Abstract
In this paper, I develop a political theory of homemaking that attempts to make sense of how space, place, and identity shape black women’s political activism. I examine and retell the spatial stories black women activists shared with me in order to clarify how gender and racialization impact black women’s conceptions and practice of contemporary grassroots politics. I explore how memory and affect in shape black women’s political work by carefully considering how black women’s unique relationship to space and place inform how they define and deploy discourses of identity and community. I ask: What are the meanings that black women attribute to space and place? How do identity and affect impact the range of politics that black women pursue in urban landscapes? In response to these concerns, I construct a portrait of black female subjectivity using the perspectives of women who do political work in Newark’s Central Ward. In this article, I focus on the narratives of four out of 29 women I interviewed between 2005 and 2007. These women represent three generations of activists, ranging in age from 26 to 70. [African American women, urban politics, geography, community activism]

INTRODUCTION
For women like Frederica Bey and Fayemi Shakur, the Central Ward of Newark represents a home that is worth staying and fighting for. In spite of generations of de-industrialization, social upheaval, chronic African American underemployment, and the troublesome impact of gentrification, Newark represents a symbolic space that can be transformed. From the perspective of these women, Newark is more than just bricks and mortar and a conglomerate of depressing social indicators. Instead, Newark is a beloved intimate space to be reclaimed, re-worked, and re-imagined as a homeplace—a symbolic space that nurtures the life-chances of young black people. I develop a political theory of homemaking that attempts to make sense of how space, place, and identity shape black women’s political activism. I examine and retell the spatial stories that black women shared with me in order to clarify how gender and racialization impact black women’s conceptions and practice of contemporary grassroots politics.¹

Homemaking is a central mode of black women’s political resistance in Newark. It stretches beyond individual women’s work in households and the sphere of domesticity. Instead, homemaking involves creating homeplaces to affirm African American life, history, culture, and politics.² Homeplaces are political spaces that black women create to express care for each other and their communities, and to re-member, revise, and revive scripts of black political resistance.³
For women like Fayemi and Frederica, homemaking involves creating and preserving autonomous spaces for relationship building between black people that foster hope, leadership capacity, and a strong, stable, and positive sense of self-identity.

Homemaking is also a critical form of spatial praxis. It involves reconfiguring a hostile and deeply racialized landscape. Homemaking requires re-spatializing social capital, that is reconstructing and reconfiguring relationships of trust, positive reciprocity, cooperation, and care within and between black people and Newark’s political imaginary. It means finding ways to creatively confront and transform extant structures of domination including processes of racialization and heteropatriarchy that undergird contemporary urban neoliberalism. I identify three distinctive modes of political homemaking. They are: (1) creating a living history of resistance, (2) the politics of reclamation, and finally, (3) the politics of selling-in. The first mode of homemaking, creating a living history of resistance, entails making space in the community for folks to remember and re-envision earlier modes of black freedom struggle. These include contemporary cultural nationalist spaces and community coalitions that insist that white supremacy, antiblack racism, and late capitalism run amuck still have an over-determining negative impact on black people’s lives. Within these community spaces activists reinvigorate and politicize the importance of black love, black solidarity, and the development of autonomous black community leadership. The second mode of resistance encompasses the politics of reclamation. These politics involve telling the story of black political and cultural resistance in order to transform the use, symbolism, and cultural potential of abandoned and neglected public spaces. Black women revive and retell counter-narratives of black resistance in order to combat feelings of disconnectedness, alienation, and hopelessness in urban space. The final mode of political resistance is “selling-in.” This is comprised of dedicating one’s professional and community life to the uplift, revitalization, and transformation of the city. All three modes of resistance are based upon a deep-rooted attachment to African American’s marked history of struggle for racial and economic justice in Newark.

NEWARK: A BRIEF HISTORY
Located less than 12 miles west of Manhattan across the Hudson River, Newark barely escaped the economic collapse of the former economic urban powerhouses in the U.S. like Saint Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland. With this said, all Newarkers must contend with the social after effects produced by generations of differential racialization. Between 1950 and 1960, 250 manufacturers left Newark, crippling the hopes of generations of black people who migrated from southern states between 1915 and 1945. By 1970, more than 1300 businesses had either closed their doors or relocated out of Newark, dramatically increasing unemployment rates (Curvin 1975). While the concentration of blacks in Newark became the basis for enhanced political representation, the inner was consolidated as a ghetto. During the 1960s and 1970s, Newark suffered increasing unemployment, social tension produced by racist housing practices, blight, and other insidious forms of social, political, and economic violence (Curvin 1975, Woodard 1999, Mumford 2007, Tuttle 2009). Newark’s historical social landscape is also tainted by decades of law enforcement practices that target African American men and others who dare to perform black masculinity in streets and neighborhoods.

