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Kristyn Scorsone

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# Invisible Pathways

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## Public History By Queer Black Women In Newark

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*Kristyn Scorsone*

**ABSTRACT:** Using oral history research under the direction of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, this essay explores how contemporary black lesbian entrepreneurs in the city of Newark, New Jersey, are engaged in entrepreneurial practices that resist patterns of gentrification. I argue for expanding our definition of public history to account for the business practices and social structures that queer black women in Newark are erecting as a part of their survival. These serve to pave the way for the preservation of their culture, enable them to collaborate with community in shared authority, and present queer black women's knowledge and history to the wider public. By expanding the definition of what constitutes a public historian, we acknowledge the power of black lesbians as producers of historical knowledge and create new access points for shared inquiry with various marginalized communities that reach beyond academia and cultural institutions.

**KEY WORDS:** public history, Newark, gentrification, queer black women, queer history, entrepreneurship

*It's an 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.* Tamara Fleming, professional photographer, former CEO of FEMWORKS, and co-president of New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce, describes what being an entrepreneur means to her.<sup>1</sup>

Who narrates gentrification? Today the development occurring in Newark, New Jersey, has been declared an economic renaissance. In what was known as “urban renewal” in the postwar era, black residents of Newark were pushed out of their neighborhoods by developers while they struggled for the same economic opportunities afforded to whites living and working in the city.<sup>2</sup> Due to the intersecting

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<sup>1</sup> Tamara Fleming, oral history interview with author, January 26, 2016, Newark, New Jersey.

<sup>2</sup> 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, Newark College of Arts and Sciences, 1965.

forms of discrimination they have faced in the job market, women of color, whether straight or queer, have found entrepreneurship to be an appealing alternative economic path throughout time. During her interview for the Queer Newark Oral History Project, Tamara Fleming compares entrepreneurship to an “invisible pathway” in order to reference the uncertainty of entrepreneurial endeavors. But we can also think of this invisible pathway as a figurative one not seen by dominant society or marked on any official map, despite the history of countless black lesbians walking it. Meanwhile, although queer culture in Newark dates back to the dawn of its urbanization, not until the early twenty-first century did an organized LGBTQ movement, largely led by black women, coalesce.<sup>3</sup> Although economic renaissance and gentrification can be two sides of the same coin, contemporary self-identified black lesbian small business owners offer a way to disentangle the two. In Newark, these women are taking on the role of entrepreneur while participating in and shaping the public history research of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, establishing safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and adults, places of worship, community resources, and business networks, as well as putting together community-driven and queer artistic, activist, and cultural events. Much attention has been paid to black women in historical studies on capitalism and the economy, especially thanks to the powerful interventions of black female scholars who have written about the ways in which self-employment and entrepreneurship have historically provided black women with more control over their working conditions than they would have had trying to navigate white-owned workplaces.<sup>4</sup> Queer black women, however, have not yet received the same scholarly treatment. Examining Newark not only combats queer black erasure by revealing a hidden history of queer black women’s mobilizations within the city, it also highlights the need for public historians to seek out and recognize historic mobilizations by queer women of color throughout the country.

In addition to the literature on black women’s labor, many scholars have looked at the relationship between gender, race, and the history of capitalism in relation to entrepreneurship, black capitalists, and small business owners. Historian N. B. D. Connolly examines urban renewal projects and eminent domain from the early 1900s to the 1960s in his book, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*. Connolly argues that white and black landlords and property managers perpetuated the racial segregation of Jim Crow and upheld

3 Zenzele Isoke, “Can’t I Be Seen? Can’t I Be Heard? Black Women Queering Politics in Newark,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (March 2014): 353–69. Isoke is one of the few scholars to date who has written extensively about black lesbians in Newark using oral history.

4 On economic histories of black women, see Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Susanna Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); and Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

white supremacy through property rights. In the name of protecting their investments, black middle-class landlords excluded and exploited the nonwhite poor and thus highlighted the class tensions within the black community.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, historian Brenna Greer looks at Moss H. Kendix, a public relations officer for the Centennial Commission of the Republic of Liberia and black entrepreneur. After World War II, Kendix worked to secure US investment in Liberia's postwar development and, according to Greer, established the value of blacks as consumers and promoted black populations as black markets. She points out how Kendix presented Liberians as in need of American assistance in the form of investment.<sup>6</sup> Both Greer and Connolly complicate capitalism in the context of white supremacy to present a nuanced history in which black capitalists are able to use the market to challenge white supremacy, yet also remain complicit in upholding it. My essay builds on the important work done by historians such as Greer and Connolly, but looks specifically at black queer women capitalists, who—although they too share some complicity in the harmful effects of capitalism—use entrepreneurship to sidestep white supremacy and resist patterns of gentrification, while also challenging these intersecting forms of oppression through community projects that I argue serve as a form of public history.

Rebecca Conard's 2003 National Council on Public History's presidential address in Houston, Texas, reflected upon the definition of public history. Conard maintained that public history is more than public scholarship. She detailed how public history, unlike applied history, engages in shared authority as well as shared inquiry. She also pointed out that it involves a degree of entrepreneurship. Conard, although not referencing small business start-ups of the kind one might find on a busy street in downtown Newark, was referring to an entrepreneurial spirit of seizing opportunities "to create new and real markets *for* history outside the conventional bounds of academic scholarship."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, public historians would do well to recognize nonprofessional, community-driven forms of public history as an opportunity for a new type of public history work. By drawing upon the elements of public history laid out by Conard, I wish to enlarge the parameters of the field to include nonprofessional and nonacademic modes of public history. I argue that public historians should expand the definition of public history to include the historical knowledge production of self-identified black lesbian entrepreneurs and other marginalized individuals similarly engaged in public history projects.

As social theorist Patricia Hill Collins points out, black women's ideas have long been suppressed as a result of institutionalized racism, misogyny, and white supremacist ideology. According to Collins, to reclaim all black women's ideas

5 N. B. D. Connelly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

6 Brenna W. Greer, "Selling Liberia: Moss H. Kendix, the Liberian Centennial Commission, and the Post-World War II Trade in Black Progress," *Enterprise & Society* 14, no. 2 (2013): 303–26.

7 Rebecca Conard, "Facepaint History in the Season of Introspection," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 18.

involves discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing the ideas of subgroups, such as black lesbians, who have largely been silenced. She writes,

Developing Black feminist thought also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals. As defined in this volume, Black women intellectuals are neither all academics nor found primarily in the Black middle class. Instead all U.S. Black women who somehow contribute to Black feminist thought as critical social theory are deemed to be “intellectuals.”<sup>8</sup>

Applying Collins’s argument to queer black women in Newark allows an understanding of their entrepreneurial endeavors as intellectual activities, which enable them to preserve and promote queer cultural expression, grassroots mobilizations, and gender diversity. Similar to the role of public historians, their work hinges on collaboration with the local queer community in shared authority. They use their positions as business leaders to present queer black women’s knowledge and history to the wider public. Moreover, as Collins advocates for the deconstruction of the concept of *the intellectual*, and who gets to claim that descriptor, public historians may also want to reassess who counts as a public historian.<sup>9</sup> Collins makes room for all black women, whether they hold a degree or not, who are “doing the intellectual work of the sort envisioned within Black feminism” and who are engaged in a “process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, those within the field of public history should consider making room for queer black women in order to facilitate new modes of knowledge exchange with marginalized individuals doing public history work.

