

INVISIBLE PATHWAYS: ENTREPRENEURSHIP

BY QUEER WOMEN OF COLOR IN NEWARK

by

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ABSTRACT

Invisible Pathways: Entrepreneurship by Queer Women of Color in Newark

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This thesis challenges ideas about gentrification and queer economic power by examining the oral histories of queer women of color who are engaged in entrepreneurial endeavors in the city of Newark, New Jersey. Centering the experiences of black lesbian entrepreneurs complicates the dominant conception of queer market capitalism as a negative where the focus tends to be on the contributions of white gay men and, to a lesser extent, white lesbians. Through the use of oral history as a member of the Queer Newark Oral History Project at Rutgers University, Newark and drawing on the scholarship of historians such as David K. Johnson, Jeffrey Escoffier, Rochella Thorpe, Mark Krasovic, Kath Weston and Lisa B. Rofel, among others I place the contributions of black queer women within the historical context of queer economies and consumerism as well as within Newark's economic history. Positioned astride these intersecting black, queer, and urban histories, black lesbian entrepreneurs are currently occupying leadership roles within economic networks that challenge the model of gentrification in a city that is experiencing immense economic development. Whether the city's redevelopment will benefit Newark residents without displacement remains to be seen. I argue that not only are these women shaping a new era of the city's economic history to be more inclusive, but they are also solidifying a queer culture landscape wherein queer black women are accumulating power amidst the corporate giants rising up around them.

Dedication

For my wife, Coleen

You always inspire me

*Thank you for your love, support,
encouragement, and laughter.*



And to my parents

for believing in me.

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“It's—it's a invisible pathway that you have to—it's almost steppin' out on faith where you have to know that there's one foot in front of the other.”¹

- Tamara Fleming, CEO of FEMWORKS and Co-President of NJLGBTCC on what it is to be an entrepreneur.

“Oh, what a beautiful city, twelve gates to the City, Hallelujah.”²

- Traditional Negro spiritual inscribed on a plaque located in Newark's U.S. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. Park adjacent to the Historic Essex County Courthouse on Springfield Avenue and dedicated to Dr. Clement Alexander Price, Distinguished Professor of History at Rutgers University in Newark, Newark's Official Historian, and Chairman of the City's 350th Anniversary Committee.

Introduction

“Well, one of my favorite days is a good Saturday in the shop. I had that two Saturdays ago. It was a—we had three different customers that came in, for the first time. They were all very different, all very different. It was me and Burley in there. It was just me and Burley was in there. I always ask if it's your first time, and what brings you down here. It was one of the nicest Saturdays we had had in a while. Just the conversation, it was a interchange of conversation. Burley was able to give one couple some information that he needed. He's a motivational speaker, young man. She was able to tell him about an organization that might be—can give him some help.

It was another group of young people that came in, white. It was two guys and a woman. One was a couple, the male and the female. Both of the males were from Newark. The couple was living in New York now. The other guy was back in Newark. Lived down there near Teachers' Village somewhere. I forget what he does. Oh, he used to work—he was the assistant to [former Newark Mayor] Cory Booker. Said he still does work for him, but he also was looking at properties on Halsey, to open a restaurant. Just to interchange with that, we talking politics. The young lady was very political, and very for Hillary [Clinton], and that conversation.

Then, another young guy, a white guy, came in. We have albums, vinyl, in there. He's a DJ and a music lover. He was sitting on the floor, going through the albums. There were all three different conversations, but we were able to have it

¹ Tamara Fleming, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, January 26, 2016. Transcript, page 43.

² Politicker Staff, “Essex County Honors Dr. Clement Price.” *Observer*. June 17, 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/06/essex-county-honors-dr-clement-price/>.

with them. Oh, there was another woman who came in, who was my peer. Had just come from the museum. She's a lifetime member of the Newark Museum, and they had something going on there. She decided she would walk around. She came in the shop, and she's very lively. She stayed with us an hour-and-a-half. She was talking. She spent money with us.

It was just—it was just a wonderful day because what we had been told, when we first opened the shop, was that people would come in, and they wouldn't just come in to shop. They would come in for conversation. They would come in for wisdom, words of wisdom. We had been told that your shop is going to be a place where people just come, just to be nurtured. That's what that Saturday was like. It was so—it was so wonderful. I even posted it in Facebook. I said it's not always about the sale. It's about the connecting with the community. Because you know that they're going to tell somebody about the shop, and they're going to come back, and they're going to bring people with them. For me, that's a great day.”³

- Saundra Toby-Heath discussing her store, The Artisan Collective.

Invisible Pathways:

The above quote from Saundra Toby-Heath, co-owner of The Artisan Collective on Halsey Street, captures the spirit of community in the diverse city of Newark. Located about ten miles from Manhattan, Newark is a sprawling city that somehow still manages to have a small town vibe. Toby-Heath has lived here all her life and loves it fiercely, as though the city were a beloved family member. Since the Newark riots of 1967, the city has been stigmatized as a violent area riddled with crime and drugs. But to residents like Toby-Heath, the city has redeeming value and is a place worth fighting for. Developers and big name corporations are starting to see its worth too, igniting fears of gentrification by those who do not want to see Newark transformed into the next hipster-fied Brooklyn, where only the affluent are able to live and thrive. Most proud Newarkers want the best for their city, but they also want to be a part of that renewal. In this contemporary

³ Saundra Toby-Heath, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, November 16, 2016. Transcript, page 55-56.

moment, Newark has an opportunity to change the paradigm of economic revitalization—where minority residents are displaced in favor of the privileged—and instead become a model of community-minded and community-driven urban renaissance.

Current and historic discourse surrounding the renaissance of Newark's economy tends to focus on large corporations such as NJPAC, The Prudential, Audible, and major universities such as Rutgers University and the New Jersey Institute of Technology, while ignoring smaller businesses. In a similar vein, examinations of LGBTQ economic ventures are predominantly about the historic amassing of financial power by white gay men and, to a lesser extent, white lesbians. What are erased in these narratives are the contributions made by black lesbian entrepreneurs, especially when black women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States.⁴ Tamara Fleming's reference to the invisible pathway becomes not just a nod to the uncertainty of undertaking an entrepreneurial endeavor, but also takes on new meaning as a figurative pathway not seen by the dominant society or marked on any official map despite the history of countless black lesbian women walking it. Even examining archives and texts for Newark's queer economic history mainly surfaces the accomplishments of black gay men such as exotic dancer Reese La Rue and Newark club owner, Al Murphy, but not as many women.⁵

⁴ Amy Haimerl, "The fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs in America" *Fortune*. June 29, 2015. <http://fortune.com/2015/06/29/black-women-entrepreneurs/>; and Lilly Workneh, "Black Women-Owned Businesses Skyrocket By 322 Percent In Less Than 20 Years" *Huffpost*. July 2, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/02/black-women-fastest-growi_n_7711078.html.

⁵ See the Tiny Prince Papers held in the Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center at the Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey. Gary Jardim, ed. *Blue: Life, Art & Style in Newark (Orange)* (de sousa Press, 1993); Barbara Kukla, *Swing City: Newark Nightlife 1925-50* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991); and Whitney Strub, Beryl Satter, Resources, "History of Queer Club Spaces" Queer Newark

There is no definitive archive to access in order to find a repository of evidence concerning the activities of black lesbian entrepreneurs in general, let alone specifically in Newark, New Jersey. The purpose of recording the oral histories of contemporary black lesbian entrepreneurs in Newark is to rectify this omission in the historical narrative and broaden the understanding of queer economic power to include the contributions of diverse female members of the LGBT community. By making this history visible, we complicate discourses about queer economies, queer consumerism, and gentrification and allow for fresh interpretations that provide a more complete picture of how economic forces impact, empower, or disempower various individuals and communities.

Oral histories like Saundra Heath-Toby's are a part of a larger historical endeavor by the Queer Newark Oral History Project, which documents queer urban communities of color. Uncovering lesbian entrepreneurship is one aspect of the project's focus. Queer Newark documents myriad life stories of Newark's LGBTQ community for the purpose of diversifying the dominant narrative of queer history wherein the contributions of gay white men, as individuals or as part of prominent activist organizations, tend to remain central. Founded in 2011 by writer and activist Darnell Moore, Rutgers-Newark history professor Beryl Satter, and Rutgers-Newark Department Administrator for History and African American and African Studies Christina Strasburger, the project is based at Rutgers-Newark, but it is community driven. Queer Newark's growing list of oral histories includes the director of the documentary *Out in the Night* as well as the Newark women, known as the NJ Four, who are the focus of the film. Also currently featured are

church reverends, youth in the ballroom scene, pioneers of AIDS activism in Newark, professors, and a co-founder of GLAAD to name a few. With the addition of queer entrepreneurs, especially black lesbian business owners, Queer Newark's oral history archive adds to what we know about the struggle for LGBTQ economic clout as a means to garner legislative rights, personal agency, and form community.

Queer Newark was born out of a series of biweekly community meetings held throughout the summer of 2011 with Newark residents, Rutgers staff and professors. Some of the women entrepreneurs interviewed for this research were either involved in those early meetings or have been a part of Queer Newark events and conferences since its inception. From this initial cohort of LGBT Newarkers affiliated with Queer Newark, other interviews have been obtained via word of mouth recommendations by interviewees or other members of Newark's LGBT community. I would categorize myself as a participant-observer, member of Queer Newark, a nearly life-long resident of a neighboring town to Newark, and as someone who has engaged in LGBTQ events in Newark and works within a community institution. But with the exception of one interviewee, I did not know any of these women before interviewing them. With the permission of the narrators, their interviews will eventually be housed on the Queer Newark Oral History Project website for use by future researchers and students as well as anyone interested in listening to LGBT oral histories by queer women of color.

Conducting and preserving oral histories of black lesbian entrepreneurs currently operating in Newark is to intervene in the process of omission wherein queer black women's stories are largely omitted from the historical archive and unaccounted for in quantitative data. Black women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs since the

late 1990s, yet black lesbian entrepreneurs are still an unknown quantity. How do the roles of these women relate to the broader queer economic history as well as to Newark's economic history and the queer entrepreneurs who thrived there in the past? Studying black lesbian entrepreneurs in Newark enriches queer historical narratives that tend to focus on organizations such as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) or the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) that are comprised predominantly of white gay men.⁶ It also goes further by exploring the cultural landscape of Newark, a city with a majority black population since roughly 1965, to provide an alternative to the gay meccas usually studied in more prominent cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, and New York.⁷

By examining what is occurring in Newark, these oral histories challenge scholarship that frames queer market capitalism as a negative, while at the same time complicating the discourse surrounding gentrification. Scholarship on queer economics can be anxious about the queer accumulation of wealth, perceiving it as a willingness to allow oneself as a queer individual or as part of the larger gay culture to become commodified and homogenized.⁸ Furthermore, as some in the gay community gain

⁶ See Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Cindy Patton. *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁷ See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. (New York: Basic, 1994); Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Susan Stryker, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1996).

⁸ See Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Political Economy of the Closet: Notes Toward an Economic History of Gay and Lesbian Life before Stonewall" *Homo-Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*. (New York and London: Routledge,

economic power, others continue to struggle creating fractures within the gay community between the poor and the affluent or between those who prioritize more mainstream gay issues over what is perceived to be radical gay politics, such as police violence and the criminalization of trans and queer youth of color.⁹ Another prominent fight within the gay community concerned marriage rights and whether the LGBTQ community should prioritize winning the fight for gay marriage, viewed as an issue that would benefit mostly privileged and majority white members of the gay community, over access to quality health care, safe streets, or ending workplace discrimination, which heavily impacts the lives of queer and trans people of color.¹⁰

Similarly, gentrification sparks fears about the corporatization of urban landscapes and how it often leads to the displacement of minority communities when certain groups become priced out of affordable housing. This process can happen to gay spaces, such as the proliferation of porn theaters (which provided refuge for mostly same-sex male activity) from the 1960s through the mid-1990s in Times Square, New York, which were pushed into extinction to make way for powerful corporations to occupy that space.¹¹ But it is also important to note that gay communities can also be complicit in

1997); Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁹ See Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, eds. *Homo-Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) xi-xxx; Megan Davidson, "Rethinking the Movement: Trans Youth Activism in New York City and Beyond" *Queer Youth Cultures*, Eds. Susan Driver (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) 243-260.

¹⁰ Arlene Stein, "What's the Matter with Newark? Race, Class, Marriage Politics, and the Limits of Queer Liberalism" *The Marrying Kind? Debating Same-Sex Marriage within the Lesbian and Gay Movement*, Eds. Mary Bernstein and Verta Taylor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 39-66.

¹¹ See Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999).

gentrification such as when affluent white gay men move into poor areas and displace the ethnic communities who previously lived there. For example, the Silverlake neighborhood in Los Angeles used to be predominantly inhabited by struggling Latino families, but is now arguably being gentrified by affluent gay white men in addition to the influx of well-off heterosexual white people as dramatized in the independent film, *Quinceanera* (2006) directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland.

These are issues that upwardly mobile queer people of color need to consider while Newark is working towards its urban renaissance. Kimberlee Williams, co-founder of Newark's FEMWORKS, discussed how safer streets for queer people would lend to the rise of Newark's economy.

Something I'd like to see is, I guess, for lack of a better word, a business district where there's lots of LGBT-owned businesses or businesses that cater to LGBT needs, and services, and social life, and things of that nature. I told this to Mayor [Ras] Baraka while he was running, I told him, I said that he had the opportunity to really focus on LGBT issues and safety. Because if this city is safe for LGBT people, it's safe for everybody.¹²

Yet an increased police presence that ostensibly protects the LGBTQ community can also become a double-edged sword. Queer theorist and historian Christina Hanhardt uses the example of elite LGBT residents in Greenwich Village to point out how—in an effort to curtail anti-gay hate crimes and create safer streets—their demand for increased safe street patrols and quality-of-life law enforcement policies actually in effect targets

¹² Kimberlee Williams, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, March 7, 2017. Transcript, page 14.

disadvantaged sexual minorities.¹³ The queer community of Newark will therefore have to consider class privilege when advocating for increased local law enforcement policies.

Moreover, queer theorist Jasbir Puar points out that the increase in economic power creates a queer racial hierarchy where white gay men and lesbians are positioned at the top. She states,

Economic access that is increasingly available to gay and lesbian consumers—often mistaken for “progress” and social acceptance—comes at the cost of more insidious gatekeeping of those who cannot/do not fit into the “good homosexual” image, something made very clear by advertisements from national tourist boards targeting wealthy, white, and predominantly male queer consumers. What falls out of these advertisements are queer women of color and other excluded queer others, who are then constructed outside the national “good homosexual” body politic, one driven predominantly by consumer privilege.¹⁴

If such is the case, how do flourishing black queer businesswomen in Newark, who are residents of the city where they are establishing their own businesses, disrupt this narrative of queer privilege and alter notions about which queer communities benefit from queer economic power? How do they push back against the whitewashed images we associate with financial privilege?

Newark’s period of revitalization is not a wholly modern phenomenon. It began in the early 1980s and gained momentum after Mayor Sharpe James was elected in 1986. Major accomplishments under his leadership were the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) opened in 1997 and in 2007 the Prudential Center as well as new

¹³ Christina B. Hanhardt, “Butterflies, Whistles, and Fists: Gay Safe Streets Patrols and The New Gay Ghetto, 1976-1981” *Radical History Review* no. 100 (December 1, 2008): 61-86.

¹⁴ Jasbir Puar, "A transnational feminist critique of queer tourism" *Antipode* 34, no. 5 (2002): 935-946, quoted at 942-943.

housing developments.¹⁵ Cory Booker was victorious against James in the 2006 mayoral election only to face the national economic recession in 2008, which hit Newark hard. As was happening all across the country, in Newark unemployment was high, businesses went bankrupt, and homes went into foreclosure. Booker became notorious for courting the media with publicity stunts such as using Twitter to respond to residents who needed help shoveling and then showing up at their homes to shovel for them. In one of his major blunders, Booker obtained a gift of one hundred million dollars for the city's school system from Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, but instead of improving Newark's public schools, he squandered most of the money on controversial charter schools, owed back pay to teachers, and paying the high salaries of figureheads and consultants with little knowledge of Newark.¹⁶ Regardless of Booker's shortcomings, his celebrity helped to attract developers and put Newark back on the map as a place for investment, which the current mayor, Ras Baraka the son of famed writer, poet, and activist Amiri Baraka, has been able to continue on his own merit.

Whether the city's redevelopment will benefit minority residents and the surrounding wards remains to be seen. At present, more corporations are migrating to the city's downtown area while luxury apartments and high rise buildings are being built in their midst. The crime rate is slowly declining and media articles ask whether Newark is the new Brooklyn, a characterization Baraka sharply rejects.¹⁷ But with all the development, will rental rates become untenable to all but well-to-do Manhattan

¹⁵ See Robert Curvin, *Inside Newark: Decline Rebellion and the Search for Transformation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014) 213.

¹⁶ Ibid., 293-296.

¹⁷ Karen Yi, "Is Newark the next Brooklyn? Mayor says no" *NJ.com*. February 19, 2017. http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/is_newark_the_next_brooklyn_mayor_says_no.html.

transplants? Will small businesses fold when they can no longer afford the rent for their store? Despite these, as yet, unanswered questions, nearly all of the women interviewed were optimistic about the changes happening and view it as an opportunity to continue to grow alongside Newark's advancement. Yet, these women are not just potential benefactors of Newark's renaissance, but integral to its success, which runs counter to the idea that gentrification is the death knell for gay communities.

Since the postwar era, when gentrification was known as "urban renewal," black Newark residents were pushed out of their neighborhoods by developers while they struggled for the same economic opportunities afforded to whites living and working in Newark.¹⁸ Because racist hiring practices and employment discrimination are not unique to Newark nor have they been relegated to the past, black women, just like LGBT people, have turned to entrepreneurship for survival throughout time. Positioned astride these intersecting black, queer, and urban economic histories, I argue that contemporary black lesbian entrepreneurs in Newark are solidifying a queer cultural landscape and ushering in a new era of the city's economic history, wherein queer black women are accumulating power amidst the corporate giants rising up around them.