Today, Newark has a living history of chronic black male unemployment, the relegation of many women of color to low-wage, service sector jobs and/or public welfare. African Americans and Latinos remain at the very bottom of the racial hierarchies that structure the city’s economy, despite the emergence of a small but growing number of Black and Latino political elites. Combined with declining educational and employment opportunities, including those produced by the current “Great Recession,” these conditions continue to foster widespread poverty and social discontent among African Americans (Tuttle 2009; Mumford 2007; Woodard 1999, Cunningham 1988, Winters 1978, Parenti 1970, Hayden 1967). This materialist history, consciously or not, shapes the subjective experiences of most African Americans who have attachments to the city. However, this familiar metanarrative of black subjugation, disappointment, and injury is countered by the efforts of activist women to frame black humanity in Newark terms of possibility, resistance, and resilience. I argue that this is the bulk of much of their political work in Newark, and is a core element of political homemaking.

THEORY AND METHODS: A STRUGGLE AGAINST FORGETTING

Our struggle is also a struggle against forgetting: a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless
Black women activists in Newark transform their communities by reimagining and reconfiguring people’s relationships to the physical, symbolic, and relational spaces of the communities that they live in (Harvey 2001, Davies 1994). This kind of political agency can be understood as “resistance politics.” Black women’s resistance politics do not just function through efforts to spark collective action, but through the bodily sacrifices they make in order to create, nurture, and reproduce political space. Black women’s resistance is often articulated affectively through discourses of care, belonging, affect, and relationality rather than through logic, objectivity, and rationality. Affect is more than just individual feelings or emotionality. Following Seigworth and Gregg (2011), I argue that affect is the force that drives us toward movement, toward thought and extension. Homemaking, as an affective form of resistance, involves more than just being attentive to and providing care to individuals. It also requires building an enduring affective relationship to the physical environment. It is the imaginative political work that transforms the built environment of the city into a home: a place of belonging, a place of remembrance, and a place of resistance. Homemaking, then encompasses black women’s efforts to build the will to resist the alienating and dehumanizing practices and ideologies that continue to ghettoize and minoritize black people in Newark’s Central Ward. It involves making people—or bodies—care about space.

From a political perspective, homemaking goes beyond voting or deciding who gets what, when, and how, and at what cost. Instead, as Barbara Ransby wrote in her biography of Ella Baker’s social activism, “Politics are immediate and measured in flesh and blood realities. You have to love the people around you, and those struggling right next to you, as much as the anonymous and amorphous mass of humanity” (Ransby 2003). Similarly, Joan Tronto (1993) argues that social scientists should consider reformulating their basic assumptions about politics and human nature away from self-interest and toward notions of care. Care, Tronto explains, embraces the ideals of community engagement, acceptance of the burden of meeting an identified need, and demonstrating a sustained effort to “maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 1993, 103). From this perspective, homemaking is not rooted in a mere psychological attachment to the city of Newark or nostalgia, but an active and collective working toward physical, symbolic, and relational transformations.

Scholars, including Patricia Hill Collins (1991, 2006), Naples (1998), Mullings (1997), Townsend-Gilkes (1998), Springer (1999) and, more recently, works by Radford Hill (2000), Simien (2006), Orleck (2006), and Harris (2009) began the work of documenting the history of black women’s politics in the United States. They, in various ways, have shown that black women express their political agency through “community mothering.” Through community mothering, activists pursue politics that attend to structural inequalities and injustices that impact people of color’s lives. This scholarship documents black women’s historical role in mobilizing around issues like poverty, affordable housing, welfare reform, prison abolition, police brutality, and gender violence (Naples 1998, Williams 2004, Springer 2005, Orleck 2006, Gilmore 2007). I extend these studies by offering a portrait of contemporary black womanhood that is situated within Newark’s specific cartographic history. I explain how memory and affect shape black women’s political work by considering how their unique relationship to space and place inform how they define and deploy discourses of identity and community. The politics of homemaking is an attempt to sketch a response, not a definitive answer, to these questions: What are the meanings that black women attribute to space and place? How do identity and affect impact the range of politics that black women pursue in urban spaces? How do black women enact political resistance in contemporary urban spaces?

This article centers the narratives of four of 29 Newark-based black women activists interviewed between 2005 and 2007. These women were selected because the theme of homemaking was resonant in our conversations. Each woman carefully linked her politicization to highly personal events in her own life, and each suggested that the conscious decision to mark Newark as “home” was an intentional sacrifice motivated by a deep-seated desire to transform the city. The women featured in this article represent three generations, ranging in age from 26 to 70. Their stories were solicited through one-on-one talk sessions that took place in various locations including activists’ workplaces, community centers, my home, their homes, and/or local eateries. Limiting this analy-
sis to just four women enables a meaningful exploration of their experiences and motivations. This move should be received as a pointed attempt to offer a counter-narrative to the widely analyzed racist-sexist discourses of urban black women as lazy, hypersexual, baby-making “hoodrats,” “welfare queens,” or “nappy headed ho’s” who are more concerned with private consumption than contributing to the public good (see, for instance, Hancock 2004, Collins 2005, Sharpley-Whiting 2007, and Atwater 2009). Using what Beaubouef-Lafontant (2009) has described as a “voice-centered framework,” this project is centered on listening to what black women in Newark had to say about politics and their political lives. Oral narratives and political biographies are theorized as spatial stories to illuminate the distinctive ways that black women imagine politics that, I argue, are realized through a distinctive way of imagining social space.8 In the text, “Newark” emerges symbolically through embodied, collective histories gleaned from the recollections and dialogues between black women activists, including myself. I honor the trust that was developed over the years by featuring the activists’ agency in their own words, as much as possible. After all, it is their work in the city, and the personal sacrifices that they make in order to do their work, that makes this article both possible and relevant. In the next section, I discuss my own relationship to Newark and reveal how my personal background, predispositions, politics, and social endeavors frame the politics of homemaking.