Oral histories conducted by the Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP) reveal black lesbians in Newark as architects of a queer cultural landscape that legitimizes black lesbian thought, creativity, and history despite the accelerating gentrification happening in their city. QNOHP builds on the work of other scholarly oral history projects, but is unique as a community-driven and community-directed endeavor dedicated to documenting and preserving the life stories of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals in Newark—especially as it pertains to the histories of queer people of color. As such, QNOHP has been able to bring the oft-invisibilized voices of queer black women to the fore.<sup>11</sup> These women

8 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, rev. ed., (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14.

9 For another recent argument for expanding the field, see Alexandra M. Lord, “Finding Connections,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (May 2018): 9–22. Lord argues for broadening the definition of what public history means and who practices it.

10 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 15.

11 Other examples of groundbreaking oral history projects include Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Larry Knopp, eds., *Queer Twin Cities: Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Nan Alamilla

have played central roles in shaping Newark's primary LGBTQ historical recovery project, and that commitment extends into their various entrepreneurial and activist work as well.

Leadership by queer black women as part of the emergence of twenty-first century LGBTQ activism distinguishes Newark from other sites of queer history. Prior to the contemporary era, however, there is nothing in the archive to suggest the existence of any black lesbian feminist organizations in Newark, unlike what has been documented in other areas of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. Newark politics pushed straight black women and black lesbians to the sidelines, as reflected in the city's most prominent Black Power figure, Amiri Baraka, who at the time endorsed homophobic and misogynist perspectives.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, although Newark has a robust history of black women entrepreneurs, only in the last couple of decades have self-identified black lesbians become prominent.<sup>13</sup> These women have clearly existed, but historians have not been able to document them. Since the early 2000s, however, black lesbians have consistently used their bodies and identities in resistance to intersectional forms of race, gender, and class oppression in Newark through the formation of queer activist, religious, and community organizations.<sup>14</sup> Queer black women in Newark have been at the helm of Newark Pride, Newark's LGBTQ Community Center, and Unity Fellowship Church NewArk, which, as a nondenominational institution, affirms all who come to worship regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. These women are also involved in community-focused creative endeavors that span photography, spoken word, art, and fashion design. Although they are conscious of the fact that rising rents and increased urban development may eventually force them to leave, they continue to mobilize to sustain their community.

Several of the Newark entrepreneurs highlighted in this article have participated in the Queer Newark Oral History Project from the beginning, making them critical contributors to a publicly accessible archive of historical research. Professional photographer and entrepreneur Tamara Fleming photographed and attended

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Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Matlin, "Lift Up Yr Self!: Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Black Power, and the Uplift Tradition," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (June 2006): 91–116; see also Amina Baraka (widow of Amiri) oral history with author, Whitney Strub, Christina Strasburger, and Mi Hyun Yoon, March 2, 2018, Newark, New Jersey in which she notes both his homophobia and also his later evolution on both gender and sexuality.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Newark was home to millionaire entrepreneur Louise Scott, who made her money in the beauty industry, much like Madame C. J. Walker, one of the first African American millionaires. 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. See *Newark Stories: Reverend Louise Scott-Rountree*, produced by Alexandra Hill, 2016, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJZGr1FEqAw>.

<sup>14</sup> Isoke, "Can't I Be Seen? Can't I Be Heard?" 2014.

the project's early planning meetings along with Jae Quinlan, co-owner of the Artisan Collective, and Peggie Miller, who is known for her all-butch fashion shows. Because of its community focus, the first QNOHP conference, "Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories," held in November 2011 at Rutgers University-Newark, featured three generations of LGBTQ individuals from Newark, rather than academics, as panelists. Fleming, Miller, and Quinlan also participated in this groundbreaking event. On large-scale screens, Fleming exhibited a series of stunning photographic portraits of Newark's queer activists along side their thoughts on how to envision social change. Miller displayed her photo series, "New Millennium Butches," featuring striking images of butch-identified black women dressed in tailored suits, the likes of which are never shown on major runways or magazines and rarely seen in television and film. Jae Quinlan took part in the second of three generational panels representing Newark's queer history as part of "the middle generation." Sitting beside Quinlan was June Dowell-Burton, who founded Newark Pride, which not only sponsors and administers Newark's annual public celebrations of LGBTQ pride each summer, but also offers scholarship opportunities and connects LGBTQ folks to the resources they need. Quinlan is also involved in Newark Pride as well as the Newark LGBTQ Community Center and Unity Fellowship NewArk, and is an artist who works to promote the artistic endeavors of other queer black women.<sup>15</sup>

Three years later, QNOHP held its second conference, "Sanctuary: A History of Queer Club Spaces in Newark," with a month-long series of public programs exploring the city's club scene. Using her talent for marketing and design, Fleming again participated by designing the conference's logo. Theresa Randolph, a black lesbian-identified woman who goes by Ms. Theresa, was one of the panelists. Known across the country for her club promotion, Ms. Theresa founded B.L.I.S.S. Entertainment as well as the Ms. Full-Figured USA Pageant and Ms. Theresa Productions. For over twenty-five years her lesbian nightlife parties have been a fixture in Newark. As a conference, Sanctuary's community-based focus on bars, clubs, and parties placed lesbian entrepreneurs like Ms. Theresa at the center of LGBTQ Newark history and gave voice to other queer black women on the panel who found refuge in these spaces. As these bars and clubs have largely disappeared from the city, in part due to gentrification, queer black women have opened new forms of sanctuary in their place. For instance, envisioning their business as a safe space, Anita Dickens and her wife, Lynette Lashawn, welcome queer people of all gender identities to shop at their clothing boutique in downtown Newark.

Queer black women have been foundational to LGBTQ public history in Newark, but this work also runs the risk of cooptation. Although people of color

<sup>15</sup> 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* 1, no. 2 (2014); "Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories," The Queer Newark Oral History Project website, <https://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/queer-newark-our-voices-our-histories>; Newark Pride website, <https://newarkpride.org>.



Peggie Miller (left) and Jae Quinlan (right) view the “New Millennium Butches” photo series at the “Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories” 2011 conference. (Photograph by Eric Ortiz)

are disproportionately represented among those displaced by gentrification as other scholars and activists have shown, due to class dynamics they can also be among those who benefit from—or at least hold dual roles in—the pattern.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in Latinx communities in Los Angeles, “artwashing” has become a concern of locals and activists, who resent the influx of new art galleries in their neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> As part of the gentrification process, city governments create incentives for artists and gallery owners to relocate to a developing neighborhood in order to make the area

16 See Christina B. Hanhardt, “Butterflies, Whistles, and Fists: Gay Safe Streets Patrols and the New Gay Ghetto, 1976–1981,” *Radical History Review* no. 100 (Winter 2008): 61–86. Hanhardt discusses how, in an effort to curtail anti-gay hate crimes and create safer streets, elite LGBT residents in Greenwich Village demanded increased safe street patrols. The resulting quality-of-life law enforcement policies, however, targeted disadvantaged sexual minorities, particularly queer people of color.

