New Jersey Online: Affective Histories in Newark's Digital Archives

By Shannon Mooney

This article examines how Newark's affective histories and narratives of racial violence are being reproduced in the city's digital archives. This article examines two digital archives, Old Newark *and the Newark Public Library's* My Newark Story, *to explore how emotion is used by individuals and institutions to narrate Newark's 1967 riots and the city's subsequent waves of white flight, immigration, and systemic neglect. The article argues that while* Old Newark *serves as a space for former white Newarkers to express feelings of nostalgia, loss, and displacement that often cast themselves as the victims of diaspora and marginalization,* My Newark Story *functions as a corrective project that resists the centering of whiteness and feelings of victimization that have haunted Newark's history.*

In November of 2018, the city of Newark, New Jersey, shared a video to their Facebook page as part of their campaign to convince Amazon to select the city as the location for its second headquarters. The caption attached to the video reads, "Dear Amazon.com and Mr. Bezos, we have a message from a 7-year-old and a stockholder, from our city to you." The two-minute clip features Master Hilton Rawls III, a young preacher who has developed a following among Newark's Black religious community.[1] Donning a suit and tie and sitting in what appears to be a politician's office, Rawls speaks to the camera for the entirety of the video, gesticulating with his hands as he recites the language of urban redevelopment and economic growth. "Mr. Bezos, I am writing to you as a stockholder of Amazon, and a child of the city of Newark," Rawls says, beaming at the camera. He proceeds to list the reasons why Newark is the ideal location for Amazon's headquarters:

---

[1] The eight-year-old has delivered sermons at New Jersey's Performing Arts Center and has garnered attention from Newark Mayor Ras J. Baraka (son of Amiri Baraka). Rawls has over two thousand followers on Facebook.

emphasizing that Newark is a lower-income city that is currently 50 percent African American and 30 percent Latinx, Rawls argues that Amazon's headquarters could provide an "entirely new life opportunity" for Newark residents.[2]

I open this article on Newark's affective histories with a description of this video, as it is representative of the ways city advocates attempt to soften Newark's reputation through the use of positive affect. Filtering the language of neoliberal redevelopment and economic prosperity through Rawls, a child orator, inflects these terms with feelings of optimism, and elides the fact that Amazon's headquarters would most likely lead to massive gentrification and be disastrous for the residents Rawls claims to represent. Rawls's social media pages, garnering thousands of followers, describe him as "an old man in a young man's body," an accurate description of how the video transforms him into a young politician and the ideal neoliberal subject, who embodies what anthropologist Ana Ramos-Zayas has referred to as "the success, respectability, and psychosocial adequacy to which a predominantly Black city like Newark should aspire in order to combat its aggressive national images."[3]

Newark's Amazon campaign video provides a useful introduction into how affect has been used to manipulate narratives surrounding Newark's transformations in infrastructure and demographics. Following the city's 1967 riots, media depictions of the city's angry and vengeful Black populations were used to justify patterns of white exodus and systemic neglect. Since then, the city has made efforts to recover from these narratives through various attempts at humanizing the city's communities of color. The city's campaign video is merely one manifestation of these efforts.

---

[2] City of Newark, NJ - City Hall, "Dear Amazon.com and Mr. Jeff Bezos . . . ," Facebook post, November 12, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=531678950637934.
[3] Ana Ramos-Zayas, *Street Therapists: Race, Affect, and Neoliberal Personhood in Latino Newark*, University of Chicago Press, 2012, 59.

This article examines how Newark's affective histories and narratives of racial violence are being reproduced in the city's digital archives. By examining two archives in particular—*Old Newark* and the Newark Public Library's *My Newark Story*—this article examines how emotion is used by individuals and institutions to narrate Newark's 1967 riots and the city's subsequent waves of white flight, immigration, and systemic neglect. *Old Newark* is a user-generated archive that attempts to virtually reconstruct the city's old neighborhoods through photos, maps, and personal memories. The site focuses on the time prior to Newark's emergence as a predominantly Black and Latinx city, and serves as a space for former white Newarkers to express feelings of nostalgia, loss, and displacement that often cast themselves as the victims of diaspora and marginalization. *My Newark Story*, on the other hand, is an archive that focuses exclusively on documenting the migration patterns and daily experiences of the city's African American and Latinx populations. Through privileging these experiences, *My Newark Story* resists the centering of whiteness and feelings of victimization that have haunted Newark's history.

