Can't I be seen? Can't I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark

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Can’t I be seen? Can’t I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark

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What does it mean for a black female to negotiate urban space? How is her body read, her politics enacted, and her agency understood and interpreted? How do black women use their bodies and identities to challenge structural intersectionality in US cities? To answer these questions, I explore how black women embraced a set of oppositional spatial practices to resist the intersectional effects of misogyny, homo/transphobia, racism, and poverty in Newark, New Jersey. I reconstruct the creation of the Newark Pride Alliance, a local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer coalition that mobilized in 2003 and 2004, after the death of Sakia Gunn. Exploring migrations between ‘black women,’ ‘black queer’ and ‘black feminist,’ I examine how black women respatialized social capital and enacted resistance. Through semi-structured interviews and frame analysis, I explore how black women forged new relationships between queer youth and black vernacular institutions, and created political spaces in which honest engagement of issues of gender violence, poverty, and power could take place.

Keywords: black women; urban geography; social movements; queer politics; black feminism

Prologue

On 11 May 2003, a 29-year-old African-American man named Richard McCullough stabbed an African-American female named Sakia Gunn in the chest. At age 15, she was already out. Her preference for baggy jeans, double XL white t-shirts, and a closely cropped afro stood in stark contrast to the conservative aesthetics of Newark’s black middle-class leadership. In fact, the ‘ag’ (aggressive) presentation of her sexual identity marked her as a product of Newark’s inner city gang culture. Sakia defied the sexual and gender norms of Newark’s predominantly black community. The outward appearance of bravado, however, did not diminish Sakia and her three girlfriends’ vulnerability as they traveled home from Greenwich Village after a night of partying. Shortly after 3:00 am, the unmanned ‘24-hour’ police kiosk located at the corner of Broad Street and Market Avenue left the four teenagers unprotected. They were accosted by two adult men in a passing car as they walked from Newark Penn Station to the Broad Street bus stop. The girls’ flat out rejection of the drunken advances of the men resulted in a brawl. In the midst of the conflict, Richard McCullough pulled a knife and stabbed Sakia in the chest. She bled to death on the way to the hospital.

How do queer black women politically navigate urban spaces? How are their bodies read, their politics enacted, and their agency understood and interpreted? How do queer...

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black women use their bodies and identities to challenge structural intersectionality in American cities? The community mobilizations that took place in Newark after Sakia’s death provide a rare opportunity to sketch a few answers to these questions. After her death, queer black women destabilized conventional notions of blackness and politics and incited new forms of political resistance in Newark’s Central Ward. By linking the politics of respectability to homophobic violence and building unlikely coalitions within and between local and national organizations, queer women challenged bigotry in local black vernacular institutions. They made it possible for queer black people to be seen and heard as political actors in Newark.

In this article, I explore how black women embraced a set of oppositional spatial practices to resist the intersectional effects of misogyny, homo/transphobia, racism, and poverty. Exploring migrations between ‘black women,’ ‘black queer’ and ‘black feminist,’ I examine how black women respatialized social capital and enacted resistance. I describe how black women remapped public spaces by forging new relationships between queer youth and black vernacular institutions, and made political space for honest engagements with race, gender, poverty, and power to take place. This process involved dissolving rigid scalar structures produced by narrow single-issue identity politicking in order to create much needed spaces for black queer youth to articulate their needs and make demands on local and national political structures that had theretofore denied their very existence. In too many ways, Sakia’s death was the ‘perfect murder.’ It brought to light many of the subtle ways in which civil society punishes gender dissidence in the African-American community.

In her classic essay, ‘The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity,’ Young (1990) argued that ideologies of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism construct certain bodies as abject and undesirable. Sakia Gunn’s subjectivity was communally valued only after her physical body was slain and queer black women rallied to make sense of and respond to her death. Sakia’s death exposed the limits of single identity politics that either ignore or marginalize queer blackness and underscores the potentially severe social consequences of occupying both subject positions at the same time. As anti-violence activists, gay rights activists, and conventional civil rights organizations tried to figure out what really happened, narrative and interpretative battles ensued. This article examines how ideology was framed, manipulated, and subverted through spatial agency to challenge race, gender, sexual, and class subjugation in Newark, NJ, USA.

Stories about street life: where black feminism meets political geography

Black feminist geographers argue that social and political domination produces uneven geographies that alienate black people, often rendering them invisible, or worse, vulnerable to premature death (McKittrick 2006; Gilmore 2002). Through the production and reproduction of intersecting hierarchies of difference, black feminist geographers insist that the lived experience of blackness is physically and symbolically tied to space and place (McKittrick and Woods 2007; McKittrick 2006). However, few studies of urban politics or ‘black’ politics examine how multiple social identities intersect with blackness, nor how this impacts the meaning and practice of politics (see, for instance, Cazenave 2011; Judd and Kantor 2008). This omission makes it difficult to ascertain the political agency of women of color in cities — who organize from multiple and intersecting social locations. As a result, much of what social scientists know about black women is divorced from the physical and social geographies that shape their political subjectivities. However,
black women are active participants in emancipatory practices that are rooted in particular locales. As Soja (1996, 87) argues,

those who are territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilize to resist, drawing upon their putative position, their assigned ‘otherness’ to struggle against this power-filled imposition.

