functioned ubiquitously among the major organizers, state delegates, and lay attendees of the Convention. Some were convinced that the politicization of hip-hop entailed a sustained intellectual engagement with hip-hop as a mode of artistic and cultural expression. Some believed that they could use hip hop as a heuristic to seduce young people broadly interested in some aspect of hip-hop culture into larger discussions of systemic social inequalities concerning race and class in America. Strategic slippages between “hip-hop” and “Black” or “hip-hop” and “Black and Latino” also worked to secure the political and financial support of a variety of different potential donors and reinforced intensive coalition-building efforts among diverse Northeast-based, progressive, people of color organizations.

The Convention extended the historical trajectory of Black radical social movements, including the National Black and Puerto Rican Convention Movements, which heralded close ties with urban Black nationalisms, cultural nationalism, and urban-based strategies for Black political empowerment *vis a vis* electoral politics (Woodard 2002). Some hoped that the Convention would facilitate the construction of a political

apparatus that could showcase the transformative potential of hip-hop by politicizing the inherent social criticisms within its artistic and cultural expression (Shomari 1995, Rose 1994, Keyes 1989 and Chang 2004). Thus the creation of a national organizing infrastructure for the hip-hop generation was stated as one of three major objectives of the national organizing committee for the Convention. For others, especially participants in the local organizing committees in different U.S. cities, the signifier “hip-hop” was a code for “urban,” “poor and Black,” or “poor and brown” communities. Activists with close ties to contemporary Black nationalist and Black revolutionary (socialist) nationalist organizations including the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the People’s Organization for Progress, the New Black Panther Party, the Young Comrades and the All African People’s Revolutionary Party, conceptualized NHHPC as a political apparatus that could be used to liberate people of African descent from the vestiges of racism, white imperialism, and capitalism.

Core Convention organizers including Baye Adofo-Wilson, Ras Baraka, Troy Nkrumah, Fayemi Shakur, and Rosa Clemente emerged from ideologically distinctive yet nationally cohesive networks of radical Black-nationalist organizing traditions from Oakland, Brooklyn, Newark and Chicago. Yet other activists sought to move beyond Black nationalism, envisioning the NHHPC as a forum in which various social issues including the criminalization of Black and Latino males, amnesty for Black, Native American, and Puerto Rican political prisoners, media literacy, racial profiling and urban educational reform could be addressed within the context of a larger progressive, youth-based social movement. In the end, no specific conceptualization of hip-hop or politics would achieve pre-eminence within the context of the Convention, or within the local



politics that emerged in its aftermath. A “Glossary of Terms WE Should Know” was included in the extensive program of events and workshops for the 2004 Convention, which defined hip hop as “using the four elements of hip hop (break dancing, djing, rapping and graffiti art) to educate and raise awareness for justice and social change.”<sup>58</sup> This simplistic definition of hip hop activism obscured the deeper political motivations behind such an impressive mobilization of African American progressive activists across the United States.

The most compelling notion cementing the radical potentiality of hip hop with “politics” was that systematic analysis the triangular relationship among urban youth subjectivity, hip-hop culture, and the commodified forms of rap music distributed by the entertainment industry would offer an effective critique of the enduring legacy of racism and capitalism in which the contradictory everyday experiences of young Black folks were rooted. Within this framework, a premier site of contestation and struggle for hip hop activists was the mainstream media. In 1995, Hashim Shomari, one of the chief architects of the 2004 Convention wrote an introduction in the first hip hop political manifesto, *From The Underground: Hip Hop Culture an Agent of Social Change*:

Equal access to media outlets (i.e. collective ownership and control of the mass media) is a necessary prerequisite to building and sustaining a movement of social change. However the establishment of an independent communications system is the first step to fully democratizing mass media. Hip hop culture, in general, and rap music in particular, can serve as an independent tool for raising political consciousness of Black and Latino youth. The hip hop movement must examine viable strategies and tactics for African American empowerment, especially if the hip hop movement is going to develop beyond its existence as merely antiestablishment cultural expression (Shomari 1995, XIII).

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<sup>58</sup>National Hip Hop Political Convention Organizing Manual compiled by Baye Adofo-Wilson

This identification of mass media as a critical site for class struggle and Black liberation (under a Black nationalistic ideological framework) became the hallmark of a new politics of loosely associated networks of young, predominantly African American leaders. The close association with “conscious” rap artists who articulated similar messages in their music and with concerted efforts to educate young people politically through a peculiar synthesis of Black (male) bourgeois and revolutionary nationalist political agenda became the unstated, yet *de facto* imperative of the 2004 Convention. These unlikely partnerships had roots in the contradictory positionalities of the hip-hop political organizers themselves, which became evident in the gender politics that unraveled during the Convention. As a North Jersey based union organizer and convention co-founder admitted in a personal interview, “This is what *we* came up with. We wanted progressive. But it *was* controlled by Black folks.” In this context “we” seemed to refer to the four Black men who initiated the call for the Convention in 2002: Hashim Shomari, Bakari Kitwana, Baye Adofo-Wilson and Ras Baraka. “Black folks” meant “Black men” and “progressive” indicated an ideological commitment to confront the structural forces of capitalism, which produced the racial caste system that criminalized and otherwise denigrated the lives of Black (male) youth.<sup>59</sup>

From an organizational standpoint, masculinity functioned as a powerful ideological signifier within the context of the National Hip Hop Political Convention. The Convention slogan “Voice, Unity, Power!” spoke volumes about the extent to which a masculinist conception of politics permeated the strategic imperatives of the

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<sup>59</sup> In defining the inherent phallanthrocentrism of this cohort’s understanding of Black political activism, Kitwana writes, “Undoubtedly part of the status that Ras Baraka and Jesse Jackson, Jr. have achieved as activists/politicians comes from their familial connections. This generation represents a new age in Black America’s activism, Baraka’s and Jackson’s comments above reflect both a new level of political sophistication and a new political reality (Kitwana 2002, 147).”

Convention. The national logo, a vertical microphone seized in a tightly closed fist bore an uncanny resemblance to the erect phallus. The raised fist, heavily reminiscent of the anger, resistance and nationalist political determination of the Black power movement established the relationship between the right to speak and be heard in the public sphere and Black (male) political empowerment.<sup>60</sup> Although six of the twenty-two founding members of the Convention were women, and nine of the twenty-two members of the staff and Convention steering committee were women, men dominated Convention planning. At the second national organizing meeting for the Convention, the organizers committed to gender parity on various issue-based committees, a norm which would structure the national political platform and the political agenda envisioned as the ultimate political outcome desired by the founders of the Convention.<sup>61</sup> Despite this norm, the public image of the Convention as a project led by Black males was reinforced by the tendency of young, predominantly male office-seekers and professionals to verbally and visually dominate press conferences, podiums, and the most highly publicized panels at the Convention.

When asked whether or not she thought that interactions between men and women activists were based on notions of equality in the process of doing political work at the Convention, Aminata Obadele, who served as program chair for the Convention gave an ambivalent response:

“No, not really. But I don’t think it was intentionally set up that way. I’m not trying to say that there needs to be three men and three women, but I think...when the press conferences were going on for [the most time] there were all men in front of the camera. And I was so annoyed by that especially when there were men who were just figure

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<sup>61</sup> Personal interviews with Baye Adofo-Wilson and Hashim Shomari. Also included in the minutes from the second national organizing meeting for the Convention.

heads and didn't do or weren't doing much work, but people who knew more about the work, or who actually did the work felt.... damn...I guess it wasn't equal.

The national steering committee was primarily composed of activists with highly respected electoral and/or issue-based, grassroots political victories. Others included nationally acclaimed speakers, journalists, public intellectuals and those who had currency with mainstream media outlets such as Jeff Chang and Akiba Solomon. This impressive cohort of young, accomplished people of color made use of relatively close knit political (and personal) relationships that predated the Convention, constituted a formidable, although somewhat contentious cadre of young leaders with a considerable stores of social and political capital in many American cities.<sup>62</sup> A highly organized contingent of activists who had strong electoral ambitions in cities including Chicago, Newark, Detroit, and Philadelphia made their way to the national political spotlight in the organizing leading up to and following the 2004 Convention. These young office seekers and political strategists: including James Bernard, Angela Woodson, Malia Lazu, Hashim Shomari, James Gee, TJ Crawford, and Angela Garretson, envisioned using the Convention to flex the political muscle of an emergent generation of local, urban voters. While those interested in electoral politics were publicly critical of the Democratic party, they generally tended to favor strategies that would result in a clearly articulated, and somewhat reductive political platform that could entice predominantly African American and (East Coast) Latino American voters who were likely to vote for Democratic

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid. Also, for instance, national organizers initiated contact with very highly respected African American political leaders and entertainers including Cynthia McKinney, Kwame Kilpatrick, Jesse Jackson Jr., Al Sharpton, Russell Simmons, Chuck-D, Mos Def, David Muhammad, Queen Latifah, and Sista Souljah among many others.

candidates in state and local elections. The electoral perspective was institutionalized within the official protocols adopted to regulate the participation of delegates. To be an official delegate with the privilege of voting for the national agenda, one was required to register and submit a list of fifty potential voters in their respective communities.<sup>63</sup> To fulfill these requirements, delegates registered 50,000 voters, whose names were submitted from over thirty American cities, including, Newark, Los Angeles, Oakland, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York, Atlanta, Selma, Jackson, Las Vegas, Houston, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, St. Louis, Washington D.C., Boulder, and Honolulu. Of more than 5,000 conference attendees, nearly three hundred were registered as delegates and voted for the national agenda.

The cultivation of relationships with left-leaning democratic organizations including American Families United, the League of Pissed Off Voters, and Move-On.Org, involved cross-pollination of internet-based political strategies, including heavy use of a national internet listserve, the Hip Hop Convention website (where more than 15,000 people registered), and heavy use of blogs from internet-based journalists/activists like Davey D, who functioned as media watch dogs and who made explicit political linkages between hip hop, corporate media and the exploitation and denigration of Black youth. In addition, the inclusion of emerging scholars including Geoff Ward, Scott Heath, Angie Beatty and Zenzele Isoke made possible the extensive use of university based listserves associated with academic departments at acclaimed research institutions including Columbia University, University of Michigan, Rutgers University and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Extensive outreach to progressive and even radical organizations including the Third World Majority, Critical Resistance, Code Pink, the

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<sup>63</sup> National Hip Hop Political Convention Organizing Manual compiled by Baye Adofo-Wilson.

Twenty-First Century Leadership Movement, and various local chapters of national organizations, ensured lively, productive and forward-thinking dialogues and debates within the fifty panels, workshops and state-level break out sessions that occurred during the four-day period of the Convention.

Politically astute hip hop artists including Dead Prez, Chuck D, Doug E. Fresh, Floetry, and Akon functioned as living, breathing exhibits of the four original elements of hip hop, attracting young up-and-coming emcees, b-boys, and b-girls, dee-jays and acclaimed graffiti artists, as well as *bona fide* contemporary hip hop superstars. In the minds of the organizers, the full participation of artists in various aspects of the Convention process, created an *avant garde* cultural and political scene through which the most transformative elements of contemporary youth organizing could be experienced in real time.