These archives are important for understanding not only how affect animates narratives of Newark's history, but also for understanding how narratives about urban dereliction tend to diminish the ways that oppression functions across difference. Newark's mid-twentieth-century racial inequalities and class tensions parallel those belonging to other postindustrial Rust Belt cities, and therefore informs broader histories of deindustrialization. Materials in these archives often cement the popular narrative that Newark's 1967 riots (historicized in the following section) were the leading cause of Newark's decline throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. While the riots contributed to Newark's white flight, placing the riots at the center of Newark's history erases the ways in which the city's Black populations were oppressed in the decades leading up to the late 1960s. Put into conversation with each other, *Old Newark* and *My Newark*

Story reveal how individual narratives of the riots—particularly from the perspective of the city's former white residents—ignore the systemic racism and rampant inequality that existed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These archives reveal the ways that digital archives have the potential to reaffirm or correct reductive urban histories.

Theorizing and Historicizing Newark's Affective Narratives

Much of the affect theory drawn from in this article highlights the increasingly visible connections between archival materials and personal histories. As scholars of affect theory have emphasized, affect's constant fluctuations and subjective nature make it nearly impossible to pin down to a single definition. Patricia Ticento Clough has referred to critical theory's recent "affective turn," which treats affectivity as "a substrate of potential bodily responses, often automatic responses, in excess of consciousness."[4] While affect is often theorized through the body or through bodily reactions, as Clough argues, "affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to 'see' affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body's organic-physiological constraints."[5] This becomes increasingly important when examining manifestations of affect in digital spaces and, in this case, digital archives, spaces in which feelings are seemingly disconnected or disjointed from the bodies that create and produce them. It's important to note that affect and emotion carry different meanings and histories. Within affect theory, emotion is typically tied to a subject (an individual who has certain emotions) while affect is typically more abstract, unstructured, and difficult to define. As Sianne Ngai argues, "affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure all together."[6]

---

[4] Patricia Clough, "Introduction." *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
[5] Clough, "Introduction," 2.
[6] Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press, 2005, 25–26.

Affect also plays an important role in the recording and narration of history. While archives, like other forms of public history, are sometimes considered to be relatively objective, archival theorists push back against this notion of neutrality. Marika Cifor argues that "affect theory provides a theoretical toolkit needed to conceptualize and reinterpret more fully, and enact change for justice in archival functions and concerns such as appraisal, access, use, responsibility, accountability, and service."[7] In other words, taking affect into consideration when examining archival materials leads to more comprehensive understandings of how history gets recorded (and, of course, of *what* histories get recorded).

The archives examined in this article are community archives in the ways that they attempt to gather records and foster feelings belonging to similar communities—in the case of *Old Newark*, former Newarkers, and in the case of the Newark Public Library's digital collections, Black and Latinx Newarkers. For this reason, formal studies of community archives provide an important foundation for this study. As Cifor et al. argue, "community archives can empower people who have been marginalized by mainstream media and memory institutions to have the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts."[8] While not all of the individuals included in these archives have been marginalized by major institutions, many engage with the archives' materials to express or grapple with the frustration and disappointment associated with marginalization. This article looks specifically at how these Newark histories record affective narratives and common emotions within their respective communities. This analysis follows what Cifor has referred to as the need to shift affect "from a tacit concern to an

---

[7] Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse." *Archival Science: International Journal on Recorded Information*, no. 1 (2016): 7, 9.

[8] Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Allina Alda Migoni, and Noah Geraci, "'What We Do Crosses over to Activism' : The Politics and Practice of Community Archives." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (2018): 69.

explicit focus" in order to "[open] it up as a category of analysis and [legitimize] it as an area of concern."[9]

Affect takes on particular resonance in Newark, a city whose history of racial violence has often been retold through narratives that are grounded in the emotion of those who have witnessed its decline over the past several decades. This article proposes that popular narratives of Newark's racial violence and rising crime rates throughout the second half of the twentieth century reveal the importance of investigating the city's historical archives, where these narratives are either complicated, confirmed, or challenged. The events that most dramatically transformed popular discourses of Newark were the city's 1967 riots. On July 12, 1967, two white police officers attacked John William Smith, a Black taxi driver, after pulling him over for "driving recklessly." After being attacked without provocation, Smith was arrested and held in prison overnight. Rumors circulated that Smith had been murdered during the attack, and for Black Newarkers who had for years faced job discrimination and overcrowding in their neighborhoods, this was the final straw. What followed were five days of rioting, protesting, and looting that dramatically altered the city's built environments. Buildings were set on fire, storefronts were destroyed, 26 people died, and over 1,000 were injured. The National Guard was called in and the riots were depicted in national news outlets as a tragedy in which angry Black Newarkers unfairly destroyed the city.[10] Here is where we begin to see affect emerge as a way to justify and explain Newark's legacy of racial violence.

Following the riots, many of Newark's upwardly mobile white ethnic populations—Jewish, Italian, and Irish Americans, groups that became encompassed within the category of whiteness throughout the twentieth century—fled the city for its outer suburbs. While white

---

[9] Cifor, "Affecting Relations," 12.