17 Alexander Nzaryan, “The ‘Artwashing’ of America: The Battle for the Soul of Los Angeles Against Gentrification,” *Newsweek*, May 21, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html>. See also Kwame Holmes, “Beyond the Flames: Queering the History of the 1968 D.C. Riot,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 304–22. Holmes’ work holds utility for analyzing the pattern in black LGBTQ contexts.



enticing for corporate investment as well as attract an influx of affluent residents.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the new galleries and accompanying businesses, such as hip coffee-houses and bars, are owned by local Latinx people, a phenomenon known as “gente-ification.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, queer black women who are entrepreneurs in Newark also run the risk of being seen as complicit in gentrification, despite their socially marginalized status, if they were to solely benefit while others in the community were displaced. Moreover, although many queer black women in Newark have worked hard to give back to their community as they find ways to thrive economically alongside gentrification, their individual successes will not help the majority of LGBTQ people in poverty. What’s more, predominantly black “legacy cities”—cities facing persistent disinvestment and decline in the postindustrial era—have also been changed by increasing LGBTQ visibility, which has interacted in dynamic ways with small business communities. This can be seen in the proliferation of municipal pride celebrations and an increase in LGBTQ advisory committees for mayors, town councils, and county governments.<sup>20</sup> Together these processes have enabled the emergence in Newark of a cadre of black lesbian small business owners, many of whom are working on behalf of their communities as well as for themselves, as black women have long done. Yet, these women must navigate a complex political landscape in which government officials and urban developers sometimes celebrate LGBTQ and artist communities as emblematic of their city’s success while failing to acknowledge existing issues of inequality that perpetuate gentrification and segregation. Community members suffering under gentrification may view any cozying up to government and urban developers as unscrupulous.

From the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s to contemporary scholars like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, many black feminists have argued that the only way to end inequality and racialized state violence is to end capitalism.<sup>21</sup> But until it can be dismantled, capitalism is the system that queer black women have to deal with as a matter of survival. It is an inescapable contradiction. Black lesbians in Newark are not blind to the ills of gentrification. They are well aware of how it benefits elites, who are predominantly white, while largely displacing communities of color. One woman pointed out, “The thing that troubles me about the revitalizing of

<sup>18</sup> See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). In this influential best seller, Florida argues that government officials must attract and retain a “creative class” to their city in order to drive urban revitalization. In his latest book, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), Florida recants his original argument, pointing to its influence on city leaders and local politicians who adopted his ideas, which ultimately contributed to increased gentrification, segregation, and inequality in urban areas.

<sup>19</sup> Nzaryan, “The ‘Artwashing’ of America.”

<sup>20</sup> On LGBTQ urbanism, see Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). For the full text of the Combahee River Collective Statement, see Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

a community, is that the people who grew up here can't afford to live here and stay here."<sup>22</sup> As a result, these women view their own economic positions as precarious. Being victimized by economic forces is not new to black women whether they are LGBTQ or heterosexual. Moreover, although recent scholarship on racial capitalism has helped deepen our understanding of class tensions within communities of color, this work has yet to engage with heterosexuality as an aspect of urban political economy, much less how queer black women navigate this system.<sup>23</sup> Despite these limitations, in Newark these women are not only finding labor autonomy, they are also using their work to elevate others who are marginalized in their community through public history projects.

By recognizing the public history efforts that black lesbians are involved in as public history work, we free space to legitimize black feminist epistemologies that take into account intersecting forms of oppression and modes of resistance within our history and culture. The paucity of public history work on queer black women means little is understood about the ways in which they make sense of their place in the world and how they mobilize against various forms of oppression. As public historians seek ways to diversify the field, queer black women are already publicly engaging with their own history in creative ways. Instead of only assigning the role of public historians to those with a degree or lofty job title, broadening the definition of public history will help promote nuanced understandings of marginalized histories as well as enrich opportunities for meaningful collaboration between historians and community members.

#### Toward an Entrepreneurial Geography of Black Lesbian Newark

The local LGBTQ-affirming spiritual community has provided a pivotal institutional base for black lesbian empowerment in Newark. Unity Fellowship Church NewArk is the city's hub for queer-led entrepreneurship and organizing. In their oral histories for the Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP), several of the women interviewed cite the Unity Fellowship Church NewArk as their main reason for migrating to Newark. Bishop Carl Bean, known for the 1977 pro-gay dance anthem "I Was Born This Way," founded the first Unity Fellowship church in the 1980s in Los Angeles, California, in response to the AIDS crisis. He 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. Unity Fellowship churches have since sprung up in other states around the nation, as places of worship that welcome LGBTQ people of color.<sup>24</sup> Being a part of the

<sup>22</sup> Alicia Heath-Toby, oral history interview with author, January 27, 2017, Newark, New Jersey.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the work of Brenna Greer, N. B. D. Connolly, and Davarian Baldwin mentioned in this essay see also, LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> See Archbishop Carl Bean, *I Was Born This Way* (New York, Simon & Shuster: 2010); Aryana Bates, "Liberation in Truth: African American Lesbians Reflect on Religion, Spirituality, and Their

Unity congregation helped many queer black women entrepreneurs in Newark to form friendship networks that ultimately led to business ventures as well as facilitated their participation with many of the city's LGBTQ organizations. In her oral history for QNOHP, Peggie Miller discussed the many activists and creative folks who attend Newark's Unity Fellowship church and are able to network there. Moreover, the city's chapter was co-founded 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.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Miller views Unity as having a spirit of fellowship that fosters collaboration among those in the congregation.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Kimberlee Williams, Tamara Fleming's business partner, views the time she spent at Unity Fellowship church as formative for making connections with other LGBTQ folks and organizations in the community. She began volunteering for Newark Pride primarily because the church already supported the organization. Her work on other church-related committees also led to her involvement with the Marketing and Economic Development Committee for Newark's LGBTQ Advisory Commission, which served then-mayor Cory Booker.<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, local business owner Jae Quinlan used to make the long commute every weekend from the Bronx to Newark to attend service at Unity. For ten years her business partner, Burley Tuggle, would also commute two hours every Sunday from where she lived in Manhattan. The love and support they found at Unity made the lengthy commute worth it. Both women emphasized how welcoming the church community is as a religious space specifically catering to the LGBTQ community.<sup>28</sup> For Quinlan, the church played a pivotal role in helping her regain her sobriety, which she struggled with due to past traumatic experiences. Through this support system she joined the Liberation in Truth Social Justice Center (LIT) and the Newark LGBTQ Community Center. She eventually came to partner with Tuggle and several other queer black women from church to open the Artisan Collective on Halsey Street in Newark's busy downtown commercial area.<sup>29</sup>

Many in Newark's contemporary LGBTQ community consider Halsey Street, located on the northwest edge of downtown in the University Heights district, to be the city's version of Christopher Street, a well-known gay enclave

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Church," in *Gay Religion*, ed. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 221–37.

25 In particular, Janyce Jackson Jones helped found the Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church and the Liberation in Truth drop-in center, the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, and the Newark Pride Alliance. See Janyce Jackson Jones's oral history interviews with Anna Alves, March 9, 2016 and March 13, 2016, Queer Newark Oral History Project website, <https://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/interviews/janyce-jackson-jones>.