The queer women featured in this article emphatically chose the latter. I examine how queer black women enacted political agency through storytelling and metaphor, as well as materially through spatial practices that reshaped and redefined power relationships in Newark. By bringing the concerns of the most vulnerable, most despised, and much maligned to the forefront of contemporary urban politics, black women enacted resistance. By fighting for places for queer people to tell and make meaning out of their life stories and making political space for non-normative queer subjectivities to be articulated, heard, and acted upon, black queer women, using an intersectional praxis, remapped the symbolic landscapes of the city.

In this article, black women’s resistance politics are revealed through spatial stories. Spatial stories, it has been argued, transform spaces into places by mapping meaning onto histories, norms, values, and practices that occur in everyday urban spaces (DeCerteau 1984). I retell the stories that activists shared with me about their efforts to stand against the recalcitrance of Newark’s political establishment. In a very basic way, these gender nonconforming women claimed a right to the city – a right to belong in Newark’s history and a right to inhabit and transform black political space. Central to my retelling of their politics are the multiple contestations around space, place, and identity – especially their efforts to appropriate emancipatory enclaves within Newark’s hostile political geographies. The spaces activists claimed for social justice work became liberatory places that young people used to forge new relationships with each other and collectively map alternative oppositional histories onto city streets, community centers, and neighborhoods.

Prior to Sakia’s death, queer people were mostly written out of dominant histories of black struggle and resistance and generally excluded from the city’s larger political imaginary. Black women activists in Newark Pride Alliance (NPA) rescued Sakia’s story from liberal political organizations who effigied her life in order to legitimate the political projects of national and predominantly white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations. Ironically, both national lesbian and gay activists local grassroots anti-violence politicized her death by forgetting the complex aspects of her life that resulted in her death. However, through NPA’s activism, and the personal stories and experiences that prompted it, black women made it possible for Sakia and other queer teenagers, to be recognized as worthy and socially meaningful members of Newark’s black community. As a result, black women reterritorialized black politics in Newark. As Delaney (2005, 17) explains, ‘territoriality is implicated in the creation, circulation, and interpretation of meaning.’ Black queer women made it impossible to ignore the presence, impact, and social meaning of gender non-conforming black people in the city. They demonstrated how they had to withstand the spatialization of power – that it is gendered racialization, heterosexualization, and neoliberalization – in Newark’s urban spaces (Oswin 2008; Brown, Knopp, and Morrill 2005; Peake 1993). Black women actualized a new politics of visibility and belonging and thereby instigated a more inclusive politics of blackness in the city.

McKittrick (2006) argued that ‘acts of saying and expressing place are central to understanding what kinds of geographies are available to black women (xxiii).’ Extending
this perspective, I use spatial stories to reveal the ways that black women experience, make meaning of, and resist geographic domination produced by the spatialization of power in Newark. The stories that queer black women tell about their politics in Newark are imbued with anecdotes that vividly describe how social trauma, alienation, and displacement structure their subjective relationships to the city. These horror stories – as Carole Boyce Davies (1994) once called them – are not meant to shock, outrage, depress, or disappoint. Rather, they are intended to illuminate how black women transform heartbreak into resistance – providing meaning and affect to those whose lives, dreams, and innocences may have ended prematurely. Their retellings of Sakia Gunn’s story, I argue, are intended to 

elucidate and make possible affective, place-based strategies of political, social and, as a corollary, geographic resistance (Isoke 2011). This process consisted of creating spaces to build resistance to the heteropatriarchal black status quo so that Newark might move toward social transformation. By transforming the symbolic function of local community centers, creating afterschool programs, organizing a sustained grassroots mobilization campaign, and insisting on keeping the complexity of Sakia’s life and death in the hearts and minds of Newarkers, queer black women enacted new ways of being political while challenging the intersecting effects of sex, race, gender, and economic subjugation on the lives of all young black people.

Methodology
Between 2005 and 2008, I interviewed 29 ‘black’ and/or ‘African-American’ self-identified women between 18 and 70 years of age who were identified as being ‘very political’ in the Central Ward of Newark, NJ. The women were selected through a process of community nomination, which began with consultation with four political insiders who represented four distinctive spheres of politics: electoral politics, cultural politics, single-issue politics, and identity centered-politics. The interviews were loosely structured and occurred in various locations including the homes and offices of activists, community centers, coffee shops, and local eateries. Our conversations lasted from 2 to 3 h. During interviews, women were asked, ‘What was the most significant mobilization that occurred in Newark in the past ten years?’ Each of the women featured in this article mentioned the mobilizations and memorials that occurred in the aftermath of Sakia’s death as the most significant mobilization.

Throughout this article, I triangulate (1) personal narratives of queer black women who have dedicated a good part of their lives organizing against homophobia in Newark, (2) the public statements made by local activists who galvanized community support to protest Sakia’s untimely death, and (3) the perspectives of black and queer feminist theorists who have taken extraordinary pains to situate sexuality as a core element of intersectional analysis and praxis. I move back and forth between these three spheres of evidence and argumentation to create an unflinching account of how heteropatriarchy saturates black political culture while showcasing the role of space, place, and scale in black women’s political activism.