[10] Kevin J. Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America.* New York University Press, 2007.

exodus was a common trend in the mid-twentieth century, what makes Newark unique is the rapidness with which the city's demographics began to shift. Between 1960 and 1970, Newark's total population plummeted from 405,220 to 382,417, and the city's white population decreased from 65 percent to 44 percent. As Carla Astudillo argues, "like a puzzle, the racial makeup of Newark's neighborhoods are explicitly linked—where Newark's white residents leave, the city's Black residents take their place."[11]

While white exodus from Newark was remarkable, understanding the city as part of a broader history of decline and deindustrialization illuminates the importance of the city's digital archives. While Newark, and New Jersey's other former industrial hubs such as Camden and Trenton, are sometimes neglected in Rust Belt narratives, Newark's deindustrialization and subsequent history of racial inequality and violence mirror that of other major Rust Belt cities, Detroit in particular. In the summer of 1967, Detroit experienced its own riots, and then-president Lyndon B. Johnson subsequently established the Kerner Commission to investigate the causes of the riots in both Newark and Detroit. While the findings in the Kerner Report were rather progressive, indicating that white anti-Black racism was one of the primary causes of the riots, these findings created severe backlash from white ethnic groups living in Newark and Detroit who refused to acknowledge the severity of systemic racism.[12] As Thomas Sugrue argues, during this time period, "Assumptions about racial difference were nourished by a newly assertive whiteness, born of the ardent desire of the 'not-yet-white ethnics' (many of them Roman Catholic, second- and third-generation southern and eastern European immigrants) to move into the American

---

[11] Carla Astudillo, "10 Maps that Show Newark's Dramatic Change Since the Riots," *NJ.com*, https://www.nj.com/news/2017/07/how_newark_has_changed_since_1960.html.

[12] Kevin Mumford. "Harvesting the Crisis: The Newark Uprising, the Kerner Commission, and Writings on Riots," African American Urban History since World War II. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

mainstream. To be fully American was to be white."[13] The archives examined in this article, *Old Newark* in particular, are evidence of the resentment and fear felt by white ethnic groups living in Newark following the riots.

The riots have largely been used to explain Newark's increasing crime and poverty rates throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, and these narratives often neglect to explain how the city's African American communities were suffering long before violence erupted in the summer of '67. As Newark historian Clement A. Price has documented, New Jersey and Newark in particular have a long history of Black exclusionary politics.[14] Popular narratives of the riots have often been told from the perspectives of former white Newarkers who describe feelings of being unfairly pushed from their former neighborhoods. Take, for example, many of Philip Roth's novels or HBO's *The Sopranos*, which often depict Jewish and Italian Americans as victims of displacement following the riots. As Kevin Mumford argues, following 1967, "white groups crafted an image of themselves as victims of society, in which they had been victimized by the media attention and political promises showered on civil rights demonstrators and Black rioters."[15]

Like many U.S. cities, over the past few decades Newark has become a testing ground for various neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism, as defined by historian Lisa Duggan, depends upon the privatization of economic enterprises and public services, and often organizes these processes "*in terms* of race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion" while simultaneously obscuring "the connections among these organizing terms."[16]

---

[13] Thomas J Sugrue. *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton University Press, 2014, 9.

[14] "Once and Future Newark - YouTube." Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB2A475FCD4EBAAEE&feature=plcp.

[15] Mumford, *Newark*, 179

[16] Lisa Duggan. *Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon Press, 2003, 3.

Neoliberal urban rebranding efforts are often grounded in affective language that attempt to humanize the city's populations as downtrodden and misunderstood. For example, U.S. Senator and former Newark mayor Cory Booker has often crafted affective narratives that cast the city's Black populations as misunderstood and in need of assistance. As Mayor, Booker intentionally spent years living in some of Newark's most dangerous neighborhoods, and in stump speeches he frequently told the story of "T-Bone," a drug dealer he met "on the streets" who initially threatened to "put a cap in [Booker's] ass" but who later confessed to the mayor his heartbreaking life story as he "sobbed into his dashboard."[17] Booker's affective narratives once again reflect the city's efforts to humanize Newark's populations of color so that the city can be viewed as a tolerable if not desirable location for corporate investment aimed at gentrification. Affect therefore shapes not only narratives surrounding Newark, but also the emotional landscape of the city. In her study of the city's Latinx population's navigation of emotional labor, Ramos-Zayas argues that:

> Urban neoliberalism has come to be influenced by the enforcement of an emotional commonsense that heightens a process by which race is psychologized and affect is racialized . . . emotions are an integral part of the historical unfolding of politically significant events, institutions, and practices in Newark . . . "anger" and "aggression" became dominant emotions . . . inscribed through the interpretation, narration, and policy outcome of salient historical events in Newark's urban landscape.[18]

These efforts show how Newark's affective historical narratives continue into the twenty-first century. The archives examined here reveal how these emotions are surfacing in Newark's digital histories that document the city's shifting racial demographics before and after the city's

---

[17] Emma Roller, "Did Cory Booker Create an Imaginary Friend?," *Slate*, 30 August 2013, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2013/08/t-bone-cory-booker-s-supposed-imaginary-friend.html.
[18] Ramos-Zayas, 6, 46.