26 Peggie Miller, oral history interview with author, March 7, 2017, Newark, New Jersey.

27 Kimberlee Williams, oral history interview with author, March 7, 2017, Newark, New Jersey.

28 Burley Tuggle, oral history interview with author, November 9, 2016, Newark, New Jersey.

29 Jae Quinlan, oral history interview with author and Monica Liu, October 19, 2016, Newark, New Jersey.

in Manhattan. Christopher Street has long been associated with the proliferation of queer establishments—especially the Stonewall Inn, popularly considered to be the birthplace of the gay liberation movement. From 2013 until August 2018, Halsey Street was home to the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, which was started by queer black women who demanded that there be a safe space in Newark for the LGBTQ community.<sup>30</sup> Halsey Street is also the location of the Artisan Collective, the eponymous MH302 Marco Hall Boutique whose owner is gay and a fashion designer, and Off the Hanger, a boutique store adjacent to Halsey owned by black lesbians who are a married couple, Anita Dickens and Lynette Lashawn. Until fairly recently, on or near Halsey Street also used to be where one would find the gay-owned retail store St. James & Company, FEMWORKS, and the Liberation in Truth Social Justice Center (LIT)—all of which closed within the last ten years. LIT was a drop-in center offering counseling and HIV testing that was started by many of the same black lesbians who pioneered the Newark LGBTQ Community Center and Unity Fellowship Church NewArk. Other LGBTQ owned businesses located nearby are Gallery Aferro, an art space owned by a white lesbian couple; Medina CITI, a multi-media “design haus”; and the Essex County RAIN Foundation, a shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth in the neighboring town of East Orange owned by Tamara Fleming’s wife, Elaine Helms. And, as stated, linking much of the gay community together is the nearby Unity Fellowship Church NewArk on Broad Street.

Newark offers a counterpoint to queer scholarship that mourns the lack of lesbian-owned spaces. Halsey Street was first considered a gay hub during the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, dance clubs were owned by gay men, such as S.R.O., Le Joc, and Doll House, and provided sanctuary to Newark’s LGBTQ community, but all have closed.<sup>31</sup> Notably, there were no black lesbian feminist organizations in existence in Newark at this time or, perhaps, none that have been historically documented. Now, however, dotted with black lesbian run businesses and organizations, Halsey Street has since been revived as a recognizably queer area. 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 predominantly black communities such as those in Newark.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, issues of safety, economics, and access have historically led queer women of color to socialize at home more than in public venues. Historian Rochella Thorpe used oral history interviews to document how queer black women in Detroit in the mid-twentieth century preferred to host rent parties in their apartments rather than go out to public bars. This was due to the

<sup>30</sup> The new home for the Newark LGBTQ Community Center will be the Newark Public Library at 5 Washington Street, a less than five-minute walk from the former 11 Halsey Street location.

<sup>31</sup> Whitney Strub and Beryl Satter, “History of Queer Club Spaces,” Queer Newark Oral History Project website, <https://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/history-queer-club-spaces-newark>.

<sup>32</sup> See Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York, 2016).

intersections of race, gender and sexuality, and class-based discrimination black lesbians encountered. By hosting their own parties, they could circumvent harassment and anti-gay violence from heterosexual men as well as discrimination from white lesbians who did not welcome black lesbians joining their social scene.<sup>33</sup>

Black queer women who are entrepreneurs engage in similar survival strategies by creating their own opportunities outside of the racist, sexist, and homophobic corporate world. Indeed, black women, queer and straight, have become the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States. The number of women-owned businesses in general grew by 74 percent 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, a whopping 322 percent since 1997.<sup>34</sup> Tamara Fleming, co-founder and former co-president of New Jersey LGBT Chamber of Commerce, explains that when black women hit a wall in their field, due to either overt or covert racial and gender discrimination, many will turn to entrepreneurship in order to create their own advancement. She went on to clarify how black women feel about corporate America:

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.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, black women earn less on the dollar than all men as well as white women. According to a 2016 Pew Research study, white women make 82 percent of every dollar that non-Hispanic white men earn, while black women earn even less at 65 percent.<sup>36</sup> Instead of accepting racism, sexism, and homophobia inherent in the status quo, many black women, queer and straight, leave their jobs to create better opportunities for themselves through entrepreneurship either on a full-time basis or part-time to supplement their regular income. Yet statistics typically do not provide data specifically on black lesbian entrepreneurs, effectively rendering their existence invisible.

33 Rochella Thorpe, "A House Where Queers Go: African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940–1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40–61. A grateful thank you to the anonymous peer reviewer for suggesting this important connection.

34 Amy Haimmerl, "The fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs in America," *Fortune*, June 29, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/06/29/black-women-entrepreneurs/>. See also Kimberlee Williams, "Kimberlee Williams: We are the New Majority," TED Residency, 6:41, November 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvQvt-DpcoA>.

35 Fleming, oral history interview.

36 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) website*, July 21, 2015, <http://www.aauw.org/2015/07/21/black-women-pay-gap/>.

Other factors have also obscured the historical presence of black lesbians in Newark. Although the 1967 Newark riots are an important moment in the city's history, this event looms so large in the historical narrative that it has largely served to obscure Newark's LGBTQ history. In the Kerner Report commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson, lack of political representation, worsening social conditions, and police brutality were recognized as the three main causes of the 1967 riots. Yet President Johnson ultimately chose to ignore the report's findings.<sup>37</sup> Instead of a meaningful analysis of structural inequality and the continuing legacy of white supremacy, Newark has since become synonymous with immorality, drugs, gangs, and violence in most media narratives, which helps to fuel public opinion. To combat this notion of Newark, many historians, civil rights leaders, and activists now refer to the riot as the Newark Rebellion.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the common perception of Newark as a wasteland persists, a convenient narrative for white supremacist rhetoric. It also obscures the existence of queer people or assumes them to be powerless victims. To help counter the city's stigma, Lynette Lashawn of Off the Hanger curated an exhibit on Newark history in order to shift public perception and encourage tourism to the city. The exhibit is on permanent display at Newark Liberty International Airport.<sup>39</sup>

Adding to these narratives of urban decay is another narrative of antigay hostility. The murder of a young butch lesbian named Sakia Gunn in 2003 entered into the media narratives of Newark, casting the city again as an unsafe place, only now the focus was on LGBTQ people. Gunn was on her way home to Newark from Greenwich Village in Manhattan. When she reached the bus stop at the busy intersection of Broad and Market Streets, two men began to sexually harass Gunn and her friends. When Gunn asserted she was gay, one of the men, Richard McCullough, attacked her. As Gunn fought back he pulled out a knife and fatally stabbed her in the chest. Tragically, she died in the arms of a friend on the way to the hospital.<sup>40</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* ran a story the following year comparing another young butch lesbian's experience to Gunn's and describes "the trash-

37 See Philip J. Meranto, *The Kerner Report Revisited: Final Report and Background Papers* (Urbana: Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois, 1970) and Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 98–99.

38 On Newark activism and the 1967 Newark riots, see Mark Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier: Community Action in the Great Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Robert Curvin, *Inside Newark: Decline Rebellion and the Search for Transformation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Junius Williams, *Unfinished Agenda: Urban Politics in the Era of Black Power* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2014); and Mumford, *Newark*.

39 Jessica Orbon, "Newark Liberty International Airport Unveils Historical Display Hoping to Encourage Tourism in City," *Fios* 1, March 14, 2019, [http://fiosnews.com/news/newark-liberty-international-airport-unveils-historical-display-hoping-to-encourage-tourism-in-city/?fbclid=IwAR2lPAfyxm95KwTsoVkiUTlt64PDsHdoJcEGAJEf\\_Nwz9f36LMcDdyMOEHc](http://fiosnews.com/news/newark-liberty-international-airport-unveils-historical-display-hoping-to-encourage-tourism-in-city/?fbclid=IwAR2lPAfyxm95KwTsoVkiUTlt64PDsHdoJcEGAJEf_Nwz9f36LMcDdyMOEHc).