The city of Newark, however, viewed the overwhelming presence of Black hip hop artists in the streets as a threat to be managed, rather than potential source of youth empowerment. The Newark city officials, including Mayor Sharpe James, expressed strong reservations about bringing so many young African Americans in the city.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the city of Newark was more interested in policing the hip hop concert that was scheduled to take place in Military Park to ensure that the city would not be embarrassed by predominantly Black and Latino “party-goers” than in catering to the convenience, safety, and market demands of thousands of Convention attendees. In a post-9/11 context, the local organizers were forced to have all artists scheduled to perform pre-screened by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. They were also required to

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<sup>64</sup>Personal interview with early convention founder who preferred to remain anonymous.

spend nearly \$80,000 for off-duty police officers and marshals, fencing, and security checkpoints, and local roof-top surveillance.<sup>65</sup>

### *Newark Local Organizing Committee*

At the second national organizing meeting for NHHPC, the city of Newark was selected as a prime location for the Convention. The cities of Detroit and Chicago were bypassed because they could not offer the tactical organizing advantages of Newark. While Chicago and Detroit were home to burgeoning young African American male office seekers, few had the name recognition, symbolic capital and national acclaim of the son of renowned poet and activist Amiri Baraka, Ras Baraka. As the deputy mayor in the administration of incumbent mayor Sharpe James, the younger Baraka's involvement in municipal politics and city administration would facilitate the navigation of city governance to secure venues, ensure adequate security, facilitate outreach to high school students and local community leaders and to garner local political support and social capital. Similarly, Convention co-founder Hashim Shomari, had also served for several years as Senator Sharpe James' Chief of Staff.<sup>66</sup> The rationale for choosing Newark as the Convention site is best summed in the minutes of the second national meeting, "We think it legitimizes the event."<sup>67</sup> The political acumen of core organizers in key leadership posts within the city would signify the hip hop community's ability to achieve mainstream electoral victories, as well as engage in independent organizing on national level.

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<sup>65</sup> Personal interview with a convention co-founder who preferred not to disclose their identity.

<sup>66</sup> From 1999-2006 Sharpe James served as both Mayor of the city of Newark and Senator of the 29<sup>th</sup> Legislative District of New Jersey.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Ras Baraka, the 2004 Convention Chair, embodied the political potentiality of hip hop on many levels. Not only was he a direct descendent of a strong cultural nationalist movement that emerged in the wake of the Black Power, but Ras also maintained close ties to the hip hop artists who used contemporary interpretations of Black cultural nationalism and themes of Black political and economic empowerment in their artistic discourse. Ras Baraka, who by age 32, had made two notable, yet ultimately unsuccessful bids for mayor and the Newark Municipal Council, represented the struggles of a new generation of aspiring Black political leaders. Baraka also possessed the unique capacity to legitimize the power of the hip hop Convention. “If we can connect our organization’s support to Ras Baraka being elected, our organization’s profile, importance and relevancy increases.”<sup>68</sup> Baraka’s well known relationships with popular “conscious” hip hop artists including The Coup, Lauryn Hill, and Sista Souljah joined hip hop and politics seamlessly into a compelling marriage called “hip-hop activism,” which was defined in the Convention program as, “using the four elements of hip hop (break-dancing, dee-jaying, rapping and graffiti art) to educate and raise awareness for justice and social change.”<sup>69</sup> What was left unresolved in this admittedly rough definition was: justice and social change for *whom*?

Newark’s geography, especially its proximity to New York City, made it especially appealing for organizers who wanted to ensure that the Convention was a marketing success. Newark’s proximity to New York hip hop media outlets, performance artists, journalists, writers and innovative Brooklyn non-profit organizations and activists ensured the mobilizations of a complex web of social networks and organizations that

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> 2004 National Hip Hop Convention Program, “Glossary for terms WE should know.”



already had a history of successful coalition-building efforts and the personal relationships to ensure that the Convention was taken seriously among progressive people-of-color organizations in the NYC metropolitan area.<sup>70</sup> Key activists in the local organizing committee could also mobilize students from local public and private high schools, Essex County College and Rutgers University, securing venues at select sites and conducting media blitz on Newark's downtown streets, where a variety of young Black people regularly congregated.

Hip hop has been and continues to be an intense signifier of Black and Latino youth cultural production in Newark. The explicit designation of this unique political event as "*The National Hip Hop Political Convention*" was intended as a publicity strategy to advertise the critical role that Newark's youth had to play in this production, but it also provided an aura of historical momentousness for the Convention.<sup>71</sup> Nested in the historic Central Ward, an urban space replete with memories of widespread Black urban insurgency and cultural nationalist resistance, the Convention drew upon the affective ties needed to mobilize young people around the mission and objectives of the organizers. The Convention was conceived as a space in which subaltern voices could be recognized and validated and in which young people's political consciousnesses could be

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<sup>70</sup> These organizations include, Critical Resistance, Zulu Nation, United for Peace and Justice, Sister to Sister, Peace in the Hood, National Urban Alliance, League of Young Voters, Prison Moratorium Project, National Black United Front, Young Democratic Socialists, Sister II Sister, Prolibertad, New Black Panther Party, Audre Lorde Project, Black Cops Against Police Brutality, Fannie Lou Hamer Project, Marijuana Policy Project, Hip Hop Odyssey International Film Festival (H<sub>2</sub>O), Right to Vote, Rainforest Foundation, New York City Environmental Justice Project, Third Wave Foundation and Refuse and Resist, among many others. *Source: National Hip Hop Political Convention 2004 Program.*

<sup>71</sup> Personal interview with convention cofounder who preferred to remain anonymous, emphasis requested by subject.

honed by sophisticated young activists and office-seekers of color who shared an affinity for hip-hop artistic, cultural and/or political expression.<sup>72</sup>

This sentiment was incorporated in the final programming design for the Convention. A generous and diverse assortment of issues were featured in the workshops, panels, performances, training and political education sessions, where the most innovative organizing techniques of the progressive youth organizers could be showcased. In addition to Conventional round-tables and panels, there were plans for guerrilla street theatre trainings, gang training and outreach sessions, health and wellness, internet and technology training sessions, and a film festival showcasing the works of several hundred activists. Participants from thirty-three U.S. states and ten countries including the U.S., Canada, UK, Cuba, Brazil, and South Africa attended the Convention, which featured more than fifty workshops, panels and town hall meetings. There were also hip hop concerts starring artists such as Kurtis Blow, Black Moon, Akon, Rah Digga and Lady Luck, a “battleground” competition, and several spontaneous performances by poets, dancers and emcees. More three hundred newspaper articles about the Convention were published across the United States. Thus the Convention was considered a huge success on many fronts.

#### *Gender and Power in the North Jersey Local Organizing Committee*

Having done extensive work as a core organizer on the “Hands Off Assata” Campaign, the “Coalition to Free Sundiata Acoli” and the Million Youth March, Aminata Obadele was firmly committed to doing social justice work that carried the potential for raising awareness about the contemporary implications of the Black Freedom Struggle, as

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<sup>72</sup> Personal interview with convention cofounder who preferred to remain anonymous.

articulated by revolutionary nationalist organizations, including the New Black Panther Party. Her rationale for involvement with various organizations, despite instances of perceived sexism, stemmed from her commitment to do so social justice work in predominantly African American communities.

“I try to seek out other people who are concerned about those issues and try to figure out solutions, or at least align myself with people who are trying to make the community better. I’m of the position, if you don’t like how something is going, you stay and you fight for your inclusion until you’re happy. But at the same time, it should not have to be like that.”

Aminata believed that there was ample opportunity for more women to be involved in the Convention, because there was so much work to be done; however she rejected the idea that there should always be intentional gender parity on committees, something that the Convention made a deliberate effort to ensure. Indeed, she tended to attribute lack of women’s presence to the decisions of particular women. “I think that a lot of women who could have had more influence didn’t step up. But at the same time, I wasn’t really around to see why those women made the decisions that they made.”

Aminata expressed a strong commitment to equal power sharing among men and women organizers. Yet she was skeptical that the deployment of power by women was necessarily respected. For example, Aminata initially intended to be a local organizer for the New Jersey Local Organizing Committee based in Newark, but she was assigned more administrative and logistical tasks by another male organizer. Her intention to play a more central role in the local organizing for the event was thwarted by decisions made by a male organizer, whom she. While Aminata did not speak out against her assignment, she did feel slighted, and somewhat marginalized as a decision-maker within the Convention.

“I didn’t address that because I still felt like I was playing a valuable role, but it was a different role that I had intended on playing. But I never shared that with the person.”

Although Aminata noticed what she deemed “problematic” relations between male and female organizers, she was thoroughly committed to making the Convention happen, and she demonstrated unwavering loyalty to a mission that was developed by her fellow organizers.

Keisha Simpson, remembered her first experience with Convention organizing as both intimidating and “unnecessarily contentious.” Keisha along with four of five women organizers whom she recruited to participate attended a meeting scheduled during the evening on the campus of Rutgers University-Newark. Prepared to organize a hip hop Convention, Keisha was expecting an atmosphere that at least superficially mirrored the stereotypical aesthetics of hip hop fashion (i.e. jeans and t-shirts). Keisha was in for a surprise, however.

“All I remember seein’ is these brothas rockin the suits, the satchels, the ties, the loafers. Rollin’ in, like, ‘yeah, we here!’ I remember saying to myself, I must not be at the right meeting. This is supposed to be the National Hip Hop Political Convention and ain’t nothing hip hop or political about these brothas right here!”

Although Keisha and her female co-organizers arrived on time for this five-o’clock meeting, they ended up having to wait several minutes for the men who invited them to participate to show up. At Keisha’s first meeting, the only people who spoke were the male organizers who initiated the meeting. Melanie Hendricks, a recently elected local school board member who played a central role in the local organizing for the Convention, was present at the meeting but chose to remain silent during this meeting,

although she assumed prominent organizing and decision-making roles in the months leading up to the Convention.

African American men were able to fully command the appearance of leadership in the public sphere in this instance, dwarfing the presence of the invited women activists in attendance. In short, these energetic young office seekers and public intellectuals, rarely hesitated to speak as representatives of the hip hop community, the Black community and of urban youth, in general. Describing the Convention speakers, Keisha elaborated,

“I just remember, all of them had suits, all of them were in the same age bracket, all of them had the same approach to things. It was just, the uniformity of the presentation was... really, only one of y’all had to speak, because you’re all the same cat.”

Keisha was initially taken aback at the homogenous physical appearance, and presentation styles of the local Convention leadership which, in her mind also seemed to translate into a rather homogenous interpretation on what the central issues and/or strategies that would be adopted by the local organizing committee. From Keisha’s perspective the women who were invited to participate were expected to more or less “fall in line” with the leadership and simply implement a predetermined plan of action. Moreover, the apparent professionalization of hip hop politics, as indicative of the “suits” that the men who occupied leadership wore, seemed to somehow intimidate the female student activists who were present, which may explain their initial silence at the first meeting.

Like Aminata, Keisha deeply respected the efforts of Black male activists to organize a national hip hop politics movement and the concerted efforts to link the

political edge of “conscious” hip hop artists to a larger movement. She was, however, dissatisfied by many organizers’ refusal to be as self-critical about issues of misogyny in hip hop culture.

“Y’all wanna do this national organizing thing. Cool. Y’all wanna talk about how the music has lost its political edge. Cool. But you define that loss of message based on the fact that they’re not talking about socially conscious stuff, like defeating Bush, changing neighborhoods, but then they will stop there. They will end the critique right there. They won’t talk about the misogyny. They won’t talk about the sexism. They won’t talk about how women are blatantly objectified. And when you call them on that, it’s like it’s not a big deal. ‘That’s not really our issue. Yo, brothas are dying out there!’”