THE REAR VIEW: NEWARK AT FIRST GLANCE

On my way home from class, I come to a stoplight after exiting 280-East. A slender young woman with permanently straightened hair gelled back into a tight ponytail approaches my car. Her black stretch pants and faded black t-shirt pull taut across her unusually large stomach. I roll the window down. ‘Can I have dollar?’ she asks, ‘I’m eight months pregnant and need to buy some food for me and my baby.’ I look into the young woman’s face and see all the telltale signs of drug addiction: the dark crusted lips, the ashen brown skin, the anxious, unapologetic desperation…I pull out all the change in my car door—probably a dollar, maybe a little bit more—and dump it into her can. I maneuver my six-year-old black Nissan through the McCarter Highway construction traffic. From the rear-view mirror, I see the young woman solicit the car behind me. I speed past the famed New Jersey Performing Arts Center dodging pedestrians, and turn into the parking lot of my downtown apartment building. I’m stunned, I’m pissed, and I’m speechless. What can I say? What is there to say?

—Excerpt from field-notes

As a part Mexican, brown-skinned, dreadlocked, African American identified female activist and researcher in Newark, admittedly, my experiences, field-notes, records, relationships, and social interactions with these women were assembled and analyzed to reproduce the milieu through which the politics of homemaking comes into focus. The brief interaction with the pregnant woman soliciting change on the highway exit is not coincidental and cannot be understood outside the macro-level processes that make the mundane interaction between us the subject of scholarly reflection. As racialized and gendered subjects, we are both products and agents of history and politics (Bourdieu 1980). Within a social space marked by intra-racial class inequality, the politics of homemaking urges me to imagine her as a sister and comrade in our mutual struggles for a better life for both of our unborn children. The experience of being solicited for money on the streets by young African American women of childbearing age became almost commonplace. This “everyday” experience underscores how privilege coincides with domination, and illuminates the complicity that all scholar-activists face when trying to speak with and on behalf of people who live in or are confined to communities racked with deprivation. This contradiction is resolved by making legible the ways that black women activists combat the conditions that produce the desperation, vulnerability, and distress that we both experienced in the city. The politics of homemaking requires naming psychological violence produced by the social distance that made her beg and me give with guilt and repressed rage. It also challenged me to consider and articulate a counter-narrative to this instance of geographic domination.

The fully conscious ethnographic encounter above says much more than the empty but all too necessary recitation of particular “facts” about Newark: 71% of the 56,000 residents of the Central Ward are African American; 41% of all residents in the ward live at or below the poverty level; the average per capita income of all adults is
just over $11,000; approximately 10.5% of all dwellings in the Central Ward are owner occupied or, conversely, 89.5% of this area’s residents are deprived of homeownership.9 In 2005, Newark ranked fifth in the nation for new cases of HIV/AIDS, and one out of 31 Newarkers (4,634) were known to be infected with HIV.10 This embodied account placed me—a three-month pregnant, 27 year old, unmarried black female from Long Beach, California—right smack in the middle of Newark’s social and political milieu. As a graduate student mother bringing home less than $12,000 a year, I could empathize with feeling compelled to request financial assistance in hostile places from potentially hostile people. However, the obstacles she faced were more ominous. Unlike myself, she was exposed to the harshest, most bodily forms of violence imaginable in Newark’s streets. Over time, it became obvious that what I could do for this woman and her child, and myself and my children, was produce an account of her community and its politics that invoked a sense of empathy and hope that we all could have a life worth living in Newark. In the next section, the analysis of homemaking continues with the story of Fayemi Shakur, a courageous, hardworking, and uniquely effective political homemaker in Newark.

FAYEMI SHAKUR: CREATING A LIVING HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

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

—Fayemi Shakur, office manager for community economic development corporation, freelance journalist, political prisoner activist, and single mother of two. [Excerpt taken from personal interview with author on April 20, 2006]

Fayemi’s words boldly refute the dismal caricature that emerges in dominant social science discourse and popular media accounts about Newark that focus squarely on Newark’s economic decay and fraught political landscape. Voted as one of the ten “worst cities to live” in AOL’s Wallet Pop poll in August of 2010, Newark has a long history of being portrayed negatively in mainstream media outlets.11 Fayemi however, encourages us to consider an alternative narrative.12 She experiences Newark as a deep source of inspiration and belonging. Newark’s history of black political resistance through grassroots organizing is central to her positive affect toward the city. Acquiring personal knowledge about this history, and the skills and confidence to share it with others, allows Fayemi to embrace the city as a desirable and beloved home.