By studying the gay consumer market, particularly the production and sale of male physique magazines, historian David K. Johnson argues that gay consumer networks fostered a sense of community, which solidified a gay identity and galvanized the gay community to demand their rights as consumers. He points out that even the riot at Stonewall was about the right to consume and it was "a culmination of a gay consumer

¹⁸ See Junius Williams, *Unfinished Agenda: Urban Politics in the Era of Black Power* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2014); *We Got to Live Here*, directed by Robert Machover and Norman Fruchter (1965) DVD copy of original 16mm documentary film.

rights revolution begun by the purveyors of physique magazines.”¹⁹ In Newark, a similar phenomenon is happening. Black lesbian women are simultaneously defying homophobia and gender discrimination while solidifying their queer identity by creating economic networks of production and consumption within Newark. Through their networks, these women have strengthened their LGBTQ community locally, but they have also linked themselves to national battle for LGBTQ rights.

This paper builds upon the work of other queer scholars who have used oral history as a way to challenge and diversify what is known about LGBTQ lives. In particular, the work of Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis in their groundbreaking book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, which focused on working class lesbians in Buffalo, New York from the 1930s-1950s.²⁰ Using oral history accounts, Davis and Kennedy brought to light the lives of blue-collar lesbians and how they found agency through work and leisure. Because Davis and Kennedy primarily spoke with white women, Rochella Thorpe’s work analyzing queer African American women in Detroit from roughly 1940-1975 is helpful for understanding the historical context of black lesbian cultural survival during much of the same time period.²¹ This paper also draws on the work of other queer scholars such as David K. Johnson, Jeffrey Escoffier, and Kath Weston and Lisa B. Rofel and recognizes the work of E. Patrick Johnson and Zenzele Isoke who have rectified omissions within

¹⁹ David K. Johnson “Physique Pioneers: The Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture” *Journal Of Social History* no. 4 (2010), 888.

²⁰ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

²¹ See Rochella Thorpe, “A house where queers go: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975” *Inventing Lesbian Cultures In America* (January 1996): 40-205; and “The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965” *Creating a Place for Ourselves* (1997): 165-181.

queer history to include the stories of queer people of color.²² Isoke is the only scholar to date that has written about black lesbians in Newark using oral history.²³

Moving forward in time from the earlier eras of Davis, Kennedy, and Thorpe's scholarship, the oral histories in this paper are comprised primarily of black lesbian women who started businesses or organizations in Newark within the last twenty years. But in order to gain a wider scope of the queer economic landscape in Newark, the oral histories of a queer white woman and two Latina women are also included. Newark is a densely populated city of approximately twenty-six square miles, however, these women repeatedly emphasize the need to maintain a sense of community. Their queer enterprises tend to be interconnected in many ways rather than solitary establishments. The women interviewed are comprised of artists, artisans, authors, consultants, freelancers, restaurant owners, and fashion designers and a few founded nonprofits. Not all of the women were born in Newark, but—with the exception of one Latina woman—all of them have lived in the city at some period in time. Regardless of their various endeavors, a commitment to social justice and the Newark community are common themes that thread throughout each woman's story.

²² See David K. Johnson's "Physique Pioneers: The Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture;" Kath Weston and Lisa B. Rofel, "Sexuality, Class, and Conflict in a Lesbian Workplace;" Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Political Economy of the Closet;" and E. Patrick Johnson, "To Be Young, Gifted, and Queer: Race and Sex in the New Black Studies" *The Black Scholar*, Summer 2014, Vol. 44, Issue 2, p. 50-58.

²³ Zenzele Isoke, "Can't I be seen? Can't I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark" *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal Of Feminist Geography* 21, no. 3 (2014): 353-369.

Chapter 1: Economic Struggles in Newark

“A lot of fabulous people came out of the Central Ward, a lot—a lot of great people.”¹

- Saundra Toby-Heath on growing up in Newark from 1953-1966.

Nearly all of the contemporary black lesbian entrepreneurs interviewed expressed a commitment to local activism and supporting community organizations that benefit queer people of Newark. Their focus on social justice for the queer Newark community has historical roots in the city’s cultural legacy of community activism and battles for civil rights. Many of those fights centered on employment issues and the right for blacks to have access to the same jobs as whites, in addition to ending police brutality, housing discrimination, and de facto segregation. Like the national struggle for civil rights, much of the focus in Newark has been on activism in the 1960s and it is a useful period to turn to for understanding how the principles of community justice took such firm root in the psyche of many of the city’s people even as later decades saw more oppression. Women were very much involved in these battles, yet their stories much less accounted for in the historical archive.

African Americans have long struggled for economic power in Newark. The five days of Newark riots in July 1967 hurt Newark’s economy, but the city was already experiencing decline in various ways. Issues of poverty and unemployment plagued Newark’s African American community for years before the National Guard was called in to violently stifle the outburst of rage that government neglect and state abuse had caused. Post-riot Newark became an icon of urban decay that is largely blamed on the

¹ Toby-Heath, oral history, 1.

supposed moral failings of the African American community rather than by acknowledging the structural inequality that led to the rebellion.² Because of this omission, many scholars, activists, and residents have chosen to reframe the riots as a rebellion in an attempt to more accurately convey how there were underlying factors leading to the uprising. While historian Mark Krasovic argues that the term “riot” can also be valuable in that it invokes the notion of mass violence in reaction to political and social issues. He also points out how the memory of a riot can be used as an effective bargaining tool by activists against state actors who fear the possibility of another insurrection.³

In the first half of the 20th century, decades before the riots of 1967, the Great Migration brought hopeful African Americans north to Newark in search of economic prosperity and escape from the Jim Crow South. They arrived in a vibrant city with a bustling downtown, enormous department stores, and lively entertainment venues. Yet, de facto segregation and racist hiring practices were the norm, which meant that due to racial discrimination most forms of employment and housing were foreclosed to African Americans. Mega department stores like Hahne & Company and L. Bamberger & Co.

² See the “New Jersey Governor’s Select Commission on Civil Disorder. Report for Action.” Trenton: State of New Jersey, 1968. Available at the Newark Public Library; “Operational Report” by the New Jersey National Guard for the National Guard Bureau, which includes a “lessons learned” section that fails to mention any structural inequality. Available on the *Rise Up North: Newark* website. <http://riseupnewark.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/C-20-After-Action-Report-State-of-NJ-Dept-of-Defense-1-ilovepdf-compressed-1.pdf>; or the United States Kerner Commission. The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, which was rejected by President Lyndon Johnson.

³ Mark Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier: Community Action in the Great Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) 9.

employed 2,800 employees at their peak, but few African Americans.⁴ In a video for the Newest Americans Project at Rutgers-Newark, Mayor Ras Baraka's grandfather, Coyt Jones talks about migrating to Newark from the South in 1927.⁵ He applied for a job at Bamberger's located on Market Street as an elevator operator, a low-paying position presumably open to all African Americans.⁶ Jones was told in the interview, however, that they would not hire him because he was too dark.

By the time Newark experienced the rebellion of 1967, employment opportunities for minorities remained bleak. Historian Robert Curvin examined affirmative action reports for Newark hiring data from 1966 to 1967. His findings include five firms that "had a total of 24,318 employees. Of that number, 2,727 were nonwhite, which was 11.2 percent of the total. However, a total of 2,181 were in clerical, labor, and service jobs. Only 2.8 percent of the nonwhite employees were in managerial or official positions."⁷ A Queer Newark Oral History Project interview with Peter Savastano, who was born in 1951 and lived in Newark for most of his life, provides a snapshot of how vibrant Newark's downtown business area was in the 1960s. If job opportunities for minorities were bleak, it was not due to a lack of businesses in Newark. Talking with Rutgers, Newark professor Whitney Strub, Savastano stated,

So the big place to go of course was downtown Newark, right? This was prior to the age of shopping malls and all of those things. So downtown Newark was

⁴ Nat Bodian, "The Legendary Philanthropies of Newark's Louis Bamberger" *Virtual Newark*. Accessed February 2016.

<http://www.virtualnewarknj.com/memories/bios/bodianbamberger.htm>.

⁵ *We Came And Stayed: Coyt Jones & Ras Baraka*, produced by Tim Raphael, Rutgers University- Newark, Talking Eyes, and VII for Newest Americans, 2015.
<http://newestamericans.com/wecameandstayed-baraka/>.

⁶ Michael J. Lisicky, *Bamberger's: New Jersey's Greatest Store* (Charleston: The History Press, 2016) 87.

⁷ Curvin. *Inside Newark*, 83.

really the only place where everybody and anybody could go to shop, to experience entertainment and culture. And in those days, because I was young and full of energy, we just all walked into downtown Newark. There were cafes to go to right down here on...what's this street here...the one if you cut through...New Street! So right on New St., the block between Halsey and Washington, was a little café called "Jolly Dolly's Café." It was a coffee house...So we had that and you know, our other favorite thing to do, I mean they were really very simple things, we used to love to walk down from north Newark, me and my sort of hippie friends in those days, and we would go to Dunkin Donuts to get a glazed twist. (laughs) Then you could just wander around in the department stores, hang out in Military Park, go to Chock Full o'Nuts, which is no longer...actually Chock Full o'Nuts was kind of over where you live now, on Broad St right at Raymond Blvd. And there were loads and loads of bookstores and record stores. So you could spend a whole day, sitting in the stacks of those bookstores, reading, looking through paperbacks, and then doing the same thing in the record stores. So there was just a world of things to do. There were head shops and hippie clothing shops. The streets of Newark were always crowded.

I can actually remember at Christmas time, a little younger than this, taking my little brother at 11 o'clock at night and getting on the bus to come down Christmas shopping, because as it got closer to Christmas the stores would remain open until midnight and one in the morning. And they were packed with people! And as a little kid you were safe! No one was...you were just safe! And it was exciting! You didn't have to go to New York, right?

Strub goes on to ask him what are some of the stores he best remembers from that time.

Savastano replied,

Well, all the department stores. That would have been at the time it was Bamberger's, which then became Macy's, Hahne's and Companies, Kresge's, Klein's, Bond's Clothes for Men, Bradford Hats, which I think believe it or not is still there, Wiss Jewelers, and then there was the Paperback Book Store, there was Park Records, Broad Street Records, Raymond Blvd Records...there was Mr. Dingle the Peanut Man, (laughs) which was down over on Park Place here on the block where the Robert Treat Hotel is. It was in the middle of the block, where the public service building is now. That used to be the old public service gas and electric building. There was this Mr. Dingle. You could go there and you could get roasted peanuts, you could buy crystallized sugar-coated orange peels, lemon peels, ginger rye, caramelized ginger, all of these sort of things. (laughs) There was Schrafft's where you could go and buy candy. There was McCrory's,

Woolworths...⁸

From this description, Newark clearly had a lot of employment opportunities open to its residents. Yet as Curvin's data shows, during this same decade only 11.2 percent of the total employees in the city were minorities. For all the bustling opportunity in Newark, individuals in the minority community were not the ones being given access to these jobs.

Before and after the rebellion, social justice organizations and community organizers in Newark fought against systems of inequality and worked to improve the situation for black residents. By the 1940s, due to redlining by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and public housing projects built by Newark's Housing Authority (NHA), African Americans were largely concentrated in the slums of the Third Ward, later to become part of the Central Ward. On the one hand, this eventually led to black people gaining some political power as a voting block and, as a result, in 1954 they were able to elect the city's first black councilman, Irvine Turner. On the other hand, they were relegated to living in deplorable conditions. Groups like Newark's NAACP, Essex County Urban League, Newark Community Union Project (NCUP), and the Newark-Essex Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were dedicated to pushing back against discrimination in hiring and housing practices as well as police brutality and urban renewal, which aimed to displace black residents under the guise of redevelopment.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty brought increased federal aid to Newark beginning in 1964 under the government's Community Action Program. As part of this program, the Economic Opportunity Act mandated that grants would be given to

⁸ Peter Savastano, oral history interview by Whitney Strub and Timothy Stewart-Winter. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, June 23, 2015. Transcript, page 12-14.

local agencies that “developed antipoverty programs with maximum feasible participation of the poor.”⁹ In Newark, the United Community Corporation (UCC), an independent community action agency, formed neighborhood area boards to design and implement programs tailored to the needs of area residents and with their direct involvement. The UCC itself was comprised of Newark Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio’s people as well as established Newark activists who were often at odds with city government. Addonizio, who is known for being an Italian American political machine, eventually became suspicious of the activists in the UCC and believed they were using the agency to inflame community tensions and thereby recruit residents to engage in actions against him.¹⁰ He was not entirely wrong. Through their participation in area boards, residents were learning how to wield their own power as a group, especially in regards to housing issues and neglectful landlords. A major turning point in community activism came in the fight against the Medical School.

The Medical School was a major battle waged against urban renewal that simultaneously confronted employment discrimination. In 1966, Addonizio as well as state and medical school authorities decided they wanted to build a sprawling medical school in the Central Ward, which would have displaced thousands of black residents and weakened their voting power.¹¹ When the Newark Area Planning Committee (NAPA) under the leadership of Junius Williams, attorney and civil rights leader, took on the fight against the Medical School, they also pressured the project to hire black men to work construction jobs. Williams employed a professor at Yale and architectural and planning

⁹ Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier*, 27.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Curvin, *Inside Newark*, 120-121.

students to come up with an alternative plan for the medical school. This plan proposed that the medical school build upwards instead of outwards in order to decrease the amount of acreage it would sit on from one hundred and fifty acres to seventeen.¹²

Joining the fight was Louise Epperson, a black woman and an entrepreneur who ran a hairdressing shop out of her beloved home, which was located within the zone designated for the medical school and therefore threatened to be demolished.¹³ During the medical school hearings, she passionately stood up to proponents of the new school and vocalized her opposition. She also helped mobilize community residents in the fight to keep their homes by tirelessly knocking on doors, making phone calls, handing out literature, and leading community meetings. Epperson formed the Committee Against Negro and Puerto Rican Removal, which joined forces with Williams and NAPA.¹⁴ Ultimately, the alternate plan proposed by Williams and his legal team was successful and the acreage was reduced to 57.9 acres. Additionally, in regards to minority employment during its construction, NAPA also successfully negotiated the workforce to “include one-third of the journeymen and one-half of the apprentices as black and Puerto Ricans” and an affirmative action job training program for blacks and Latinos who wanted a healthcare position at the hospital.¹⁵

A few years prior to the Medical School fight, other Newark construction sites were called out for discriminatory hiring practices. In 1964, the Rutgers University Law School became the site of demonstrations led by Raymond Proctor, chairman of the Newark-Essex County chapter of CORE, who was also a gay man. Because of his

¹² Williams, *Unfinished Agenda*, 177.

¹³ Curvin, *Inside Newark*, 121.

¹⁴ Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier*, 266

¹⁵ Williams, *Unfinished Agenda*, 187-188.

sexuality, some members of CORE even questioned his authority when Proctor took over the role of chairman from Robert Curvin, wondering whether “anyone who dressed and spoke as meticulously as Proctor could be an effective leader.”¹⁶ But his commitment to civil rights activism in Newark won people over. In an article for the *New York Times*, Proctor described the hiring practices at Rutgers University Law School as “inadequate” with “no Negro plumbers and no Negro iron fitters included in the list.”¹⁷ He stated that the protest would be peaceful, but firmly added, “we consider ourselves free to utilize any methods we see fit if we don’t get satisfaction by next weekend.”¹⁸ One year prior to the Law School demonstrations, a group of about two hundred picketers, including members of CORE led by Curvin, protested the construction site for Barringer High School.¹⁹ They eventually succeeded in pressuring the unions to agree to hire minority applicants. Upon implementation, however, the unions did whatever they could to thwart full compliance.

Although the Barringer protest was not a major win, it laid the foundation for future successful fights such as the battle against the Medical School. It also led to the creation of the Business and Industrial Coordinating Committee (BICC) to address exclusion of blacks and Puerto Ricans from being hired. BICC was a coalition of local business leaders from notable companies in Newark such as Bamberger’s, New Jersey Bell Telephone Company, and Prudential who agreed to examine and adjust their hiring practices so that more jobs would go to minorities. Ultimately, BICC did not bring about sweeping changes, but it did help show the power of collective action to incite progress.

¹⁶ Douglas Eldridge, “Proctor Leaving CORE Post, Chapter Leader Going to Sweden” *Newark News*, May 9, 1965.

¹⁷ “CORE Set to Picket Rutgers On Hiring” *New York Times*, May 23, 1964.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Curvin, *Inside Newark*, 75.

But in the following decades, job loss in Newark became a problem almost insurmountable to Newark's hope for revitalization.

Writing in 1993, Gary Jardim called Newark's renaissance a myth and pointed to job loss as the main culprit. According to Jardim, even though the population of Newark shrank significantly by 1970 as people moved to the suburbs, the job base held steady. But in the ensuing decade, the city lost over 73,000 jobs and then 10,000 more in the 1980s with no letup in the early 1990s.²⁰ In 1970, Newark elected its first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson who succeeded Addonizio. The black and Latino population in Newark thought he would bring a salve to many of the issues in the city that most affected their communities. But ultimately Gibson did not accomplish as much reform as his constituents had hoped he would. Prominent leaders in Newark, such as Dr. Hilda Hidalgo, accused his administration of abandoning his commitment to the African American and Puerto Rican community by appointing officials from the former conservative Addonizio administration.²¹ To make matters worse, by the 1980s, a severe economic depression due to job loss and the mass exodus of Newark's middle class, both black and white, left the city in shambles.

²⁰ Jardim, "The Myth of the Renaissance City" *Blue: Life, Art & Style in Newark*, 1993, page 68.

²¹ See Hilda Hidalgo to Mayor Kenneth Gibson, March 9, 1972, box 5, folder 9, Hilda Hidalgo Papers, New Jersey Research and Information Center, Newark Public Library. In her letter to Gibson, Hidalgo asserted that Gibson was associating with and recognizing the "old guard conservative leadership" of the Addonizio administration; See also Larrie Stalks to Gus Heninburg, February 18, 1971, box 5, folder 3, Hilda Hidalgo Papers, New Jersey Research and Information Center, Newark Public Library. In a letter from Larrie Stalks, who was appointed to executive secretary of the City Planning Commission by Mayor Addonizio, written to Gus Heninburg, President of the Greater Newark Urban Coalition, Inc., Stalks expresses anger at Hidalgo for accusing her of being appointed to the Coalition board by Addonizio's people in order to represent his administration's point of view.