Melanie Hendricks was one of the women who called the shots. Melanie is a twenty-seven year old youth organizer for a Rutgers campus-based leadership program, Newark Student Voices. In April of 2004, Melanie had also been recently elected as member of the school board in the neighboring town of Hillside. She described her initial involvement in the Convention:

“I came into it as the person to help out the University. So on a weekly basis I would help to convene meeting and make sure that all of the university folks, the police, the vice presidents, the, some of the folks from the Convention... that they were abreast of all the different intricacies of what was going on. I also participated in a lot of the different meetings, whether it had to do with the specific workshops, if it had to do with the performance, if it had to deal with the national vote. I basically would sit on each committee so I was a...I would say an ex-officio member of every committee except the national committee.”

Melanie did not acknowledge feeling marginalized, tokenized or otherwise excluded because of her sex by the Convention, and she chalked up differences that did emerge between men and women to differences in “personality.” Melanie played a critical role in later meetings leading up to the Convention. As the person in charge of securing classrooms for panels and workshops, serving as a liaison between Rutgers University,

Essex County Community College, and the North Jersey Convention leadership, Melanie attended meetings, moderated meetings, and negotiated with warring factions within the Convention and college administration. Melanie was also responsible for ensuring the successful registration and placement of the several hundred delegates who attended from thirty different U.S. states and around the world.

The glaring omission of gender as a central political issue facing the hip hop generation amplified the power imbalances between men and women Convention organizers. The preoccupation with music as a defining feature of hip hop culture, Keisha noted, tended to divert attention away from social issues that were specifically relevant to young women in dispossessed communities that the music was supposed to have spoken for. In contrast to Aminata and Melanie, Keisha was dissatisfied with the limited attention given to the everyday issues that young women confronted as they developed their sense of self in a misogynist culture.

The politics of scale also produced a gendered division of labor that prevented Keisha from more wholeheartedly engaging in the local organizing for the Convention. From her perspective, most critical decisions were being made by men who organized at the national level, although they were being implemented by women who organized at the local level. She also observed that Convention “leaders” who organized nationally, most of whom were male, assumed much of the credit for innovative organizing strategies that were being enacted in the local organizing committees.

“We got no love from national folks. No love. None! It was like, right there is when I got this bad taste in my mouth. You got all these brothas who sit around on national calls, doing all the national organizing, the national fundraising. And then you got all these sistas that are doing the local organizing, and trying to do the local fundraising.”

Keisha produced one of the most successful performance-based workshops at the Convention, which successfully combined the transgressive elements of improvisation with the performative politics of the body: the “battleground” competition. The battleground competition was an open freestyle session in which break-dancers, emcees and dee-jays competed for the attention, excitement, enthusiasm and respect of audience members. When Keisha first mentioned the idea of sponsoring a battleground session, key organizers basically “brushed her off,” tabling the idea in order to address more pressing, logistical issues. Only when a regionally acclaimed promoter picked up on the marketing appeal of the battleground session and rearticulated the proposal at a later meeting, did national organizers take the idea seriously and begin to support Keisha’s efforts to reach out to performance artists by allocating funds to secure an appropriate venue for the event. In Keisha’s assessment: “We just basically did the work for the battleground competition, but this other dude who just came in got all the credit. It was like, we had been saying the same thing all along, but nobody was really feelin’ it; nobody was really takin’ it seriously.”

There was a rigid line of demarcation between local organizing work and national decision-making power. For Keisha, this line was crossed only by select women who contributed to substantive decision-making at the national level. In her opinion, these women seemed to have pre-existing personal relationships male organizers, leaving little room for women workers who were disconnected from these personal networks. Instead of being equal partners, local organizers were left to their own devices concerning what they could or should do to organize the Convention. As Keisha noted:

“When we go to the brothas to get some help, there’s not a partnership there. Its kinda like, ‘Look we got this thing, you got your



thing. Now play your role.’ It’s funny, the sistas had roles and the brothas didn’t. There was one sista who was organizing the schedule and the agenda. There was another sista who was manning the office, and coordinating the volunteers. Another sista was doing media and outreach. I remember there were a lot of brothas there but I don’t know what they did. They were there, they were contributing to the call, but in terms of what their exact role was, still to this day I have no idea.”

Although Keisha, Aminata, Melanie and Angelica did not consider themselves “feminists,” all except Angelica, were sympathetic to “womanism,” because they associated the term with Alice Walker and with Black women. The concept of feminism was more closely aligned in their minds with “white women” or “lesbians.” Most of these women could not clearly differentiate between womanism and feminism except through these basic racial and sexual orientation stereotypes. Keisha was the only activist who explicitly mentioned the term “hip hop feminism” during an interview.

### *The Progressive Women’s Caucus*

In contrast to the Black women involved in the Convention Organizing Committees at the national and Newark levels, most participants in the Progressive Women’s Caucus consciously identified as “feminist” or “Black feminist,” and explicitly adopted an intersectional analysis of social oppression as a defining feature of their politics. The politicized nature of their feminism was received with varying levels of support, indifference, and sometimes open hostility by other women organizers in the Convention. While the female local organizers were busy ensuring the successful coordination and execution of the Convention workshops, events, venue requisition and mobilization, members of the Progressive Women’s Caucus were involved for the sole

purpose of politicizing gender-based issues that affected women of color in the context of the hip hop Convention.

The Progresssive Women's Caucus functioned as an outspoken, highly organized and effective counterculture within the hip-hop political movement. While PWC organizers were granted space to participate, some people simply did not like much of what they had to say. In 2003, PWC argued that gender was an important issue that should be addressed on its own terms. Some other women in leadership positions argued that gender was a "white" thing and issues of concern to women should be incorporated into the larger slate of major issues on the National Agenda, which included education, economics, criminal justice, health and wellness, and human rights. This initially seemed reasonable. Closer scrutiny, however, indicated no evidence that these "major issues" were being understood in terms of sexual, raced and gendered specificity. People could agree that women hip-hop artists should be involved in the Convention and that there should be a panel on women and media—as long as it pointed out the obvious (i.e. "hip-hop is misogynist, but we can't forget the positive elements of hip-hop which get little attention because of the greed of the entertainment industry"). This construction of gender and hip-hop became hegemonic because it alleviated the responsibility of both Black men and women for their own complicity in reproducing certain destructive characteristics pervasive in hip-hop and in African American culture, which have never received serious attention in the Black public sphere.

Initially the Progressive Women's Caucus identified issues such as domestic violence, reproductive justice, heterosexism/homophobia and the cultivation of women's leadership as pressing issues to be addressed. After several three to four hour monthly

meetings sharing personal stories from their own family histories, PWC also identified deceit and abandonment as important gender-based issues to be addressed by the hip-hop generation. Extrapolating from their collective experiences, PWC members suggested that it was simply too easy for African Americans to lie to each other. It was too easy for men to defy the expectations (realistic or not) of women and young girls. In the assessment of core PWC organizers, many of the problems that plague urban communities such as teen pregnancy, impaired self-esteem, HIV/AIDs and the economic hardship characteristic of single parenthood had a great deal to do with unfulfilled promises. When the PWC discussed the “down-low,” the phenomenon of Black bisexual men, they understood it as both a problem of Black homophobia/heterosexism as well as a problem related to the chronic lack of integrity in personal relationships in Black communities. At first activists were concerned about the potential conservative slant to such a perspective, but eventually many recognized the validity of radical feminists’ insistence that the personal was indeed political. The PWC acknowledged that one of the hallmarks of historic Black feminism did seem “conservative.” The impetus for Black feminist political activism unwittingly reinscribed liberal, middle-class principles of hard work, civic volunteerism, and a conviction that social change at the community level was actually possible. Accepting this as a productive contradiction, the Progressive Women’s Caucus decided to press on with their efforts to politicize gender in the context of the Hip-Hop Political Convention. For *most*, agreeing to live with this contradiction was not a matter of preserving the conventional heterosexual institution of marriage, which many core PWC organizers would publicly argue *was* inherently oppressive to women. Most members of the PWC were adamant that personal integrity was essential to the

transformation of urban communities and to the eradication of external sources of exploitation and oppression.

During their monthly meetings PWC members shared numerous personal encounters with heartbreak, infidelity, sexual molestation and exploitation as young girls. Drawing on their personal experiences for guidance, they agreed on the importance of politicizing the ease with which some Black men patronized, deceived, emotionally abused and neglected the emotional needs of Black women and girls with whom they had sexually relations. One PWC activist who had recently ended a twenty-year marriage because of the long-term infidelity of her spouse with a younger woman insisted: “There’s no one to hold Black men accountable for the things they do to Black women. He brought that women around our family and friends and no one said anything--no one.” PWC organizers were aware that “calling it as we see it” could come at extreme costs, including the risk of reproducing prevailing stereotypes that marked Black men as dangerous, irresponsible and prone to criminality. Nonetheless, they decided that these issues must be seriously addressed. After nearly a year of meetings, PWC concluded that these issues needed to be addressed because Black boys and Black men suffered just as much if not more from some of the practices under discussion. They too were victims of domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, rape, and deceit. But the PWC knew that men would be unlikely to force a discussion of these issues unless a firm position against the gender domination existed in Black communities.

The Progressive Women’s Caucus emerged during the planning processes for the Convention. The need for the PWC was identified because issues specific to the lives of women in the hip-hop generation such as reproductive justice, sexual and gender-based

violence, economic violence, homophobia and heterosexism were conspicuously absent from the first two drafts of the NHHPC political agenda. All members of the PWC supported the issues included in the first two drafts of the agenda, such as police brutality and racial profiling; the devastating impact of incarceration on underserved communities, and the need for community-based schooling as a way to combat the failing public school systems in urban areas. PWC organizers saw this particular articulation of “*the issues*,” however, as insufficient to represent the full spectrum of politics confronting the hip-hop generation.

In 2004, the PWC strategically appropriated the core set of themes, which had come to prominence through the efforts of journalists, essayists, biographers, cultural critics and performance artists, and used them to develop an organizing methodology that could explicitly politicize sexual violence against young women and girls in communities of color. The Progressive Women’s Caucus should not be understood as an organized body of feminists who attempted to bash “hip-hop” or to denigrate its entertainment and artistic value. On the contrary, the Progressive Women’s Caucus chose to use the National Hip Hop Political Convention to systematically explore and politicize women of the hip hop generation’s own complicity in perpetuating raced and gendered systems of power within mainstream hip-hop culture. Specifically, the Progressive Women’s Caucus sought to bring to public attention devastating cycles of psycho-sexual trauma that had permeated “the era of hip hop” but which had been neglected by African American males who comprised the overwhelming majority of the leadership of the Convention. As Kimala Price, reproductive rights activist and PWC co-founder, noted: “hip hop generation” was an attractive trope because it could highlight the specific way

that these issues impacted young women of color.” PWC’s provocative attempt to link mainstream hip-hop to sexual abuse and drugs in communities of color was a conscious effort to jar fellow hip hop generation activists into acknowledging, recognizing, and countering the epidemic of pain and damaged self-esteem arising directly from sexual violence (in the form of child sexual abuse, incest, rape and gang rape), and sexual exploitation (street harassment, pedophilia, the sexual enticement of pre-teen and teenaged girls by adult men). They politicized these issues while also linking them to modes of self-medication by the use, abuse and trafficking of dangerous chemical substances including alcohol, cocaine, heroine and ecstasy in communities of color.