Fayemi was raised in a suburban, middle-class New Jersey family. Ironically, she did not experience her relatively privileged childhood as a source of pride. Instead she willfully shunned many of the benefits that her upbringing could have afforded her. For Fayemi, her parents’ desire for a “middle class lifestyle” symbolized a conscious choice to turn away from Newark’s predominantly black cityscapes and toward what she considered an “ahistorical” existence. In her view, the suburban environment in which she was raised minimized the historical significance of black culture in Newark in exchange for a “better life.” She interpreted her parents’ decision to move away from Newark as a moving away from her extended family and childhood friends as well as a conscious turning away from contemporary black freedom struggle.

As a young mother, Fayemi’s decision to make Newark a physical home for herself and her two sons signified an important return to a “place that had a really rich cultural history.” For her, black culture itself was an attractive commodity that outweighed other quality of life issues that might have logically made suburban New Jersey a better place to raise her children. She explains,

My extended family is here [Newark]. My grandmother lived here. My sister is here. My cousins are here. A part of me felt like we were trying to be middle class, but we were really from another environment that we didn’t acknowledge any more, and tried to suppress. I really didn’t understand why.

As a college student, Fayemi strongly identified with Newark’s oppositional political history. Her initial interest in politics was sparked when she joined the Black Student Union during her second year at a local community college. This popular campus organization had recently taken on a more nationalistic identity, renaming itself “The Black Freedom Society.” As a member, Fayemi was exposed to nationalistic and Pan-Africanist readings of African American history. She attended community meetings, Kwanzaa ceremonies, and participated in study groups where she,
“met a lot of elders. They shared information with me that I had never really been exposed to before, but I felt like I knew it. And once I heard it I wanted to learn more.”

From this point on, Fayemi became an active member of several local organizations including the People’s Organization for Progress, the New Black Panther Party, and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement—all of which she felt had a “positive impact” in the city. She went on to spearhead the New Jersey chapter of the “Hands Off Assata” Campaign—a national coalition that aggressively linked contemporary injustice against people of color to state-sponsored efforts to criminalize radical activists like Assata Shakur who participated in local movements for self-determination and racial justice in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Fayemi, like several other women interviewed in this study, made reference to the Newark “rebellion” (not riots) of 1967, and the subsequent community mobilizations of Newark’s minority voters. Although the riots took place years before she was born, she insisted,

You can’t really understand Newark, if you don’t understand how this city was burnt to the ground. You can’t understand Newark, if you don’t understand how black folks organized to take power back in the city, and how they had to fight for their own independence and self-determination. We had to fight. We had to rebuild from the ashes, from the bottom up. And we still haven’t finished. We still have a lot of work to do.

When the streets cooled, resistance materialized as a blend of cultural and political nationalism that was geared toward seizing electoral power using Newark’s increasing number of African American and Puerto Rican voters. This history of political organizing inspired a personal commitment to participate in and make struggle for racial justice in Newark today.

At the onset of the new millennium, in spite and having lost one of her children’s fathers to gang violence, Fayemi played a central role in three local youth mobilizing efforts in Newark: the Million Woman March (1997), the Million Youth March (1998) and the National Hip Hop Political Convention (2004). As an organizer, Fayemi made sure that young black bodies from local community colleges and public high schools had the opportunity to participate in black freedom struggle. For Fayemi, mobilizing black people to participate in demonstrations and marches was a way for her to personally revive black radicalism in Newark. Her willingness to publicly articulate a message that reflected the socio-political needs of what she sarcastically called the “undesirables” of Newark in national venues provided a special meaning to her political work. Taking an active role in the living history of political resistance in Newark far outweighed other quality of life issues that could have made suburban New Jersey a “better place” to raise her two young sons, each of whom were enrolled in Newark’s troubled public school system. She explains,

When I found out who I was, by learning about my history from the elders in my community, I was able to see that my life could have purpose. I could do more than just work for myself. Instead, I could work to leave a legacy that my kids and other young people could appreciate. That’s what my political works provides. An example. It provides an example that you can be more and do more, and not be satisfied with the status quo.

Fayemi’s work with predominantly black grassroots organizations that openly challenged contemporary white supremacy, police brutality, and poverty was testimony to the fact that there were people in Newark who were working toward something better than the status quo. Through her work, Fayemi aggressively debunked the idea that you black people in Newark are apathetic and did not want anything better. She explained,

People blame those who suffer, but how can you blame a whole generation for their suffering? Who can you blame when an entire generation fails? Look at how young people are being raised. They don’t really have that many [positive] examples. But for me, when I come around, they are going to see an example of someone struggling to make a difference. They’re going to hear about an opportunity for them to do something better, to be something better. That’s why I organize. I organize because Newark is our home, and it’s up to us to make it better.