Defining queer in a black feminist context
In homonormative queer studies, ‘queer’ has mostly been theorized from the experiences of white lesbian and gay-identified subjects whose spatial agency has centered on questions of same sex desire and white LGBT territorializing in highly gentrified or gentrifying urban spaces (Brown, Knopp, and Morrill 2005; Tucker 2009; Handhart 2008).
The theorizing of ‘queer space’ was accomplished in efforts to study the history of gay street patrols, parades, solidarity marches, public displays of same sex desire, and the mixed effort of gay- and lesbian-identified people to run for public office. These formulations of queer geography have been critiqued for reifying binaries between male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, and gay/lesbian with the consequences of reproducing binary gender identity categories while conflating queerness with sexuality (Oswin 2008; Halberstam 2005; Browne 2006). In recent years, scholar have further argued that the identity categories of “lesbian,” “gay” and even “queer” have functioned as normalizing registers that can marginalize different kind of gender non-conforming subjects (Valentine 2007; Brown 2006; Kunzel 2008; Wright 2010). As a response to these critiques, queer geographers have sought to decouple and differentiate between geographies of sexuality and queer geographies in order to move beyond questions of gender and sexual transgression in order to, as Browne (2006, 888) says, ‘challenge us to think beyond and through processes of normalization’. This new approach entails examining the remaking and rearticulation of social boundaries that mark people, and mapping and remapping places and spaces as ‘queer’ (Browne 2006; Oswin 2008). Although the role of race and class has been examined in this literature, these discussions have hinged upon the racializing practices of majority white lesbian and gay activists within predominantly white activist spaces. Within this framework, prolonged discussions about ‘people of color’ have coincided with questions of criminality and governmentality, inadvertently reproducing stereotypes about urban black people as inherently violent and homophobic (Handhart 2008). Until now, there have been few investigations into how gender non-conformity and other resistances to heteropatriarchy have been understood and practiced by black political subjects, especially queer black women.

In homonormative queer studies, the most frequently analyzed tropes of black queerness are the male ‘homooth,’ ‘black drag queen,’ and the transient black male gay intellectual (see, for instance, Walcott 2007; Ferguson 2004; Johnson 2003). Less understood and analyzed are representations of black female queerness that build from the experience of black lesbians, ‘aggressives,’ and transwomen who are active and engaged members of black civil society: those whose voices, politics, activisms, and theoretical interventions are simply ignored.5 Queerness in the context of black feminism must be thought of as more than rejecting the performance and embrace of heteronormativity (i.e. ‘being straight’). Rather, queerness should be viewed as an unwillingness or, perhaps even a glorious failure, to conform to both the dictates of white normativity (skin color, body shape, phenotype) and the politics of respectability rooted in contemporary black Protestantism (Fogg-Davis 2006; White 2001; Cohen 1997). This also includes rejecting codes of dress, social mannerisms, and gender performances deemed ‘respectable’ in heteronormative black working and middle-class culture (Collins 2005; Johnson 2003; White 2001).

Black feminists have long argued that the subjugation of black women under white supremacy operates through the historical exploitation of black women’s bodies, especially through the global proliferation of controlling images that mark black women (especially poor black women) as abject and unworthy of love, caring, respect, and sympathy (Harris Perry 2011; Wanzo 2009; Collins 2005; Hancock 2004; Cohen 1997). Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) demonstrated the explicit ways that black women have been rendered abject and illegible through what she calls, ‘the politics of disgust’ in American political discourse which, in many ways, situate black women as queer. In her classic essay, ‘Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,’ Cohen (1997) argued that women of color, regardless of whether or not they fell into the category of homosexual or
heterosexual, are rarely perceived as normal, moral, and worthy of public support (political or otherwise). Whether they are poor, butch, welfare-reliant and/or simply try to publically advocate on behalf of themselves and their communities, black women are generally portrayed negatively in mainstream society (Harris 2011; Atwater 2009; Wanzo 2009). Black feminist scholars have linked the global circulation of images of black women portrayed as ‘mammies,’ ‘jezebels,’ ‘sapphires’ and today, ‘bitches,’ ‘ho’s,’ ‘welfare queens,’ ‘gold-diggers,’ and ‘dykes’ with the legacy of slavery, the confinement of generations of black women to low-wage work, and the global appropriation and commodification of black American culture (Perry 2004). As a result, the dehumanizing portrayals of black womanhood in American popular culture almost always overshadow the vital role that black women, especially queer black women, have played in American civic life (see, for instance, Sharpley-Whiting 2007; Ferguson 2004; Collins 2005; White 2001; Hull and Smith 1982).

This article aims to displace this tendency by centering the ways that black women actively contest ideologies and practices that position them as abject and ‘queer’ in the communities they live in. I reconstruct queerness in my retelling of black women’s politics by assembling a bricolage of stories, media accounts, and personal interviews. Using the queer of color epistemic interventions outlined by Ferguson (2004), I expose how dominant frames of community and identity make it difficult for black gender non-conforming people to be construed as viable political subjects.6 As an unmarried African-American single mother and an ally of queer feminists in Newark, I examine the multiple and conflicting identifications between ‘black women’ and ‘queer,’ unhinging accounts of black women’s political subjectivity that are fixed to a presumed and unquestioned heterosexuality. Taking a cue from Walcott (2007, 237), I argue that black women organizing and mobilizing in Newark forged an ‘intimate geography and space of black queer identities’ that effectively traversed class, gender, sexual, and age formations that permeated Newark’s landscapes. Through respatializing social capital – creating and redefining relationships within and between black vernacular institutions and local and national lesbian and gay organizations – I argue that black women queered black political space in Newark. In the context of black feminist/queer of color critique, here ‘queering’ signifies the insistence that the politics of difference – a politics that emphasizes multiplicity and heterogeneity of identities – insists upon a strident disinvestment in both black heteronormativity and white homonormativity in order to build an alternative culture of political empowerment for all black people (Ferguson 2004, 127).