PWC embraced hip-hop as a productive site to address the intersecting forms of gendered violence--economic violence, sexual and gender violence and racialized state-sponsored violence--that routinely corrode the possibilities for transformative social justice politics in Black and brown communities. The Progressive Women’s Caucus used the National Hip-Hop Political Convention as a unique opportunity to generate awareness about how sexual, economic and gender-based violence within these communities are both evidence of and exacerbated by the troubled gender ideologies spread through so much of what is called “hip-hop” on the public airways. This critique was not new. In the context of the Convention, however, it was the first time that a feminist cultural critique was pointedly directed toward the young and predominantly African American political leadership of the hip-hop generation.

The first dilemma that PWC faced in disseminating their message stemmed from the fact that many young activists and organizers continued to cling to myths about feminism, particularly Black feminisms in communities of color. Many young activists,

man and women alike, still interpreted feminism as a “white woman’s thing. In 2004, the myths that Barbara Smith had taken such deliberate pains to debunk two decades earlier in *Homegirls* still circulated with full force among the intellectual and political elites of the hip-hop generation (i.e. myths concerning feminism as man-hating, Black women being already liberated, and the myth that issues specific to women are narrow and apolitical, and therefore marginal). This reality suggested to PWC organizers that even among the very best, most articulate, well-educated and well-resourced of the hip-hop generation, there was a continuing intolerance of and/or ignorance of the contributions of Black feminist thought to community of color politics. A pervasive conservatism concerning gender politics persisted in the Black public sphere. This intolerance/ignorance included the neglect of critical re-readings of feminism introduced by Chicano, Asian American and indigenous feminisms that emerged within community activism and indigenous, community-based organizations. In the PWC, there was strong contingent who preferred to focus primarily on African American women, yet others endorsed a multiracial feminist perspective, and this cohort prevailed. Gender-based disparities within the Black communities were re-conceptualized to emphasize the positionality of poor women of color—especially how economic violence was exacerbated through state sanctioned efforts to police, regulate and discipline Black and brown women’s bodies. For example, the PWC initially discussed the importance of Black women’s political leadership around issues in relation to reproductive rights, child-care, and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The PWC platform was reframed in terms of “gender justice” rather than “gender rights,” using language that emphasized women of color’s positionality *vis a vis* the state. This position emerged as PWC heard

from women activists from across the country who were working in organizations that the PWC had mobilized to participate in the Convention such as the Black Women's Health Imperative, IBIS Reproductive Rights, Sister II Sister, and We Got Issues!, among many others.

The second dilemma that emerged within the context of the Convention was that some of the most vocal and visibly hostile opponents to the PWC political agenda were other women organizers, and not the prototypical Black male leadership. Some women in leadership roles were explicitly or duplicitously anti-feminist and anti-Black feminist in their opinions, actions and worked to silence the Progressive Women's Caucus. Particularly troubling were their public claims that the PWC was unnecessary because "we all know that Black men are the real endangered species," and that to "have a women or gender section is to make these issues distinctive from the rest of the issues."<sup>73</sup> These remarks revealed that some of some of the most influential women involved in the national Convention were opposed to the basic premises of community-oriented feminisms of women of color. These contentious exchanges also indicated that there would be a tough competition over whose account of gender politics would prevail in the hip hop Convention. As Kim Price recalls, "I always felt like there was a competitiveness as to who got to claim the feminist territory. Because some women were so hostile to the idea of a women's caucus early on, after we had two rather successful events (non workshops) all of a sudden people were "thanking the PWC" and some even claimed to be a part of it, when they played no part in organizing it."

To confront the more subtle aspects of the regressive gender politics that were reflected in the attitudes of some key organizers, the PWC aggressively promoted a slate

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<sup>73</sup> Minutes from second national organizing committee meeting.



of issues under the framework of “gender justice” for inclusion in the National Hip-Hop Political Agenda. Members of the PWC attended workshops and state and local delegate meetings to debate, publicize, and generate support for their stance. The PWC argued that heterosexism, homophobia and other forms of sexual and/or gender-based violence (whether in the forms of misogynist images, street harassment, hate crimes, domestic violence, or the sexual exploitation of girls) were critical issues facing the hip-hop generation. Using palm cards, purple ribbons, bodies, personal testimonies, education and passion, the PWC de-centered the consensus hip-hop generation issues (education, police brutality, criminal justice, human rights) by encouraging participants to examine their own prejudices and bigotry toward women of color and the LGBT community.

The PWC also designed and organized a slate of panels that were explicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic. These panels were designed to build self-awareness and solidarity among different kinds of women of color rather than impose a particular language or articulation of gender justice. These panels succeeded in reaching out to the hip-hop community and in recruiting to the Convention anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, humanist organizations including SisterSong, the Third Wave Foundation, Code Pink, We Got Issues (The First Wave of Women and Power), Newark Pride Alliance, and the National Black Women’s Health Imperative. The presence of these speakers at the National Hip-hop Political Convention transformed many of the other panels and workshops into spaces where lively, informed and productive engagements with a variety of issues could occur. Because there were so many different perspectives represented, including those of Newark high school and junior college students, educators, performance artists and activists, a collective language emerged

among participants that traversed disparate sites of political resistance such as feminism vs. womanism vs. anti-feminism. While PWC reached out to feminist women of color organizations, they also reached out to local Black female elected officials—further expanding the language and perspectives of the “hip-hop generation.”

To facilitate the development of a working consensus about the specific issues to address, and to get young people thinking about the possibilities of what it means to organize around issues specific to women of the hip-hop generation, PWC distributed a questionnaire that challenged the respondents to identify the three most important issues facing women of the hip-hop generation. Of five hundred survey cards distributed, 232 were completed and returned. The cards asked respondents to “circle the three most important issues facing women of the hip hop generation. The top three issues identified were poor self esteem, degrading images of women in hip-hop, and the HIV/AIDs epidemic. Other central issues included sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls, low-wages, the excessively high costs of childcare and quality education for children. Women who joined and worked with PWC at the Convention used this information to develop a succinct statement that to present on the Convention floor—further raising awareness around the issues of gender justice. These women included Kim Price, Ruth Nicole, Angie Beatty, Shani Jamila, Malika Sanders, Lisa Smith, Aisha Durham, Shannel Roberts, and Alicia Holmes.

For PWC organizers, the most critical moment of the Convention was on Thursday night at a local restaurant and called Flava, where the PWC along with We Got Issues! hosted a “Rant Fest.” Young women from Oakland, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, New Jersey, Michigan, and Puerto Rico arrived with Afros,

dreadlocks, and curly waves to express themselves to rhythmic drumming incense, candles and warm and supportive brown female bodies. More than 150 young feminists of color converged to seize the “mic”—to sing, rhyme, recite poetry, cry, testify, and preach. The immense power and beauty assembled in one place, at one time was overwhelming. Participants articulated love, compassion and eagerness to heal together and build together—not because they all shared the same politics, but because they understood the triumph of release and the victory that is intrinsic to any righteous struggle. Many young girls in the audience (who had come expecting something different—to dance, to hear some hip-hop, to meet a “conscious brotha”) left feeling the elixir of woman-centered, emotional bonding. The transformation was evident both in the tears, the laughter, the prayers, the hugs and smiles of the women and girls in the room. They left with the familiar experience of “personal is political” feminism, which ironically, rallied and rejuvenated them for the impending political fight ahead on the Convention floor.

The PWC understood that the incisiveness of their language could, and most likely would, intimidate other women who did not hold what they deemed “progressive” views regarding the issue of gender. Still some members were ill-prepared for the sheer venom that was directed toward those who openly claimed to be “feminist.” When PWC members solicited the support of women leadership in the Convention, they were given a cold shoulder. It was rumored that although “they agreed with what the PWC was saying, it doesn’t really come from the community.” When PWC organizers forced the issue, they were told by the female Co-Chair, Angela Woodson that “*Black men are the real*

*endangered species!*”<sup>74</sup> In the minds of female NHHPC leadership, issues of gender-based and sexual violence couldn’t hold a light to issues like hood economics, policy brutality, failing educational systems, the prison-industrial complex, and the social marginality of urban youth (read urban male youth). Gender was somehow disengaged from other chronic social issues—“it wasn’t really a ‘hip hop’ issue.”<sup>75</sup> In the minds of some the Convention organizers, the way Black sexual politics unraveled in the context of urban crisis was secondary to the other “more important” issues facing Black families in urban areas.

Obviously members of the PWC did not agree. In response to this attempt to derail the PWC, caucus members used their resources as graduate students, community college instructors, administrative assistants, and activists to tap into the previously unexplored realm of third wave feminist activism that was emerging locally across the country. Activists in the PWC designed a slate panels that would foster much needed debate around core issues such as Gay Rights as Human Rights, Reading Misogyny, and Black Women’s Political Leadership. PWC reached out to organizations like “We Got Issues,” the National Black Women’s Health Imperative, the Third Wave Foundation, Code Pink, Twenty-first Century Youth Leadership Movement, the Office of Lesbian and Gay Affairs at Rutgers University, and several women who free-lanced for magazines like *Source*, *Sister to Sister*, *Blue*, and *Essence*. All at various points expressed skepticism about participating in a “hip-hop Convention” organized primarily by Black male public elites to develop a “National Agenda.” Such a commitment seemed “suspect” to self-acclaimed *feminists*, but they also understood that there would be thousands of

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<sup>74</sup> Personal copy of email exchange from 1/28/04.

<sup>75</sup> Personal copy of email exchange of 3/25/04.

young Black and brown bodies present at the Convention, and this was the opportunity to organize together to develop a gender justice political platform, which would be unique for a national agenda instigated by predominantly Black male leadership. PWC organizers also emphasized that they could ensure that young girls had a place within the Convention to celebrate and intensify their own power and agency in the larger discussion of hip-hop. “We needed their help to ensure that the hip-hop could more fully realize its own objective of creating a political agenda for the “hip-hop generation.” We wanted to help, so we asked for help.”<sup>76</sup> We saw the potential for a crossing and transformed our physical, mental and electronic bodies into a bridge.

During the Convention all participants were overwhelmed by the fruits of their labor. Teenage girls—U.S. Black, Latina, Muslim, Asian American and Caribbean--came to workshops and programs, further radicalizing the PWC platform developed during the Convention.. Twenty-something women dressed in mini dresses and high heels who came to the Rant Fest for the purpose of clubbing were inspired by the prose of feminist women pouring their hearts out on a open mic. “We cried, we sang, we shouted, we pumped our fists, we laughed and we reveled in our own beauty.”<sup>77</sup> Members of the PWC as well as other national organizers were floored by the success their efforts yielded. “We felt like we did something worthwhile, and we were passionate about continuing this work. We became, as much as most of despised the term, “hip-hop feminists.”

Although the PWC was a legitimate part of the Convention, members always felt like “interlopers. We always got the rolled eyes, the funny looks, and comments like ‘she’s with the PWC you better watch what you say around her. In a way, we became

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<sup>76</sup> Personal interview with PWC organizer Ruth Nicole Brown.