“Better” was more than green manicured lawns, shiny new two-story homes and strip malls. For Fayemi, better doing justice, being justice. Doing freedom, and being freedom. Organizing a national campaign for the amnesty for the exiled
Black Panther Assata Shakur was one way that she could be more than just another single “baby momma,” but also be a community homemaker. Fayemi’s sense of personhood was tied to her ability to transform the imaginary space of Newark into a symbolic place of black resistance in contemporary times. This was achieved by mobilizing black bodies to demand racial justice, pursuing a life work of struggle by aligning her personal career goals with the revival of an earlier generation of Newark radicalism, and creating opportunities for critical education for young people like herself. Fayemi’s political work, ironically enough, involved embodying black struggle by taking responsibility for the failures of earlier generations who now, according to her, often blame young people for their economic and social hardship.

THE POLITICS OF RECLAMATION: AMINA BARAKA AND FREDERICA BEY

Claiming blackness in Newark entails the loving cultivation of spaces of nostalgia, belonging, and reclamation. Sixty-two-year old poet, singer, and activist Amina Baraka, who was born and raised in Newark, was quick to remind me that black artistic expression in the form of jazz, R&B, and blues found a home in Newark’s numerous nightclubs and bars. This, combined with the heavy inflow of southern African American culture, made Newark a home away from the imaginary home of “down south.” Amina’s mother and grandfather were two of the first African American union organizers in Newark during the 1940s. As a child, Amina’s three-bedroom flat became a homeplace for the neighborhood because of her grandmother’s willingness to mother other people’s children. She wanted to make certain that her grandmother’s legacy of community mothering was channeled into her own political work. She reminisced,

She made clothes for the community. She made clothes, chair covers, darlies. She was a kind person, my grandmother. People in the community called her “ma” because she was always cooking, she would take kids off the street and tell them they need to come and take a bath. She would give them a bath and wash their hair. [Excerpt from personal interview with author on February 7, 2006]

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

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

Amina’s remembrances invoked more than the individualized nostalgia of childhood, they also served as social commentary on the importance of artistic production for her understanding of family and community. These gatherings showcased the deep respect and admiration that community members had for her family as activists and artists who were deeply committed to providing venues for Newark’s black social life—a life molded by her family’s attachment to southern African American cultural mores. Newark was the closest thing to the “Carolina” that her grandmother reminisced about. A life long resident of Newark, Amina considered herself a self-educated and a self-acclaimed “cultural worker.” As the daughter and granddaughter of union organizers, she continued her family tradition of mobilizing the black working class. Throughout adulthood Amina weaved her family history of labor organizing into her own cultural work. As the partner of an early founder of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, she continued to forge bonds between her biological family and the larger “black working-class.” Newark was the place where her political work was rooted, as it was essential to the preservation and maintenance of familial cultural and political bonds.

In 2004, Amina’s daughter, Shani, and her partner, were murdered by a black man. Shani, a Newark high school girls’ basketball coach who was out as a lesbian, was shot to death while helping her sister leave her abusive husband. Even as tragedy “struck the core of her existence,” Amina did not retreat to grief and despair, instead she extended her personal heartbreak outward toward the transformation of poor people of communities. Less than a year after her, Amina co-founded the Newark chapter of PFLAG (Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays) as a way to connect with other black working-class women and men.
of Lesbian and Gays). Politicizing and taking a stand against the intersecting effects of gender violence and homophobia in the black community became a new focus for her local organizing, communal storytelling, and artwork. Perhaps not so ironically, even after surviving the untimely death of her child to violence, Amina viewed Newark as “a place to be cherished, not condemned.” After a long pause, she explained,

I didn’t choose it [Newark], my parents did. As an adult, I chose to stay because I like Newark. To this day, if I’m gone two weeks, I’m coming back home. I don’t stay away too long. It’s a part of me.

Over her lifetime Amina’s political work included cofounding the African Free School, the Black Women’s United Front, Community For a United Newark and other progressive community coalitions. Today, the most important component of all of her political work was “telling the story” of black cultural and political resistance. At age sixty-eight, Amina continues to speak out, playing the revered role of neighborhood griot. She makes political space by telling stories about Newark’s black cultural history through poetry and spoken-word, volunteering in after-school programs in her neighborhood, and participating in community meetings. She helps young people imagine and reclaim Newark as a sacred space that gave birth to musical legends like Sarah Vaughn and Gloria Gaynor. For Amina, the old bars that are now viewed as isolated, potentially dangerous eyesores are abandoned repositories of black cultural productivity. She helps young people who are otherwise ignorant of Newark’s history see its neighborhoods as sites of creative possibility and resistance.

Born in Newark in October 1944, Frederica Bey was raised by her mother and stepfather, a Chinese laundry owner. After marrying at age 23, separating at age 31, and delivering two healthy children, Frederica removed herself from her five-year stay on Essex County’s welfare roll, and her family from a Section 8 housing unit by earning a real-estate license and starting her own business. In 1974, after divorcing, and enrolling at Kean College to work toward her bachelor’s degree, Frederica decided to take out a loan to purchase a devalued piece of property, renovate it, and move her family into it. Frederica confesses,

I took a part of my loan and put it on a house because I couldn’t have my children graduating from the projects, and stepping over drugs in their little prom gowns going downstairs. I had to get out of that place. It had become a real slum.