**Placing black heteropatriarchy**

Before theorizing black women’s agency, we must first place it within a specifically raced and gendered geopolitical context. Heteropatriarchy is a very adequate descriptor of Newark’s geopolitical climate. Heteropatriarchy is constituted by convergent of processes of black racialization, heterosexualization, neoliberalization, and patriarchy (Alexander 2005; Smith 2005). Heterosexual black men have dominated Newark politics since the election of Newark’s first African-American mayor in 1970 (Mumford 2007; Woodward 1999). Sharpe James, who succeeded Kenneth Gibson in 1986, served five 4-year terms, declining a bid for a sixth term after being indicted on 25 federal charges of fraud, corruption and racketeering in 2007.7 In 2006, the son of the disgraced mayor, John Sharpe James, contemplated a bid for mayor. After coming home with a purple heart from Afghanistan, James, Jr. made a point of visiting ‘two churches every Sunday’ to build community support for his unsuccessful effort to oust the current Mayor Cory Booker.
In 2006 Booker, an Ivy-League educated Rhodes Scholar, dismantled the Sharpe James machine by aggressively courting wealthy liberal campaign financiers vis-a-vis cable news outlets, multiple appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and two broadly acclaimed documentaries about Newark, *Street Fight* (2004) and *Brick City* (2008).

Heteropatriarchal political practices and racial ideology are tightly bound in Newark. Black civil society is patrolled and regulated by a relatively small circle of influential and well-connected black men who are oriented toward deeply masculinist and liberal understandings of political and economic empowerment that have origins in the civil rights and black power movements (Woodward 1999; Mumford 2007).8 Like all politicians in Newark, these men actively contend with the social after effects of deindustrialization which includes chronic black male unemployment and high poverty rates among African-Americans and Latinos. As a testimony to their commitment to racial uplift, each of these men have long track records of employing black people in the local public sector, creating much needed opportunities for black entrepreneurship, and recruiting black male and female civic leaders to rail against black on black violence, racial profiling, police brutality, and lack of quality of education for poor people. However, this political framework has largely restricted the development of gender progressive political outlook that challenges the combined effects of race, gender, class, and sexual oppression on the lives of women of color and gays, lesbians, bisexual, transsexual, and/or transgendered people in the city.

Blackness in Newark operates as a primary lens to make sense of the desires, needs, and power location of folks of African descent in Newark. In many ways, the ability to articulate and enact oppositional (living) histories of blackness is the dominant way which black people come to public voice, and thereby come to be active, worthy, and respected political subjects in the city (Isoke 2011; Johnson 2003). In this way, Newark functions much like a ‘city-state,’ serving as the central locale for the production and circulation of political power for black people in Northern New Jersey (Grosz 1995). In Newark, it is not difficult to find support for Lubiano’s (1997, 235) observation that ‘there is no way of being outside of the state, we encounter it in our public imaginings about the nature of our world.’9

Black heteropatriarchy, and the gender ideologies that undergird it, saturates local community institutions, governing bodies, the public education system and, not surprisingly, most of Newark’s majority black churches. However, after Sakia’s death, the city’s heteronormative black power structure was challenged by a loosely affiliated network of black queer activists and socially ostracized teens. This unlikely coalition exposed the violent consequences of unchecked black heteropatriarchy and brought attention to the invisible fault lines of Newark’s black community. Through their efforts to remember Sakia Gunn by creating spaces for black queer people to be in the city, NPA demonstrated that, through their hard won failures, heteropatriarchy can be effectively challenged in American political and civic life. I begin my story of how black queer women enacted resistance with the story of Laquetta Nelson.

### Laquetta Nelson and the NPA

She was murdered early Sunday morning. I found out about it on Tuesday. That day I sent an email that went out all around the country and overseas. We got condolences from all around the country and the world, but we didn’t get condolences from right here in this city, from our community. Our community was in crisis then. We suffered and nobody cared. There were some people who cared, but it just wasn’t enough. (Laquetta Nelson, 50-year-old retired bus driver, Army veteran, and community organizer)
The story of black queer activism in Newark begins with Laquetta Nelson. Immediately following Sakia’s murder, Laquetta took note of the marked differences between the reactions to the murder. She expressed dismay that local black leadership seemed oblivious to the political significance of Sakia’s death. Although Sakia’s death received attention from national gay rights organizations as the ‘murdered black lesbian,’ in Newark, she was just another example of black on black violence. The story of her death exploded in the majority of white lesbian and gay blogosphere, but ironically, her death was not yet important enough to feature in mainstream printed news media. It was the widespread disorientation and inept response by Newark’s black community that lead Laquetta to spearhead the creation of the NPA.

Laquetta Nelson and James Quedle founded the NPA in June 2003, only a month after Sakia’s murder. Their original mission was straightforward: ‘NPA seeks to make Newark a city to be proud of and a city to be proud in, a city safe for all its people: gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian and trans-gendered.’ One major objective of NPA was to build a community center that catered to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gendered youth through the creation of an ‘Ags and Femmes’ Sakia Gunn Memorial Fund. Laquetta reached out to closeted gays and lesbians active in Newark politics, offering personal support to Sakia’s family and friends. Laquetta and James mobilized a close-knit, yet invisible network of black lesbians and gays who worked or volunteered for a variety of community programs. Shortly thereafter, activists began pressuring state and local officials for anti-violence/anti-bullying measures to protect queer students and to provide the resources to build a community center to address their needs.