40 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>; *Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Film Project*, directed by Charles Bennet Brack and produced by Sam Castrillo (New York: Third World Newsreel, 2008).

blown and violent streets of Newark” as an “empty wasteland for gay teenagers.”<sup>41</sup> In 2007, the *New York Times* followed up with, “to live in Newark often means grappling with unrelenting poverty, the anesthetizing lure of drugs, murderous gangs, a lack of decent jobs” and describes how LGBTQ residents need to constantly dodge violent attacks, whether they are at home or in the streets.<sup>42</sup> What’s more, when queer black women first tried to get the city to provide an LGBTQ community center as a safe space in reaction to Gunn’s death, they were dismissed by then-Mayor Sharpe James who failed to even recognize the existence of queer people as his constituents. When June Dowell-Burton approached the mayor, he said to her, “There are no gay people in Newark.”<sup>43</sup>

Not only do LGBTQ people exist in Newark, but their lives are not all defined by violence and oppression. Newark is also home for many queer people who find opportunity in the city and who refuse to be defined by either the post-1967 urban-hellscape myth or the narrative of Newark as an unsafe, antigay place. Although the canon of LGBTQ urban history has always included queer people of color, the institutional and archival hypervisibility of middle-class white gay men inevitably reasserts itself.<sup>44</sup> Newark’s demographics cultivate a uniquely black, working-class LGBTQ movement, and an analysis of it provides a window to explore diverse queer histories not accounted for in most historical narratives.

Urban renewal is often framed as the positive remaking of an urban landscape, and Newark has been marked as a place ripe for a corporate makeover. Publicized in the media as “the next Brooklyn,” Newark is being reinvented as a corporate-friendly adjunct to New York City.<sup>45</sup> A crucial turning point came in 2017 when a Whole Foods opened downtown, signaling the beginning of the area’s gentrification. In addition, major companies such as Audible and Panasonic relocated their headquarters to Newark in recent years.<sup>46</sup> Urban boosters, including chambers of commerce, developers, and CEOs, have long promoted economic development uncritically. Those in favor of redevelopment view it as way to uplift a devastated

41 “Coming Out in America,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 2004.

42 Andrew Jacobs, “In a Progressive State, a City That’s Tough on Gays,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2007.

43 June Dowell-Burton, oral history interview with Whitney Strub, December 1, 2015, Newark, New Jersey.

44 For groundbreaking research on LGBTQ history in New York and San Francisco, 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); and Susan Stryker, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1996).

45 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](http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/is_newark_the_next_brooklyn_mayor_says_no.html).

46 Rick Rojas, “A Revival Comes to Newark, but Some Worry It’s ‘Not for Us,’” *New York Times*, August 8, 2017; Tom De Poto, “Christie Cuts Ribbon on Panasonic’s New Headquarters in Newark, Salutes Bipartisanship,” *NJ.com*, September 17, 2013, [https://www.nj.com/business/index.ssf/2013/09/christie\\_newark\\_panasonic.html](https://www.nj.com/business/index.ssf/2013/09/christie_newark_panasonic.html); Aaron Hurst, “How Audible’s CEO Is Working To Lift Up The City Around The Company’s Office,” *FastCompany.com*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40440554/how-audibles-ceo-is-working-to-lift-up-the-city-around-it>.

area. The idea is to provide incentives for corporate investment based on the assumption that this will lead to an overall improvement in quality of life for residents who benefit from increased job availability and safer streets. Urban renewal, however, is also known for predatory market practices that lead to a decrease in housing affordability for all but the affluent.<sup>47</sup> In response to urban boosterism, communities of color have developed a counternarrative about economic development that emphasizes who gets excluded or displaced. This is especially pertinent to black urban communities who have experienced firsthand the empty promises of urban boosters as waves of disinvestment—flight of capital and jobs—occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Plainly stating its duplicity, James Baldwin and others famously called federally sponsored urban renewal “Negro removal.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, even within these counternarratives the emphasis has ultimately been on the displacement of black families, which are assumed to be traditional families. As a result, queer people are rarely acknowledged.

With so many racist and homophobic forces obscuring the lives and history of queer people of color, public history methodologies are a vital way to combat their continued erasure. Using Newark as a case study illustrates how productive public history research can be when it branches out from dominant narratives that typically define a place in order to unearth voices and experiences that have been marginalized as a result. In Newark, queer black women are making their history known by participating in public history projects with their communities as they resist harmful narratives of urban decay as well as a society that rarely acknowledges their worth. Validating their work as intellectual endeavors of historical reclamation and retelling will ultimately advance how we understand LGBTQ history more broadly as well as expand the public history field in diverse and dynamic ways.

#### Public History and Entrepreneurship by Queer Black Women in Newark

In 1998, Kimberlee Williams was attending a business class in downtown Newark when she noticed that most of the offices in the building were empty; ergo, she decided to rent one for only one hundred dollars a month. 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.”<sup>50</sup> But

<sup>47</sup> Scholarship on national urban renewal and race is massive, but for a deeply influential overview see Thomas Sugrue, *The Orgins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For a powerful study on how discriminatory practices in the banking industry in concert with racist federal policies impacted housing in African American communities, see Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> For an example of the displacement of queer communities due to urban planning, police repression, and gentrification and how queer community projects can resist their erasure, see Gregory Rosenthal, “Make Roanoke Queer Again,” *Public Historian* 39, no. 1 (February 2017): 35–60.

<sup>49</sup> Fred R. Standley and Louis H. Pratt, eds., *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Williams, oral history interview.



three months later, the business had failed. Undeterred, Williams restarted FEMWORKS in 2004 with Tamara Fleming. 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.<sup>51</sup>

She explained how those conversations about representation are what cemented the formation of their business partnership. As a multicultural marketing agency, FEMWORKS would be about helping other companies reach African Americans, the LGBTQ community, and urban communities—people that, according to Fleming, could relate to the founding partners.

Authenticity in representation drove the mission of FEMWORKS and the image of the company's founders. Not only would FEMWORKS help serve underserved communities, but it would also make itself visible as a company run by two black lesbians. Initially Fleming was worried that they would lose clients if they were open about their sexuality.

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.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, instead of hiding their sexual identity, they touted it as a business asset. According to Fleming, their website was the only one she was aware of that not only stated the sexuality of the owners openly, but also named it as a reason why companies should do business with them.

As a multi-media marketing company run by two queer black women, for over a decade FEMWORKS was key to bringing Newark's vibrant queer community to the fore through their use of social media and advertising. Together, Fleming and Williams reflected a twenty-first century black lesbian entrepreneurial style that is community-driven in its economic model.<sup>53</sup> Understanding the power of the media to shape perceptions of marginalized individuals, FEMWORKS engaged in vital

<sup>51</sup> Fleming, oral history interview.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> In a September 19, 2018, message sent to the author via Facebook, Tamara Fleming stated that FEMWORKS no longer exists. Kimberlee Williams is now the marketing director at Rutgers University–Newark. Williams plans to resume FEMWORKS at a later date but is currently doing only small projects under FEMWORKS based on interest in order to focus on marketing for Rutgers full-time.

work to positively shape attitudes towards queer people of color. In 2010, for instance, FEMWORKS partnered with the African American Office of Gay Concerns (AAOGC) in Newark on their “Status Is Everything” campaign targeting men who have sex with men (MSM) in order to promote HIV testing and reduce risky behavior. In an effort to maintain authenticity, Fleming photographed LGBTQ Newark residents for campaign advertisements to be placed around the city. The photos would reject the usual clinical tone favored by many HIV resources and instead feature compelling images where love is central, such as gay black men in romantic embrace. Fleming was especially proud of her photograph of a transgender woman used on a giant billboard in Newark:

Nowhere in Newark were you driving around seeing a transgender [woman] on a poster or on a billboard. It wasn't in the side alley streets or anything. It was downtown Newark. It was right on Washington Street. It was bold in your face.<sup>54</sup>

Her photographs of LGBTQ community members were also used as bus wraps and on postcards. More than just a plea for HIV testing, these were positive images, which publically portrayed Newark's LGBTQ community as health conscious, vibrant, and proud.