When I was at Kean, I applied for all of the grants and loans and put a down payment on a $23,000 house. I bid on it. It was boarded up [at the time] and I got the bid. That house is now valued at $300,000. [Excerpt taken from personal interview with author on March 14, 2006].

Frederica never finished her undergraduate degree, but in 1965 joined the Nation of Islam and began an extensive career in community organizing in Newark through the seventies and eighties. In early 1995 she was asked to chair the fundraising effort for the Million Man March called by Louis Farrakhan, and eventually incorporated this fundraising arm into an independent non-profit organization called “Wisomm” (Women in Support of the Million Man March). In 1995 Wisomm, under Frederica’s leadership, purchased a dilapidated mansion in the Central Ward, renovated the building, and used it to host a variety of community programs including: African dance, an African ball, after-school care, health and wellness education classes, and a variety of town hall meetings. In October 2004, Wisomm purchased the Second Presbyterian Church a 65,000 sq. ft. facility consisting of three buildings, which currently houses the African American Education, Cultural and Resource Center. All three facilities host ongoing community events and programs. Some of the programs now sponsored by Wisomm include the Boycott Crime Campaign, and the “American Prisons...Second Coming of Slavery”—a series of open forums and town hall meetings held to raise awareness about racially motivated human rights violations in U.S. prisons.

Education was one of the most frequently mentioned social issues linking contemporary social ills to Newark’s extended history of racial domination. Although poorly administered public schools were frequently acknowledged to be one of the most pressing problems facing African Americans, education through formal means as not viewed as the panacea. More pressing was the fact that many children lacked a basic understanding of Newark’s political history of racial injustice. The inability of students and teachers alike to connect overcrowded, poorly funded, dangerous, and crumbling schools with Newark’s history of systematically ghettoizing African Americans was
seen as a roadblock to student success. Frederica Bey insists,

We must educate our own children. This country banned us from reading, banned us from a legal education. So we have to educate our own people and our own selves. And from that education will come the economics we need and the self-sufficiency we need. Black folks doing for black folks—that’s how it’s going to look when it happens. Creating the first African American cultural center in the history of this state...this is how you begin to make it happen.

Frederica’s lifetime goal was realized with the founding of the Adelaide L. Stanford Charter School, an independent, African American majority school designed to enhance the education of Newark’s youth. By incorporating the principles of Kwanzaa, and enhancing the standard New Jersey K-12 curriculum with a rich and varied assortment of black diasporic histories and African-centered pedagogies, Frederica made good on her promise to,

Have our children enjoy the best education that we can possibly give them, and have all the self esteem that they need to excel, and do whatever it is they want to do. Yes, we are teaching our children African values and a strong sense of self, of who they are, and who and where they are in relation to this society. And, yes, it’s highly political.

Frederica’s political work in the Central Ward should be understood as an oppositional feminist spatial praxis and not simply nationalist rhetoric. Frederica’s political work spiraled out from wanting to provide a home for her biological children to reimagining to ultimately transforming the Central Ward into a communal home for people of African descent. Her raw materials were her formidable organizing skills, her ability to excavate and promote a living history of resistance to racial domination in the city, and to create sustainable spaces of cultural resistance.

Frederica’s and Amina’s political homemaking established new geographic relationships between the past and present, and, created new spatial possibilities in a blighted geographic area. While much of Amina’s work was reviving lost histories and transforming hardship and loss into a will to live gracefully within Newark’s space, Frederica’s work was about physically building spaces of solidarity, knowledge, and consciousness for the uplift and prosperity of new generations of Newarkers. Both women had life long ties to the city and stand steadfast with the city through its many transitions.

THE POLITICS OF SELLING IN: JENNIFER WELLS
Not all of the women identified as “very political” in the Central Wardresided within Newark’s geopolitical boundaries. Jennifer Wells, a 42-year-old environmental activist was born in raised in Newark, graduated from a local high school, and from Rutgers University’s Newark Campus. Two years prior to our interview, Jennifer moved to the bordering town of Irvington. Her decision to move her children outside of Newark illuminates how much is at stake for people who live in the Central Ward. Her desire to provide a safe, functional public education for her children outweighed her desire to stay close to the place where she did most of her work around environmental racism. Jennifer visibly grappled with her fairly recent decision to “move away” from her family. With an expression of poorly disguised guilt she justified her decision,

I moved here [to Irvington] two years ago. The reason I stayed in Newark so long was not only because of my political activism, but also because it was a safe place. I was a widow at twenty-nine. My husband had cancer. I just had to get away.

When I was out of high school, instead of uprooting myself and moving out, I lived in the community where my family was. I realized a lot of my friends who went to college decided, “I’m not coming back to Newark.” That was not me. I put a lot of energy into this city. And it was good for me. But it is not a place where I can raise a family now, and have my children be successful.