When Laquetta read about Sakia’s murder in the Star-Ledger, she sent mass emails to her regional and national contacts. She used her national stature with the Stonewall Democrats to politicize Sakia’s death among national lesbian and gay organizations. Her appeal to these organizations proved effective. Several regional organizations sent their respective representatives to Newark to cover the story, and immediately began publishing information about the circumstances surrounding Sakia’s death on their websites. Laquetta was grateful for the early show of support; however, she surmised that the only reason that Sakia’s death mattered to them was she was lesbian. Although Sakia’s death was politically useful as a symbol of homophobia, it seemed disingenuous to ignore the other elements of her identity that played a role in her death. For Laquetta, focusing solely on Sakia’s sexual preference was a dangerous tendency that unwittingly colluded with the conservative efforts to criminalize black men. In her view, demonizing McCollough as a perpetrator of ‘hate crime’ did little to help establish an anti-homophobic and culturally inclusive community of queer people of color in Newark. It was for this very reason that Laquetta wanted to build a local grassroots campaign similar to the ones that made many national LGBT organizations so effective. She recalled:

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

Laquetta’s prominence in lesbian and gay rights circles did not translate into the social capital needed to politicize Sakia’s death in a way that made sense to Newarkers. So she and a handful of her friends and associates singlehandedly mobilized scores of queer people, especially young queer people, in Newark. With their help, over 2500 people attended Sakia’s funeral. Over the next few months, several demonstrations and vigils
were organized in conjunction with Sakia’s family and friends and an increasingly visible and outspoken black queer community.

**Queer body politics in the streets of Newark**

“We were the peacekeepers. We actually formed a human line between the young people who attended the funeral and the police.” (Janyce Jackson, 49-year-old retired NYC police dispatcher, and senior pastor of Liberation in Truth Unity Church (LIT)).

The tendentious relationship between the police and queer teenagers came to a head at Sakia’s funeral. With help from NPA, LIT Unity Church made an effort to ‘bring the tensions down.’ The teenagers’ hurt was intensified by the heavy policy presence at the funeral. Fifty uniformed police officers stood outside the church to provide ‘security’ to young people who were often harassed by and left unprotected by law enforcement. For young people who knew Sakia, the police were as much to blame for their loss as was Richard McCullough. After all, McCollough’s deadly assault took place less than 100 ft from a vacant ‘24 hour’ police kiosk. As a result, in the early days after Sakia’s death LIT’s activism involved serving as a mediating zone between the traumatized young people and Newark’s power structure. At the funeral, many young people were enraged enough to physically lash out at the cops – who they viewed as being partially responsible for Sakia’s demise. However, according to Janyce, LIT used their bodies and relationships to keep them ‘safe and out of jail, or worse.’

According to Jaynce, one reason that queer youth had to ‘hang out on street corners or travel into New York City to hang out in bars’ was because they did not ‘have a place in Newark to simply be.’ Often confined to what Talmadge Wright has referred to as ‘refuse spaces,’ young queer black folks forged a visible, yet socially maligned social geography in order to interact and be with each other on their own terms.11 Queer youth socialized in certain parks, street corners, popular bus stops, and the storefronts of queer friendly businesses – including tattoo parlors and hair salons on and adjacent to the Broad Street corridor. While visible and assessable, these spaces were often shared with addicts, street peddlers, homeless people, homophobic passerbys, and hostile cops working their beats. From Janyce’s perspective, the streets were simply not sufficient to meet the social and development needs of young queer people – especially black teenagers from poor, Central Ward neighborhoods. For her, ‘surely there is a better way.’

The creation of what Janyce called a ‘safe space’ was seen as an important way to alleviate the alienation of queer teens by members of the NPA, including LIT Church. Founded in 1995, LIT is a member of the National Unity Fellowship Church, a religious organization committed to serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Initiated by an out African-American lesbian minister, Jacqueline Holland, LIT sought to be a ‘beacon of light in the city of Newark’ by addressing the issues of homelessness, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. The Social Justice Center (SJC), a Central Ward drop-in center, provided showers, laundry services, needle exchange and condoms to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in Newark.

At Sakia’s memorial service, Mayor Sharpe made a shocking open promise to build a ‘counseling center’ for local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer (LGBTQ) youth. Given this seemingly heartfelt pledge, NPA activists naively assumed that the city would include young people who wanted to play a role in the planning of such a center. Such was not the case. NPA could not even get city hall to schedule meeting space downtown. Efforts to follow up with the mayor’s office were met with active indifference. It was clear that Newark’s newly politicized queer community was on its own. Although initially
reluctant to engage in the formal political process, LIT staunchly backed NPA and directly petitioned Sharpe James to keep his easily given promise. LIT also assisted NPA in their efforts to informally lobby city council members and bureaucrats, to requisition the city for a room that youth could use to meet to flesh out their ideas about how to proceed with the Ags and Femmes Memorial Fund, and other community initiatives for queer teenagers. The city, however, simply refused to act. Janyce explained:

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

NPA needed to find a suitable place to hold community gatherings. Their efforts to secure meeting places at local high schools and other publicly funded places in the city proved futile. LIT stepped in to offer their assistance to what they hoped would be a temporary problem. Janyce recalled, ‘We offered our center as a space for everyone to come together and express their feelings. What we did was allow them to talk.’ While catering to some of the vulnerable residents in Newark on the tightest of budgets, LIT decided to donate the physical space of the SJC. Under Janyce’s leadership, the SJC became both a formal and informal gathering for NPA activists as well as students and other ‘young people’ who had been traumatized by Sakia’s death. In Reverend Jackson’s view, the SJC was a refuge from the open hostility that queer teenagers often faced at school. In the year following Sakia’s death, the SJC became the premier social space in which queer teens could receive affirmation, encouragement, and mentoring by queer adults. For Janyce, simply being able to offer a space to these teenagers and supporting any leadership efforts that girls proposed was the most basic ‘political’ act that LIT could engage in.