'67 riots, and these archives' materials are useful for understanding how narratives of Newark are being reproduced or challenged.

"Do you remember Newark?": Nostalgia and Whiteness in *Old Newark*

This section examines how the user-generated archive *Old Newark* provides a space for former, predominantly white Newarkers to express, reflect on, and build community formed around their feelings of nostalgia, loss, and frustration at the city's neglect and decline over the past several decades. Established in 1998, the archive consists of photos, maps, and personal memories, and was founded and is administered by Glenn Geisheimer, a former Newark resident. The site's layout is rather simple, and at times feels quite outdated.[19] A menu on the left-hand side of the home page contains an extensive list of options, including census, birth and death records, events, newspapers, and photos. However, this section primarily focuses on the archive's "Newark Memories" page, where contributors post personal memories related to Newark. Constituting what Ann Cvetkovich refers to as "alternative modes of knowledges" within archives, "Newark Memories" is the primary place where affect emerges as a method for navigating one's relationship to ethnicity, whiteness, and geographic mobility.

Old Newark's documentation of the riots occurs primarily through the "Newark Memories" page. In fact, running the words *riot* or *riots* through the site's search engine returns very few results, and often directs people to the user-contributed memories. Similarly, running the word *race* through the site's search engine primarily returns results related to the city's racetrack, and the search *racism* only returns one result (a personal memory discussed later in this section). This

---

[19] Navigating the site requires clicking through various links—for instance, when you arrive at "oldnewark.com" you're directed to a welcome page that requires you to click to "enter" the site—it's unclear exactly what purpose this welcome screen serves. While Geisheimer and the contributors to the site don't indicate their age (though race and ethnicity are often mentioned, which will be explored later), the site's the lack of sophistication potentially dates not only the archive but also its primary users.

in and of itself indicates the archive's investment in fostering community around nostalgia: historical documentation primarily occurs through contributors reminiscing about the way Newark "once was." While *Old Newark* does not specify a date before which Newark is considered to be "old," the archive's "Memories" section implies that it is primarily interested in the time before the riots and the city's subsequent decline. On the "Newark Memories" home page, the site introduction prompts visitors to contribute their own memories through asking: "Do you remember Newark? What was it like when you were growing up?" These questions establish that the site is seeking stories and memories that represent a version of the city that has disappeared or changed in some way.[20]

"Newark Memories" functions as a site where the city's former ethnic enclaves are reconstructed through memories that depict these neighborhoods as community-oriented and crime-free. This page is where *Old Newark* most clearly emerges as a community archive, as users gather to reminisce over similar memories about a singular place. As one contributor says, "Every so often I go to Newark Memories to I guess, relive my youth. And it always seems to inspire some old story or some wonderful memory, so here I go again."[21] The contributor proceeds to provide descriptions of the old Italian neighborhood he grew up in. These sorts of memories are common: in many ways, the site serves as a way to document the existence of former ethnic enclaves, neighborhoods that once functioned as relative safe havens for new immigrants prior to middle-class assimilation. As Noriko Matsumoto has described, New Jersey's ethnic enclaves "occupy a transitional phase in the incorporation of new groups into society, providing mutual support, orientation to the new land, and a channel for integration . . . eventual departure from the enclave

---

[20] "Welcome to Newark Memories," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, accessed 18 December 2019, http://newarkmemories.com/mainindex.php.
[21] "Reliving My Youth," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, http://newarkmemories.com/memories/1011.php.

has been regarded as a sign of social success."[22] The process of assimilation and the transformation of these neighborhoods can be traced through *Old Newark*'s archives.

In the posts written by former white Newarkers, Blackness often lingers on the margins of these personal memories and the descriptions of neighborhood transformations, as many of these areas are now predominantly African American. While this demographic shift is rarely explicitly mentioned, these changes are alluded to through coded language that instead references crime and dereliction and is often narrated through emotions related to disappointment, loss, and even heartbreak. For example, one post describes: "Now living in the shore area, I still think of Newark as it once was, in its glory days. Tempted to visit? Yes. But the Newark I remember does no longer physically exist, but in my mind, trees in summer, autumn leaves burning at the curb in fall, all reside fragrant and full color in my mind."[23] Through describing a Newark filled with nature as the version of the city that "no longer physically [exists]," this contributor suggests instead that present-day Newark is quite the opposite, a city associated with urbanity and its negative connotations.