<sup>77</sup> Personal interview with PWC organizer, Alicia Holmes.

notorious. Our reputations preceded us.’’<sup>78</sup> After the 2004 Convention, while there were very few who would dare to publicly challenge the PWC, the Convention still found ways to “table” proposals to institutionalize the PWC as part of the official body of the Convention. Although the PWC was later invoked by male organizers in public speaking engagements to boost the legitimacy of subsequent hip hop political mobilizations, PWC was never able to become a substantive decision-making body within the Convention. Keisha, Aminata, Melanie, and Angelica, core Newark organizers for the Convention, developed enduring, working relationships with local members of the PWC, but their “political” work remained exclusively focused on “Black youth.” Although they are now more receptive to feminism, gender as an important organizing issue remains elusive in Newark. However after national radio host Don Imus attacked the Rutgers’s Women’s basketball team, “Gender Justice” was adopted as part of the agenda leading up to the National Hip Hop Political Convention in 2008. The PWC achieved national recognition and respect for woman of color organizing in the context of the Convention, but they lacked legitimacy at the local level because few women of color have the resources, wherewithal, and political support to take up issues like reproductive justice, economic violence, and sexual violence in cities like Newark. Given such mixed results, a few members of the PWC begrudgingly agreed to continue work with NHHPC to ensure that women of color organizations that do work at the local level have some, albeit limited, access to the public stage of Black politics. On the other hand, PWC managed to elicit considerable support to bring their politics to national organizing bodies, especially within organizations and associations that are interested in “gender” as a political issue.

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<sup>78</sup> Personal interview with Kimala Price, PWC Co-founder.

*Gender, Power and Social Capital in the National Hip Hop Political Convention*

The National Hip-Hop Political Convention was successfully used as political space by feminist and non-feminist Black women activists. Not only was hip-hop understood as a space that could challenge Black youth marginality, and the myriad of issues that are associated with urban youth (gangs, street violence, poor education, economic disadvantage) in ways that systematically linked art and culture with a larger movement for social justice, but it was also successfully utilized as a space through which some political Black women could come to voice. Without doubt, one of the major benefits that U.S. Black women activists enjoyed through their participation was the opportunity to use their own stores of social capital in service to a larger predominantly African America social movement, especially the identification and cultivation of leadership among minority youth in urban communities around the nation. For Aminata, this meant using personal contacts derived from prior years of organizing with the New Black Panther Party, the People's Organization for Progress, and the Million Youth March. For Melanie, this meant using her relationships with Rutgers University administrators and students, teachers and administrator from Newark's public school system to forge more intimate and lasting ties between the national organizing body and local political elites. In the months leading up to the Convention activists were able to cultivate the leadership potential of young people by exposing them to a variety of viewpoints on the state of urban communities using the trope of hip hop. Activists within the PWC were able to build relationships with other women of color organizations, craft a language that was more inclusive of the larger goals of the Convention, while also carving out a space (though contested) for feminist activists

within the Black public sphere. Many women who organized with NHPPC went on to run for office, initiate new projects with colleagues from around the country and around the world, and were able to otherwise become more fully engaged in the “politics” of their respective communities. Having played an intrinsic role in the collective mobilization effort of the U.S. Black women activists effectively re-established the centrality of coalition-building efforts within and between African American organizations, progressive people of color organizations, *and* a variety of leftist organizations that all mutually benefited from tapping into the electoral power of potential voters in urban communities.

While it is clear that U.S. Black feminist activists were able to seize hip-hop as a viable space for Black women to enact their “politics,” it is not clear that hegemonic Black gender ideology within the Black public sphere could be transgressed through U.S. Black women’s “politics,” feminist or not. The ability to translate their social capital into decision-making *power* was stymied at various points and the directional flow of Black women’s social capital was carefully maneuvered to benefit predominantly Black male political elites in the sphere of Black politics, or to individually benefit select Black women activists (both feminist and non-feminist). The opportunity structures in place for U.S. Black women activists to gain access to the public stage of Black politics was regulated by nationalist, and liberal bourgeois ideologies firmly rooted in patriarchal and heteronormative social values. While activists from the PWC managed to create an atmosphere in which the explicit intersectional political engagement with issues like rape, domestic violence, and the sexual exploitation of girls could be systematically addressed, they were not able to de-marginalize these “gender” items, and have them



addressed on their own terms. For example, PWC activists rigorously lobbied state delegates to adopt gender justice as an individual social justice agenda item along with major issues such as criminal justice, education, economic justice, health and wellness, and human rights. After intensive debates, the Convention adopted only two lines that had originated in the PWC agenda. These were (1) “we call for federal legislation to ensure women’s reproductive health, including safe and legal access to reproductive choices, and education and awareness about reproductive issues” and (2) “we oppose all forms of economic violence” which was included as an economic justice agenda item. No explicit language was included opposing sexual and gender-based violence, or homophobia and heterosexism and misogyny in the hip hop generation, the most distinctly “feminist” issues that the PWC advocated. In the end, despite arduous efforts by the PWC, the National Hip Hop Political Convention of 2004 produced an agenda that recapitulated the political demands of the peculiarly nationalistic, racially liberal, heterosexist and resolutely moderate, Black left.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Social Capital, Black Women's Political Space and Black Cultural Production**

In the past decade several eminent scholars have advanced rather dire assessments of the contemporary state of African American women's political activism. Patricia Hill Collins (2004), for example, examines scholarly anthologies to gauge the contemporary state of Black feminisms. Conflating academic and journalistic analyses with activism, she questions whether works devoted to discursive analysis of popular culture are sufficient to challenge the dismal social conditions that face a new generation of African Americans in the aftermath of twentieth-century American social movements. When she turns directly to local activism, she poses the following questions to her readers: "In essence one might ask whether Black women of the hip hop generation are beginning to make these important connections between the power of mass media and grassroots political organization, even though the connection might not be immediately apparent. Conversely, a similar question concerns how Black women working within grassroots organizations are to be the beachhead of Black women in popular culture" (2006, 1994). Despite the importance of such questions, in *Black Sexual Politics*, Hill Collins does little to engage the voices of Black women who are involved in Black community politics. Although she briefly discusses the murder of Sakia Gunn, she does not investigate the processes through which Sakia Gunn's life and death were politicized and made visible to larger, albeit restricted publics. She pays little attention to the intersectional politics of identity that produced the narrative of Sakia Gunn, nor to the institutional political forces

that failed to act on behalf of Newark's Black LGBT youth. The Black women activists who mobilized after Sakia's death remain shrouded in a cloak of anonymity. By mistaking journalists and social critics for social activists, Hill Collins helps to render invisible the full scope of Black women's political activism in Newark.

In Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment (2000), Sheila Radford-Hill seeks to revitalize Black women's political activism, calling for new alternatives to the "destructive" impact of Afrocentric nationalisms and contemporary academic feminism. Her argument for revitalization rests on the premise that there has been a significant decline in Black women's community activism: "The decline of Black women's empowerment is characterized by a diminution of Black women's grassroots activism. Black women's abdication of community building and political action repudiates standards of Black womanhood that previous generations were socialized to uphold" (2007, 23). Radford-Hill's claim that Black women have retreated from the politics of "racial uplift" is curiously nostalgic. She interprets contemporary Black women's political agency solely in terms of the familiar modes of social movement politics that guided the civil rights and Black power movements. Defining African American politics as highly visible, national *demonstrations*, Radford-Hill does not consider the possibility that Black women's political agency has emerged in alternative spaces that do not rely upon identity in the same way that earlier Black feminists imagined, and indeed undermined rigid scalar constructions of politics. Wed to a limited notion of mass demonstration, Radford-Hill fails to recognize that the most radical manifestations of Black women's political agency may lie in the connections and

resource flows among networks within and between cities rather than through tightly bounded social ties within national membership organizations.

Many scholars have situated Black women's activism within the larger civil rights movements for racial and sexual equality, especially struggles for equal access to the ballot box (White 1999, Terbogg-Penn 1999, Giddings 1984, Orleck 2005, Williams 2004, Hanson 2003, Springer 1999, Collier-Thompson 2001, White 1999, Terbog-Penn 1998, Robnett 1997, Guy-Sheftall 1990, Gilkes 1988, Giddings 1984). Within these works, U.S. Black women's activism is tied to participation in social movements aimed at ensuring full citizenship for African Americans, augmented by middle class Black women's associationalism, which was specifically aimed at racial uplift in the Black community. From a strategic vantage point, these "racial uplift" programs relied upon imparting middle class values through education, poverty relief, and the cultivation of Black middle-class, professional social networks that increase opportunities for employment among African Americans (White 1999, Terbogg-Penn 1999). Black women's creation of and participation in these "racial uplift" programs are so central to historical accounts of Black women's community activism that they have come to define Black women's activism. But this conception of activism has a particular ideological cast. It is (1) largely integrationist, (2) shaped by class yet over-determined by racial inequality and race-loyalty, and (3) firmly situated within a liberal conception of individual self help and community empowerment through civic voluntarism and social activism (Kukla 2005, White 1999, Tergbogg-Penn 1998, Giddings 1984).

While there is little question that Black women's political agency played a crucial role in organizing the highly visible demonstrations of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-

century civil rights politics, Black women were required to play these roles behind the scenes. Thus many popular constructions of Black women's political activism reinforce conventional scripts of Black political power, reaffirming a hegemonic Black gender ideology: women work behind the scenes and Black men claim credit in front of the camera. This image of "Black politics" incorporates a highly problematic sexual politics. Failing to take gender power seriously, it overlooks the fact that the Black public sphere is carefully patrolled. As political subjects, many Black political women have been assigned scripts written by Black male political elites.

Indeed, the claim that Black women have remained "silent" or have stayed on the sidelines of Black community politics, is plausible only if one accepts a masculinist conception of politics predisposed toward a certain, albeit unstated, scalar construction of politics. Such a conception of politics relies upon a rigid demarcation between local and national that neglects translocal politics, a politics that relies upon frequent movement within and between scalar structures and ideological stances for success (Sandoval 2000). The intensive focus of scholars and the media on the male-dominated national agenda masks Black women's political work at the local level unless that work recapitulates a familiar meta-narrative of Black cultural production. Such a perspective masks the intricacies of Black politics at the local level, it also masks the actual production of translocal politics which makes the illusion of a cohesive national Black politics possible.

Some recent studies of U.S. Black women's activism emphasize Black women's engagement with the state, including local welfare agencies and public housing authorities. Contesting racist attitudes that shape official public policy and racist practices in the implementation of public policy, Black women have manifested their

agency through the creation of formal and informal organizations that challenge state-sanctioned racial hostility toward Black families headed by single, welfare-reliant mothers (Orleck 2005, Williams 2004). These studies extend earlier analyses of Black women's community activism, showing how class, race and sexuality intersect in a socio-political environment produced through intensive policing of Black women's families, personal lives and reproductive capacities (Orleck 2005, Williams 2004, Roberts 1997). While these studies document Black women's resistance, attending to efforts to organize and mobilize within particular communities, they retain a state-centered focus which ignores Black cultural production and the role of local Black political elites.

In contrast to these social movement and state-centric approaches, this research suggests that Black women's political activism can be found in quite different venues. Guided by conceptions of politics articulated by Black women activists themselves, I have investigated translocal social networks through which Black political women in Newark express collective needs and mobilize political action to achieve tangible local programs. The network of associations that Black women activists in the Central Ward of Newark have created and sustained demonstrates the permeability of the local and national. Local stores of social capital translate into national visibility for specific "Black political issues" or "Black political agendas," but this social capital also creates spaces for the development of the leadership potential of Black youth. By focusing on concrete efforts of local women activists to address pressing concerns, my research rescues their agency from stereotypical notions that women's roles are necessarily scripted by Black political elites. It also demonstrates how a narrow focus on state-centric politics serves

masculinist ends, privileging dimensions of political life from which poor, Black women have been largely excluded.