Meanwhile, ‘the city’, meaning bureaucrats and public officials, emerged as a homophobic force that marginalized and manipulated the black queer community. This duplicitous behavior incensed NPA activists and heightened their sense of outrage. The Janus-faced administration intensified the injury of Sakia’s death for many activists, driving home the lack of respect and recognition that many felt everyday as they went about their lives. Unusually pessimistic in the context of our initial 2 hour interview in 2005, Reverend Jackson remarked:

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

In the black community, Sakia’s death politicized black homophobia, but this was not enough. LIT and NPA insisted that the contributions of gays and lesbians in Newark be made visible by showing up at council meetings and making their sexual politics known. LIT played a major role in this effort. Janyce explained:

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

Although black lesbians and gays were active in mainstream city politics, they were politically invisible to the establishment. While it was well known that black gays and lesbians, like Laquetta, were deeply involved in civic affairs, their sexual identities were ignored – basically a non-issue. The political establishment wanted to maintain the
heteronormative status quo. When activists like Janyce and Laquetta tried to introduce ‘gay issues’ into city council meetings, council members tabled them or relegated them to ‘talking points’ to be used at some later, unspecified date.

NPA activist June Dowell, a 37-year-old returning Rutgers student, sent more than a 100 invitations to black churches in Newark to attend a community meeting to address homophobia. Five churches agreed to attend, but only three showed up. June, a busty brown-skinned activist with an auburn, dreadlocked mohawk, surmised that the physical presentation of her queerness could have been enormous barrier in galvanizing support from institutions that may have otherwise advocated on the behalf of young African-Americans. In her opinion, it was one thing to express solidarity after a brutal act of black on black violence; it was another altogether ‘to stand shoulder to shoulder’ and organize with people who repudiated the politics of respectability and openly claimed queer identities. Predictably, in spite of the initial displays of support in front of the cameras that showed up for Sakia funeral and a few of the subsequent vigils, black clergymen kept their distance from NPA. Even fewer were willing to come to the SJC to talk about homophobia and HIV/AIDS with NPA and their young constituents. June surmised:

When people won’t even acknowledge letters that you send them or return phone calls when you’ve left messages for them. It is like them treating you like you don’t exist. This is how the black church looks upon gay and lesbian folks. They act like we don’t exist and we do exist.

June, who organized movie nights for queer youth at SJC in conjunction with local high schools, reported that queer students’ day-to-day aesthetic sensibilities often drew negative attention from police officers, security guards, and school teachers who assumed that they were using drugs or engaging in some criminal activity. In short, they were considered to be a threat and a nuisance simply because of their attire. And when they were on the streets they were more vulnerable to physical violence, including anti-gay bullying and harassment from the cops. The principal of West Side High School, Fernand Williams, told the students, ‘If some choose to live a certain lifestyle, they must pay a certain price.’ Mr. Williams then refused a student led petition to have a moment of silence for Sakia until over a year after she died. The social confinement of queer black youth to refuse spaces in Newark’s streets visibly troubled Sue ‘SuSu’ Stewart, a self-proclaimed ‘aggressive’ youth activist and NPA member. Not surprisingly, she attributed blame to Newark’s political establishment. She lamented:

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

At age 42, SuSu conducted weekly technology seminars and photography workshops for teens at a Central Ward Boys and Girls Club. As a part of her political work, she also organized music production classes for teenagers interested in rap, spoken word, and singing. In her opinion, all young black people in Newark suffered equally from lack of resources or lack of knowledge about how to utilize existing community resources. From her perspective, they were vulnerable to all kinds of social problems that contributed to what she called, ‘that blank look of despair … they don’t look happy. They look depressed. What’s worse is that nobody really seems to care.’ Her dismal interpretation of the plight of visible teen black bodies in Newark may not be completely unfounded considering that within a year of Sakia’s death, West High School – a school with a majority African-American student population – banned queer students from the wearing
gay pride rainbow insignia. The administration’s decision to criminalize out gay and lesbian students who probably wore the rainbow in schools to express solidarity and support for each other — a form of queer body politics — spoke volumes about the refusal of opinion leaders to grasp how homophobia intersects with class and racially discriminatory attitudes, practices, and policies.

**Making sense of murder: a black feminist analysis**

Theorizing the mutual constitution of race, gender, and oppression specifically links black women’s sexual oppression to black patriarchy. The Combahee River Collective argued in over 20 years ago,

> Sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We find it difficult to separate race from class from sexual oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. (Hull et al. 1982, 16)

Gender-based political subordination of black women is rooted in the historical processes and ideologies of capitalism, as well as in modes of U.S. Black racialization, including chattel slavery, Jim Crow, *de facto* racial subjugation via segregation, white supremacy, and what critical race feminists have called ‘the new racism’ and the ‘New Jim Crow,’ respectively. Contemporary black feminist thought also explicitly identifies heteropatriarchy within African-American community politics as a major source of gender-based oppression of black lesbian women and gay men (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004; Fogg-Davis 2006; Nikol Alexander-Floyd 2007).