Branching out from her role at FEMWORKS, Fleming began to document leaders of Newark's LGBTQ community as an intervention in black queer erasure with a historical consciousness attached to it. Conceived of as an ongoing image study and archive, Fleming has photographed approximately twenty queer individuals to date in what should be recognized as a public history project.<sup>55</sup> Her portraits also include physically disabled queer people of color, delve into issues of mental illness, and explore emotionality. The portraits, which included captions featuring each subject's vision for social change, were displayed at the first Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP) conference in 2011, “Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories,” and presented a window into Newark's LGBTQ community to a rapt audience. Fleming also took part in the genesis of QNOHP by photographing the organization's early planning meetings. These images are now an important part of QNOHP's archive. In addition to documenting LGBTQ individuals, Fleming has another community archival project, which features elderly women living in the Newark neighborhood of Lincoln Park.

In addition to their partnership in FEMWORKS, Williams and Fleming worked together in 2013 to form the New Jersey LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce in response to the lack of racial and gender diversity within the National LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC). Although not a public history project in the strictest sense, it is a significant mobilization against whitewashing that historical

<sup>54</sup> Fleming, oral history interview.

<sup>55</sup> Tamara Fleming's website showcases many of these photographs under “Passion Shoots,” <http://tamaraflemingphotography.com/personal/jf4rv6o2quikzjfbobqbc6vy336b>.

organizations should similarly strive to achieve. According to Fleming, NGLCC had been largely made up of gay white men at the time she was involved with the organization.<sup>56</sup> This was significant because NGLCC not only connects queer-owned businesses, but also works to influence federal and local government legislation to advance LGBTQ economic interests. Thus, a lack of diversity meant the needs of queer people of color who are business owners risked being overlooked. As an affiliate group, the New Jersey LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce links Newark and greater New Jersey LGBTQ entrepreneurs in a more powerful way to NGLCC. As leaders, Fleming and Williams used their platform to advocate for queer black business owners to be heard and included. Similarly, their vision aligns with the National Council on Public History's Diversity Task Force, which was formed in 2015 to address the lack of professionals of color in the field of public history.<sup>57</sup>

As small business owners, in defiance of the whitewashing process inherent in gentrification, the queer black women who own the Artisan Collective are carving out space for themselves and their community. The Artisan Collective is a boutique co-owned by five queer black women: Jae Quinlan, Burley Tuggle, Saundra Toby-Heath, Juanita Martin, and Leslie Peterson.<sup>58</sup> Located in the heart of downtown Newark, the owners of the store primarily sell handmade goods. Yet the women of the Artisan Collective view their store beyond strictly economic terms. According to partner Saundra Toby-Heath,

Well, one of my favorite days is a good Saturday in the shop. I had that two Saturdays ago . . . 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.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the Artisan Collective is not only a business, but also a cultural hub whose mission is to use art to galvanize and elevate the community.<sup>60</sup> The partners

<sup>56</sup> Fleming, oral history interview. At present, the NGLCC website shows an apparent increase in racial and gender diversity within their staff and board of directors, <https://www.nglcc.org/who-we-are/founders-and-team-nglcc>.

<sup>57</sup> Brian Joyner, "Whither diversity?" *NCPH.org*, April 22, 2016, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/whither-diversity/>.

<sup>58</sup> After co-owning the store since its inception in 2012, Saundra Toby-Heath retired as partner in December 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Saundra Toby-Heath, oral history interview with author, November 16, 2016, Newark, New Jersey.

<sup>60</sup> Tamara Remedios, "Spotlight on the Artisan Collective," *NewarkPulse.com*, August 10, 2012, <https://www.newarkpulse.com/news/detail/spotlight-on-artisan-collective>.



Jae Quinlan opened the Artisan Collective in downtown Newark with four other women in 2012. (Photograph by Tamara Fleming)

participate annually in the Newark Arts Festival, frequently hold their own art events, and regularly display artwork for sale by local artists in their shop. Quinlan also serves on the board of Art Front Galleries, an organization that helps local artists gain visibility through pop up art shows and repurposes vacant storefronts as gallery displays.<sup>61</sup> In all facets of her life, whether through her business or her social justice work with Newark Pride, the Newark LGBTQ Community Center, and Unity Church NewArk, or her participation in the creation of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, Quinlan is committed to engaging with the community in ways that harness her historical understanding of the queer black urban experience and then translate that understanding into artistic and cultural expressions that destabilize racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas in society.

As a public space that provides a venue for the expression of black lesbian and gender nonbinary subjectivities, the Artisan Collective adds to the historical legacy of lesbian owned and operated businesses that over time have contributed to queer history and shaped lesbian culture. As a store, it functions as an egalitarian-style

61 Quinlan, oral history interview.

business in which rent, utilities, display area, and hourly shifts are shared equally among the partners. This collaborative model is reminiscent of the partnership of Olivia Records in the early 1970s. Founded by radical feminists, Olivia Records was a successful record company committed to releasing the music of lesbian artists who sought to define lesbian politics and affirm a lesbian lifestyle. Moreover, in 1976, Olivia Records was the first record company to release a spoken word album. It featured the interracial pairing of white lesbian poet Judy Grahn with black lesbian poet Pat Parker.<sup>62</sup> Descended from the ethos of Olivia Records, the Artisan Collective is shaping the queer community by providing a hub for black lesbian expression, not only through artwork and craft, but also through Quinlan's open mic night, "Crack the Mic," which features spoken word and music performances predominantly by local women of color, many of whom are queer and gender nonconforming. Unlike Olivia Records, which frequently centered the viewpoint of white middle-class lesbians despite promoting some black artists, "Crack the Mic" validates and fosters the voices, ideas, history, and desires of queer black women who vary in their socio-economic status and gender identity. In addition, Quinlan also facilitated QNOHP's acquisition of a set of pioneering safer-sex materials and '90s ballroom camcorder-shot videos, making the Artisan Collective an integral part of preserving LGBTQ Newark history.