Similar to the idea of BICC in that it was a coalition of major local businesses to improve economic issues in the city, Renaissance Newark, Inc. (RNI) was established as a “privately funded development corporation set up by the city’s Big Five—New Jersey Bell, PSE&G, Prudential, Mutual Benefit Life, and First Fidelity Bank.”²² Instead of combatting job discrimination, as was the mission of BICC, RNI looked to commercial office space as a way to achieve a renaissance. In order to entice corporate renters, tax incentives and abatements were given out by the city. As Jardim explains, in a city with an already weak tax base due to its limited square acreage (approximately 26 square miles) taken up by tax-exempt universities and churches, government buildings and Newark International Airport, how could awarding more tax abatements ever uplift the entire city of Newark? But in the 1980s the dominant ethos was “public-private partnership,” which, according to Jardim, implied civic responsibility, but in practice meant RNI would be working with government officials in Newark’s City Hall to shape Newark’s renaissance by granting more tax incentives. When commuters from the suburbs outside of Newark are hired for most of the jobs created by new offices downtown, the residents of Newark living in the surrounding wards remain trapped in economic depression. Adding to this issue was the discriminatory practice of redlining, which excluded black residents from mortgage and loan opportunities available to whites, the relegation of the poor to housing projects, and a rapidly declining school system.

During the same era, Dr. Clement Price, Rutgers professor and Newark’s historian, expressed uncertainty in the city’s future. In 1993, he cautioned against blind optimism fed by city officials who were trying to rebrand the city’s image into that of a

²² Ibid., 69.

phoenix rising up from the ash.²³ That year, Mayor Sharpe James and his administration took part in a ceremonial ground breaking for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center while the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra played Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man."²⁴ This new entertainment venue was touted as a job creator and a means to boost Newark's nightlife and attract more people to the city. Yet would it actually warrant such fanfare from all of the city's residents or would it just become a new downtown fixture for suburbanites to work at, enjoy, and benefit from? Price also saw this optimism as a way to gather momentum for the city to move in a positive direction, but he cautioned that unless change benefited the neighborhoods and residents first, there could be no true renaissance. As Newark's downtown continues to boom in contemporary times, these same issues continue to plague Newark today.

²³ Clement Price, "Newark and the Rhetoric of Optimism" *Blue: Life, Art & Style in Newark*, 1993, 55-64.

²⁴ Evelyn Nieves, "Newark's \$150 Million Answer to Lincoln Center Is Under Way" *The New York Times*, October 29, 1993.

Chapter 2: Black Women and Entrepreneurship

According to the 1977 Economic Census Data report, women owned 7.1% of all firms nationwide. Minorities owned only 5.7% of all firms nationwide and out of that number only 43% were black owned. Black women were not counted in either set of statistics dealing with women-owned or minority-owned businesses, which is often the case when trying to find quantitative data on black women entrepreneurs throughout history before statistically booming after 1997 when their numbers grew exponentially. Yet, despite their lack of inclusion, black women do have a legacy of entrepreneurship in this country dating back to slave times. When Clara Brown was given her freedom from slavery in the 1850s, she migrated north to Colorado where she became a successful businesswoman running her own laundry. She also owned properties, invested in mines, and was known for having a philanthropic spirit.¹ In the early 1900s, Annie Turnbo Malone started Poro, a cosmetology business that became a multi-million dollar industry.² Around the same time, in 1903, Maggie Lena Walker became the first black woman in the U.S. to charter a bank when she established the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank in Richmond, Virginia. Her bank withstood the Great Depression and she was able to later merge it with two other black banks. It was renamed the Consolidated Bank and Trust and became the longest surviving black bank in the country until 2005 when it was

¹ Herb Boyd. *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 25, 2017.

² Evelyn Newman Phillips. "Ms. Annie Malone's Poro: Addressing Whiteness and Dressing Black-bodied Women" *Transforming Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (June 2003): 4.

acquired by Abigail Adams National Bancorp, the parent company of Adams National Bank in Washington.³

Besides her incredible success as a businesswoman, Walker is also noteworthy for her commitment to helping other black women gain economic opportunities. When she took over the position of Grand Worthy Secretary for The Independent Order of Saint Luke, a mutual benefit society, her first order of duty was to get women involved. Out of nine executive board members, six were women including Walker. In addition, Walker was a part of the universal suffragist movement, which included advocating for black men as well as for women to gain voting rights.

In Newark in the 1950s and 1960s, Mrs. Amelia Stewart was known as a very successful restaurateur. In his book *Inside Newark*, Robert Curvin cites a conversation he had with John Stewart about Mrs. Amelia Stewart, who was his mother.⁴ He claims she was one of Newark's first successful black entrepreneurs. She lived off the books with her home-based business as a cook. She sold fried chicken to all-night gambling houses until she made enough money to buy her own home. Eventually, she was able to open several restaurants in the Central Ward and later in the South Ward.

Also within the 1977 Economic Census Data report it is stated that Newark had 5,172 women-owned firms collectively making \$438 million dollars.⁵ One of those

³ Gertrude Woodruff Marlowe. "Remembering Maggie Lena Walker: The Making of a Black Bank" *Black Enterprise* 34, no. 11 (June 2004): 258-262; Carol Hazard.

"Consolidated Bank to become Premier Bank" *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 4, 2011. http://www.richmond.com/business/consolidated-bank-to-become-premier-bank/article_3b794b82-c1bc-5862-982a-01fe7aaef43d.html.

⁴ Curvin, *Inside Newark*, 19.

⁵ United States Census Bureau. 1977 Economic Census Data report. The report also states New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania as having a total of 14.2 thousand black owned businesses, but the area with the most black owned businesses was what the report refers

women would have been Louise Scott, who made her money in the beauty industry similar to one of the first African American millionaires and successful entrepreneurs, Madame C. J. Walker. In 1959, the Krueger Scott Mansion, former home of Newark's beer baron Gottfried Ephraim Krueger, was sold to Scott who both lived there and used it as headquarters for her beauty school, Scott College of Beauty Culture. Scott also owned a successful chain of beauty salons in Newark and is believed to have been the city's first African-American female millionaire. In a video for WBGO, Newark's Jazz radio station, her daughter Louise Scott-Roundtree refers to her mother as a loving and compassionate spirit who would help less fortunate community members. She describes how every Christmas her mother would put a sheet out on the stage, buy crates of apples and oranges, and invite the entire community including children to come take whatever they wanted.⁶ Ultimately, Scott lived and ran her beauty school in Newark until she died in 1982.

It is important to note that Scott's story does not represent the entirety of black women's experience in Newark during the mid-twentieth century. At that time, most of the African American women in the city were struggling to make ends meet. In the 1965 documentary, *We Got to Live Here*, filmmakers Robert Machover and Norm Fruchter record the experiences of black women who lived in the Clinton Hill neighborhood.⁷ The film opens up on the crowded streets of Newark's downtown, the same area where Peter Savastano fondly recalled all the stores he used to patronize. But the scene shifts from

to as the South Atlantic Division, moving down the coast from below the tri-state area and east of Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, and extending down into Florida.

⁶ Newark Stories: Reverend Louise Scott-Rountree, produced by Alexandra Hill, (2016). YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJZGrIFEqAw>.

⁷ *We Got to Live Here*, directed by Robert Machover and Norman Fruchter (1965) DVD copy of original 16mm documentary film.

one of bustling enterprise to the rubble, shelled out buildings, and empty lots of Clinton Hill. As new projects went up in the Central Ward, black people were pushed out of their homes due to development and into Clinton Hill. Women in the film describe how the neighborhood deteriorated as whites moved out, blacks moved in, and the rents were raised, causing overcrowding. Their situation was made worse by lack of employment options.

The women in *We Got to Live Here* explain how African Americans migrated north to places like Newark to find opportunities that they did not have in the South only to be met with similar discrimination. There may not have been Jim Crow signs posted marking off which facilities were for blacks or whites, but de facto segregation existed. Black women were only hired for housework and factory work. As one woman remarked in the film, it was “the dirty work for colored people to do.” As a voiceover during the film, audio for an advertisement reveals how a woman at that time could get paid seventy-five dollars a week plus tips as a beautician or twelve dollars a day plus tips as a manicurist. But the problem was these jobs required a license and thus were not a possibility for African American women who often lacked the means and access to certifications in order to acquire special skills. One woman in the film describes how she can only get factory jobs, because she did not finish high school. She states that the most salary she is offered is a dollar twenty-five an hour and she has to take it in order to provide for her children. Another woman explains that they are unable to get work in the stores in Newark, because they do not hire colored women.

A documentary called *With No One To Help Us* (1967)—made a few years after Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his infamous Moynihan

Report (1965) concluding that poverty in black communities was as a result of a “tangle of pathology” within black families headed by single mothers instead of acknowledging rampant joblessness and structural inequality—featured black women in Newark who organized a food-buying club to protect their welfare rights.⁸ Because these women often had to make purchases on store credit, they were fed up with being over-charged for goods by unscrupulous storeowners. They decided to bypass the stores by going straight to food distributing companies to buy items wholesale. But they were faced with more roadblocks. Many of the wholesalers refused to sell food to them. Furthermore, when the women sought assistance from the United Community Corporation (UCC)—an independent community action agency in Newark formed to address the needs of Newark residents and solve issues stemming from poverty—they were ignored. Showing the power of community organizing, the women nevertheless were able to find a wholesaler willing to sell to them and, collectively, they placed an order.

This was a small victory in a longer struggle, however, as politicians—on both sides of the political aisle—sought to decrease spending on welfare. To justify cuts they stigmatized black women on welfare as undeserving. The image of the “welfare queen” coined by Republican President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s was used to frame black women on welfare as immoral con artists who were cheating the government and is an unfair characterization that has persisted through contemporary times. But Democratic President Bill Clinton’s sweeping cuts to welfare in 1996 did even further damage to the poor. He signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act

⁸ *With No One to Help Us*, directed by Eugene and Carol Marner (1967) Available streaming online: <https://archive.org/details/WithNoOneToH>; Daniel Patrick Moynihan. “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action” Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965.

(PRWORA), ending cash-assistance known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which had guaranteed aid to any eligible poor person and replaced it with state-run assistance programs called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).⁹ According to Michelle Alexander, “TANF imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare assistance, as well as a permanent, lifetime ban on eligibility for welfare and food stamps for anyone convicted of a felony drug offense—including simple possession of marijuana.”¹⁰ As a result, over the years black women have employed different strategies to survive such as the food-buying club in Newark, working multiple jobs, or attempting entrepreneurial endeavors.

Currently women in Newark still run the gamut of those who are economically thriving and those who still struggle. Racist hiring and promotional practices as well as sexism within the workplace are forces that work against black women’s economic advancement across the nation. Because of these roadblocks, black women have turned to entrepreneurship throughout time to supplement their income or create their own economic success away from corporate America. For black queer women, homophobia in the workplace and the policing of gender binaries also drives queer women of color to be their own bosses. Similar to the spirit of civil rights activism in Newark and nationwide that caused people to stop waiting for rights to be slowly handed out by the oppressors as it suited them; black women’s entrepreneurship has been a call to action. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Newark that call to action has encompassed entrepreneurial endeavors and a commitment to social justice by local black lesbians. As

⁹ Barbara Vobejda. “Clinton Signs Welfare Bill Amid Division” *The Washington Post*, August 23 1996.

¹⁰ Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

a result, their work has influenced Newark's revitalization while gaining economic clout for the advancement of the local queer community and beyond.

Chapter 3: Entrepreneurship by Queer Women of Color in Newark

“This is what it looks like to be an entrepreneur. You go out there not knowing, and you keep fighting until you make a way out of what can be absolutely no way.”¹

- Tamara Fleming on advice given to her by her business partner, Kimberlee Williams.

Black women, encompassing queer and straight, have become the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States. The number of women owned businesses grew by 74% between 1997 and 2015—a rate that’s 1.5 times the national average—while the growth of businesses owned by African American women is even more impressive at a whopping 322% since 1997.² Tamara Fleming, co-founder and co-president of New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce, explains that when black women hit a wall in their field, either due to overt or covert racial and/or gender discrimination, many will turn to entrepreneurship in order to create their own advancement. She went on to clarify how black women feel about the corporate world,

I'm not gonna be able to break this glass ceiling at this company. Too many times, I've been training the people to work over me. I'm more qualified than them, and yet I'm training them. It's impossible for me—I think this company I'm workin' for will never see me for a powerful person or main contributor, an innovator. They're always gonna see just a black woman.³

In a separate interview, Kimberlee Williams, Fleming's business partner, talked about how this trend also pertains to black women earning less on the dollar than men and white women. According to a 2016 Pew Research study, white women make 82% of every dollar that non-Hispanic white men earn, while black women earn even less at

¹ Fleming, oral history, 13.

² Amy Haimerl, “The fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs in America” *Fortune*. June 29, 2015. <http://fortune.com/2015/06/29/black-women-entrepreneurs/>.

³ Fleming, oral history, 36.

65%.⁴ Instead of accepting the status quo, many black women leave their jobs to create better opportunities for themselves through entrepreneurship or they start businesses in addition to other employment with the hope of eventually transitioning away from working for someone else to being fully self-employed.

While black women-owned businesses are growing exponentially, LGBTQ-owned businesses are also making gains nationwide. As of October 2016, the National Gay Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC) certified nine hundred and nine businesses as LGBT Business Enterprises (LGBTBES). Of those nine hundred and nine businesses, one hundred and thirty-five were founded over two decades ago with the oldest business founded in 1919.⁵ It is worth noting that the average lifespan of LGBTQ owned businesses is twelve years, which surpasses the average failure rate of all start-ups in general by seven years.⁶ In a 2015 survey of LGBTQ business and commerce, conducted by Community Marketing & Insights in partnership with National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), it was reported that twenty-five percent of female business owners identify as lesbian and bisexual as compared to seventy-three percent that identify as gay or bisexual men, three percent as transgender, and five

⁴ See Eileen Patton, “Racial, gender wage gaps persist in U.S. despite some progress” Pew Research Center. July 1, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/>; Kathryn Bibler, “The Pay Gap Is Even Worse for Black Women, and That’s Everyone’s Problem” The American Association of University Women (AAUW). July 21, 2015. <http://www.aauw.org/2015/07/21/black-women-pay-gap/>.

⁵ National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, “America’s LGBT Economy 2016 Snapshot,” NGLCC, 5.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

percent as queer.⁷ One year later, NGLCC's 2016 snapshot report increased the number of female business owners to nearly thirty-two percent.⁸

What these statistics do not tell us is the percentage of black lesbian owned businesses. The 2016 NGLCC snapshot report comes closest by citing that a little over four percent of all LGBTQ business owners identified as African American, but does not include a breakdown by gender identity and race. But this report is the first of its kind. According to a press release on their website, it is “the first ever snapshot demonstrating the economic and social impact of America’s leading LGBT business owners and entrepreneurs.”⁹ With the outstandingly rapid growth of businesses owned by African American women it stands to reason that a sizeable percentage must be black lesbian owned, but the lack of statistics contributes to another silence in the archive. Looking at the concentration of black lesbian owned businesses in Newark highlights how black lesbian entrepreneurs should no longer be discounted.

⁷ National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, “CMI’s 5th Survey on LGBT Business & Commerce,” 5th Edition, July 2015. Community Marketing & Insights in partnership with National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), 6.

⁸ “America’s LGBT Economy 2016 Snapshot Report” National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), 9. The exact percentage is 31.8%.

⁹ National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. Press release, January 18, 2017. <https://nglcc.org/press-release/first-ever-'america's-lgbt-economy'-report-released-national-gay-lesbian-chamber/>.

FEMWORKS and the Power of Representation:

“If there are pathways for LGBT people to be economically empowered, those same pathways can be used by everybody.”¹⁰

- Kimberlee Williams, founder of FEMWORKS.

In 1998, Kimberlee Williams was attending a business class at 24 Commerce Street in downtown Newark when she noticed how most of the offices in the building were empty. She learned from the class instructor that the offices were available to rent for merely one hundred dollars a month. Thus without a business plan she rented one of the offices. She recalled, “I had no clue what I was doing, but I knew that I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I had a name. I had a general idea of what I could be doing, and at this point, I had an office.”¹¹ But three months later, the business had failed.

Although the first iteration of FEMWORKS folded, it laid the foundation for later success. Williams explained that she made two crucial mistakes during that initial attempt. She said that she involved too many friends in the business and they all, including Williams, stopped showing up at the office. Williams later found out that during the time they were absent, legendary singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill’s Grammy Award winning album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) was being produced in the office next door to hers. The album is one of Williams’s favorites and missing this opportunity caused her to further regret their lack of commitment to the business and take stock of what went wrong. If they had only showed up to the office, she felt that not only would she not have missed out on an amazing opportunity to hear her favorite album

¹⁰ Williams, oral history, 14

¹¹ Williams, oral history, 8.

being recorded, but the business would have had a better chance of getting off the ground.

Williams restarted FEMWORKS in 2004 with Tamara Fleming after they were both laid-off a few months apart with severance packages from their respective jobs. Instead of considering it a hardship, they viewed unemployment as an opportunity to start something new. Williams wanted to try again with FEMWORKS and Fleming wanted to use her skills as a photographer in a new venture so they joined forces. According to Fleming, who was laid off when her boss caught her working on her entrepreneurial endeavors during company time, explained how she often felt inadequate in the corporate world dominated white people, especially white men.

At least I'm thankful that I took the leap anyway because I wasn't in the boardrooms and the business community, but as an entrepreneur, I was. I was at these tables, but at the same time I brought my fear with me because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to say it. I thought that there was—actually, I spent a lot of times being very clueless about business. What a company wants and what we have to give, and then how magically it seems that everybody around the table understood the conversation, and I'm still catchin' up. It's almost as if there was another language that was being spoken that I didn't know about what it was. Right? That used to keep me up at night just because I felt incompetent...