Despite the relevance of these critiques of power by black feminists, their insights have been evaded, ignored, and/or misappropriated. These evasions allow Sakia Gunn’s life to be understood solely in terms of black homophobia without specifically linking homophobia to black heteropatriarchy. Similarly, these evasions permit Sakia’s death to be understood as a ‘hate crime’ against gays and lesbians rather than as a characteristic example of misogynist sexual violence against a young black female (Miller 2008; Fogg-Davis 2006; Ritchie 1996). The systemic neglect of various modes of radical black feminist analysis helps explain why it is only when Sakia Gunn’s death is framed explicitly as a hate crime against a lesbian that any attention at all was given to her death. In the absence of LGBTQ activism around hate crimes, Sakia would have remained another nameless, faceless young black victim of Newark street violence. No story there. Although the few national organizations that politicized Sakia’s unfortunate death sought to challenge homophobia in black communities, these politicized narratives of Sakia’s life stand in stark tension with the testimony of black queer feminist activists who organized locally to commemorate her life and to breathe life into tragedy of her death. The racialized gender dynamics that produced homophobic street violence shaped both the sites and strategies of contestation and resistance taken up by queer black women. In the context of an ideologically ‘perfect murder,’ however, the voices and perspectives of black feminist politics and activisms, while perhaps the loudest, were still the least respected in the politics of representation that emerged in the aftermath of Sakia’s death.

**From horror stories to geographies of resistance**

On 12 August 2010, America Online’s (AOL) Wallet Pop, a daily blog that is circulated to more than 10 million users named Newark as one of America’s ‘Ten Worst Places to Live.’ In spite of all of its problems, Newark is still hailed by local activists as a place to be ‘cherished and not condemned.’ Amina Baraka, a 68-year-old community activist and
storyteller, weaves tales of resistance into her narration of the city’s continuing economic and social difficulties. In 2005, she lost her own lesbian-identified daughter to murder at the hands of a black man. In spite of this Mother, Baraka, a long-time proud African-American cultural nationalist, devout socialist, and Newark enthusiastic, refused to be broken. Instead, she turned her horror story into a tale of resistance. As an elder, she became a participant and outspoken leader in the Newark chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Over 18 months after her daughter’s death, her deep-seated affection for Newark was undeniable. She insisted, ‘I didn’t choose Newark, Newark chose me. To this day, if I’m gone two weeks, I’m coming back home. I do not stay away too long. It is a part of me.’

Sakia Gunn’s life and death provides us with a deep intersectional account of black female subjectivity in urban space. By documenting efforts to remember her, we are able to interrogate the boundaries through which particular identity categories are produced and deployed, as well situate our interrogation within an active social arena – a place that has an active history of contesting shifting contours of both blackness and queer identities. Black queer feminists retold the story of her death to make legible the politics of community of agents who were already intrinsic to workings of the city. In so doing, they made it possible for us to see, appreciate, and learn from a new geography of cultural resistance. Newark was already an uncomfortable home for queer people; however, black queer women made it clear that it was still a home worth fighting for. By reaching out to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances and redefining the meaning of old relationships, women like Laquetta Nelson, June Dowell, Susu Stewart, Janyce Jackson, Amina Baraka, and countless others respatialized social capital and thereby reterritorialized blackness in the city. They transformed their own hardship and vulnerability into spatial agency – activating networks of struggle and making new kinds of black resistance politics possible. By refusing to be silent and invisible and by giving each other the courage to speak truth to the heteronormative power structure of the city, their audacious acts of everyday resistance provided a living alternative to the geography of domination that ended Sakia’s life so prematurely.

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Notes

1. I use the term ‘queer black women’ to refer to self-identified ‘black women’ who transgress norms of heteronormativity in one or more of the following ways: (1) they love and stand in solidarity with black lesbians, gays, transsexual, and transgender people; (2) they take open political stances against sexism, homophobia, and gender violence (rape, gay bashing, domestic violence, and/or street harassment) that is perpetrated within the African American community in Newark; and (3) they openly reject hegemonic gender norms that require black people to perform respectability in public spaces.

2. Social capital typically refers to those features of social organization that enhance the possibility of cooperation and collective social action (Putnam 1993). Looking beyond the resources and capacities of individuals, social capital directs attention toward the common resources and capacities of communities made up of complex networks of human relationships. Some basic features of social capital include trust, rapport, and reliable means to interact and demonstrate positive norms of reciprocity with other community members.
3. I employ what Jack Halberstam has called a ‘scavenger methodology’ that uses multiple methods to produce knowledge about the political lives of queer subjects (Halberstam 1998).

4. I define black heteropatriarchy as the local convergence of processes of black racialization, heterosexualization, and patriarchy. For further discussion, see M. Jacqui Alexander’s Pedagogies of Crossing (2005) and Lynda Hart’s Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression (1994).

5. The term ‘aggressive’ is a self-acclaimed gender category of women of color in the northeastern USA, who often self-identify as ‘black’ and who have an androgynous, often marked masculine, self-presentation rooted in urban African-American vernacular culture. Interestingly, many ‘aggressive’ or ‘ag’ black women reject the label of lesbian as it does not adequately represent their distinctively racialized gender performances of sexual identity. In 2004, producer Daniel Peddle produced a documentary entitled The Aggressives that explores the experiences of aggressive women in New York City.