Similarly, another contributor describes: "We moved out of Newark, like many folks did, after the riots. My wife and I recently came back to Jersey and visited the old stomping grounds. I had tears in my eyes when I saw what had become of this once great city. My hope is that maybe someday this city will thrive again." The affective language in these posts allows contributors to distance themselves from accusations of racism. For example, the description of the one contributor having "tears in [his] eyes" allows him to avoid describing precisely what it was he saw that was so upsetting. These sorts of posts use feelings of loss and nostalgia to justify their

---

[22] Noriko Matsumoto. *Beyond the City and the Bridge: East Asian Immigration in a New Jersey Suburb*. Rutgers University Press, 2018, 7.

[23] "My Life on Fifteenth Avenue," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, http://newarkmemories.com/memories/1044.php.

privileging and centering of whiteness, and allow contributors to avoid confronting their own

relationship to white flight and the decline of the city that they so deeply mourn.

While Blackness often exists on the margins of these memories, the '67 riots are often at

the center. *Old Newark*'s "Memories" section is the primary place where the riots receive mention

and recognition as a major historical event in Newark's history—many contributors emphasize

just how drastically the riots transformed the city. This fact alone reveals how narratives of the

riots are skewed through being told only from the perspectives of Newarkers who had the means

and mobility to leave the city when things turned violent. Through their emphasis on their fear of

violence, these posts often function as justifications for why people felt the need to leave the city.

For example, one contributor describes learning about the riots when he and his family were on

vacation down the shore:

> The scenes on TV of buildings on fire, armored vehicles manned by the New Jersey State
>
> National Guard rumbling down the city's avenues, gunfire, police beating, arresting and
>
> shooting looters and demonstrators filled me with fear . . . As an eleven year old kid, I
>
> could not understand the anger and frustration that had built up over decades in the Black
>
> community in Newark. The two hour drive back home up Routes 35 and 1 & 9 filled us
>
> with anxiety and fear. By the time we reached Newark Airport we could still see some
>
> smoke wafting over the center of the city. Exiting on Delancy Street, we were somewhat
>
> heartened by the lack of signs of destruction in the Ironbound.[24]

Similarly, another contributor describes:

During the riots, I had sat on the front porch of my Hillside home, just 800 feet from the

Newark line, listening to the gunfire emanating from the Newark side . . . and concerned

---

[24] "The Newark Riots Through the Eyes of a Child of the Ironbound," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*,
http://newarkmemories.com/memories/1039.php.

about the welfare of my widowed mother living alone, in Newark, in an Elizabeth Avenue apartment opposite the park . . . and being turned back after the gunfire had ceased at the Newark-Hillside line by rifle-toting National Guardsmen.[25]

Interestingly, these posts narrate the riots from a distance, both geographically and politically. These contributors were uninvolved in the riots, their neighborhoods were largely unaffected (as were most of Newark's predominantly white neighborhoods), and they lack an understanding of why the riots began. Many of the posts describe the riots as an event that seemingly happened out of nowhere and that drastically transformed what had been, for them, a peaceful and conflict-free city. These posts reflect the way that, following the riots, narratives of the event were often told through the rhetoric of personal responsibility; the riots were thought to have been caused by "personal frustrations" felt by Black Newarkers, overshadowing the city's long-term and widespread racial inequalities.[26] Through their engagement with affective language, these individuals, intentionally or not, have a tendency to cast themselves as the true victims of the riots. As Robert Zecker argues, within *Old Newark*'s "Memories" section, "a selective airbrushing of problematic or conflict-laden violent pasts has occurred to fabricate the cities that white ethnics would prefer they had come from."[27] While these individual memories offer one-sided perspectives on Newark's legacy of violence, their belonging to the personal or affective realm does not make them any less historically valuable or accurate.[28] But these memories' versions of the riots tend to erase the role that systemic oppression played in the event.

---

[25] "A Recollection of Newark of 1939 and After the Riots," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, https://www.virtualnewarknj.com/memories/newark/bodianriots.htm.
[26] Mumford, "Harvesting the Crisis," 206.
[27] Robert M. Zecker, "'We Never Locked Our Doors at Night': Newark on the 'Net, Minus the Mob." *Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 4 (December 2008): 361–72, 362.
[28] Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects," *Feeling Photography*. Duke University Press, 2014.

While many of the memories included within *Old Newark* are written from the perspective of former white Newarkers, occasionally individuals of color offer their own alternative or more nuanced perspectives on their experience in Newark. While most contributors offer positive memories grounded in nostalgia, one contributor instead offers a lengthy post on his memories of racism in the city. He writes:

> Most of all I can remember Newark City Hospital where Blacks were treated like dirt, and White People were treated like Gods at St. Barnabas Hospital . . . My point is racism did not start with the Newark Riots, it started long before that and it did not start with Black People. For sure after the riots Newark was never the same, I left Newark in 1975, I have been back quite a few times to me nothing has changed.[29]

This contributor not only offers an alternative perspective on the riots (they were not a single, unforeseen or unfounded event), but he also provides an alternative perspective on Newark's politics and history through insisting that the city has largely stayed the same since before the riots. His narration of his experience, however, reveals how this contributor realizes he is writing to an audience who might tend to disagree with him. He feels the need to explicitly acknowledge, for example, that the riot was "a bitter part of everyone's life regardless of your ethnicity," a statement that elides systemic racism within the city and the fact that the majority of the damage caused by the riots occurred in the city's predominantly Black neighborhoods. The post therefore reads as a tempered attempt at convincing his audience about the true cause of the riots. His narration in many ways becomes a negotiation of racial politics within a predominantly white space.