It took me a long time to realize that my silence in these meetings was very loud and clear and that silence came off as inexperience. It probably came off as not being confident or not very knowledgeable of a certain topic of somethin'. I think it was a mix of havin' a personality of maybe a quiet-natured person but one that doesn't want to also say the wrong thing, to not be looked at as ignorant or somethin', and then a whole bunch of other things, a whole bunch of other conversations I was probably havin' in my mind while the meeting was happening. I can't say it's somethin' that—goin' back to is it somethin' I've always wanted to do. Not necessarily, but so very glad that I did.¹²

FEMWORKS became a way for Fleming to grow and gain confidence as a businesswoman. Initially Fleming and Williams involved one other friend in the business,

¹² Fleming, oral history, 13-14.

but she left in its nascent stage due to an illness in her family. Fleming recalled the first conversation they had about starting FEMWORKS together. She said,

With me, I think just a conversation of what we see as not seeing enough content that's distributed that talked about people of color, women, gay women, gay black women, women in urban communities, blackness—all of that. Just not really seeing enough of our own representation.¹³

She explained how those conversations about representation are what cemented the formation of their business partnership. FEMWORKS would be about helping other companies reach African Americans, the LGBT community, and urban communities—people that, according to Fleming, looked like them.

Authenticity in representation drives the mission of FEMWORKS and the image of the company's founders. Not only would FEMWORKS help serve black, LGBT, and urban communities, but they would also make themselves visible as a company run by two black gay women. Initially Fleming was worried they would lose clients if they were open about their sexuality. She said,

At that time, we did have faith-based companies working as our clients, and I felt like if we say this, then we're gonna lose them as a client. I was concerned on that end, but, eventually, that fear subsided, and it was more so like, "If they leave, then they're not for us anyway." I've never really hidden anything, so I'd rather have lost them as a client than to lose myself as a person that's trying to cover up this thing because I was too afraid and too ashamed of it.¹⁴

Instead of hiding their sexual identity, they touted it as a business asset. For example, on their website, they initially used the term “intimate knowledge” to convey their first-hand experience with the communities they would be connecting other businesses to.

Currently, their website states,

¹³ Fleming, oral history, 3-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

FEMWORKS is an award-winning consultancy specialized in creating authentic connection with real-every-day people in multicultural communities.

FEMWORKS builds the relationships necessary to ensure that community outreach is targeted, meaningful, and measurable. The majority of our team members are native to the multicultural communities we specialize in reaching. Our unique combination of cultural fluency and data driven strategies deliver a winning approach to long-lasting authentic community relationships.¹⁵

Using key words like “authentic” and “native” clearly sends the message to prospective clients that the people behind FEMWORKS are a part of the community that the client wants to reach. According to Fleming, their website was the only one she was aware of when they began FEMWORKS that not only stated the sexuality of the owners openly, but also stated it as a reason why companies should do business with them.

As a photographer and a black woman, Fleming also saw how other ad campaigns would represent women of color in ways that were not authentic. She explained how she is able to recognize when the person’s stylist is not a person of color. Often the model’s makeup is shades lighter than their skin tone or their hair is styled in a way that a black woman would not normally do. This becomes a problem, because if there is no one of color working on the project then there is no one there to step in and point out how the image is inauthentic or whether a stereotype is being perpetuated. Fleming wanted to use her skills as a photographer and her identity as a black woman to create images that would assure accurate represent people of color.

Tamara Fleming’s interest in photography began when she was a young girl and was born out of insecurity regarding her own appearance. She considered herself ugly and internalized any negative comments made by her peers. Her self-esteem was further diminished by the lack of African American representation in fashion and media.

¹⁵ See <http://www.femworks.co/authentic-multicultural-marketing>.

No, I didn't see that representation so freely back then. It wasn't like there was a big push towards having even Barbie dolls that were brown like me or darker skin tones. My dolls were white with blond hair. You grow up lookin' at a doll that's 12 shades lighter than you, playin' with hair texture that's nothin' like yours. All of that kind of stuff. Yeah. You're like "Wow. Okay. Beautiful is probably a size 2. Beautiful is blue eyes. Beautiful is much thinner lips," and everything else.¹⁶

Photography became a way for Fleming to help others recognize their own beauty. She states how “photography allowed me to help other people. Because in photography, it's me celebrating another person.”¹⁷ When Fleming engages in corporate and business photography she appreciates how insecure even the most powerful CEO can be. “All of the ego and all of the accomplishment—they become 15 years old again when they're in front of the camera. It's my job to build 'em back up,” explains Fleming.¹⁸ Because of the shame she felt about her appearance as a young person, it is important to Fleming to help the person she is photographing feel beautiful when they are with her.

On Fleming's portfolio website, crystal clear photographs of all types of individuals are featured, but most of the photographs are of African Americans. When considering Jasbir Puar's aforementioned notion of who is considered a “good homosexual,” as defined by marketing campaigns featuring white people and made for white consumers, Fleming's work pushes back against hegemonic perceptions that mark who is the idealized citizen even among LGBT populations. Her work adds to the desperately needed counter-narrative about beauty in this country. The one that rejects the unwritten rule that seems to mandate willowy white women still fill most pages of beauty magazines. Fleming's photos add more faces to the definition of beauty, not only

¹⁶ Fleming, oral history, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

because they come from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, but also because they are diverse in age, size, gender identity, and sexuality.

We tend to frame the archetypical entrepreneur as a white male in a business suit, which drives our understanding of who can be a successful entrepreneur. In her Ted Residency talk, Kimberlee Williams discusses this problem of representation and how it influences our perceptions of who embodies the image of a successful businessperson. She points out the incredible advancement of black female entrepreneurship in the last twenty years and cites the four hundred and fifteen percent growth of multi-cultural buying power from six hundred and sixty-one billion in 1990 to 3.4 trillion in the U.S. in 2014.¹⁹ Yet despite this data, when Williams performed a Google Image search in July of 2016 for the term “small business owner” the results were mostly images of white men and a smattering of white women. Out of sixty-three images, only five appeared to be black women business owners despite their rapid growth as a group. When she checked Getty Images, she found more of the same. This lack of representation not only restricts our society’s understanding of who is successful in this country, but also places a conceptual limit on the possibilities for young black women who are not seeing cultural representations that reflect who they are and who they can become. It also obscures roadblocks to minority achievement in business, which need to be identified in order to be eliminated.

Similarly, one of Fleming’s favorite advertisement campaigns by FEMWORKS dealt with altering an identity framework. In this case, FEMWORKS teamed up with the African American Office of Gay Concerns (AAOGC) in Newark to change the concept

¹⁹ *Kimberlee Williams: We are the new majority.* Kimberlee Williams. Ted Residency (2016). YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvQvt-Dpc0A>.

of what it means to get tested for HIV and how a positive result subsequently defines the infected person's existence as clinical, restricted, and isolated. Launched in 2010, the campaign was called "Status is Everything" and focused on showing individuals that they could be proud of their HIV status instead of fearful. The aim was to encourage people to talk openly about getting tested and through dialogue claim ownership to their HIV status. As a result, they would feel empowered to protect themselves, get the treatment that they needed, and protect current and/or future sexual partners.

Authenticity of people and experience became key to successfully shifting the perceptions around getting testing for HIV/AIDS. The women of FEMWORKS made a conscious decision not to use stock photos and instead photograph real people in their community in order to market the campaign. According to GLAAD, who worked with FEMWORKS to help promote "Status is Everything" in the media,

AAOGC teamed with marketing firm FEMWORKS to design StatusIsEverything.org, which includes PSAs of local African-American gay men discussing their personal stories and speaking out about why getting tested is key. They have also worked to create a social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Causecast; and large-scale movie theater and outdoor advertising in the greater Newark area.²⁰

In addition to having a press conference with Cory Booker, who was then mayor of Newark, they chose to have one of the mothers of the ballroom scene, Bernard McAllister, be a spokesperson, because of his stature in the gay community and because he had lost many individuals in his house over the years to the disease.²¹ Fleming

²⁰ Stephanie Barns, "GLAAD Helps Promote New Jersey Based HIV Awareness Campaign" GLAAD.org, February 3, 2010. <http://www.glaad.org/2010/02/03/glaad-helps-promote-new-jersey-based-hiv-awareness-campaign>.

²¹ See "Status Is Everything" campaign video for the African American Office of Gay Concerns (AAOGC), In *Facebook*, Accessed April 15, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/AAOGCNewark/videos/1344983105716/>.

explained the importance of having someone like McAllister promote the message of “Status is Everything,”

If you had your local mayor—you had Cory Booker as the mayor—he saying one thing is one thing, but when you have someone that's the mayor on the street that is really like your father of the house and he says, "Child, you need to go get tested," you're better go get tested.²²

Their campaign also featured a transgender model, which meant that commuters and residents were gazing up at a transgender woman on a huge billboard in downtown Newark. Fleming pointed out that the billboard was not on an obscure side street, but posted on Washington Street, one of the main thoroughfares of the city. All of these tactics worked together to create a new image for those who get tested for HIV to be seen as individuals who matter and are thriving, instead of equating a test result to a scarlet letter and a shunned existence.

Fleming cited community engagement as the most exciting part of the project with AAOGC. She explained how people could send their loved ones personalized digital postcards, which asked the recipient if they had been tested. The postcards featured photographs that Fleming took of people in the community. She spoke with immense pride about how she used her apartment to photograph a bedroom series for the postcards where she depicted men kissing. She wanted to get away from the clinical nature of HIV testing that made people fearful. Instead, the postcards were meant to be a loving message that, regardless of the results, by getting tested and practicing self-care it was possible to continue engaging in life, love, and sex. She explained that

...it was pretty cool to get that in your inbox where you get someone that's, first of all, the person on the postcard is someone that you know, and then this

²² Fleming, oral history, 10-11.

message is almost like a gentle reminder as like, "I love you. I want you to go get tested" type of thing.²³

In addition to the photographs, all of Fleming's day-to-day work on "Status is Everything" was community focused. It was the first time she produced a project from start to finish; she managed the creative process, acted as talent scout for the models and community members involved, and had to be on location for all video shoots and interviews. She explained that this deep involvement made for difficult work, but she emphasized that it gave her life. She explained, "I loved getting a chance to really know the people in the community a lot better. That's what was the most exciting for me, I would say."²⁴ It is likely that this involvement with the community is the reason why the campaign was considered successful.

Fleming's community engagement goes beyond her work with FEMWORKS. She also started Expoz(HER), a personal development program that uses photography to empower girls and young women of color in urban communities. The idea for Expoz(HER) started organically. In 2006 Fleming brought a few small mirrors with her to give to girls randomly in order to create for them a moment of acceptance and self-love in their appearance. Initially, she gave the mirrors to three little girls and within a few moments she described how it looked like the entire village was running towards her. For Fleming the moment was humorous, but also an opportunity to spread her message further. A few years later, a friend of Fleming's invited her to work in Haiti for ten days after the devastating earthquake in 2010 at a camp that held about a hundred girls. Fleming asked her friends to help crowdfund her plane ticket—crowdfunding is a very

²³ Fleming, oral history, 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

21st century entrepreneurial tool for acquiring the capital needed to commence a project or business idea. Once in Haiti, she used her personal story of why she wanted to become a photographer in the hopes of inspiring the girls in her camp to overcome their own self-doubt.

I was lettin' 'em know, "Wow. You guys have a lot of beauty here. If you do ever see interest in becomin' a photographer or to get a chance to take pictures, perhaps you can take photos that can change the perception of your country, and then sell the postcards. Talk to your tourism board to talk about redefining what Haiti looks like so that people can come here and see for themselves just how beautiful you guys are."²⁵

While Fleming worked on their self-esteem she also taught them how to use art to redefine what is considered beautiful by society.

In a way, Fleming took the mission of FEMWORKS in Newark—whose advertisements alter hegemonic ideas about beauty and normalcy commonly embodied in whiteness and heteronormativity by showcasing people of color and queer people—and spread it overseas to young Haitian women in a country commonly defined by poverty and ruin. The world outside of Haiti will never see other facets of the country other than its turmoil if there exists no documentation of its beauty to counter it. In which case, Haiti's beauty becomes repeatedly silenced by the media and in common discourse in favor of the disaster and poverty narrative. This is not unlike what has happened in Newark where different institutions, corporations, and community members are working to rebrand Newark from a city of ill repute to signify—despite the problems which plague many urban communities—that this is a place with an already existing vibrant community and has promise for new development and innovation. According to Fleming, "Newark isn't always created in the media as a positive and wonderful, dynamic place as

²⁵ Fleming, oral history, 26.

well, too, but there's a lot of places in Newark that is beautiful. If you just look up or look out, then you see more beauty...”²⁶

Indeed, queer cultural spaces are visibly flourishing again in Newark. Halsey Street used to be considered a gay hub in Newark during the 1970s and 1980s, where gay clubs such as S.R.O., Le Joc, and Doll House provided sanctuary, but have since closed.²⁷ Newark’s contemporary queer landscape, dotted with lesbian businesses, has revived Halsey Street as a queer mecca and it also offers a counterpoint to scholarship that mourns the loss of lesbian owned spaces.²⁸ Queer eulogies on the loss of music festivals, coffee houses, and bookstores owned and patronized largely by white lesbians, although important to note, pass over the existence of lesbian spaces within a predominantly black communities. And indeed, many LGBT businesses in Newark, particularly lesbian-run, are proliferating downtown, particularly on Halsey Street where they are adding to the establishment of a vibrant culture district. Moreover Newark’s Halsey Street has become the city’s version of Christopher Street in Manhattan, which has long been associated with the proliferation of queer establishments and where the Stonewall Inn—legendary birthplace of gay liberation—is located. Halsey Street is home to the Newark LGBTQ Community Center started by queer women of color, The Artisan Collective owned by five queer women of color, the MH302 Marco Hall Boutique named after the owner who is gay and a fashion designer, the gay-friendly hot spot 27 Mix where the women-led Newark Pride Alliance often has meet-ups, and Off the Hanger, a boutique store owned by two married lesbian women on Linden Avenue, a side street off Halsey. Halsey also

²⁶ Fleming, oral history, 27.

²⁷ Strub and Satter, “History of Queer Club Spaces” Queer Newark Oral History Project.

²⁸ Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York, 2016).

used to be where one would find a gay-owned retail store named St. James & Company as well as the Liberation in Truth Social Justice Center, a drop-in center on New Street off Halsey started by female members of the LGBTQ Community Center and Unity Church. Known as LIT, they offered counseling and HIV testing. Not too far off from Halsey Street are other LGBT owned businesses such as the art space Gallery Aferro owned by a lesbian couple, Medina CITI, a multi-media “design haus,” the aforementioned FEMWORKS, and the Essex County RAIN Foundation, a shelter for homeless LGBT youth in the neighboring town of East Orange owned by Fleming’s wife Elaine Helms. And linking much of the gay community together is the Unity Fellowship Church NewArk on Broad Street, where LGBT church leaders provide Newark’s LGBT community a safe space to worship.

As a multi-media marketing company run by two queer black women, Williams and Fleming are able to use FEMWORKS to bring this queer landscape to light through their use of social media and advertising. The representational work of FEMWORKS is key to bringing Newark’s vibrant queer community to the fore. Together, Fleming and Williams reflect a 21st century black lesbian entrepreneurial style that is community-driven in its economic model. Understanding the power of the media to shape perceptions of marginalized individuals and communities, FEMWORKS is engaging in vital work to positively shape attitudes towards queer people of color who are otherwise far too often ignored or discounted.

The Artisan Collective and Hierarchical Models in Lesbian Institutions:

“My earliest memory of Newark? My earliest memory of Newark would have to be the first day that I stepped into Unity Fellowship church.”²⁹

- Jae Quinlan, founder of The Artisan Collective.

Jae Quinlan used to commute every weekend from the Bronx to Newark to attend the Unity Fellowship Church NewArk. In fact, she cites the Unity Church as the main reason she moved to Newark in 2000. At the time, she was dealing with drug addiction stemming from traumatic events in her past and the Unity Church’s leadership and congregation provided her with the support system she needed in order to regain her sobriety. Quinlan started attending services through her mother, who was friends with the chapter founder in Newark. She remembered,

And it came right on time, and I would like to say that it actually saved my life literally, because I was not feeling like God loved me or that who I was, was beloved by God, accepted by God, and you know it was—tearing me apart on top of other things that were tearing me apart. So I came. It took me a minute to get here after I got the information but I came and I have never stopped. It brought me here [to Newark].

Quinlan joined the church choir and later became a deacon. Through this support system she worked with at the Liberation in Truth Social Justice Center, the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, and eventually came to partner with friends from church to open a business in Newark, The Artisan Collective.

Bishop Carl Bean, famous for the 1977 gay liberation dance song “I Was Born This Way,” founded the Unity Church in the 1980s in Los Angeles, California in response to

²⁹ Jae Quinlan, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, October 19, 2016. Transcript, page 8.

the AIDS crisis.³⁰ Bishop Carl Bean saw the need for a spiritual space that would welcome gay men of color who had been ostracized from their churches because they tested positive for HIV/AIDS.³¹ Unity Churches have since sprung up in other states around the nation, as places of worship that welcome the LGBTQ community and recognize all are worthy of religious salvation. Newark's chapter of the Unity Church considers itself to be a social justice ministry.

Quinlan emphasized how the tragic death of fifteen-year-old Sakia Gunn in 2003 impacted her as well as many others within the Unity church's community. Gunn was on her way home with friends from Greenwich Village in Manhattan. When she reached the bus stop on Broad and Market Streets two men began to harass and proposition them. Gunn stood up for herself and told him she was gay. One of the men, Richard McCullough, then pulled out a knife and stabbed her. Tragically she died in the arms of a friend on the way to the hospital.³² During that time, Quinlan was involved with the Liberation in Truth Social Justice Center (LIT), which was a drop-in center that provided HIV prevention in Newark and was started by members of the Unity Church in 1998, but eventually lost funding. After Sakia Gunn's death, the LGBT community in Newark as well as those who were a part of the Unity Church were outraged by this hate crime and demanded safe spaces for LGBT youth, in particular they wanted a city-sponsored LGBT

³⁰ See Archbishop Carl Bean, *I Was Born This Way* (New York, Simon & Shuster: 2010).