By investigating women's social networks, I have been able to illuminate a political agenda that exceeds the issues preferred by the Black church and Black elected officials. Indeed, I have demonstrated how Black women have contested the self-serving politics of local elites and how they have attempted to inject issues pertaining to race, gender and sexuality into local and national debates. Refusing to abide by the scripts accredited by the institutions of church and state, Black women engage myriad issues although their oppositional politics tends to be ignored by elites, media, and academics. Indeed, my research suggests that these diverse modes of political activism tend to be erased from the public record, unless they support hegemonic elements of Black cultural production. By tracing how long traditions of Black nationalism and Black patriarchy continue to play out in Newark, I have identified constraints upon Black women's political activism seldom acknowledged by social scientists.

*Persistent Constraints: Black Nationalism and Black Patriarchy*

While many studies have demonstrated that local Black elites exercise power through established institutions such as local government, public bureaucracies, cultural and religious institutions and community organizations, few explore liberal, heterosexist, and masculinist biases within these institutions. Nor do many examine the complex interrelationships between Black nationalism and Black patriarchy in mainstream organizations.

Studies documenting Black women's participation in the Black Power movement, and other nationalist or cultural nationalist spaces, have discussed Black women's agency, typically in terms of their demonstrated loyalty to the ideological missions of nationalist organizations. Women have played particularly important roles in creating and maintaining educational and cultural programming for Black youth, and providing administrative and moral support and leadership within these organizations (Collier-Thompson and Franklin 2001, Woodward 1999, Kuumba 1999, Wallace 1984, Brown 1992). In these accounts, Black women strongly support nationalist organizational missions designed to resist racism and racial inequality through collective Black self-determination and militancy. While many women within such organizations have explicitly challenged sexist exclusionary attitudes and practices by Black males, they also actively created autonomous spaces in which to cultivate their decision-making and creative capacities, especially through their community programming efforts. Organizations like the Black Women's United Front and the National Congress of Black Women emerged in the 1970's and 1980's. These organizations continue to attract hundreds of Black female activists, who continue to engage in sustained levels of local, translocal, and sometimes national activism.

These new women's political formations were initially positioned more or less amicably in relation to larger nationalist and Pan-Africanist organizations. Within these spaces Black women were lauded primarily as formidable "cultural workers." Their labor was viewed as essential to building a strong Black nation or community, particularly in urban areas like Newark. Yet these women's auxiliaries were specifically designed to cultivate women's leadership in their respective communities, and to foster



the development of a womanist consciousness, which Kuumba (1999) argues forged a simultaneous analysis of nation/class/gender oppression. Within these spaces the seeds of womanism or indeed, a specialized Black feminist critical consciousness, could emerge.

My research suggests that particular forms of Black cultural production associated with Black nationalism are characterized by a gendered division of labor, which continues to operate in venues at some remove from cultural nationalism. Indeed, the testimonies of my respondents and my case studies suggest that patriarchal nationalism circulates throughout mainstream and progressive sectors in Newark, creating significant obstacles to the achievement of women activists' political objectives. Black women were and are expected to work behind the scenes in nationalist organizations. That legacy infiltrates and structures mainstream, electoral politics in Newark, as well as innovative initiatives like the National Hip Hop Political Convention.

The case of Women in Support of the Million Man March (WISOMMM) illuminates the politics of this gendered division of labor and how Black nationalism spills over into electoral politics. In 2005, WISOMMM received a \$5.5 million dollar subsidized loan from the City of Newark and Independence Bank to purchase the 65,000 square foot, First Presbyterian Church of Newark for use as a cultural center. Malika Wilcox, a devout Muslim and Executive Director of Women in Support of the Million Man March, was an avid political supporter of Sharpe James, Ras Baraka, Ron Rice, Ron Rice Jr, Donald Payne, Donald Payne, Jr. and other Black male political elites in the city of Newark. Her close ties with Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, further cemented her formidable political and cultural clout within Newark's Black community. She had demonstrated ability to raise money, mobilize voters, and build viable

institutions purchased and controlled by Black people, yet she supported a decidedly masculinist conception of Black cultural and political production, a conception that continues to flourish in the city of Newark to this day.

Malika had long supported then Mayor Sharpe James controversial redevelopment programs, which led to the decimation of public housing, even as the remaining units were over-run with crime, mismanagement and gang violence. As a core organizer for Women in Support of the Million Man March (WISOMMM), in 1995 Malika supported the idea that African American women refrain from attending the Million Man March so that issues directly affected African American men could be publicly addressed: “I got a lot of flack from women who were mad because I supported the march. But I thought they (the men) did it right. I thought that women should go some place and find their own way.” Malika’s path to politics was one that was closely tied to the urban based social justice programs heavily influenced by revolutionary and Black nationalist activism in the 1960’s-1970’s, especially the Newark based chapter of the People’s Organization for Progress (POP).<sup>79</sup> The People’s Organization for Progress mobilized primarily around police brutality, reparations for people of African descent, and various forms of “anti-violence work,” including the routine organization of anti-war protests, gang truces, and vigils, marches, and other local direct actions aimed to both politicize and curb street, gang and police violence in Newark.<sup>80</sup> Malika viewed her own role as a woman leader as instrumental to POP’s local mobilization efforts in Newark. As a result of her participation with the People’s Organization for Progress and

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<sup>79</sup> The People’s Organization for Progress grew out of the leadership of the Black Student Movement in New Jersey, which facilitated the development of Black student unions on high school and college campus in Northern New Jersey. The organization was instrumental in the anti-apartheid movement, in which a number of the political women identified in this study took part.

<sup>80</sup> Personal interview with People’s Organization for Progress national chair, Larry Hamm.

the Nation of Islam, she was asked to form WISOMMM to raise money and coordinate the mobilization of over 50,000 Black men in the Northeastern seaboard. As she recounted: “Well, Larry Hamm asked if we would be the support arm of WISOMMM in 1995, because they needed somebody to help them raise money. They always came to the women, so they asked me whether I would chair. Of course, I loved the idea and did it.” Under Malika’s guidance, after the March, WISOMMM incorporated and began to develop autonomous community based programming, including sponsoring after-school care, African dance classes, Kwanzaa and Black history month programs, community health screenings, annual trips to Africa, and quarterly forums with guest lecturers who spoke on a variety of social, cultural and political issues that were deemed relevant to the Black community.

Malika’s political work focused on the creation of institutions to foster the development of self-esteem and to promote self-determination and self-reliance of Black people, especially Black youth. She was particularly concerned to pass on a political, economic and cultural “inheritance” to the emerging generation of Black political leadership and saw institutionalization as key to this transmission of values.

“With us being able to purchase property so we can have the programs that we want to have in these buildings. I think that it’s been pretty effective. I mean, teaching the three and four year olds like going right to the cradle, and teaching the babies giving them a strong sense of self. And that’s what you see, when you see our children when they get up and perform. They have a very strong sense of self, because they are taught by teachers who love them. And so, that’s been great. We’ve been able to bring street organizations and gang members in and talk them as mothers and grandmothers. We have dinner and we bring them and have Ras, DeLacey, Baye, and the other young brothers you know, talk with them.

It’s important to have a piece of land and have your property that you don’t have nobody ringing bells, telling you when you got to leave or what you got to do or telling you can’t have the kind of program here. That’s very key. I think that’s

been the best when working with this organization that they are not afraid to venture out and to reach.”

Beginning with the Million March March in 1995 and continuing well into the twenty-first century with the founding of the first African American Cultural Center in the State of New Jersey, WISOMMM under the direction of Malika Wilcox expertly cultivated social capital, enabling the flow of communication, resources, and trust within and between scalar structures. Malika construed this powerful political work in gendered terms, indeed in terms of the ideology of motherhood. Within this mothering frame, social capital is fostered through mechanisms like talking and having dinner, nurtured by the “love” of “mothers and grandmothers.”

Malika’s relationship with Sharpe James and other Black male political elites in the city did not go unnoticed or uncriticized, especially in light of the numerous accusations and investigation of corruption within the James Administration. Yet Malika understood her role in relation to the city’s notorious autocrat in a rather peculiar manner:

“I know everybody calls me a Sharpe James operative. You know, they said that in the paper last week and everybody was so upset. I wasn’t really upset. I know they meant it in a very derogatory way. What I do know is that he’s done a lot for this town. Could he have done more? Sure, he could have. But he’s done a lot. You can’t say the man ain’t did nothing. Nobody can’t say that, Cory [Booker] can’t say that.”

In Malika’s view, supporting and encouraging Black political leadership that contributed to the development of autonomous Black economic, cultural and political institutions that could impart “strong African values” in Black youth was tantamount. Black women were idealized as mothers, supporters, nurturers and as vehicles of sacrifice for the larger Black community. When I asked whether or not Malika had ever felt marginalized at all when going about her political work, Malika responded, “Never. I

have always been thrust into leadership positions.” Although Malika understood patriarchal nationalism to be empowering, other Black women who were less willing to endorse male priorities chafed against these unrelenting constraints.

*Black Cultural Production versus Social Transformation*

The form and content of Black women’s political networks in Newark reveal how identity and agency intersect to create possibilities for both social transformation and the perpetuation of the status quo. In the case studies investigated in this dissertation, Black women create and utilize political space with markedly different outcomes depending on whether they support or contest male initiatives. In many respects, women’s ability to use social capital operates within fairly narrow parameters tied to Black cultural production. When Black women’s political agency contributes to Black cultural production endorsed by patriarchal nationalism, they receive political support and their projects flourish, especially at the local level. Conversely, when Black women challenge hegemonic elements of Black cultural production—particularly when they challenge masculinist conceptions that conflate Blackness and community—their social capital tends to be stifled, thwarting their efforts at social transformation at the local level.

In *Stand and Deliver: Political Leadership, Activism, and Hip Hop Culture*, Yvonne Bynoe attributes the lack of a contemporary, national social justice movement for Black liberation and political empowerment to the apathy, individualism, and disorganization of the hip hop generation. Her complaint is quite compelling, but for reasons that she only sparsely addresses: “A few men have claimed the leadership mantle based on their media presence and rhetorical skills. These men, unable or unwilling to

examine the current state of affairs are content to use a worn-out blue print as the means of obtaining a national platform for their own advancement. Neither Black people generally, nor the mainstream media that continually spotlights these so-called leaders seem concerned that these individuals, unlike their predecessors, lack a constituency, an organization or even a plan” (Bynoe 2004, 27). Bynoe does not consider an alternative interpretation: what appears to be the absence of a plan might indeed be the perpetuation of a gendered status quo. My examination of the politics of National Hip Hop Political Convention suggests that even when “leaders” get organized, mobilize their considerable local constituencies, and develop a plan, the larger community may prefer to reject their masculinist vision. “Inaction” in this instance may signify dissent from the vision on offer. The contemporary national Black “social justice movement” may fail to be attractive to a new generation of Black feminist activists because it simply reinforces values that are sexist, homophobic, and contrary to the needs of poor people of color who are interested in imagining and achieving an alternative conception of politics. Appeals to liberal, democratic procedures and appeals to clarity, rationality, and compromise may strengthen rather than dismantle longstanding systems of domination, especially if leaders use their power to keep certain issues off the political agenda.