The educational system is very, very bad. You have more kids who drop out than [who] are in school. Instead of creating the future leaders and making education a priority, they’re [school administrators and public officials] allowing our children to be functional illiterates, and putting them in the streets to survive...knowing they won’t survive. So it is not a place that I think my kids can make it. Definitely not. [Excerpt from personal interview with author on August 23, 2005]
What makes Jennifer’s commentary so poignant is that she previously served two terms on the Newark Board of Education, and served as campaign manager for the first African American woman ever elected to serve on Newark’s City Council, Mildred Crump. Remarkably, Jennifer was one of the first local activists who organized against HIV/AIDS in Newark in the early 1990s. She recounted,

Two of my brothers and my sister died of AIDS. One [brother] got it heterosexually. My older brother was gay, and he caught it from one of his friends. My sister was on drugs. That had a tremendous impact on me, and I had to support my mother. And that just led to the activism, and trying to educate the community about…you know…there are just so many ills in our society. AIDS just ran through our community. At that particular time they just wanted us to die. Folks didn’t want to talk about AIDS and how it was destroying our community.

She transformed her family’s tragic encounter with the disease into a strong motivation to do political work around HIV/AIDS in Newark’s inner city. After the loss of her school board seat, and the untimely death of her husband, Jennifer accepted a position as executive director of a Montclair, NJ based environmental justice organization. Now, her political work links the prevalence of cancer and cancer-related deaths in Newark to the proliferation of air and water pollutants in the inner city, the excessive use of pesticides in urban grocery stores, and other taken for granted, yet dangerous materials contained in discounted household cleaning products heavily marketed in poor urban communities. Her political work took new forms as she became exposed to new information, and new ways to expose and critique severe imbalances of power, health, and opportunity that produced Newark’s uneven geographic development. She proudly embraced her reputation as a fighter. She declared,

It’s my responsibility to engage the African American community. There’s a disconnect among African Americans. We tend to think the environment is going to last forever. If we don’t become better stakeholders, and better providers of this earth we won’t have a planet — and we black people [will] be the first one’s to go. I have the credibility of being a fighter. I collaborate with organizations, churches, and elected officials to get them to see the importance of the environment. When I come to the door and I’m talking about environmental issues, they listen.

In addition to her environmental work, Jennifer also served as head of the local chapter of the National Black Women’s Congress, an organization that actively recruits and trains African American women to be community leaders in both electoral and non-electoral politics. Jennifer’s extensive portfolio of community organizing is awe inspiring, considering that within four years of our first interview she had lost both her mother and husband to cancer and a niece she parented to street violence in Newark. Still she insisted,

The strength of Newark is that regardless of the lack of support that we are getting, there is a group of us who is standing up, who, no matter what, we are bucking that system. We are standing up and speaking out.

Jennifer’s story teaches us that black women’s political work in Newark takes multiple forms in different stages of life. Jennifer spent her formative years as an activist living and working in Newark. After years of withstanding multiple instances of family tragedy, Jennifer chose to move her physical home out of Newark’s inner city to the neighboring town of Irvington to give herself and her children reprieve from everyday struggles that might have very well resulted in more hardship. However, from nine to five, Jennifer put her heart, skills, knowledge and know-how into educating people and mobilizing resources to combat different forms geographic racism in Newark. In the end, Jennifer created a niche that enabled her to give back, make a living, and make a difference. Her effort to politicize connections between issues like public health, poverty, education, and the environment were echoed by many of the women I interviewed. The interconnectedness of these social issues, and the complicity of local black politicians in exacerbating these issues were emphasized.

Although Newark’s city council has been dominated by African American males for over 40 years, it was not viewed as an institution that recruited or otherwise nurtured black people’s community leadership. In most of the conversations
I had with black women, “City Hall” emerged as an oppressive institution that frequently shirked its responsibility of addressing the complexity of racialized poverty in Newark. According to many of the activists I spoke with, elected officials often settled for easy, oversimplified policy solutions that left intersecting structures of domination in tact and fully operative. Many women suggested that the city’s heteropatriarchal governance structure was “non-democratic,” “hostile,” “despotic” and even more shocking, “a contemporary vestige of slavery.”

In spite of this, Jennifer sold-in to Newark by transforming the neo-slave narrative of escape from urban poverty, despair, heartbreak, and powerlessness into the story of staying home to create spaces to redefine politics as commitment, care, sacrifice, and a hard-won resolve to do and be something better.

**RECONSTRUCTING HOMEMAKING THROUGH SPATIAL STORIES**

“Acts of expressing and saying place are central to understanding what kinds of geographies are available to black women.”


“And it is here that I think African American culture is instructive as a way of rethinking, of reshaping our thinking processes, our understandings of history and politics themselves”


The spatial stories that black political women told reveal that Newark was a “home” that was worth the individual sacrifices of extraordinary stores of time, energy, and resources. The painful history of racial discrimination and violence was not as important as reviving and creating myriad forms of resistance. This is the essence of the politics of homemaking in Newark. Whether through selling in, reclaiming space and forgotten histories, or through creating a living history of resistance, black women’s politics involved making room to build healthy and productive relationships to the city. Their political work was imaginative, as it involved spatially reworking symbolic representations of the inner city and making oppositional discourses readily available to the city’s inhabitants.