³¹ Alicia Heath-Toby, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, January 27, 2017. Transcript, page 3.

³² See Timothy Stewart-Winter and Whitney Strub, "Queer Newark: The Murder of Sakia Gunn and LGBT Anti-Violence Mobilization," *Outhistory.org*. 2011. <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/queer-newark/murder-of-sakia-gunn>.

community center. Also in reaction to Gunn's death, the Newark Pride Alliance was formed and held its first week-long Pride celebration in 2005.³³

Yet what they got was continued government inaction, first by Mayor Sharpe James and subsequently by Mayor Cory Booker. Despite the lack of follow-through by city government, the leaders of LIT, specifically Reverend Janyce Jackson Jones and Reverend Alicia Heath-Toby, bypassed the city and opened their own Newark LGBTQ Community Center in 2013.³⁴ According to Heath-Toby,

...the community said, "Enough." Because there were killings of trans folks, and sexual abuse happening, and the rise of health issues in the community. Wrongful arrest, and all those things were happening to LGBTQ folks. Particularly young folks, and so a group of leaders said, "Enough is enough. Let's take this place, this space, which is 11 Halsey, which was where we were for years, since '98, and let's just say this is the Newark LGBTQ Center." That's really how it came to be. It came as a result of people just being fed up.³⁵

Being a part of the change in Newark since Gunn's death was very gratifying to Quinlan. She described it as

“a pivotal moment in my history of being here, loving here, working here, being part of change here is everything that happened around Sakia Gunn dying—being murdered—and the response that we immediately had—the church immediately had—to be supportive.”³⁶

Queer women of color in Newark showed that they were not going to wait around for the city to protect them. If city government would only “pay lip service” to the needs of

³³ See Zenzele Isoke, "Can't I be seen? Can't I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark" *Gender Place And Culture* 21, no. 3 (2014) 353-369; Newark Pride Inc. website, www.NewarkGayPride.org.

³⁴ Ibid.; Heath-Toby oral history, 1.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.

³⁶ Quinlan oral history, 20.

LGBT people in Newark—as one frustrated community leader, Gary Paul Wright, had declared in a local newspaper—then they would do it themselves.³⁷

A year prior to the Newark Community Center opening, Quinlan started her own business with five of her friends, whom she had met through the Unity Fellowship Church. Another friend of hers had exposed a few people including Quinlan to a personal development series called “Momentum Education” and it inspired her into action.³⁸ Quinlan has been an artist since she was a child, but now she wanted to turn that hobby into a business. Although she knew which friends she wanted to partner with, she still needed to find a space for a storefront. Quinlan described how it all came together,

I walked down the street that I walked down every day, and saw for the first time, like really, really saw, like this space that I had walked by for over a year. And I looked at the number and I was like, "Wow, that number looks very familiar to me." And it was my old landlord's number. So I called and he showed this space and we fell in love with it immediately. I am grateful that they fell in love with my dream and that we have been together now for almost five years in that space.³⁹

Because each of the five women, who had been friends for fifteen years, contributed their own unique artisanal crafts to sell in the store, they decided to name it The Artisan Collective.

The Artisan Collective fits into the historical legacy of lesbian owned and operated businesses that over time have shaped lesbian culture. Much of this history focuses on lesbian owned bookstores, bars, and coffee shops and tends to bring the

³⁷ Gary Paul Wright, op ed. “Remembering the murder of Sakia Gunn, and Newark’s lost opportunity: Opinion” *Star Ledger*. May 23, 2013.

<http://www.aaogc.org/2013/05/remembering-the-murder-of-sakia-gunn-and-newarks-lost-opportunity-opinion/>.

³⁸ See Momentum Education: <https://www.momentumeducation.com>.

³⁹ Quinlan, oral history, 25-26.

experiences of white lesbians, specifically white working class women, to the fore.⁴⁰ An exception to this paradigm is Rochella Thorpe's study on black lesbians who adapted their social institutions away from public bars, which were often inhospitable to black patrons, and instead created semi-public spaces by organizing rent parties.⁴¹ The Artisan Collective adds to these histories by representing a collaboratively owned black lesbian space that is both public and whose members are involved with other queer institutions in the city of Newark.

The Artisan Collective's collaborative model between five women also harkens back to the five lesbian women partnership of Olivia Records in the early 1970s. Olivia Records was a successful record company committed to releasing the music of lesbian artists whose music defined lesbian politics and affirmed lesbian lifestyle.⁴² Similarly, in the case of the Artisan Collective, all five of the owners are lesbians, but unlike Olivia Records, the Artisan Collective is not explicitly focused on sexual politics. Moreover, Quinlan insists that their sexual preference is not central to the business or its patrons. She said,

Although most people know that that's who we are, it's hard not to know that when you come in. But you know we don't lead with—we lead with love, and love for our craft and for the people that come in. We are known as a safe zone and a cultural hub, so people come there just to get some peace.⁴³

⁴⁰ See Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press), 2007; Roey Thorpe, "The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1932-1965." In *Creating a Place for Ourselves*, 165. n.p.: 1997; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

⁴¹ Rochella Thorpe, "A house where queers go": African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975" *Inventing Lesbian Cultures In America* (January 1996): 40.

⁴² Bonnie Morris. "Olivia Records: The Production of a Movement" *Journal Of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 3 (July 2015): 290-304.

⁴³ Quinlan, oral history, 27.

One of the original partners who recently retired from the store, Saundra Toby-Heath, also known as “Honei” to her friends and wife, echoed Quinlan’s description of the shop’s atmosphere as a generally neutral space. When asked whether she deals with any issues related to her gender, race, or sexuality as a business owner she said she had not and guessed her partners had not either. She cited it as a reason that Artisan Collective was special and recalled a story about how her daughter-in-law told her coworkers that when you walk in the door to the Artisan Collective you feel immediately welcomed. She went on to say,

I don’t think that—I don’t remember hearing anything negative about anybody coming into the shop. Because that’s just not what the shop is. When you come through the door, you coming into a special place. That’s really nice. It’s always been that way, right from the beginning. I’ll miss it.⁴⁴

The owners as well as the patrons seemed to view the store itself primarily as a service to the community as a whole—to provide a calm, centering place anyone could enter and find relaxation.

Yet even without being an explicitly political space, The Artisan Collective is shaping the queer community and cultural landscape by providing a hub for black lesbian expression. Each of the women contributes to the store using their own unique talents. Toby-Heath makes functional and decorative items out of mud cloth, a beautiful textile from Africa. Reverend Jerri Lee Mitchel specializes in making bags out of found objects. Quinlan designs jewelry, hand-paints articles of clothing, and makes abstract paintings while Burley Tuggle holds monthly wine tastings as a sommelier. Other partners who have come and gone have brought with them their own individual talents, which means

⁴⁴ Toby-Heath, oral history, 49.

the store is always shifting and growing in exciting new ways. Other black lesbians have also been able to display their art there, such as June Dowell-Burton, founder and an executive board member of Newark Gay Pride, Inc. whose paintings have been on display for sale.⁴⁵ In addition, Quinlan runs an open mic night out of the store called Crack the Mic, which features spoken word or music performances predominantly by black women in the community. This after-hours event helps promote more work by local black lesbian women in a way similar to Olivia Records.

The Artisan Collective is an egalitarian-style business, where the rent, utilities, display area, and hourly shifts are shared equally among the partners. Since opening in 2012, different women have come and gone with the current iteration of owners being a mix of new and founding partners. Yet, despite some turnover the store has remained a fixture on Halsey Street and they have been able to maintain their shared responsibility. Burley Tuggle, one of the founders who is still involved in the store explained that

We created our own business model where we said, “You know what? We’re going to be five women. We are intergenerational. We have five different concepts, right, but we’re going to do all of this together under one roof...Everybody’s name is on everything. Everybody’s name is on the bank account. There’s no boss. We didn’t pick titles. We just said, “No, we’re equal partners.” We all have a voice in decision-making.⁴⁶

This can become stressful when expenses vary, such as when the heating bill increases or decreases depending on the temperature during the month. What used to be the agreed payment amount tends to increase as time goes on due to rising rent or utilities. Another factor in this commitment means that when one of the partners cannot afford their share,

⁴⁵ See June Dowell-Burton, oral history interview by Whitney Strub, Queer Newark Oral History Project, December 1, 2015.

⁴⁶ Burley Tuggle, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, November 9, 2016. Transcript, page 35.

the others cover what that person owes. But the partners weather these issues as a team whenever they arise.

This is not to make the claim that Newark's lesbian-owned spaces are perfect. When Kathleen M. Weston and Lisa B Rofel examined issues of race, sexuality, and class by interviewing women who worked together in a lesbian auto-repair shop in a metropolitan area they discovered that class can affect power and privilege even in environments where it seems like the playing field is level.⁴⁷ Oppression due to homophobia, sexism, and race should be alleviated due to a shared identity and thus the working relationship should be able to sustain a meritocracy predicated on fairness. But their study revealed class divisions based solely on a hierarchical division of labor between the mechanics that worked there and competed for commission and the two women who owned the shop. Eventually, multiple conflicts led to the mechanics going on a prolonged strike. At the Artisan Collective, where all of the women are black and queer and the partnership is ostensibly nonhierarchical, the class divisions become even harder to appreciate. Yet the need to "cover" the expenses for partners who cannot afford to pay their share surfaced as a potential location of tension among the women.

According to Tuggle,

Also, when you have a partnership, sometimes everybody is in a different place in terms of what they can bring to the table financially. I would definitely say I've had to experience tightening my belt and putting money into a business when you're not always going to see—you know you're not going to get it back.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Kathleen M. Weston and Lisa B. Rofel. "Sexuality, Class, and Conflict in a Lesbian Workplace" *Homo-Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 25-44.

⁴⁸ Tuggle, oral history, 35.

Tuggle also points out that when partners leave, the cost increases between the remaining members. Although Tuggle works a full time job in addition to the business, there have been occasions where she has put so much money into the store that she has had nothing left in her bank account. But she considers financial perseverance to be one of the traits of an entrepreneur and therefore good naturedly accepts this occasional hardship as a natural part of the business. These types of issues reinforce the notion that Weston and Rofel put forth regarding the existence of tensions and conflicts within lesbian institutions despite the lack of most –isms prevalent in most other workplaces.

Although conflicts still exist in any workplace regardless of a seemingly even playing field the Artisan Collective did not end in strike like the mechanics shop. They continue as a team even when it is not easy. Toby-Heath explained how it could be tough to have so many business partners who all have their own needs and wants regarding the store and how it is run.

Yeah, trying to work it all out, and not get on each other's nerves. I think that five women, though, I think we did a pretty incredible job. That's one of the things that people always talked about. "Wow, five women?" But we've known each other for so long. That was a blessing, for us, because we knew each other. We knew each other from church and intimate stuff.⁴⁹

The women of the Artisan Collective are tied to each other beyond the obligations of business. Even if they are not still with the store, as in the case of Lee Mitchell and Toby-Heath who have since left or retired, they are nonetheless bonded through friendship, spirituality, and community activism, enabling these women to persevere as they keep their vision for success and commitment to each other a shared priority.

⁴⁹ Toby Heath, oral history, 47-48.

Important to note, hierarchical models persist even when the business partnership is between two lesbian white women who are married to each other. Emma Wilcox owns Gallery Aferro, an art exhibition and artist residence space in Newark, with her partner Evonne Davis. When they were first starting out, they undertook a mentorship with an older lesbian couple that owns an art space in upstate New York. Wilcox began ranting about equal partnerships and about how she and Davis reject hierarchical business models when one of the women took the two of them aside. According to Wilcox,

She just kinda wrinkled her eyebrow and is like, “I get that. I get that. I’m from the hippie days,” but essentially, someone has to be listed as an ED [executive director] to do grants.” It’s actually quite difficult to mediate with the world on your terms.⁵⁰

Wilcox continued to explain that regardless of whether you decide to assign the role to someone on paper solely as a formality, other people that you deal with in your daily operations automatically will conceive of that person to be the chief executive officer.

Wilcox added,

That seems relevant to the idea of lesbian entrepreneurship is the world is not going to work with you on your terms all the time, and it happens in these very subtle and weird ways. The model is still the pyramid with the guy on top.⁵¹

In order to try to alleviate the power imbalance, Davis became the artistic director, making her the curatorial head of the space. Yet this role tends to signify an image of someone who is the artistic mind of the operation and therefore is seen as the less serious, less authoritative figure as opposed to Wilcox’s role as executive director. This codes her role as the rational businessperson and that perception automatically elevates her to be the one in charge.

⁵⁰ Emma Wilcox, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, January 18, 2017. Transcript, page 14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14-15.

Wilcox also surfaced hierarchical issues related to gender presentation in lesbian owned and operated businesses even when housed in counter-cultural spaces, such as an artist community. Between the two partners, Wilcox lands on the more feminine spectrum of gender presentation while Davis is more masculine. As a result, Wilcox has noticed that occasionally people will treat her differently from Davis, because of her more normative gender presentation. Wilcox adds her body weight as another dimension of why her voice is often elevated over Davis's, who is heavier than her.

...but let's talk about fem and visibility and the extremely raced and classed nature of the so-called progressive art world. It was immensely painful for me seeing how, because—I don't wear makeup, but just being—I don't know—skinny or being the one that was wearing pantyhose or whatever you wanna call it—whatever my verbal presentation—people acted as if Evonne was invisible sometimes...⁵²

It is crucial to recognize how women in the progressive art world, who are in positions of power and who own an artist space, still deal with sexist and homophobic micro-aggressions amounting to largely invisible forms of oppression. With this being the case, then as a society we must recognize and validate similar complaints from women and gender-nonconforming individuals in mainstream, hierarchical workspaces and organizations even when they seem to be bastions of liberalism.

Despite the model of power that values masculinity over femininity, a masculine presentation does not automatically confer male privilege. Wilcox mused how she became the person everyone wanted to speak with despite being womanly. Compared to Davis, she claimed she was viewed as “the important person, or the girly one, which is funny because you still need a penis to get anything done. You would think that the butch

⁵² Ibid., 16.

person would have an easier time of it, but go figure.”⁵³ Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, which sheds light on how multiple and interlocking social identities impact how a person experiences oppression and to what level of harm, helps explain why Davis’s masculine presentation would disadvantage her in a society that values maleness.⁵⁴ Her social identity as a woman, as a lesbian, and as butch, contains an additional level of otherness that Wilcox lacks. Heteronormativity and binary thinking within mainstream society, regardless of an artistic setting, still influences many people’s unconscious understanding of who is an authority and whose voice carries more weight.

Lesbian owned and operated businesses enable queer women to escape the straight white male dominated spaces of most companies, yet they still have to confront societal issues. Whether brought on internally by class differences or through dealing with the normative world as part of day-to-day operations, there will always be constraints placed on lesbians no matter how idealized their business environment is. Yet the women of the Artisan Collective and Gallery Aferro have found their own unique ways to work within these constraints by supporting each other and by queering traditional business models; the hierarchy of Gallery Aferro exists only on paper and the Artisan Collective thrives on egalitarian collectivism. Like FEMWORKS, the Artisan Collective and Gallery Aferro are community-driven businesses that often collaborate on events together as a part of their mission to enrich Newark’s queer community through art and creativity.

⁵³ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99.

Off the Hanger and AG Visibility:

“I want a place where people, women like me, are comfortable to shop and you don’t have to worry about whether the dressing room says men or women. It’s open. It’s for us.”⁵⁵

- Anita Dickens, co-owner of Off the Hanger.

“I live unapologetically. I do. This is me. It's easy to do, because I am dark-skinned and I am butch. I can't be any—Those two things, I can't change that. Given my circumstances, I can't. I'm not gonna lighten up, and I'm not goin' to wear a pump and heels because it's the thing that I'm supposed to do, 'cause I'm a gendered woman. This is it. (*laughs*)⁵⁶

- Reverend Alicia Heath-Toby, former vice-chair of the Newark LGBTQ Community Center.

Among some of the black lesbian women interviewed, discrimination based on non-binary gender presentation may have foreclosed some mainstream employment opportunities, however, it opened up avenues of entrepreneurship that have proven to be more rewarding than corporate America. With her close-cropped hair, broad shoulders, and handsome beauty Tamara Fleming’s wife Elaine Helms has a very masculine appearance. According to Fleming, Helms refuses to conform to societal ideas on acceptable feminine modes of dress, which means that she is unable to find as many employment opportunities in corporate America as those who are gender conforming—a roadblock that butch women have experienced for decades.

In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, authors Kennedy and Davis highlight how butch women in the 1950s wore jeans and t-shirts and slicked their hair back in the style of men at the time. In order to maintain their gender presentation, they could not take middle-class jobs such as secretary or teacher that required feminine attire. Instead they

⁵⁵ Anita Dickens, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, December 8, 2016. Transcript, page 21.

⁵⁶ Heath-Toby, oral history, 13.

tended to stick to working class jobs in factories, bartenders, or as taxi cab drivers, because maintaining their gender identity was more important to them than class advancement. According to Kennedy and Davis, “By not denying who they were and looking queer as much of the time as possible, or associating with those who did, tough bar lesbians drastically reduced their options for work and their chances of partaking in the American dream of upward mobility.”⁵⁷ Helms continues that tradition of butch authenticity by rejecting occupational roles that would try to alter her identity as a butch woman. Instead she created her own entrepreneurial endeavor, a homeless shelter for LGBT youth.