The 2003 murder of Sakia Gunn was instrumental in galvanizing Newark's LGBTQ community, and it is striking that black gender nonconforming lesbians were central to these efforts from the beginning. Collectively, their mobilizations resulted in sharply increased political visibility for the city's queer communities. Butch lesbian Jae Quinlan stated that Gunn's death was a pivotal moment that propelled her work with the Liberation in Truth drop-in center and later with the Newark LGBTQ Community Center. Saundra Toby-Heath's wife, Reverend Alicia Heath-Toby, also made herself visible as a butch lesbian as she demanded justice for Gunn and safe spaces from city government for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth. Heath-Toby states her identity in unequivocal terms:

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.<sup>63</sup>

In line with her outspokenness and commitment to the LGBTQ community, when the government failed on its promise to provide an LGBTQ center, Alicia Heath-Toby helped establish the Newark LGBTQ Community Center with its founder Reverend Janyce Jackson Jones. In effect, queer black women in Newark

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

63 Heath-Toby, oral history interview.

demonstrated 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 LGBT people in Newark—as one frustrated community leader, Gary Paul Wright, had declared in a local newspaper—then they would build organizations themselves.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Tamara Fleming’s wife, Elaine Helms, who also identifies as a butch lesbian, founded the Essex County LGBT RAIN Foundation, a shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth in nearby East Orange, which predominantly houses black trans women from Newark. Peggie Miller, who organizes butch fashion shows, assists Helms at the shelter and engages in community work through a local fraternity club for black butch women. Moreover, Anita Dickens, a black gender nonconforming fashion designer and business owner in Newark, began by volunteering for Newark Pride—also formed in response to Gunn’s murder—and later served as a board member. As publicly visible and proud black butch and gender nonconforming lesbians, they have all been integral to improving the political climate and safety for queer people in Newark. This increase in black queer visibility and sanctuary spaces has created avenues for their public history work to flourish.

Anita Dickens is engaging in public history by shifting the conversation around gender in an urban space and disrupting the history of racialized gender-binary spaces. Since 2010, Dickens has co-owned a boutique clothing and furniture store called Off the Hanger with her wife Lynette Lashawn in downtown Newark. Half of the store features femme fashions, which is the vision of Lashawn, while the other half of the store is home to Dickens’s collection of masculine of center or unisex clothing under her own brand, ANE. Dickens prefers to dress in menswear, but resents using traditional clothing store fitting rooms where she often experiences what she refers to as “the look,” wherein other customers or employees make it clear that a queer or gender nonconforming person is not welcome in a space where gender is specifically demarcated in binary terms.<sup>65</sup> Discrimination that occurs in fitting rooms is similar to discrimination and legislation against transgender individuals who try to use bathrooms that correspond to their gender identity. Che Gossett places anti-trans bathroom legislation in the context of “racial slavery” and the Jim Crow era when bathrooms were segregated by “men,” “women,” and “colored.” Gossett writes, “The bathroom, with its gender-binary regime of sexual difference, is one of the signatures—along with hyperincarceration, mass deportation, and racial capitalism—of the afterlife of slavery.”<sup>66</sup> In resistance to the historical legacy of violence against black and trans bodies, which includes discrimination and harassment in public spaces such as fitting

64 Gary Paul Wright, “Remembering the murder of Sakia Gunn, and Newark’s Lost Opportunity: Opinion,” *Star Ledger*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.aogc.org/2013/05/remembering-the-murder-of-sakia-gunn-and-newarks-lost-opportunity-opinion/>.

65 Anita Dickens, oral history interview with author, December 8, 2016.

66 Che Gossett, “Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 184.

rooms, Dickens's store provides an alternative space outside the limits of heteronormative society where gender nonconforming individuals will be able to shop without social or legal judgment. To make clear her mission, Dickens placed a sign inside Off the Hanger that reads, "All Genders." Located directly below a mirror, it serves to underscore the reflected image of each person who reads it. Moreover, by modeling all of the clothes herself via her website and social media, she uses her black queer body to demonstrate how the fashions are not exclusive to cisgender male consumers while also interrupting the presumed whiteness of trans identity.<sup>67</sup>

Until its recent closure, a local restaurant called Diamondz N Da Ruff was co-owned by Peggie Miller. It was established in 2014 with two other queer black women, Debra Holmes of Jersey City and Gloria Carter, who is also the mother of rap artist Jay Z. Similar to the Artisan Collective, Diamondz N Da Ruff endeavored to be a community hub where patrons could feel at home, including those who lack a stable residence. Individuals experiencing homelessness were never turned away and were always given a free meal. According to Miller, "We felt that everyone in Newark is a diamond. No matter how rough it is, there's diamonds, and they deserve to be treated with royalty."<sup>68</sup>

Miller has dedicated herself to making black butch lesbians legible to the public in ways that celebrate black butch identity. In 2000, Miller created PMP Enterprises, an entertainment company for music and fashion. As part of PMP Enterprises, Miller holds annual New Millennium Butch Fashion Shows featuring aggressive black lesbians—the term "aggressive" or "AG" refers to masculine-identified lesbians and is primarily used within the black community—that she met through Unity Church NewArk and her Newark fraternity, Pi Lambda Phi (PLP), which is comprised of black butch lesbians who engage in community activism together. In 2009, Miller published *New Millennium Butch*, a coffee table book featuring photographs of local black butch lesbians wearing tailored suits along with an accompanying calendar.<sup>69</sup> Tamara Fleming took some of the photographs for the project, while Elaine Helms and Jae Quinlan are among the models featured. Miller believes black butch visibility is essential to combatting their marginalization:

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 . . . 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.<sup>70</sup>

67 Cisgender is defined as a person's gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth.

68 Miller, oral history interview.

69 Peggie Miller, *New Millennium Butch* (n.p.: PMPEnterprise, 2009).

70 Ibid.



Peggie Miller published *New Millennium Butch*, a photography book featuring aggressive or butch identified models. (Photograph by Tamara Fleming)

When Miller exhibited these images at QNOHP's first conference, "Our Voices, Our Histories," the audience, a wide mix of people in terms of age, class, gender, sexuality, and race took in these images of proud black butch lesbians, some perhaps seeing black butch women positively represented for the first time.<sup>71</sup> This presentation harkened back to the transmasculine performances of earlier entertainers such as blues singer Gladys Bentley and Stormé DeLarverie of the Jewel Box Revue. As entertainers, activists, entrepreneurs, and designers, Miller and her models reimagine new possibilities for black queer expression. Moreover, in 2018 Miller held an all-butch fashion show at Rutgers University-Newark's Express Newark, a new university-community collaboratory in the historic Hahne & Company building, as part of a larger art exhibition on identity, cultural norms, and representation entitled *Mirror, Mirror*.<sup>72</sup> Miller's participation with university-led

<sup>71</sup> Moore, "A Community's Response to the Problems of Invisibility," 1.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Robeson Galleries website, <https://artgallery.newark.rutgers.edu/2018/08/18/reflection-new-millennium-butch-fashion-show/>.



artist events and historical projects forms a bridge between the academic and local Newark communities. What's more, this collaboration facilitates an exchange of ideas in ways that are key to generating new knowledge production and challenge conventional modes of thinking.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

The issue of Newark's urban renaissance provokes varying reactions from the women interviewed depending on their background and positionality as Newark community members. Former Harlem resident Alicia Heath-Toby expresses anger at how gentrification displaces people of color:

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 Sandra] was born and raised here [in Newark], 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.<sup>74</sup>

When only a few miles away in Manhattan minority communities have been lost to block after block of luxury condominiums, Duane Reade stores, fast food chains, trendy eateries, and Chase Manhattan banks, it can be difficult to see how Newark will be able to buck the same neoliberal market forces that have so visibly reshaped other cities and neighborhoods. One of the former partners at Artisan Collective, Reverend Jerri Mitchell-Lee, emphasizes how development is confined to Newark's downtown area where the corporations are concentrated,

<sup>73</sup> For a great model of urban cultural formations see Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), in which he argues that whenever there is an examination of knowledge production, it is necessary to take into account ideas regardless of where they are created or what form they take. In his notion of a marketplace intellectual life, Baldwin views the Chicago marketplace in the early twentieth century as a site of knowledge production where the exchange of ideas between new black urban migrants, white observers, existing residents, and black intellectuals and leaders challenged conventional theories of race, class, gender, and citizenship.