Political homemaking serves as a pointed reality check to politicians who try to publicly dwell on Newark’s strengths while programmatically ignoring the city’s inability to provide some of the basic amenities of a “free” society (a decent education and opportunities for social and economic advancement). Through homemaking, black women activists created political spaces to tell and to actualize counter-narratives to the harsh material realities of the city. Their counter-narratives linked time, space, and place toward the conscious aim of fostering what bell hooks has aptly called radical black subjectivity—an identity, standpoint, that enables creative, expansive self-actualization (hooks 1990). Their political agency transformed Newark’s urban landscape into a geography of resistance.

With this said, the complexity of these women’s lives is inspiring and deeply disturbing. Their stories were inspiring in the sense that they provided living, breathing, real-time examples of women who had come from humble backgrounds and managed to create fulfilling lives for themselves doing the political work they loved. However, they were disquieting in the sense that stories provided such an intensely personal portrayal of the dire and often deadly social and economic circumstances that constitute so much of Newark’s geography. Case in point: after I conducted a gender violence awareness workshop at a local community college organized by one of the women I interviewed, a tenth-grade girl from the workshop came up and told me that in the past two years at Central High School, about ten of her friends or “friends of friends” had been killed in street and/or gang-related violence. This chilling account makes eerily real the “fatalities of power” theorized by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, over a decade earlier, and underscores the gravity of the political work that activists in Newark engage in daily. The “hierarchies of difference” that Gilmore argues render black life ungeographic operate through premature death, imprisonment, addiction, and, most importantly, by forgetting a legacy of black political resistance.

The politics of homemaking is a politics of not forgetting, of not looking away, and, most importantly, creating new spaces to affirm black life, black struggle, and black survival. Even as the contours and boundaries of identity, place, and community shift and are contested with increasing numbers of non-blacks living in the Central Ward, these women still seek to build a homeplace for, in Amina’s word’s, “my grandchild, or my neighbor’s
child, or my cousin’s child, or that child standing over there on that corner.”

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NOTES
1. Spatial stories refer to stories that black women tell about Newark that emphasize the dynamic and shifting elements of Newark’s physical, symbolic, and relational space. It illuminates how activist women’s stories repudiate a stable, bounded, and strictly physical understanding of Newark’s geography. For example, many black women’s understanding of “Newark” is based upon their experiences organizing and living in the city’s predominantly African American and Latino Central Ward.

2. The term homeplace, as I am using it was coined by bell hooks (1990, 42). She writes, “Historically Black women have resisted white supremacist domination by working to establish a homeplace.” Homeplaces are sites of resistance to white supremacist, capitalists patriarchy.

3. Political spaces are complex social spaces in which black women must engage and negotiate in order to do their political work of resisting the overlapping effects of race, gender, and class domination. The concept of political space also helps to describe the spatial-temporal configurations of power and become apparent and legible with black women’s efforts to transform their neighborhoods and communities.

4. Laura Pulido (2006) defines differential racialization as the process through which particular sets of racial meanings are attached to different racial/ethnic groups that affect and are a function of class position and racial standing.

5. Three of the women featured in this paper have agreed to go on record in order to have their lives and contributions to Newark politics and culture documented. The identity of “Jennifer Wells” remains anonymous.

6. While these categories are certainly not mutually exclusive, they did help to ensure that I was able to reach out to a broad pool of potential black female subjects who did “political work” in Newark. It also enabled me to get a sense of how vernacular meanings of the word “political” operated in the Central Ward. For example, one informant was a staffer and campaign manager for a local elected official, another was a well-known African American LGBTQ activist, while yet another was executive director of a black nationalist organization that consistently offers quality community programming in Newark. Each informant was knowledgeable about the city’s history, including the various spheres of influence that regulated the contemporary political landscape.

7. Most interviews took between two and a half to four hours to complete, and all took place in a single session.

8. Michel de Certeau (1984) argues that spatial stories transform places into spaces. He writes, “space exists when one takes into consideration directional velocity and time. Space occurs as the effect produces by the operations that orient it, situate it, and temporalize it, and allows space to function.”


12. National media attention on Newark is typically confined to reports on high unemployment, persistent poverty, and the dramas associated with winning or losing the coveted office of mayor. White flight, the over-representation of racial-ethnic minorities among the poor, high, urban riots, and the widely publicized high rates of auto theft and violent crime in national media throughout the 1980s and 1990s contributes to the routine depiction of Newark as a dangerous, “blackened” space (Collins 2005; Jackson 2005; Wilson 2009). Schol-
ars who “study” places like Newark typically focus their investigations on failing inner city schools, unemployed black men, or political “saviors” like Cory Booker who manage to accumulate massive stores of political power but fail to deliver electoral promises due to “structural forces” that inhibit the realization of “visionary” political leadership. See for instance the film Street Fight (2004) directed and produced my Marshall Curry, and the five-part documentary series “Brick City” (2009) produced by Mark Benjamin and Marc Lewin.


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