Similar to the experience of Emma Wilcox and her wife Evonne Davis, Fleming noticed the difference in how she is treated as a feminine lesbian in relation to how people react to Helms. She explained,

Just like with my wife, Elaine. She dresses male—if you wanna put gender on there, it's like, "Okay." It's like her—she's not gonna wear a dress, first of all. She's not wearing heels. When I met her, she had suits on every day. [Chuckles] Going to the store. "Why you got a suit on? You're going to the store." ... The way she dresses would be very intimidating for a corporate entity, to have some woman that's dressed as a male, quote/unquote, and workin' at this company. She had to create her own business because of that, but even in the entrepreneurial world, you still gotta do business with straight people or whatever, and they will still judge you. It's still not as easy. I think I may have it, if I could say, easier because I can pass, quote/unquote, for being just two things instead of three things. I can pass as bein' a woman and a black person...I can pass as bein' those two, but I don't have to say that I'm gay.⁵⁸

In Fleming’s assessment having a butch and gay identity can sometimes be more of a hindrance moving through the world than being a black woman who can use her femininity to pass as straight. In order to maintain her autonomy, Helms turned away

⁵⁷ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 82.

⁵⁸ Fleming, oral history, 37.

from regular employment to an entrepreneurial endeavor that gives her the power to be her true self and at the same time serves the queer community—although, as Fleming points out, like Davis and Wilcox, Helms still has to interact within normative society and the restraints placed on non-binary individuals. She may not be able to escape societal norms completely, but through entrepreneurship she created her own public sphere where she could deal with oppressive forces as a visible butch woman from a position of strength.

Throughout history women have opted to pass as male in order to access financial opportunities and employment positions open exclusively to men. According to economist Julie Matthaei, “Many passing women directly referred to their inability to survive on women’s wages in explaining their decisions to take up the masculine gender.”⁵⁹ Contemporary butch women like Helms may not feel the same pressure to pass as men since women have gained more economic opportunities than in other historical eras despite the wage gap which means women earn less on every dollar compared to men—and this wage gap grows larger for minority women compared to white women. But overall, women still do not have the full range of opportunities that are open to cisgender men, including equal pay, nor are they immune to harassment based on their appearance. This can cause many butch women like Helms, but also women and other minorities in general, to leave the corporate world to create alternative pathways that allow them to live freely while pursuing financial success.

⁵⁹ Julie Matthaei, “The Sexual Division of Labor, Sexuality, and Lesbian/Gay Liberation: Toward a Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Sexuality in U.S. Capitalism” *Homo-Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 144.

Additionally, when queer people, women, and other minorities lack support systems they may turn to underground economies for survival. Helms worked for the Port Authority at the World Trade Center in Manhattan until she was injured during the 9/11 attacks. While in recovery, she worked in a laboratory that was located across the street from where many sex workers hung out. When Helms noticed that many of the sex workers were transgender youth, she approached them to ask why they did not have jobs. According to Helms,

They said they were discriminated against, thrown out of homes and that nobody seemed to understand them. Most of them were on drugs to get high to take their minds somewhere else while they did what they had to do to survive. They wouldn't stay in the clinic because they were ridiculed by other people there. This experience gave me the idea to open a shelter to give them love and skills in a safe place where they would be accepted.⁶⁰

Helms, being in a more fortunate position, opened a shelter to provide a safety net for transgender and queer youth who have become trapped in a bleak situation as a result of societal and familial rejection. Helms did not just find a way to escape the white heteronormative landscape of corporate America and advance her own status; she has dedicated her life's work to empower queer people of color in a way that inspires and lifts up the entire community.

Experiencing discrimination as a masculine woman also influenced the entrepreneurial path of Anita Dickens, who co-owns a women's clothing boutique called Off the Hanger with her wife Lynette Lashawn. The store, a mix of retro and modern décor, is divided in half—one side features feminine women's fashion with racks of clothes hanging from gigantic industrial-grade hangers which represent the store's name

⁶⁰ Guest Blogger. "Meet Elaine Helms – Survivor and LGBT Advocate" TOMBOYX. September 1, 2015. <https://tomboyx.com/blogs/news/44296004-meet-elaine-helms-survivor-and-lgbt-advocate>.

and the other side has androgynous styles suited for men or women. Lashawn curates the half of the store that features feminine styles and the unisex side is the brainchild of Dickens. She named her collection “A Girl Guy Thing” (AGT) and expressed how she wants it to be a welcoming space for queer people to shop in.

In its nascent stage, the store only existed online and was accompanied by personal shopping services. Then it moved into showrooms until eventually in 2011 Lawshawn felt ready to make it a brick and mortar store in Newark with AGT being added in 2013. According to Lashawn,

Being born and raised in Newark, and always wanting to have something in Newark—I know I wasn’t sure if it was going to be fashion or if it was going to be something else, but I knew I wanted to do something in Newark and come back and bring the people of Newark something that they never even imagined could be in Newark, really.⁶¹

Dickens was also born and raised in Newark and, like the women of the Artisan Collective, is proud of the positive atmosphere the store provides for the community. She expressed how

when people come in they really just love the store. Some people just want to come in just to have a conversation with us, we’re cool with that. We even offer them a glass of wine, on certain days. But they come, they love being in the store. We keep hearing how the energy is so good there, and that’s important to us, because it meant a lot to us, when we actually put it together and bring it to Newark.⁶²

In addition to creating an inclusive shopping experience, Dickens and Lashawn are both excited to be in the position to employ youth in Newark through a city program that matches high school students up with employers during the summer in order to provide them with job experience and training. Dickens and Lashawn also explained with pride

⁶¹ Lynette Lashawn, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, January 19, 2017. Transcript, page 8.

⁶² Dickens oral history, 18.

that they always hire local employees and vendors. For instance, when they had the idea for the oversize hangers, they commissioned an entrepreneur who started a welding company in the Ironbound section of Newark to create them.

Dickens's idea for her half of the store, "A Girl and Guy Thing" (AGT), originated from her experiences as a masculine presenting woman who has felt uncomfortable in store dressing rooms. Dickens explained that she prefers to shop in the men's department. But when she goes to try on clothes, the experience becomes very uncomfortable. She is either sent to the men's side and then has to correct the clerk's mistake or she is sent to the women's side where other women stare at her; both scenarios cause her embarrassment and frustration. She explained how this led to her starting AGT,

I wanted to create that experience, when you come into the store that if you're a woman that wears men's fashion you can find it there. You're going to be comfortable there because I'm there. Dressed. Styled. And it's what I wear so I definitely believe in what I have. Again, that whole experience pretty much motivated me to bring this experience to my LGBT community.⁶³

Dickens, like the other women interviewed, wraps her vision up in how it will serve Newark and the LGBT community. She currently is working with gay designer Marco Hall to enhance AGT. Hall's store MH302 Marco Hall Boutique is another local staple on Halsey Street, where occasionally his dog can be spotted sitting in the large front display window among a couple of mannequins and fabulously dressed to match.

Another woman interviewed, Peggy Miller, uses her identity as an aggressive woman to pursue multiple entrepreneurial endeavors to uplift women like her. Primarily used within the black community, the term "aggressive" or "AG" refers to masculine identified lesbian women. In 2000, Miller started a photography project called *New*

⁶³ Ibid., 21.

Millennium Butch that began as a modeling event and turned into an independently published book and a calendar featuring all aggressive models, including Elaine Helms and Jae Quinlan among others. Tamara Fleming was also involved in taking some of the photos in addition to another local Newark photographer. All of the models were either friends of Miller's from Unity Church or women she met at a Newark fraternity called Pi Lambda Phi (PLP). The fraternity, who Miller has been a member of for five years, is made up of all aggressive women who engage in community activism together, such as feeding the homeless or participating in marches for breast cancer awareness. Similar to the ethos expressed by Fleming, representation is important to Miller. She emphasized,

My focus has always been on the aggressive women because I've never felt the aggressive woman got all the attention that's needed. Not only that, since we are always hid because of who we are. You know what I mean? You're aggressive, so sometimes it's not good remarks. I wanted to make sure we're shown in our best light. You know what I mean? That's why I love showing them or showing myself. I don't model, but I just put it together, showing how beautiful, that we are beautiful, regardless, and that we should be seen.⁶⁴

Miller was one of the community members who participated in the Queer Newark Oral History Project's first conference in 2011 where her models made a palpable impact on the audience. Darnell Moore, conference organizer and project co-founder, noted that

LGBTQ activists and high school students, street workers and church leaders, politicians and university students, professors, administrators and university staff sat rapt, watching rare and stunning images of "New Millennium Butches," resplendent in tailored suits of black, pink or purple, flashing before them on a thirty-foot screen.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Peggie Miller, oral history interview by author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, March 7, 2017. Transcript, page 14-15.

⁶⁵ Darnell Moore, Beryl Satter, Timothy Stewart-Winter, and Whitney Strub. "A Community's Response to the Problem of Invisibility: The Queer Newark Oral History Project" *QED: A Journal In GLBTQ Worldmaking* no. 2 (2014): 1

Fleming also contributed photographs to the event featuring Newark's LGBTQ leaders accompanied by each subject's message for social change. Miller has been putting on butch fashion shows in Newark since 2000 and was given an award for her work as recently as 2017 at a butch fashion show held in North Carolina. She also currently co-owns a restaurant in Newark called Diamondz N Da Ruff with two other women.

Butch women of color in Newark are creating spaces in and around the city that affirm their gender identities and provide public space for AG expression. In 2003 when Sakia Gunn, a young butch lesbian, was tragically murdered, her death sparked Newark's queer community into action. With the establishment of Newark Gay Pride and Newark's LGBTQ Community Center came more visibility and sanctuary for AG lesbians of color due to the pioneering efforts of black queer women in Newark. Anita Dickens, Elaine Helms, and Peggy Miller have been integral to creating safe spaces and events, essential for both queer youth and adults, where AG identity is not only visible but also celebrated.

The Unity Fellowship Church NewArk and the Leadership of Black Queer Women:

"They are creators. It's like we're all there cuz if you need a singer, it's in the church. If you need someone to sew, they're in the church. If you need an accountant, it's in the church, so it's like everything we need is there..."⁶⁶

- Peggy Miller, co-owner of Diamondz N Da Ruff.

The Unity Fellowship Church appears as a nexus between many of the women on their path to economic power. It acts as a regular meeting space where the women make connections, learn entrepreneurial skills through church initiatives, and become inspired

⁶⁶ Miller, oral history, 6.

through the church's leadership. Similar to Jae Quinlan of the Artisan Collective who would drive from the Bronx, her business partner Burley Tuggle used to commute two hours every Sunday from her home in Brooklyn to attend the service in Newark. She did this for about ten years, from 1997 to 2006 when she finally moved to Newark. "I fell in love with it, because I'm like, "Oh my god, I didn't even know there was a church like this out there," Tuggle explained.⁶⁷ Also similar to Quinlan, Tuggle at first joined the choir. Later she became a grant writer for the church as well as a trustee. She recalled the first time attending one of their services,

I felt welcome. I felt like, "Wow. This is a place where I can be myself." That was part of the message, too. Just everything from during the service we do what we call an affirmation. Basically, the gist of that is that God loves you just as you are. That just really resonated with me.⁶⁸

She explained how queer people are drawn to the church through a need for validation. Unity Church is a sanctuary for people who were told by the churches they were raised in that they were headed for eternal damnation due to their sexuality. Because Unity Church is a social justice ministry, their message is always about serving the larger community. By becoming involved in social justice projects through the church, such as Liberation in Truth or later, the LGBT Community Center, members learn entrepreneurial skills and make connections with other people involved in starting other businesses or organizations. Tuggle emphasized how important the church is to the formation of Newark's LGBT community and its various queer enterprises.

My church though, we have really been on the forefront of that building of the community and most of the businesses that you see now that are LGBT, people

⁶⁷ Tuggle, oral history, 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 14.

from our congregation, they're involved in those enterprises or artists. There's also an artist community as well.⁶⁹

And indeed, the arts community and the LGBTQ church community are highly interconnected. Emma Wilcox praised the women of the Artisan Collective as their artistic forebears in the community and they are often both involved in local events such as the Open Doors Citywide Arts Festival. But overall the church remains central to the women for establishing business relationships and spreading an ethos of community mindedness throughout Newark's LGBTQ community. According to Tuggle,

Literally, every venue that's associated with the LGBT community, whoever's leading that effort, they have either been a member (laughs)—yeah, let's just say they've all been members of our church or they've passed through or they've volunteered... Yeah. Basically, everybody, okay, even people who have gone on to form other churches and non-profits and restaurants and artist—anything, right, LGBT-related has touched—I mean, they've been involved somehow, okay, within our church community.⁷⁰

Kimberlee Williams also credited Unity Church as being integral to building her entrepreneurial career. She used to attend Unity Church regularly with her wife and that was how she met different people around the city. She said,

I got to know the leadership of the church really well. They helped me make connections in Newark related to my business and related to other social movements, and what have you, that were occurring in Newark.⁷¹

Through the church Williams was able to join various committees, such as the Newark Pride Alliance, where she was further exposed to networking opportunities because Unity Church supports the annual Newark Pride events. Williams brought her marketing skills to the organization and eventually her work with the Pride Alliance led her to become involved with the city of Newark's LGBT Advisory Commission, formed under Mayor

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁷¹ Williams, oral history, 6.

Cory Booker and created as a result of the murder of Sakia Gunn. Quinlan, who is now a deacon at the church, takes pride in facilitating these types of connections for other people. Consequently, she even has come to refer to herself as “the mayor.”

Yes, my nickname is the mayor. In Newark that's my nickname. I am the connector. I connect people to people for—you know because I know this person does that, and this person does that, whatever, whatever. I'm like, "Oh yeah I know somebody," and then—yeah, and then put them together so that's—so that's my nickname! (laughs)⁷²

All of the community collaboration and skills learned by the women at Unity Church has reinforced their individual and collective ability to build strong economic networks integral to Newark's renaissance.

Even the church itself is in many ways an entrepreneurial venture. When asked whether there was a spirit of entrepreneurship at the church, Williams responded yes but with the caveat that they are still donation-based,

Well, yeah. I would say yes because it's a church in adverse situations and an adverse environment. To survive in an adverse environment, you have to be creative and scrappy and think out-of-the-box, and all those kinda things. To be around as long as they have, they've had to definitely be good at all those kinda skills. Truly entrepreneurial in the sense of coming up with businesses that would help them sustain, that hasn't come yet. I think they're more in the tradition of the classic church where it's like donation-based and tithes and whatever.⁷³

But that scrappy can-do business sense impressed itself on members like Burley Tuggle who claimed,

Even my whole involvement in my church—church is a business. When I started to do the grant writing and everything, yeah—so I really feel like my entrepreneurial career really started with my church through fundraising and grant writing and handling the finances for my church as well, and recognizing that churches are business enterprises.⁷⁴

⁷² Quinlan, oral history, 28.

⁷³ Williams, oral history, 6-7.

⁷⁴ Tuggle, oral history, 29.

The institution provided a space and a framework for these women to learn from as well as provided a base where a collaborative and creative pool of people could engage in a weekly community discourse, exchange ideas for local innovation, and then branch out to implement social service organizations that serve the LGBT community as well as create their own endeavors using the skills and connections they made through the church.

It is important to note that, although the church has broadly influenced the ethos of Newark's LGBT community by bringing the queer community together to exchange ideas, all of the interconnected networks spawned from this establishment are led primarily by black lesbian women. Even if someone is not a member of the church, they may be involved in the Newark LGBTQ Community Center or Newark Pride Alliance, all started and run mainly by black lesbians. Unity Fellowship Church NewArk was co-founder by Pastor Kevin E. Taylor and Reverend Janyce Jackson Jones who are both considered entrepreneurs as well as pillars of LGBTQ social justice organizations in Newark. Pastor Taylor works for the cable channel Black Entertainment Television (BET) as a writer and producer, but he is also a published author, empowerment speaker, leads several different training workshops, and is the master of ceremonies at various events.⁷⁵ But it's Jones who is either at the forefront of or heavily involved with nearly every organization working to improve Newark's LGBT community. Jones helped found the Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church and its drop-in center, the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, and The Newark Pride Alliance in addition to the Unity

⁷⁵ See Reverend Jerri Mitchell Lee, oral history, page 16-17 and Kevin E. Taylor, <http://kevintaylor.com>.

Fellowship Church NewArk, and she shows up to many Queer Newark events.⁷⁶ With this caliber of leadership spearheading local LGBT movements, they have continued to gather momentum as a dogged force for queer social justice.

Also at the forefront of the LGBTQ community is Reverend Alicia Heath-Toby, who was by the side of Reverend Jackson Jones in the creation of the Liberation and Truth Social Justice Center as well as the Newark LGBT Community Center. Heath-Toby recalled LIT with pride,

We were the first drop-in center in Newark. One of the things that I will always remember is that we proudly met the need, as we were. Folks came who were homeless, who needed food, who needed a shower. We gave what we had and who we were as LGBT folks. There was never a question of—it just came so easy. People cared for us, and we cared for them.⁷⁷

She emphasized the importance of the work to the community as an especially valued part of the experience for her.

It was sad when it had to end, because we lost the funding, but that's a fond memory I have. It was community. The real essence of community, like no-holds-barred. It didn't matter how we presented, just helping folks and meeting the need. It was appreciated, and it was a blessing to be able to be part of that.⁷⁸

Heath-Toby continued to work for Newark's queer community up until a year ago in 2016 when she retired from her esteemed position as president of the board of Newark's LGBTQ Community Center. During her time with the community center, Heath-Toby

⁷⁶ Colin Bayne. "Retirement of Reverend Jackson-Jones, Director of Newark LGBTQ Community Center" *The Vector*. September 16, 2016. <http://njitvector.com/2016/09/retirement-of-reverend-jackson-jones-director-of-newark-lgbtq-community-center/>; Reverend Janyce Jackson Jones, oral history interview by Anna Alves. The Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, March 9, 2016.

⁷⁷ Heath-Toby, oral history, 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., Page 3.

and the other leaders lent support to some of the women nationally known as the NJ Four, who are the subject of Blair Doroshwalther's documentary *Out in the Night* (2014).