<sup>74</sup> Heath-Toby, oral history interview.

while surrounding residential wards are neglected and may very possibly remain that way.<sup>75</sup> Thus, downtown corporations and the predominately suburban commuters who staff them are the main beneficiaries of the revitalization. Anita Dickens views the changes in downtown Newark more optimistically as a way to attract people and income into the city. Yet she also questions who ultimately benefits: “The thing is, what’s coming in? What is available for the people of Newark?”<sup>76</sup> For all of the women interviewed hopefulness was more often than not tempered with concern regarding displacement of existing residents.

Although some view the revitalization as an opportunity, others have mobilized to fight against the danger of gentrification in Newark. In early 2017, community advocates, including members of Newark’s NAACP, attempted to strengthen a 2014 rent control ordinance making it difficult for landlords of rent-controlled buildings to quickly increase the rental price upon becoming vacant. The ordinance also requires new housing developers with thirty or more units to provide 20 percent affordable housing. But tenant leaders viewed these measures as not enough. Instead, they also pushed for the inclusionary housing ordinance to go into effect immediately rather than being phased in, for Newark residents to have housing priority, and to broaden which developments would have to comply.<sup>77</sup> By March 2017, despite pushback from residents, Newark City Council approved changing the rules to allow landlords to raise rents in vacant rent-controlled apartments, which sparked increased fears of resident displacement.<sup>78</sup> Yet, according to Kimberlee Williams:

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 . . . 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 . . . 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 there’s a huge space for new people.<sup>79</sup>

75 Reverend Jerri Mitchell Lee, oral history interview with author, February 21, 2017.

76 Dickens, oral history interview.

77 Karen Yi, “Advocates Push for Housing Affordability, Rent Control in a Changing Newark,” *NJ.com*, February 16, 2017, [https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/housing\\_advocates\\_push\\_for\\_more\\_affordability\\_rent.html](https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/housing_advocates_push_for_more_affordability_rent.html).

78 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](http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/03/newark_rent_control_ordinance.html).

79 Williams, oral history interview.

In the last sixty years, Newark's population significantly declined as primarily white middle class residents moved from the city into the nearby suburbs as a result of the 1967 riots, increasing racial tensions, redlining, and the lure of home ownership. As deindustrialization accelerated in the 1970s, businesses and factories likewise relocated out of the city or closed their doors, hastening the city's economic decline and drastically increasing the unemployment rate.<sup>80</sup> Williams' confidence in Newark's ability to accommodate an influx of new residents and businesses is echoed by Mayor Ras Baraka, who is quoted as saying, "Most of the places we are developing are abandoned or have been abandoned for thirty, forty, fifty years. So we're not displacing people."<sup>81</sup> In Baraka's estimation, Newark will be a model for how to create development and housing without causing hardship to existing poor and working class residents, unlike what has happened in other urban areas that have gentrified. To this point, he has emphatically pushed back against any claims that Newark might be "the next Brooklyn."<sup>82</sup> Yet, even if empty space is repurposed, there still remains the risk that the price of rentals will increase beyond the means of many current residents and small business owners, including Newark's LGBTQ community and the local entrepreneurial projects of black lesbians. In December 2018, based on the recommendations of a report submitted by Rutgers Equitable Development Working Group and Rutgers Center on Law, Inequality & Metro Equity (CLiME), Mayor Baraka took further measures to protect residents. He announced an anti-gentrification initiative involving a fifteen-member commission to oversee the city's development and prevent the displacement of residents. With a median household income of \$37,000 and rents that have already risen 20 percent since 2000, actions taken to protect residents (of which 78 percent are renters) must be stringent.<sup>83</sup> It remains to be seen how this new initiative will unfold.

In spite of the city's uncertain future, public historians can resist erasure of black queer history in places like Newark by recognizing and naming the effort of LGBTQ residents who are endeavoring to preserve their own culture and history. Newark's queer history is already largely a history of absences. Bars, clubs, and organizations that once provided sanctuary no longer exist. The Newark LGBTQ Community Center, established by black lesbians who refused to be balked by government inaction, almost permanently closed its doors in 2017 when developers purchased the entire block as part of the corporatization of downtown Newark. Fortunately, the governing body and staff members at the Newark Public Library

80 Mumford, *Newark*, 215–216.

81 Karen Yi, "Is Newark the next Brooklyn? Mayor says no," *NJ.com*, February 19, 2017. [https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/is\\_newark\\_the\\_next\\_brooklyn\\_mayor\\_says\\_no.html](https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/02/is_newark_the_next_brooklyn_mayor_says_no.html).

82 *Ibid.*

83 Karen Yi, "Newark is Changing, But It Will Not Become Brooklyn, Mayor Promises," *NJ.com*, December 6, 2018. <https://www.nj.com/essex/2018/12/newark-is-changing-but-it-will-not-become-brooklyn-mayor-promises.html>; Rutgers Equitable Development Working Group and Rutgers CLiME, "Recommendations to the City of Newark, Mayor Ras Baraka" report, October 2017, <https://clime.newark.rutgers.edu/sites/CLiME/files/Recommendations%20to%20the%20City%20of%20Newark.pdf>.

intervened to provide space within their institution for the center in what would otherwise have been a devastating blow to Newark's LGBTQ community. Consequently, the center will be able to expand its hours and continue to provide resources, events, and programs to those in need. This will also open new possibilities for collaboration on cultural and historical projects between the center, the library, and the communities they both serve.<sup>84</sup> To this end, in February 2019 the library hired their first LGBTQ Community Outreach Librarian who will reach out to and collaborate with various local LGBTQ communities and organizations. This new partnership between the library, the LGBTQ center, and other local LGBTQ organizations is one example of how public history institutions can engage in meaningful community collaborations in ways that can produce alternative visions for public history projects.

Likewise, reimagining what it means to do public history work and who is a public historian will not only deepen interpretations of marginalized histories, but also create new relationships with the communities public historians serve. Along these lines, community advisory boards are often called in to shape public history projects in ways that facilitate nuanced interpretations of history. Their involvement is also a way to extend ownership of public history projects to the very communities whose history is being presented. Taking this approach one step further, public historians would do well to recognize the ways in which diverse community members are already engaging in nonprofessional public history projects. Doing so in places like Newark, and other smaller, black-majority cities, adds to our knowledge of queer urban life as well as legitimizes the existing knowledge produced by ordinary individuals. Instead of accepting the status quo, wherein the intellectual life of queer black women is regularly devalued, public historians could be on the front lines of establishing collaborations that enable a truly intersectional approach to history. Black lesbians in Newark are already presenting their history in ways that engage the public, shift conversations about race, gender, and sexuality, and deepen the ways we understand our shared history. By expanding the definition of public history to include their contributions, public historians can light the path for others.

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*Kristyn Scorsone* is a doctoral student in American Studies at Rutgers University-Newark, where she is the volunteer manager for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. She is also the producer and host of the new Queer Newark Oral History Project podcast on iTunes and was part of the curatorial team for the traveling exhibit, "At Home in Newark: Stories from the Queer Newark Oral History Project." Prior to entering the doctoral program, she worked as an archival assistant

<sup>84</sup> Newark LGBTQ Community Center's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Newark-LGBTQ-Community-Center-122093567813793/>.

in the Puerto Rican Community Archives held at the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center in the Newark Public Library.

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