In this dissertation, I have investigated Black women’s politics, as understood, enacted, and defined in practice in the *habitus* of Newark. The cityscapes of Newark, a visual economy of urban blight, urban revitalization, and cultural production of blackness, structure the political terrain of the Central Ward, shaping women’s perceptions of political need and political action. Local Black women’s politics entails the creation and transformation of political spaces to develop the political leadership of

marginalized Black youth. In the case of Sakia Gunn, poor Black youth in the Central Ward transgressed conventional sexual and gender scripts, challenging the heteronormativity of public school teachers and administrators, clergy, and elected officials. Black women activists sought not only to create safe spaces for these contestations, but to politicize issues of heterosexism and homophobia within the Black community, as well as Black-on-Black violence among youth.

Black women activists mobilized in Newark's Central Ward in the aftermath of Sakia Gunn's death, building a formidable coalition of local activists who sought to empower a population marginalized by class, age, sexuality *and* Blackness. Enormous stores of social capital were expended by Newark Pride Alliance to politicize HIV/AIDs as a cross-cutting issue to solicit the support of predominantly Black intervening institutions to confront the deadly social and personal implications of hatred and heterosexism. Transformative efforts to create youth-based programming and to secure political support for a center that incorporated an intersectional critique of urban power and hegemony failed to materialize. The only palpable result to emerge in the aftermath of Sakia's death addressed a generic form of street violence. Despite the arduous efforts of LGBT activists, the token transformation involved an "anti-bullying ordinance" passed by the city council. While the anti-bullying ordinance was an important step forward in a public school system racked by various forms of violence, this political-juridical response completely erased the intersectional critique of power articulated by the Newark Pride Alliance activists—a critique that intentionally and systematically linked the vulnerability of Black LGBT youth to a political economy reinforced by heterosexist cultural norms.

In the case of the National Hip Hop Political Convention, youth who expressed a nominal interest in some aspect of “hip-hop” were mobilized by both established Black elites and a new generation of feminist activists. Although the networking and coalition building among feminist activists throughout the Convention generated a strong and concise collective statement linking gender, sexual, and reproductive oppression with economic violence, this radical feminist agenda was reduced to “health and wellness” and a national stance supporting women’s reproductive “choice” in the agenda approved by the Convention delegates. When the language of economic violence was detached from gender- and sex-specific issues, the transformative potential of intersectional politics was reduced to liberal reform.

Despite their inability to persuade “voters” to adopt their feminist agenda, activists at the National Hip Hop Political Convention did succeed in transforming political spaces at the Convention. An artistic and cultural terrain that is renowned for its reliance on hypersexualized, destructive deployment of Black and female bodies was publicly challenged by Black women who called attention to sexism and misogyny in hip hop as well as in Black (and white) communities more generally. While Black feminist politics was without doubt marginalized within the context of the convention, women succeeded in contesting hegemonic interpretations of Blackness.

It is worth noting that the radical interpretation of social justice politics embedded in the structural intersectionality of hip hop feminism was defeated by the adaptation of “democratic decision-making” on the convention floor. Economic justice was collectively rejected for a more convenient liberal articulation of women’s “individual choice,” defined as a “progressive” stance in Black community politics. Moreover, Black



male activists used this *de facto* de-radicalization of the feminism of young women of color to legitimate their own sexual politics. Adopting the unrealized norm of gender parity, Black men effectively erased the more transformative elements of feminist organizing within the convention. In the process they reproduced an old pattern, reducing Black women to passive supporters of Black men who held political ambitions to win votes in urban communities. With this reassertion of patriarchal power, sexuality was erased as homophobic and heterosexist tendencies in the Black community withstood a momentary challenge.

Although feminism flourished in the Progressive Women's Caucus at the Convention, many Black women activists articulated a preference for "womanism," a view that affords a familiar role for Black women in the empowerment of Black communities. Despite the presence of a cohort of articulate Black feminists at the Convention, "womanists" rejected feminism because it purportedly privileged the struggle of white women and lesbians over that of Black people. Yet more is at issue in this rejection than the politics of white supremacy. Those who rejected feminism were the same political women who declined to mention sexuality, homophobia or heterosexism in their discussions of pressing political issues in the Black community. Only those activists who explicitly identified with "feminism" or "Black feminism" concretely engaged issues concerning sexual and other forms of gender-based violence in their political work, articulating an anti-heterosexist political stance. Not surprisingly, then, issues of homophobia and heterosexism were politicized within of the convention only by those who identified as feminist.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> It should be noted that the few gay men who attended the convention, also identified with and participated in the final proposals of PWC.

Although the talents of Black women community activists and organizers were actively recruited for the larger political purposes of Black solidarity and the appearance of a gender-inclusive “hip hop political agenda,” support for Black women’s autonomous “political work” at the local level was not tolerated unless it reproduced hegemonic Black cultural production, as defined and institutionalized by local Black male political elites. Ideological processes embedded in patriarchal nationalism regulate interpretations of Black cultural production within liberal and nationalist frames in ways that patrol Black women’s access to the Black public sphere. Regardless of the extensiveness of transformative vision and effort, Black women political activists’ political work did not receive recognition, resources, and political support unless it enhanced the particular interpretation of Black cultural production defined by Black male political elites. Explicitly feminist antiracist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic politics at the local level and at the national level are particularly vulnerable to erasure. The concrete policies, platforms, and political agendas that dominate the Black public sphere continue to marginalize the political interests of radical Black women, while rendering their political work invisible. The issue for feminist scholarship then is not the dearth of Black women’s political activism, but its suppression.

Kimberly Springer (2002) has pointed out that the “wave analogy” is untenable for those who wish to understand Black feminist activism. Extrapolated from the experience of an affluent cohort of white women, the notion of feminist “waves” perpetuates the exclusion of women of color from the histories of women’s movements and from feminist theorizing. My research both supports and transcends Springer’s insight. Many U.S. Black women come to the public sphere through gendered political

scripts rooted in historical struggles against Black racialization. Whether politicized within the Civil Rights Movement or the Black Power Movement, many Black women developed political consciousness in the context of resolutely patriarchal Black politics. Although these political movements made important strides against white supremacy, they failed to deliver crippling blows to the detrimental forces behind contemporary Black marginality: racialized, urban poverty and gender, class, and sexual struggles *internal* to the Black community.

Black women's political agency, as understood and defined by women activists within poor urban communities, is eclipsed by more than the wave metaphor, however. While the politics of white middle-class feminists have often elided the issues and struggles of women of color, so too have Black patriarchal politics, whether in nationalist or liberal guises. Black women political activists in inner cities struggle against processes within and without the community which render them invisible. Neither objective social science research, nor GOTV efforts have attended carefully to the autonomous agendas of Black women's social networks. Although Black elites have appropriated Black women's abilities to mobilize funds and voters for mainstream purposes, they have been far less interested in Black feminists' critiques of the status quo. Whether deemed invisible or apolitical, Black women's autonomous political work has been largely discounted. By illuminating the context and content of Black women's political activism in Newark, this dissertation seeks to redress this historic oversight.

*Final Thoughts on Identity, Experience and Black Women's Political Agency*

This dissertation is inherently a sustained reflection on structure and agency, specifically how identities themselves get constituted in the ubiquitous and ever continuing interplay between structure and agency. To ground this discussion, I chose a topic that was close to my heart and my own “politics.” Feminists of a psychoanalytic persuasion may suggest that my preoccupation with identity, with black women as both subjects and objects of truth and meaning-making, is the result of a sufferance, of injury and lack. Given U.S. black women’s extenuated history of sexual, social, political, and epistemic violence, this might very well be “true.” In this research, I interpellated my subjects as “black political women in the Central Ward of Newark.” The twenty-nine activists I interviewed for this dissertation were nominated by community members who had stakes in Newark’s political system. My informants also understood they had a stake in playing a role in the constitution of Black female activists in Newark as subjects.

In this research, I granted epistemic authority to my subjects. Indeed, the principle source of evidence for this dissertation was “experience,” as recounted through semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. The testimonials of these activists were juxtaposed against hard empirical facts about the socio-economic and demographic data about the Central Ward. I situated black women’s agency and subjectivity within the discursive space of the Central Ward, the visual economy of blackness that permeates Newark’s cityscapes, as well as the larger historical process of racialization, deindustrialization and urban insurgency that have shaped the political economy of Newark’s Central. While the initial interests driving this project was a reconceptualization of politics—this interest was complicated by the growing relevance of scale as these relate to “politics” and as scale itself shaped political action black

women's political agency. The adoption of an urban anthropological framework "demarginalized the intersection" (to use Kimberly Crenshaw's term) of identity and space as these relate to the constitution of political subjects. In the end, this project evolved into an ethnographic inquiry into the political spaces that black women created in the city as they mobilized after the murder of Sakia Gunn, and in preparation for the National Hip Hop Political Convention of 2004.

Sustained inquiry into the "politics" of my subjects entailed a foray into how their own narrations and actualizations of political agency were both spatially and temporally constituted, and how they were articulated through a variety of ideological positionings. Specifically, the cultural production of blackness *vis a vis* black nationalism and black racial liberalism. The reclamation of the Newark's cityscapes as a beloved home, though mired in racialized poverty, alienation, despair and blight, emerged as one of the most prominent themes shaping black women's political subjectivity in the Central Ward. Black political women's widespread participation in a variety of community-based organizations, and institutions far exceeded the purview of what political scientists like Sidney Verba, Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina have termed "civic volunteerism" and "civic engagement." Much of their agency did not rest on the sole the assumption that the local apparatuses of the state were "democratic" and *could be* accountable to and responsive to their needs of the communities. Even as my many subjects sought and won elected offices, much of their political efficacy was realized outside of the confines of formal means of political participation.

In many places, this dissertation illuminated the sheer ineptitude of predominantly black intervening institutions at the local level to address the claims making of black

women activists—especially activists who aimed to subvert structural hierarchies based upon sexuality, age, class and gender through the developing the “leadership capacity” of black youth through the deployment of identity. Ironically, this dissertation has suggested that although black cultural production provides spaces of acceptance and affirmation for black female political subjects, especially their willingness to cultivate the leadership of black youth, these same spaces also constrained black women’s agency by stifling black women’s utilization of hard won social capital that they themselves produced in their leadership development efforts.

In this project, the selection of “experience” as the primary means through which make visible how intersecting structures of domination shapes the political identities and lived experiences of U.S. black women was a result of a personal commitment to make use of the theoretical insights produced by black feminist thinkers including Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, and bell hooks, among others. Through their scholarship these black feminist scholars have laid out an emancipatory blue print to illuminate the lives, perspectives, dilemmas, agencies, oppressions, joys, pains, and lived experiences of Black women. While their works are largely ignored or dismissed as essentialist, dated, or worse in most graduate courses in women’s and gender classrooms today (thereby inhibiting the production of knowledge about black women’s lives) the widespread denial of their insights based on racist and sometime racist reasoning does not go unnoticed. In fact, in this work I have “reclaimed” identity (to use Paula Moya’s phrase) in order to fulfill a larger social justice goal in black community politics—that is the eradication of widespread misogyny that continues to smother the opportunities and life chances of millions of black and brown women in the United States. The sophisticated treatments

and theoretical suppositions of Chicana feminists including Chela Sandoval and Gloria Anzaldua have been invaluable in producing an account of black women's agency rooted in empirical assessment of oppression yet overdetermined by the interiority of experiences of survival, talking back, living and being agentic in places that routinely deny the legitimacy of their existence.