6. To tap into black women’s spatial resistance, I interviewed 29 activists – black women who have been or continue to be engaged in political activism who were selected through the process of community nomination. I consulted with informants from each community of practice to identify potential interviewees. The activists who participated in this project are diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status, levels of educational attainment, and age. Six (21%) of the women interviewed were under 40 years of age, with the youngest being 24 years old. Twelve women (41%) were between 40 and 50 years of age. The remaining 11 women (38%) were 50 years or older; the oldest being 79. All of the women interviewed had completed high school, and 16 (55%) had completed an undergraduate college degree. Of those who had completed college, five had gone on to pursue professional graduate degrees. In this article, we hear from five gender transgressive black female activists who organized in the aftermath of Sakia Gunn’s death.

7. It should be noted that Mayor James was convicted of only five counts of fraud and later served 27 months sentence in a federal prison.

8. In 2009, the city council was comprised of Ras Baraka (son of the esteemed activist poet Amiri Baraka a.k.a. LeRoi Jones), Donald Payne Jr (son of recently deceased U.S. Representative Donald Payne, representing New Jersey’s 10th Congressional District), and Ron Rice Jr (son of New Jersey Congressman Ron Rice). These men’s ties with African-American churches and community organizations including the Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, state and national Congressional Black Caucuses, and the Democratic Party are notorious. They wield considerable influence in the identification and selection of candidates for the Board of Education, the Zoning Board, and municipal council seats. All of these men are heterosexual, monotheistic, and generally mute on issues of gender and sexuality in their basic orientation and practice of politics.

9. Other scholars, including Cazenave (2011), has referred to U.S. cities as ‘urban racial states’ which he defines as, ‘the political structure and processes of a city and its suburbs that manage race-relations in ways that foster both its own immediate interests, and ultimately, white racial supremacy’ (25). This perspective, while illuminating undermines the extent to which black agency, as a response to racial domination in cities, has reproduced structures of violence predicated upon heterosexual male political dominance.

10. Newark Pride Alliance website.

11. For more discussion about refuse spaces, see Out of Place: Homelessness, Mobilizations, Subcities and Contested Landscapes by Talmadge Wright (New York: State University Press of New York, 1997).

12. For example, while ignoring requests from activists to meet, Cathy Cuomo-Cacere made public statements in the New Jersey Star-Ledger claiming to have met with ‘members of the gay community.’


14. The administration justified this decision by arguing that the rainbow was a form of ‘gang paraphernalia.’ See, for instance, ‘Student Orientation: More Teenage Girls are Testing Gender Boundaries’ by Crowley, Peggy. in New Jersey Star Ledger, 26 May 2004.

15. This ‘new racism’ includes contemporary manifestations of age – old racial ideologies facilitated by contemporary processes of globalization, transnational corporate hegemony, and the global proliferation of racial ideologies via mass media.
16. For a more general discussion on the deployment of identity, politics, and discursive practices, see Yuval Davis (2011).

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References


ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS
¿No puedo ser vista? ¿No puedo ser escuchada? Las mujeres negras haciendo queer la política en Newark

¿Qué significa para una mujer negra negociar un espacio urbano? ¿Cómo es leído su cuerpo, realizada su política, y entendida e interpretada su agencia? ¿Cómo utilizan las mujeres negras sus cuerpos e identidades para desafiar la estructuralidad e intersectorialidad en las ciudades de EE.UU.? Para responder estas preguntas, exploro cómo las mujeres adoptaron un conjunto de prácticas espaciales oposicionales para resistir los efectos intersectoriales de la misoginia, la homo/transfobia, el racismo y la pobreza en Newark, Nueva Jersey. Reconstruyo la creación de la Alianza del Orgullo de Newark, una coalición local de lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transexuales y queers (LGBTQ) que se movilizó después de la muerte de Sakia Gunn en 2003 y 2004. Explorando las migraciones entre “mujeres negras”, “queer negra”, y “feminista negra”, examino como las mujeres negras respacializaron el capital social y llevaron a cabo la resistencia. A través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y el análisis de marco, exploro cómo las mujeres negras forjaron nuevas relaciones entre jóvenes queer e instituciones negras vernáculas, y crearon espacios políticos en los que hay lugar para una honesta participación en temas de violencia de género, pobreza y poder.

Palabras claves: mujeres negras; geografía urbana; movimientos sociales; política queer; feminismo negro

我无法被看见、被听见？纽华克黑人女性的酷儿化政治

黑人女性协商都市空间意味着什么？她的身体如何被解读？她如何从事政治？她的施为如何被理解与诠释？黑人女性如何运用她们身体及认同，挑战美国城市中介性的多元交织性（intersectionality）？为了回答上述问题，我将探讨黑人女性如何拥护一组对抗性的空间实践，以反抗新泽西州纽华克市中厌恶女人、恐同症、畏惧跨性别、种族主义与贫穷之间多元交织的影响。我将重现纽华克骄傲联盟的诞生——Sakia Gunny死后，一个在2003及2004年由在地的男女同志、双性恋者、跨性别与酷儿（LGBTQ）动员组成的联盟。我透过探索“黑人女性”、“黑人酷儿”与“黑人女性主义者”之间的移动，检视黑人女性如何重新空间化社会资本并进行反抗。我透过半结构式的访谈及架构分析，探讨黑人女性如何打造青年酷儿与黑人地方组织之间的新关係，并开创性别暴力、贫穷及权力议题得以诚挚交会的政治空间。

关键词：黑人女性、都市地理学、社会运动、酷儿政治、黑人女性主义