The “NJ Four” were unjustly imprisoned for fighting back against a man in New York City who brutally attacked them when they told him they were lesbians and rejected his sexual advances, not unlike what happened to Sakia Gunn. In fact, some of the women were friends with Gunn and considered—based on what happened to her—how the man might kill them if they did not fight back.⁷⁹ But instead of their attacker receiving a prison sentence, the women were charged with gang violence and incarcerated, while the media grossly categorized them as a “Gang of Killer Lesbians.”⁸⁰

One of the women, Terrain Dandridge, and her mother had attended the Unity Church where they were considered to be more than just faces in the congregation. Toby-Heath recalled,

She and her mom used to attend church, and so when the tragedy happened, we were family. It was just easy. It was the thing that family does. There was a need, and we supported them as best that we could. There's still—Kimma [Dandridge's mother] and her are still in my family. It was family. The church rallied around them. From the simplest things like just sendin' them letters and visiting 'em. Showin' up at the court dates. Being support for their parents, when they just needed a space to cry and to scream, to rest. We do what we do. You know?⁸¹

This story illustrates the ethos of support for the community by the Unity Church and the women involved. To paraphrase what Burley Tuggle explained with regards to the Artisan Collective, sometimes one person cannot pay their portion, but that is when you rise up and pitch in for the good of everyone. She emphasized,

⁷⁹ See for instance, Venice Brown, oral history interview by author, Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey. October 12, 2015.

⁸⁰ See <http://www.outinthenight.com/about-2/>.

⁸¹ Heath-Toby, oral history, 5.

We have a type of business where no matter what, whether or not you can put in your fair share or not, we support each other. Because we realize that it's not about the individual. It's about the business.⁸²

This code of ethics shared by many of the women, where sacrifice and support for others is held in high esteem, allows everyone to not just stay afloat economically within one business, but permeates all community endeavors and strengthens the queer community as a whole.

Because all of these women are interconnected via queer community networks and most have been a part of the Unity Church at some time, it is no surprise that they all share a commitment to social justice issues even if it's not the main focus of their business. As mentioned, Tamara Fleming uses photography to mentor young girls and the women of the Artisan Collective hold open mic nights to promote the work of women of color. Lynette Lashawn is working on a web series for YouTube and Vimeo in support of her store, Off the Hanger. With a focus on fashion and lifestyle, she also plans to use it as a platform to shed light on health issues affecting women. For many years, Lashawn has been living with five large fibroids, which are muscular tumors that grow in the wall of the uterus. As a result, whenever she is menstruating she experiences debilitating pain. Lawshawn explained that because fibroids have to do with menstruation women will often suffer in silence, ashamed to publically discuss what they consider to be intimate details. Lawshawn asserted,

In this episode where I'm talking about fibroids, giving the facts and all of that good stuff, I'm just being real. I'm just being as transparent as possible, because I'm not embarrassed about it. It's nothing that I can control. Seventy-five percent of women will deal with some aspects of fibroids, and fifty percent of those women are African American women. Why? No one knows. So if I can be a voice for Newark, too—because I'm sure there's so many other women who have dealt

⁸² Tuggle, oral history, 37.

with this in silence, because I've dealt with it in silence for so many years. Now I'm just breaking out like, I'm not embarrassed. I can't control this no more than anyone can control finding out they have breast cancer or whatever. It's just part of life. Biological aspects of aging. All that good stuff. I'm just dealing with it.⁸³

Lashawn's wife, Anita Dickens, used to volunteer for Newark Pride Alliance and later served on the board. Peggy Miller, in addition to her community work through her fraternity, also helps Elaine Helms with her work at the LGBT youth shelter. Likewise, Reverend Jerri Mitchell Lee serves on a commission in Newark to help the homeless and has created informational booklets for places like Unity Church so they can assist homeless individuals with resources to shelters and services.

The Unity Church serves as a counterpoint to the media's overemphasis on the homophobia of the black church. For instance, when Proposition 8, a statewide ballot proposition in California to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry, was on the ballot in 2008, homophobia in the black church was blamed as the reason why the majority of voters approved the measure. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Ta-nehisi Coates expressed outrage with those in the LGBTQ community who made religious folks in the black community their scapegoats by overblowing the percentage of black support for Prop 8.⁸⁴ Yet, homophobia in the church is a problem. In 2015, Darnell L. Moore and Nyle Fort criticized the bigotry in black churches as black church leaders throughout the country condemned the Supreme Court's decision that year to make same-sex marriage

⁸³ Lashawn, oral history 22.

⁸⁴ Ta-nehisi Coates. "Prop 8 and blaming the blacks" *The Atlantic*, January 7, 2009. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2009/01/prop-8-and-blaming-the-blacks/6548/>.

legal in all fifty states.⁸⁵ When Whitney Strub, co-director of the Queer Newark Oral History Project at Rutgers University, sat down for an interview with Steve Adubato, whose father was a powerful political leader in Newark's North Ward, one of the first questions he asked Strub concerned homophobia in Newark's black churches. To which, Strub replied,

There's a national narrative of black homophobia that's, I think, really oversimplified... You know, the reality is, homophobia cuts across racial, ethnic, religious lines, we know that. We know white communities, black communities, Latino, have all been complicit in homophobia in the past. But I think the black church has been particularly blamed for a disproportionate amount of homophobia. And so when we look at the story up close, what we really see is, you know, a complication of that narrative. We see that for a lot of young queer people the black church has often been a place of solace and community. Places like the choir have been a safe place for, you know, sort of non normative people of various stripes and we've gotten that in a lot of the interviews we've done. You know, we expected to find homophobia in the church and the reality is a lot of young people have told us the church was somewhere that they made gay friends.⁸⁶

Thus while homophobia exists in the black church, the reality is more complicated than a monolithic notion that queer people of color are universally without agency or acceptance in their churches. Queer acceptance, agency, and homophobia all manifest within the black church the same as it does in churches of any community regardless of race.

According to Aryana Bates, writing about Liberation in Truth (LIT),

This church and the people who create it represent a subaltern community on several levels—as lesbian and gay people practicing religion, as black people in a racist society, as people creating innovative religion that both challenges traditional black church ideology—and draws upon the liturgical practices of that

⁸⁵ Darnell L. Moore and Nyle Fort. "An Open Letter to the Church: Homosexuality Isn't a Sin, but Homophobia Is" The Root, July 24, 2015. <http://www.theroot.com/an-open-letter-to-the-church-homosexuality-isn-t-a-sin-1790860584>.

⁸⁶ "Recording Newark's LGBTQ Community's Past and Present" *One on One with Steve Adubato* produced by the Caucus Educational Corporation (CEC), December 5, 2016. Available online: <https://steveadubato.org/recording-newark-s-lgbtq-community-s-past-and-present.html>.

same heritage. These women and their church demonstrate how people can claim all aspects of their identity and work to create a liberative community in the face of multiple forms of oppression.⁸⁷

Likewise, the Unity Church has become a sort of religious entrepreneurship in terms of innovating by creating a queer affirmative church led by black women and whose congregation represents a diversity of experiences, both positive and negative, within mainstream black churches where they have worshipped.

In 2002, Reverend Alicia Heath-Toby and her wife Saundra Toby-Heath joined Lambda Legal, an LGBTQ legal organization, in a lawsuit seeking marriage equality. The case, *Lewis v. Harris*, went all the way to the New Jersey State Supreme Court where on October 25, 2006 the seven justices legalized civil unions in New Jersey, thanks in part to the hard work of Heath-Toby and Toby-Heath, who were the only African American couple involved out of the ten women and four men which served as plaintiffs.⁸⁸ The next day the two women made the cover of *The New York Times*. Toby-Heath told the story,

I took my shower, got ready for work, got on the bus, went down to Penn Station, and I go to the newsstand. I buy the *Times*, and I look, and there's me and Alicia. The only other picture on the *Times* is George Bush. He's up top, and we're at the bottom. I was like oh, my god. I buy it, and I fold it, put it in my bag.

I'm turning to leave out of the newsstand, and there, in the middle of the floor, is a lesbian, a butch—very clear that she was a butch. She sees me. She's watching me, actually. I look up at her, and she was smiling. She was like—and I just, my eyes got watery, and I'm just like, oh. I guess she—I didn't even know that she was—I didn't pay attention to anybody. I was just walking, and go get the paper. She must've seen me. When I turned, and she's just standing—she's just standing.

⁸⁷ Aryana Bates. "Liberation in Truth: African American Lesbians Reflect on Religion, Spirituality, and Their Church" *Gay Religion*, Eds. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005) 221-237.

⁸⁸ David W. Chen. "New Jersey Court Backs Full Right for Gay Couples, But Justices Direct Legislature to Decide on Issue of Marriage" *The New York Times*, October 26, 2006.

She wasn't moving. She's just looking at me, and she's just smiling. I just smile. I smile back, and I just walk to my track.

A couple people on the train—I guess people who look at the newspaper—and I'm sitting there, and a couple of people like, "I just saw her." Of course, when I got to work, everybody was going crazy. They were like, "Oh, my god. You're on the *New York Times*." I make a joke about it. I said, "I know Bush, he actually looked at me and Alicia's face, because that's what your chief of staff—they bring stuff to you, to let you know what's going on. I know his chief of staff had probably brought the paper, and said, "Look at these fucking lesbians here. Look at this." I said, "Well, George Bush looked at us! He looked at us. He looked at our face on the front page, with him!" That was funny. Me and Alicia laughed about that one.⁸⁹

Toby-Heath's story underscores how important the court case was for the LGBTQ community. It was the first major step on the road to legal recognition for same-sex marriage equality nationwide. Although there are still many more legal battles to be won—in terms of workplace discrimination, transgender rights, and healthcare access, to name a few—civil unions, and later full marriage equality, were major victories for queer people.

In addition to the amazing work done by black lesbian women, queer Latina women have founded notable social justice organizations in Newark. Marleny Franco, who immigrated to the U.S. as a child from Colombia, is a horticulturist committed to environmentalism and food justice. She created the Greater Newark Conservancy in the late 1980s to teach individuals, school children, and families as well as the formerly incarcerated to grow their own food through the creation of organic community gardens in Newark.⁹⁰ Franco has since moved on to other entrepreneurial ventures, but the Greater Newark Conservancy is still running with programs to teach and empower people to grow their own food in an urban environment where food deserts are a reality and fresh

⁸⁹ Toby-Heath, oral history, 31-32.

⁹⁰ See Marleny Franco, oral history interview by the author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, November 19, 2016.

produce is hard to come by. Originally from Puerto Rico, Ingrid Betancourt, along with Dr. Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim, co-founded The New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center (NJHRIC), which contains Spanish language resources and reference materials and the Puerto Rican Community Archives housed within the Newark Public Library. Her work as director has helped to preserve the history of the Puerto Rican community in Newark and statewide.⁹¹

LGBTQ Entertainment in Newark:

Newark has long had a vibrant queer entertainment bar, club, and ballroom scene, which women have added to with a few of their own spaces over the years. Miller mentioned how she and other prominent women in the community have thrown lesbian dance parties in Newark. The parties that Miller threw were specifically for women, because she felt that the men had more bars and clubs in town that catered to them. Joyelle Chandler, who has her own business as a disc jockey and is known as DJ Just Love, likewise remarked on the lack of lesbian bars and clubs in Newark. Chandler's wife Dinean Robinson throws parties for women around the city. Chandler explained,

Some of the other parties were more women-gearred, lesbian-gearred, because they used to say, "Oh, the boys get all the stuff and everything anyway." (*laughs*) So I'm like, "Yeah. Male privilege is real, whether it's a straight man, gay man. It's real."⁹²

Miller and Chandler also talked about Theresa Randolph, known locally as Ms. Theresa, who runs the annual Ms. Full Figured USA Pageant and rents out spaces to hold queer

⁹¹ See Ingrid Betancourt, oral history interview by the author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, January 25, 2017.

⁹² Joyelle Chandler, oral history interview by the author. Queer Newark Oral History Project, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, October 25, 2016. Transcript, page 10.

parties.⁹³ In 1996, Ms. Theresa and her friend Elaina Lewis were featured on the cover of a local magazine, *New Jersey's Gay Black Woman*, for sponsoring various gay and lesbian social events in Newark. The accompanying blurb, subtitled “WOMEN OF ACTIONNNN,” exclaimed,

These “responsible” sisters have also made safe sex information and products – dental dams, condoms and literature – accessible at these venues toward educating our community.⁹⁴

The magazine, published bi-monthly by “New Jersey Womyn” in Newark featured brief inspirational writings, astrological signs, poems, and book reviews as well as listings for lesbian businesses, parties, events, and services throughout the state.

With any mention of queer club spaces in Newark, nearly all the women interviewed talked fondly of Murphy’s Tavern, which used to exist on Edison Place but has since been torn down to make way for Prudential. Toby-Heath was especially effusive.

I loved Murphy’s. I miss Murphy’s. Murphy’s was a place to go and see folks, folks from the community. They had the best music. Oh, god... You can go in, sit down, and have a nice drink, or two, and see people that you know around, and enjoy the music. For me, it was just enough.

Both Toby-Heath and her wife lamented a lack of new places in town. Alicia Heath-Toby blamed it on a lack of city investment in LGBTQ spaces. Lately, members of Newark’s Gay Pride Alliance tend to hang out at 27 Mix, which is not gay owned and does not have the same friendly feeling that Murphy’s held. Toby-Heath clarified,

What happens is—it used to be a young lady, Skylar, who was the bartender there, young lesbian. She had such a great personality. She had that place jumping. It would be packed. It would be—and I don’t know what the heck happened, but she lost her job there. I don’t know what the heck happened. It’s

⁹³ See <https://www.msfullfiguredusa.com>.

⁹⁴ *New Jersey's Gay Black Woman* Spring Issue, Vol. 2, No. 7., 1996, page 2.

just become a different place now. I think it's like three—it's like three owners. One, I think he would be okay about it, but the other two are white guys, and they want a different kind of—It's right boring in there now!⁹⁵

In addition to Murphy's, Dickens mentioned Shadows as a local gay bar where she and Lashawn would party separately before they became romantically involved. Lashawn added that Café Euphoria was a lesbian hangout spot that used to exist on the corner of Academy Street and Halsey as well as Globe Trotters near Lincoln Park. There was also First Choice on Ferry Street in the 1980s, where Miller used to hang out and has also been cited as a favorite among other prominent queer Newarkers such as James Credle and June Dowell-Burton.⁹⁶

Queer women in Newark are always looking for ways to improve their community. Quinlan has also noticed the current lack of queer clubs in the city and has an idea to eventually open her own club in Newark.

I think we are missing spaces where—Black Box had this song out in, I don't remember, I guess it was the 80s. It was the end of the 80s or in the 90s, "Everybody, Everybody." And it is still played all the time. And I want that! Right? Just everybody! Just clap your hands, stomp your feet! Come on, let's go! You know, let's just—and to utilize that space as a space where people can actually, you can go behind the curtain and go get tested. You can go over here you know, somebody who's transgender might be able to make an appointment to see a doctor, or you know like stuff like that. Like I would want it to feed the community. I don't just want to have it. I want it to serve a purpose. Feature artist, you know, all kinds of stuff!⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Toby-Heath, oral history, 39.

⁹⁶ See James Credle, oral history interview by Whitney Strub, Queer Newark Oral History Project. Rutgers, University, Newark, New Jersey, May 3, 2014 and June Dowell-Burton, oral history by Whitney Strub, December 1, 2015, who recalls, "First Choice on the other hand for the girls, that's when I saw the girl strippers for the first time. But again it was small like a little small space probably like double size of this office."

⁹⁷ Quinlan, oral history, 31.

Truly civic-minded, Quinlan envisions her club to be more than an entertainment space. And if brought to fruition, will be another positive in Newark's revitalization as conceived through the vision and effort of black lesbian entrepreneurs.

Newark's Renaissance:

The issue of Newark's renaissance provoked varying reactions from the women depending on their background and positionality as Newark community members. As a white person and a Newark transplant, Emma Wilcox expressed anxiety over how efforts towards the revitalization, especially in terms of publicity for the art community, which seemed to have the goal of attracting more white residents to the city. When the Prudential Center first opened, Wilcox was asked questions by members of the media whether she was noticing new people moving into Newark as a result of the new stadium. As a white resident, she interpreted these questions as a coded request for her to provide a response that would influence other white people to relocate to Newark by creating the perception that Newark was becoming a dominantly white area. Her identity as a white art gallery owner would also lend credence to Newark's new conception as an upwardly mobile and trendy city teeming with new exciting developments. Wilcox added that this idea of "newness" becomes coded within gentrification, "New is white, and new is moneyed and heteronormative and commercially oriented."⁹⁸ Self-aware of her white privilege, she cautioned,

This idea of erasure, the fear of erasure, and the erasure and the destabilization of the cultural authority of people of color in communities like Newark is a real thing. I feel like anyone, like me, who doesn't speak about that honestly and see it

⁹⁸ Wilcox, oral history, 24.

and interrogate their own work, again, you're just participating willfully and blindly in the process that you'll probably benefit from.⁹⁹

But Wilcox does not see the redevelopment in Newark as only being problematic and expressed cautious optimism for the city's future.

There's a lot of pretty crazy stuff happening right now, and we're gonna have to see how it all shakes out. I love working in Newark because it's challenging. I want a lot of things for the people that I meet and the people we serve and for ourselves. The city's people are really this amazing resource, and I want that resource to actually serve them.¹⁰⁰

Those in position to influence the shape of Newark's revitalization must remain aware of how development affects city's residents if the city is to maintain a true renaissance and not replicate the gentrification seen in other nearby urban areas like Brooklyn.

Some of the women expressed trepidation regarding Newark's upward trajectory. Joyelle Chandler grew up in Roselle, New Jersey, but moved Newark in 2012, because, in her words, she was "drawn to the energy" within its LGBT community. When asked what she meant by that, she responded,

So just that connection and caring. Just a sense of community that I've just had with them [referring to her queer friends from Newark]. Newark has an artsy feel, to some extent. At that time, I felt that connection, that energy, that buzz a little bit stronger. It just kinda drew me towards here.¹⁰¹

But Chandler does not see that same energy persisting in Newark that attracted her to the city a few years ago. She connected the city's revitalization to its depletion and expressed ambivalence about the city's future.

That energy is a different energy. Like I said, I don't know if it's just—like, "Oh, I don't feel like going out. I'm just sitting on the couch," or if it's because of the changes. You see downtown is totally different from when I was visiting Newark to me living here now. Totally different. So like seeing that and thinking, okay,

⁹⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰¹ Chandler, oral history, 1.