---

[29] "Newark Riots," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, http://newarkmemories.com/memories/823.php.

Similarly, another contributor offers yet another perspective on his experience growing up as a Black person in the city:

Do I have memories? What Newarker of old doesn't? I and my four siblings were all born in Newark, back in the thirties and forties when we were Negroes LOL. My memories are fond ones . . . What stands out most notably in my mind is that race was never an issue. I don't ever remember feeling different from anyone else I grew up with and as a result I grew up with no racial hang-ups.[30]

While on the surface, this post seems to suggest that racism was never an issue in Newark, the writer's ambivalence toward race suggests that he, like the previous contributor, realizes he is writing for a predominantly white audience. While the contributor states that racism was "never an issue" that he faced, his first sentence—"back . . . when we were Negroes"—seems to suggest otherwise. What lurks below the surface of "Back . . . when we were Negroes" is the suggestion that this term was not merely a label but also functioned as a means of categorization that recalls a longer history of oppression. And yet, the writer's use of "LOL" following this sentence immediately minimizes any suggestion that this should be taken seriously—it relegates the term "Negro" and the oppression it signifies to the past. Posts such as these reveal how the site's few contributors of color negotiate the fact that they are writing for predominantly white audiences nostalgic for a mid-twentieth-century city.

The ways in which some of the site's white contributors attempt to reckon with their own racism also reveal how the site has been established as a predominantly white "safe space" of sorts. For instance, one contributor recalls his time at Rutgers University's Newark campus:

---

[30] "Who's Got Memories of Newark?," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, https://www.virtualnewarknj.com/memories/newark/price01.htm.

In 1969 change came. Some of our African-American classmates locked themselves into

Conklin Hall. The signs said that Rutgers-Newark was a "white oasis." . . . We felt little

empathy and worried about what would happen to the Rut's reputation at grad school

admission time if it went "open admissions." Fortunately, the University didn't agree with

us. The powers that be recognized the imperative to educate those in need of it . . . The

lesson was unforgettable. A large number of us went on to success, unhindered and even

helped by those men and women who locked themselves in Conklin Hall. Today, the Rut

is the most diverse campus in the nation.[31]

This contributor reflects on his changing attitudes toward race across time and space. His

willingness to admit his prior racism reveals his awareness that he is probably writing to and for a

group of like-minded, white readers. Another contributor reflects on the riots: "As a teenager, I

never fully grasped what I had witnessed that afternoon on the front porch on Ferry Street. The

friendly messages that were pouring out of our stereos from Motown artists and other Black

performers provided a nice distraction from the realities that had rolled past my friends and me

that day."[32] Here, this contributor reveals how her position as a white Newarker sheltered her from

the oppressive realities that incited the '67 riots. These sorts of personal memories further establish

the archive as one in which former white Newarkers gather to reflect on and grapple with their

relationship to the city's changes. Through examining *Old Newark*'s "Memories" section, we can

see how feelings of nostalgia, loss, and frustration emerge among former Newarkers as they

navigate their relationships to whiteness and geographic mobility.

The narratives in this section expose not only how the riots are being historicized through

personal accounts, they also show how the riots are often centered as the primary cause for

---

[31] "Rutgers-Newark 1969–1972," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, http://newarkmemories.com/memories/1022.php.
[32] "Soul brothers vs. the Man," Newark Memories, *Old Newark*, http://newarkmemories.com/memories/866.php.

Newark's decline. The user contributions in this archive reveal how narrating Newark's history through the riots—putting the riots at the center of its history of racial politics, as opposed to the systemic racism that occurred prior to and leading up to 1967—largely privileges the experiences of former white Newarkers who had the means to leave the city. The sheer number of personal accounts points to these narratives' pervasiveness in popular discourse. The following section examines *My Newark Story*, a digital archive that makes a concerted effort to complicate mainstream and reductive narratives of Newark's history through a focus on the city's Black and Latinx populations.