While this dissertation was informed by black feminist standpoint epistemology, my invocation of experience in this dissertation was not utilized uncritically and unproblematically. In fact, the deployment of U.S. black women as an identity was not inattentive to complex ideological systems that produced black female political subjectivity and the ways in which black female political agency was made visible. In fact, ideology itself was most clearly witnessed through the vast range of 'spaces' through which black women's political activism were allowed to flourish. Insights from urban anthropology provided the methodological leverage to situate black female subjectivity with place and space while simultaneously accounting for impact of historical processes of racialization, that necessitates intersectional politics on the ground, and which have made certain identities seem so real for so long.

Following Joan Wallach Scott's critique of 'experience,' I have tried to not only to attend to the historical processes and discursive mechanisms that position black women as subjects, but I have also tried to show that the project of making black women's political experiences visible does not preclude analyses of categories of representation (i.e. young, black, gay, female and "political,"); nor analyses of how categories of representation operate to produce both subjects of study and valid accounts of their political agency and subjectivity. In this dissertation, experience has been used to

constitute knowledge about black women's politics in Newark, however I have not presumed an unmediated, direct relationship between these women's identities and their politics. In fact, the politics of identity practiced by black political women's seemed to be more closely tied to space than to any essentialist invocation of one or more aspect of their personal identity.

Ultimately, this project is an exploration of how identity creates, negotiates, and reproduces complex interplays, iterations, and tensions between structure and agency. In this project, differences between black female activists were showcased rather than sameness. The heterogeneity of social locations and subject positions of black political women was privileged in my retellings rather than their homogeneity. When patterns of sameness emerged in the testimonials of my subjects, it was most pronounced in their evaluations of a political system marked as "non-democratic," "hostile," "cutthroat," and "despotic." When these evaluative comments are correlated with the actual bodies that wield official power in the city of Newark and within the Central Ward, specifically, this is where the politics of identity, as retold by the narrator (myself) becomes relevant. This when it became important for me, as "knower," to evaluate the relevance of identity based claims made by my subjects, to specify the power relations that actually exist in the city and, importantly, to specify how black "political" women are situated within them.

In this dissertation I posed four key questions: What are the institutional origins of contemporary Black women's political agency? Within what social networks does Black women's political agency emerge? When and why do U.S. Black women mobilize for political action in urban communities? Rather than attempt to provide coherent straightforward "answers" to these questions, this dissertation has explored the complex



ways in which these personal interests of the researcher have emerged as scholarly questions to be investigated. For example, my analysis of black LGBT activism in Newark after the tragic death of Sakia Gunn revealed not only the painful ways in which Sakia herself got constituted as ‘political’ but the ways in which the efforts to politicize her death was systematically foreclosed by political elites who objected to the very presence of Sakia as an interpellated poor, black, teenaged, murdered lesbian and those who purported a positive affinity with her despised identities—that is, their solidarity through their identity politics

In 1998, Barbara Smith lamented, “There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women’s experience through studying our history, literature and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect for those who write or talk about our lives. Finally, there is not a developed body of black feminist politics whose assumptions could be used in the study of black women’s art (Smith 1998, 6).” To a large extent this project was an attempt to answer Barbara Smith’s challenge, and to develop a political theory of intersectionality that would enable the further development of themes to make meaning of the lives of black women.

**Appendix A:**  
**Newark Cityscapes**



**Figure 1.** Hamidah's Cafe and Body Shop is a Black Muslim business located on Halsey Street in the Central Ward of Newark. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 2.** The Afrique Hall mural is located on Halsey Street in the central downtown district of the Central Ward. Photograph by author.





**Figure 3.** Dr. Jay's is an urban clothing store located in the central downtown district on the corner of Market Street and Halsey Street. Photograph by author.



**Figure 4.** An African Hair Braiding Salon located on Washington Street in the Lincoln Park Neighborhood of the Central Ward. Photograph by author.





**Figure 5. All Brothers Liquors #1 is a liquor store located on West Kinney Street and Washington Avenue. Photograph by author.**

**Appendix B, Figure 1**  
**Education, Age, and Occupation of Selected “Political” Women**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Tamara Brown	College Grad	45	Property Manager
Aminata Obadele	Community College	29	Office Manager
Janet Armstrong	Post-Grad, Seminary School	54	Executive Director of Social Justice Center
Keyana Dunn	College Student	37	Student
Charlie Ann Grant	College Grad	67	Retired/Volunteer
Fatima Muhammad	High School Grad.	64	Poet/Organizer
Malika Wilcox	Community College-Real Estate License	62	Executive Director of African American Cultural Center
Renita Wiley	College Grad.	51	Retired Bus Driver
Roxanne Hampton	Community College	40	Newark School Board
Jennifer Wells	College Grad	39	Executive Director of Environmental Organization
Keisha Simpson	Post-Grad, Public Policy	27	Organizer for Community Economic Development Corporation
Melanie Hendricks	Post-Grad, Public Administration	28	Director, Youth Organization
Olivia Taylor	Post-Grad, Social Work	53	New Jersey State Legislator
Marilyn Wilson	Post Grad, Law School	45	Policy Director, Hospital Adm.
Tia Stewart	College Grad.	42	Youth Activist, Boys and Girls Club
Henrietta Parsons	College Grad	78	Retired Union Organizer
Ama Mdupe	Post-Grad, Education	59	Executive Director, Social Service Agency
Yvonne Warren	Community College	39	Newark Municipal Council
Angelica Hernandez	College	22	Outreach Coordinator, Community Center

**Appendix C:**  
**Active Organizational Membership/Civic Participation**  
**of Black Women Activists in Newark**

<b>Name<sup>82</sup></b>	<b>Names of Organization</b>
<b>Ama Mdupe</b>	President of Newark Public Library 1 <sup>st</sup> Vice President for National Congress of Black Women Women's Board Association of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center Chairperson for Commission on the Status of Women in Newark Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Vice Chairperson for National Congress of Black Women
<b>Aminata Obadele</b>	Black Student Union-"Black Freedom Society" The Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign Member of Malcolm X Grassroots Organization Minister of Education for the New Black Panther Party Alumni of New Leadership of the Eagleton Institute Member of Young Men's Christian Association Newark Student Voices National Hip Hop Political Convention
<b>Angelica Hernandez</b>	The All-Star Program-Mentor The Leadership Institute-Mentor Hip Hop Convention-Delegate & Volunteer Ebony Club-Co/Founder Universal Zulu Nation Cadet Program---Alumni Program T & T Teens Networking for Today Newark Public School District-Substitute Teacher
<b>Charlie Ann Grant</b>	Volunteer for the Integrity House Jon Corzine's Women's Committee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Member of Bethany Baptist Church Board member for the Boys and Girls Club Board member for the Independence Family of Services Founder of the Newark Women's Conference Founder of 100 Black women Founder of the International Congress of Black women New Jersey State Opera Guild
<b>Fatima Muhammad</b>	Community for Unified Newark African Free School Black Women United Front The National Black Political Assembly
<b>Janet Armstrong</b>	Advisory Board of She-Project—African American Women Newark Pride Alliance Liberation in Truth Lambda Legal Defense Fund Women Wear Hats Marriage Equality Organization Parent-Teacher Association Member—unspecified

<sup>82</sup> All subjects' names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.



Jennifer Wells	Black Voice/Carta Boricua International Black Women's National Congress First Baptist Church of Nutley Metropolitan Bowling Center "Above the Rim" Basketball Program National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Parent-Teacher Association: Harriet Tubman Elementary School and Weequahic High School Co-founder and President of the Weequahic Alumni Association Essex County Environmental Commission New Jersey Professional Women's
Keisha Simpson	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Hip Hop Political Convention, Indian Education Initiative, Near Eastside Neighborhood Association, Historic James Street Commons Association, Beyond Campus
Keyana Dunn	Gay Men's Health Crisis Mashood in Brooklyn Newark Pride Alliance Newark Episcopal Church Gay and Lesbian Student Network Project Wow! Gay Straight Alliance North Jersey Community Research Initiative/New Jersey's Aid Alliance
Malika Wilcox	Jihad Health Network Anti-Lynching Campaign, Concern Citizens of Essex County The Legal Women Voters Great Women In Support of the Million Man March People's Organization for Progress Black Cops Against Police Brutality President of the Carmel Towers Tentative Associate Parent-Teacher Association Springfield Avenue Community School
Melanie Hendricks	Leadership Newark Congressional Black Caucus Leadership Institute Member for the Hillside Board of Education Leadership Newark Graduate Organization National Hip Hop Political Convention Eagleton Institute of Politics Rutgers-Newark Urban Studies Rutgers-Newark Public Administration Department American Society for Public Administrators Northern New Jersey American Society for Public Administration Chapter Pi Alpha Honors Society Student Voices Empowerment Civics
Olivia Taylor	Member of New-Ark Participant of the Black Topological Library Newark Coalition for Neighborhoods Newark Coalition for Low-Income Housing

	Board Member, Institute of New Jersey Member for the East Orange Board of Education New Jersey School Board's Association National Council of Negro Women Lincoln University of Alumni National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Urban League Sierra Club Member of the Young Men Christian Association Trustee for Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey Board Member of Babyland Family Services
<b>Renita Wiley</b>	United States Army (E-5) District Leader- 28 <sup>th</sup> district in the Central Ward Newark Pride Alliance New Jersey Stonewall Democrats Unity Fellowship Church in New Brunswick Executive Board of the New Jersey Gay and Lesbian Coalition
<b>Roxanne Hampton</b>	New Black Panther Party Court Appointed Special Advocates Newark Tenants Council Recreation Program General Educational Development Program (GED) Million Man March
<b>Tamara Brown</b>	Pillars of Peace Youth Ministry Ministry Advisors Council for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center Volunteer of CASA Newark Cycle Club, Public Relations Officer Churches In Corporation (CIC) The Leaguers, Inc. Essex County Antiviolence Coalition
<b>Tia Stewart</b>	National Hip Hop Political Convention Newark Boy's and Girls Club Newark Pride Alliance
<b>Yvonne Warren</b>	The Angel's Project Women With Hats for Cure Babyland Family Services New Community Corporation

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## Curriculum Vitae

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Doctor of Philosophy, Women’s and Gender Studies
- May 2001 University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (9/98-5/01)  
Master of Arts, Political Science.
- May 1997 Clark Atlanta University (9/93-5/97)  
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**OCCUPATION**

- Fall 2003-Spring 2007 Graduate Teaching Assistant  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick
- Fall 1998-Spring 2002 Graduate Research Assistant  
Institute for Social Research  
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- Fall 2000-Spring 2001 Graduate Student Instructor  
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**PUBLICATIONS**

Isoke, Zenzele. Book Reviews: *Black Feminist Voices in Politics* by Evelyn M. Simien and *From Black Power to Hip Hop* by Patricia Hill Collins. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 32(3), forthcoming Spring 2007.

Isoke, Zenzele. “Hip Hop Politics of Ya Little Sista!” in *Feminist Trajectories: Newsletter of the Department of Women and Gender Studies*, Rutgers University, Department of Women’s and Gender Studies, Spring 2004.

**AWARDS**

- 2003-2007 Excellence Fellowship, Rutgers Graduate School
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- 2004-2005 Governor’s Executive Fellowship, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University