“What’s coming next then?” These elements that are here, the good and the bad, like how is that getting pushed out or embraced or just a ripple effect of downtown being developed and these luxury rentals popping up. It’s just different. I don’t know if—I’m on the fence about it sometimes now.¹⁰²

Former Harlem resident, Alicia Heath-Toby expressed anger at how gentrification changed her old neighborhood in New York and decimates communities of color in particular.

It happens in Harlem, it has happened in Harlem a number of times. The community I'm talkin' about is the communities of color, and that—it just incenses me. It makes me so angry . I think that it's about money, at the end of the day. The city wants to make money, but at what cost, and who gets pushed out, and who gets to stay? I don't like it. I understand it for what it is. It's good for the city, but is it good for the people? I have mixed feelings. Honei [Alicia's wife Saundra] was born and raised here, and she just—she's thrilled about it all, and she gets to be, but I just struggle with it. I feel like there's not a happy—there's not a happy medium. When they decided to build the stadium, tons of business owners got pushed out. People. Then, once they did that, then housing, and then the people who lived in the surrounding areas. Yes, the projects are not the best place to live, but they had a place. They tore those down, and they moved it. Where did those people go? They go to the streets, and they go to the shelters, and they go to the prisons. It's just a vicious cycle. Again, at what cost? I struggle with it.¹⁰³

When only approximately ten miles away in Manhattan, minority communities, artists, and queer communities have been lost to block after block of luxury condominiums, Duane Reades, fast food chains, trendy eateries, and Chase Manhattan banks, it can be hard to see Newark as being able to buck the force of capitalism as it has so visibly commodified other cities and neighborhoods. Reverend Mitchell Lee noted that she sees the positive changes downtown as uplifting only that area, while other neighborhoods in Newark remain neglected. It remains to be seen whether Newark’s other wards will ultimately benefit as well.

¹⁰² Ibid., 7.

¹⁰³ Heath-Toby, oral history, 11.

Interestingly, many of the women welcomed the city's revitalization, especially as a way for Newark to escape its negative reputation. For Heath-Toby's wife Saundra, who has lived in Newark since childhood, development in the city is a welcome change from the city's historical stigma since the Newark rebellion in 1967. She explained,

Well, personally, I like it. Personally, I like it. I don't know. I don't want the—I don't know if I should say disenfranchised, or the people who maybe are not quite as secure, whether it's job or education or whatever. I don't want them to be left out. I don't want them to be left out, but I also don't want Newark to just continue to be that city that's talked about so bad. It is just like we're just like the worst thing since—I want it to be a mix of allowing people that love Newark, and this is their home, a place for them to be able to live, and be comfortable, not just throw—don't just throw them the scraps. I like it. I do. I think that Newark deserves it.¹⁰⁴

In the same way that her wife loves Harlem, Toby-Heath explained that she loves Newark just as fiercely and it's why she chose to buy a home here. She is concerned with the city's inability to retain its residents and fears that if everyone leaves Newark then the city, which is so dear to her heart, will die. Her emotional ties to the city manifest as hope in a true renaissance. Tired of having to visit affluent neighborhoods in New Jersey or trek across the river to Manhattan for entertainment and culture, Burley Tuggle also expressed an excitement for the changes.

I mean, I just want us to be trendy and artsy. I don't want to have to run to New York City or Jersey City or Montclair and Maplewood and every other place other than where I reside to do something cool and artsy and fun and cultural. Yeah, I mean, I think we have so much potential. The only thing that I don't want—I don't want the local communities to be displaced or not really included in all of these great things.¹⁰⁵

When asked whether Newark can be revitalized without displacing its people, Tuggle responded that Newark not only has the potential to be a welcoming place for different

¹⁰⁴ Toby-Heath, oral history, 39-40.

¹⁰⁵ Tuggle, oral history, 43.

communities, but already is a place where students, artists, business owners, are already successfully mixing.

I see it already. I love it when we [The Artisan Collective] do the art crawl or when some of the galleries have their openings and their auctions and I think it really gives local students and business owners and artists just an opportunity to really experience Newark.¹⁰⁶

Lynette Lashawn, like Toby-Heath, was born and raised in Newark and views the revitalization with excitement.

I honestly think it's amazing. I think it's amazing. It's long overdue. It's high time that people see Newark in more than just this poverty-stricken area that is infested with drugs and crime and all of that stuff. Newark is so much more. Born in Newark and raised, and seeing the different changes that is happening in Newark from where it was, it's a great thing. It's definitely a great thing.¹⁰⁷

Her wife echoed her opinion on the city's development.

Downtown is beautiful. It's historic. You know just coming back from the riots. Obviously, that was a, you know, turning point, you know, for African Americans there. There was a lot, that, you know, we struggled with. Right now there are still a lot of property that is abandoned. Inner Newark is still the way, is ruins, honestly. But the revitalization of downtown Newark, if that's what starts bringing in more people, or more income, to fix up around and inner Newark, I'm all for it. The thing is, what's coming in? What is available for the people of Newark? That's important.¹⁰⁸

Whether effusive or critical, all of the women worry about displacement, especially in terms of affecting communities of color. In early 2017, community advocates in Newark, including members of Newark's NAACP, tried to strengthen a 2014 rent control ordinance that makes it difficult for landlords of rent-controlled buildings to quickly increase the rental price upon becoming vacant.¹⁰⁹ The ordinance also requires new

¹⁰⁶ Tuggle, oral history, 43.

¹⁰⁷ Lashawn, oral history, 12-13.

¹⁰⁸ Dickens, oral history, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Karen Yi, "Advocates push for housing affordability, rent control in a changing Newark" *NJ.com*, February 16, 2017.

housing developers with thirty or more units to provide twenty percent affordable housing.¹¹⁰ By March 2017, however, Newark City Council approved changing the rules to allow landlords to raise rents in vacant rent-controlled apartments sparking increased fears of resident displacement.¹¹¹

In the last sixty years, Newark's population was cut in half as more people and businesses moved from the city into the nearby suburbs. Much of the white population migrated out as a result of the city's rise in black population and the Newark riots. They also left to take advantage of attractive mortgage opportunities open to whites that sweetened the attainment of a suburban lifestyle. Because Newark's population is half of what it once was, Kimberlee Williams explained she is not worried about displacement in Newark.

I'm not sure how quickly gentrification will happen, however, in Newark. Because, one, there's just so much empty space in Newark. I mean, you look at downtown, all of those commercial buildings are just occupied on the ground level. There's no inhabitants of upper floors in any of those buildings. That's unused, vacant space, which means that there really isn't density downtown. Nobody lives downtown cuz there's nowhere to live. There's very few places to live downtown.

Then you go into the neighborhoods, which were really badly hit by the economic downturn. There's a gigantic inventory of houses that were on some stage of foreclosure. There's opportunities for people to live, in other words, that wouldn't necessarily literally displace anybody. *[Laughter]* You know what I mean? Because the city has the capacity—and this is back in the day—the city had the capacity to house a million people. We only have about 300,000 inhabitants, so

http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/housing_advocates_push_for_more_affordability_rent.html#incart_river_index.

¹¹⁰ Karen Yi, "Is Newark the next Brooklyn? Mayor says no" *NJ.com*, February 19, 2017. http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/is_newark_the_next_brooklyn_mayor_says_no.html.

¹¹¹ Karen Yi, "New rule 'deconstruction of rent control' in Newark, advocates say" *NJ.com*, March 7, 2017.

http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/03/newark_rent_control_ordinance.html.

there's a huge space for new people.¹¹²

This confidence in Newark's ability to accommodate an influx of new residents and businesses has also been reflected in statements made by Mayor Ras Baraka. In an article for NJ.com, Baraka stated "Most of the places we are developing are abandoned or have been abandoned for 30, 40, 50 years. So we're not displacing people."¹¹³ He asserted that Newark would be a model for how to create development and housing that would keep from pushing residents out.

In order to escape the common paradigm of gentrification, many of the women interviewed realize they too have to be a part of the effort to push back against forces in power seeking to monopolize the landscape. The advancement of mega-corporations in Newark can place hardship on small businesses in other ways besides raising the cost of living. Because Quinlan is friends with their landlord, rent has not been a problem for The Artisan Collective. Instead, parking became their biggest issue. Reverend Jerri Lee Mitchell recalled how construction on and around Halsey Street by the Prudential Center meant a loss of parking spaces for potential customers on an already busy street. According to Reverend Mitchell Lee, as a group, the women at the Artisan Collective went to Prudential and used their collective strength to demand and negotiate free parking for their customers from Prudential at nearby commercial parking lot. In this and many other ways, even with a supportive mayor, small business will have to fight back against corporate encroachment.

Fleming sees FEMWORKS as an important tool to shape the trajectory of Newark so that it can be a place of positive upward mobility for all. She explained her

¹¹² Williams, oral history, 15.

¹¹³ Yi, NJ.com, February 19, 2017.

opinion on Newark's renaissance and how its success depends on a focused effort to maintain the city's integrity. She said,

I think the revitalization is great. It just has to be—like with anything, you have to be very, very, very purposeful in making sure that it stays true to its organic roots. It's built on a city of immigrants and people that migrated here to seek better fortune, and I think we need to keep that as a main ingredient because without that, you just lose—the lackluster just dwindles, and it becomes just a money-makin' machine that has no heart. I think the city just needs to keep the heart as the focus as much as it has been years of—[people claiming] it never had a heart. "Newark is awful. It's terrible. The only thing you see is negative, bad things." There were so many—always so many beautiful things happening, but you have to look for that beauty. I think people have to still make sure that it's looked for.¹¹⁴

Fleming believes FEMWORKS, as a communications agency, has an important role in guiding the city's development. Using the power of publicity and media, she intends to remain committed to telling the stories of Newark residents who have been contributing to the city for years instead of solely focusing on the influx of new businesses by outside corporations and speculators.

Her partner at FEMWORKS, Williams, is proposing solutions that will keep Newark from succumbing into a corporate landscape where only the wealthiest benefit. She cautioned that a rise in apartment rentals would also mean a rise in rents for small business owners. But for Williams, understanding the deleterious effects of gentrification does not mean its characteristic outcome is a given. Williams views what is happening in Newark as a chance for the city to reinvent the wheel,

I think it's a real opportunity for this administration and whoever else may come down the line to think about, how do you encourage local ownership so that people have some financial stability around what their bills are gonna be, so that when this upturn occurs, they don't have to worry about changes in their rent, or what have you. How do we shift people from becoming renters to becoming owners? That's renters of apartments or renters of commercial space. A lotta

¹¹⁴ Fleming, oral history, 42.

times, the gentrification conversation really focuses on people who live in Newark, but what about the people who own businesses in Newark?¹¹⁵

By understanding that individual as well as business renters are particularly vulnerable, Williams is advocating for a shift in discourse that centers solutions instead of problems. If a landlord who has the choice between collecting rent from a chain store with more capital versus a mom and pop store is enticing for building owners, then according to Williams the city has to be creative in how it counteracts the market to protect people.

Again, how do we shift the conversation to be less about gentrification, which is a renter issue, to be a conversation which is about ownership? How do we own Newark so that we're not vulnerable, but rather, we can benefit from gentrification.¹¹⁶

As a senior fellow for Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), Williams is not just raising these questions, she is actively working towards shaping Newark's economy to benefit the entire community. BALLE's mission is to support a philosophy of localism by building relationships between small businesses and entrepreneurs. According to BALLE's website, a localist must "promote collaboration over competition, and cooperation over hierarchy, recognize that my capital has power, and keep dollars where my heart lives, and cultivate and choose connection, in my business and community."¹¹⁷ In addition to BALLE, Williams also became Senior Entrepreneur in Residence of the Newark Business Hub in 2016, a program of Rutgers Business School Center for Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development that

¹¹⁵ Williams, oral history, 16.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁷ See Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), <https://bealocalist.org>.

connects several prominent local entrepreneurial leaders in the city together as a working cohort to promote local business collaboration and innovation.¹¹⁸

In 2012 Williams and Fleming founded the New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce as a local affiliate of the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce. A small business advocacy organization for the queer community, the NJ LGBT Chamber connects queer owned businesses throughout the state to each other for the purpose of increasing the economic strength of LGBTQ businesses overall. The reason Williams and Fleming started the New Jersey affiliate was due to the lack of diversity in the National LGBT Chamber. Initially, they became members in the National Chamber through their business, FEMWORKS, and became a notable fixture at the organizations events and conferences. The National Chamber displayed posters of the two women at events in an effort to show diversity in race and gender that was not a true representation of the chamber's membership.

The national chamber is very white, and it's very white male. Here we were, two black women, and we were the like poster children for everything. Literally, I had a friend, she was also a lesbian. She owned a business, like a web design business. She went to some event with the national chamber, and she called me. She was like, "Girl, how did you—what did you do? I wanna get down whatever you're doin'."

I'm like, "I don't even know what the hell you're talkin' about."

She says, "Man, I'm at this event, and your picture is everywhere. They have big posters of your picture."

I'm like, "Really?" We were literally poster children for the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

Williams started out by assembling a group of LGBT businesses in Newark such as Medina City and Minuteman Press as well as others in the state to form the New Jersey

¹¹⁸ See Newark Business Hub, <http://www.newarkbusinesshub.com>.

affiliate. At the same time, a couple of white gay businessmen in the area were also attempting to form a chamber in New Jersey. Williams invited the men to join her group, which was comprised mainly by people of color. The collaboration became unsuccessful when the two men immediately asserted dominance and adopted a condescending attitude towards Williams's group.

We were all people of color except for one person. I said, "We need to open ourselves up to other people and just maybe have some facilitated workshops and develop a platform." Why did I say that? We opened ourselves up, these guys come in, some white dudes. They try to intimidate us. They try to be condescending to us, like we don't even know what the definition of a chamber is. They come in with the whiteboard and literally spell out what a chamber is on the whiteboard. They bring in some dude from, let's say, Goldman Sachs on Wall Street, and he's tryin' to—God was wit' me that day when it happened.
*(laughs)*¹¹⁹

Eventually, the two men left the group and Williams was able to move forward without them. Williams and another woman were the first co-presidents, but the chamber's leadership is regularly cycling to provide leadership opportunities for other people. Currently Fleming is the co-president with another woman who owns a business in Princeton. According to Williams,

Now, the chamber has some sustainability to it. It has regular programming that helps businesses get certified as LGBT-owned. It has networking events. They participate in the national conferences and things of that nature. It exists in New Jersey, and it was founded by the leaders of FEMWORKS.¹²⁰

Founding the New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce is not just significant for its local impact; it connects Newark and greater New Jersey LGBT entrepreneurs in a more powerful way to the National Chamber, whose mission includes harnessing queer economic power to influence national legislation towards LGBTQ equality. This work

¹¹⁹ Williams, oral history, 13.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 13-14.

builds upon the legacy of queer American workers since the mid-1960s, who have similarly gained economic and political clout through their participation in labor unions.¹²¹

Fleming and Williams went from being the poster children for diversity at the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce to independently organizing the New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce where they could call the shots. This transition in power is exemplified in a story Fleming told regarding an exclusive event she was hired to photograph for the National LGBT Chamber.

Every year they would have this event at the New York Stock Exchange where they would ring the closing bell and on the trading floor they would have this really elaborately wonderful event that was a reception. They would go into a larger hall to have the dinner. I photographed that for maybe four or five years. It was just amazing, and it was one of the cool things that one of the employees just was like, "You know? This one time when we hired you to do this event—"

[Fleming stops herself to explain] We were in this very secure, secret—only the top of the top people come in here. I had 50 people I had to photograph in a group, so it was a little challenging to get eye-level. Someone says, "Stand on a table."

I took off my shoes and I stood on a table—this table where major transactions went down through the whole world. This black gay woman is standin' on the table, pushin' all these white people around, tellin' 'em, "No. You get your butt over here. You get your butt—" Not like that, but "Move over here. Come up here. I can't see you. Move over." I was directin' them on a table.

[The employee] was like, "That was one of the most profound instances that I love about working with you and working with you in this capacity, because it said so much. Not only did you have—the terminology, 'We want a equal seat at the table as a gay-owned business!' You were on top of the table! You weren't sittin' at the table. You were on top of it." Yeah. Then we did just several years of buildin' a relationship and—

¹²¹ See Miriam Frank. *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

As the interviewer, at this point I interrupted to ask if anyone took her picture while she stood on the table. She replied,

Oh, no, no. No. Nobody. I wish. That was one of those things. Nobody took my picture. That's what [the employee] was sayin'. She was like, "I wish I had pulled out my phone and I took that picture cuz it was profound."

I always got a kick out of it anyway cuz even when I was shooting, I always felt—it was always out of hundreds of people attending, it was maybe always probably about five people that were black in the room.¹²²

Fleming, Williams, and the rest of the queer women of color entrepreneurs in Newark have all found a way to stand on that metaphoric table. And by documenting and preserving their contribution to queer history we are there to take their picture.

¹²² Fleming, oral history, 29-30.

Conclusion:

“I only see it getting better. I see Newarkers being more active in having a role to play in the growth of the city. Because we are all responsible. There’s a sense of community here that everybody have a responsibility to do something, to do their part.”¹

- Lynette Lashawn

If Newark can achieve a true renaissance that is inclusive of all its neighborhoods and residents, it will owe a large part of its success to the community driven work of queer women of color who are committed to ensuring the city makes good on its promise to create a thriving diverse community that benefits everyone. Newark’s patchwork of queer power is comprised of the queer black women of the Artisan Collective who are connected with the art community at Gallery Aferro to create the culture people normally look to Manhattan for; it is stitched to the female leadership of the Unity Church who created safe spaces and resources for the LGBTQ community in Newark and driven by the vision of Kimberlee Williams and Tamara Fleming who are connecting the local to the national through the New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce as they simultaneously use FEMWORKS as a vehicle to change Newark’s representation and show the value of the people who live there. When queer women of color walk their own pathways to establish community centers, shelters for the homeless, art communities, vibrant businesses, and commit their time to local social justice issues they are already creating a renaissance. If we fail to acknowledge their contributions, we fail to document the full spectrum of queer history.

¹ Lashawn, oral history, 13.

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