"Memory that is physical": The Newark Public Library's Corrective Histories

In 2016, the Newark Public Library received a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to digitize the city's historical materials and promote literacy within the city. What emerged from this grant is *My Newark Story*, a digital archive that documents the histories and experiences of the city's African American and Latinx populations. While *Old Newark* in many ways erases or overshadows the experiences of the city's communities of color, *My Newark Story* instead centers on these communities. In many ways, *My Newark Story* functions as a corrective project that complicates the ways in which narratives of the riots have circulated. Unlike *Old Newark*, *My Newark Story* offers thousands of documents and photos that historicize the time leading up to, during, and following the '67 riots. However, it would be reductive to suggest that these two archives merely function in opposition to each other. While *My Newark Story* makes a concerted effort to archive the migrations of the city's African American and Latinx populations, it sometimes does so through promoting what Jodi Melamed has theorized as "liberal multiculturalism," a system that "[enjoins] Americans to affirm a positive cultural pluralism by recognizing that 'we are the world'" and whose logic "[justifies] applying the ethnic model of

immigrant social mobility to people of color."[33] Initially, the Newark Public Library received the

grant with the primary goal of "promoting literacy" in Newark's public school system. The end of

this section examines how the archive's lesson plans—the products of the archive, aimed at

educating future generations—reproduce forms of multiculturalism that ignore how oppression

functions differently across political identities. The ways that these discourses emerge reveal how

multiculturalism is often promoted through affective language.

Unlike *Old Newark*, the Newark Public Library's digital collections contain excessive

documentation of racism in and around the city throughout the twentieth century. The archive has

an entire "Newark Riots Collection" that contains documents, newspaper spreads, and photos

related to the riots. One document titled "How My Life Changed in 1967," written and read by

Reverend Estelle David at a 2017 Black History Month celebration, describes not only the July 12

police brutality incident but additional events that incited the riots. She describes urban renewal

projects that displaced Black families in favor of major highways and new buildings, and states

that the July 12 incident was merely "the spark that exploded the powder keg in Newark."[34]

Similarly, the "Newark Riots Collection" contains copies of "Stop Police Brutality" posters that

were created during the riots, as well as a report from an investigation into the 26 deaths that

occurred during the five days of rioting. The report documents the deaths of innocent civilians,

including a mother searching for her children.[35] Combined, these documents craft complex

histories of the riots that push back against narratives that suggest white Newarkers were the

primary victims of the incident. Instead, these documents elucidate the injustices leading up to the

---

[33] Jodi Melamed. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 35.

[34] Rev. Estelle David, "How My Life Changed in 1967," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/newarkriots%3A1a055699-e170-4f8f-b4b1-036414b49cd0#page/1/mode/2up.

[35] "Findings and Action taken in their investigation of 26 deaths . . ." Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/newarkriots%3Ac8dde89d-981c-4582-a9d2-956462dd94ee#page/1/mode/2up.

riots and their effects on Newark's Black communities. And for contemporary audiences, these

documents illuminate the long history of police brutality in Newark and throughout the U.S.

Newark's white flight prior to and following 1967 contributed to Northern New Jersey's

suburban development, and *My Newark Story* includes documentation that makes clear how Black

individuals and families were systematically excluded from the financial benefits of

suburbanization.[36] The archive includes documents and letters belonging to Levitt & Sons, the

suburban developers who mass-developed Levittown communities throughout New Jersey,

Pennsylvania, and New York. In the early 1960s, Levittowns were some of the largest all-white

suburban communities in the U.S. The communities were popular because their houses were

affordable and they were conveniently located, often near major cities.[37] *My Newark Story*

documents the process of African American families attempting to move into New Jersey's

Levittown, located in Southern New Jersey. Materials include a letter from Levitt & Sons to

Newark Civil Rights activist Harold Lett confirming the dispersal of funds for a program aimed at

achieving integration in Levittown—this was following a court case that required the developers

to stop discriminating against Black families.[38] There also contains a list of prospective African

American applicants for Levittown, accompanied by comments that make clear the middle-class

values the community was looking for. For example, one family is described as "a fine, desirable

family . . . cultured, intelligent, accustomed to integrated education and work." Similarly, the

husband of another family, marked as "not eligible" due to his low income, is described as

---

[36] For more on Black exclusion from U.S. suburbs, see: Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, 1985*.

[37] For Levittown's development, see Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000*. Vintage Books, 2004 and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

[38] "Letter from Levitt and Sons," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/lett%3A17f1b576-f779-43fa-ace3-693cee7018be#page/1/mode/2up.

"untrained but . . . quiet, conservative, solid, dignified. Now living in completely integrated garden apartment . . . has had almost 15 yrs. of integrated living and working experience."[39] Clearly, prior "integrated experience" mark these Black families as more amenable and assimilable compared to families who have lived in all-Black neighborhoods. These historical documents reveal the selectivity and challenges these families faced when trying to move to the suburbs, and they provide a more thorough history of Newark's racial politics.

Affect most clearly emerges in *My Newark Story*'s photo collection as a way for present-day Newarkers to assert their belonging to the city and to Americanness more broadly. Many of the photos in the digital collection are historical ones, including some famous photos of the '67 riots. More interesting, however, are some of the personal photos of Newark's African American and Latinx populations that emerge. As archival scholars have shown, photography is an important aspect of archives, especially as it pertains to affect. Ann Cvetkovich argues that:

> Although the history of photography is deeply entwined with conventional modes of documentation and surveillance, as well as realist aesthetics, its links to affect also make it an important medium through which to critique conventional archives and documentary, specifically their relation to modes of power and domination. As an archival object, the photograph's power derives as much from its affective magic as from its realist claims, and ultimately from the powerful combination of the two.[40]

The photos included in this archive suggest that there is historical value in personal experience, and that the personal narratives of these individuals, no matter how mundane, are deserving of documentation. Some of the first materials that appear in the archive's "Photographs"

---

[39] "Candidates for Levittown," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/lett%3A124d362f-bb8d-426e-84e1-ad8aee3a0b63.
[40] Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects," 276.

section are "Family Photographs" from various events—banquets, proms, and birthday parties, for

example. A photo tagged under "Hispanic Americans" and "Puerto Ricans" shows a young man

smiling at the camera, wearing medical scrubs with a stethoscope around his neck. The only

accompanying description is "photo of a man wearing a stethoscope and medical scrubs."[41]

Another photo shows a man and a women with their arms around each other, smiling—the attached

description is "Amilkar Velez-Lopez with his wife Norma Mutt de Velez."[42] While on the surface

these family photos, of which there are many, seem insignificant and devoid of context, they insist

that there are stories, histories, and importance to be found in the everyday experiences of the

city's communities.

My Newark Story's photography archive also includes a collection of "personal objects,"

photos in which individuals hold objects up to the camera, with their faces excluded from the

frame. The photos are simultaneously anonymous and intimate: the objects are random enough

that they feel incredibly personal, and the photos' accompanying summaries include quotes from

the individuals that describe the greater significance of the object. For example, one photo shows

an individual holding a Statue of Liberty clock. The attached description reads: "Porque nos

recordó los primeros días que vinimos, nos mostró el futuro que tendriamos en los Estados

Unidos"[43] / Because it reminded us of the first few days we came, it showed us the future we would

have in the United States; It was a gift / regalo."[44] Another photo shows an individual with their

back to the camera, holding two thumbs up and wearing a red hoodie that reads, "Once an East

---

[41] "Family Photographs," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/velez-lopez%3A502d88d5-526b-43d8-a261-e79989cb0481.

[42] "Family Photographs," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/velez-lopez%3Add2482a7-1713-45c5-b61a-315fd6310da4.

[43] Text originally appeared as "Porque nos recuercia los primeros dias vinimos. Muestro el future que tener en Estados Unidos."

[44] "Clock/Reloj," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/ironboundhistoryharvest%3A94221254-2441-4436-877d-4f0605bc4761.

Sider, Always an East Sider!" The caption describes: "It represents my connection to the Ironbound. I have spent my whole career at ESHS. Got the object at work, through a sports team."[45] The Ironbound is Newark's predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, located on Newark's east side. Similarly, another photo shows a person holding a small figurine of a Brazil racing helmet, with the caption, "Compre na Brazil" / I bought it in Brazil. "Lembranca se qui ficotiva" / "Memory that is physical."[46] The descriptor "memory that is physical" captures the essence of many of these personal objects photos—they create what Cvetkovich has referred to as an "archive of feelings," a collection that "blurs conventional distinctions between archives and collections by claiming archival status for collections that might otherwise be seen as personal rather than public."[47] *My Newark Story* uses these personal objects to historicize the city of Newark as one that is diverse and layered. The individuals in these photos express pride in their connections to their home countries and to their city, and in turn the archive historicizes Newark's immigration and culture through the inclusion of these objects. As contemporary materials, these objects are also important for picking up where many white narratives of the riots leave off. They reveal the experiences of Newark's communities following the mid-century white flight.

As previously mentioned, the Newark Public Library received the grant for *My Newark Story* with the intention of "promoting literacy" in Newark's public schools. On their home pages, the archive includes a list of "Literary Resources," which include lesson plans, book lists, and activities. Many of the lesson plans are scavenger hunts that encourage students to explore different areas of the digital archives; some of them echo the histories that the archive documents. Many of

---

[45] "ESHS Hoodie," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/ironboundhistoryharvest%3Aa0c44aec-ace8-40bf-8499-a6bc58f52f5f.
[46] "Camisa de Brazil/Shirt and Helmet of Brazil," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/ironboundhistoryharvest%3Accdddd334-bc3a-4801-b764-1b00ebdddb62.
[47] Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects," 274.

these lesson plans also seem to be an attempt to shift Newark's history of the 1960s and the riots away from narratives of violence and instead attempt to foster communal knowledge-building.

The lesson plans examined here encourage students to think about their identities in relation to race, ethnicity, and geographical location, but promote differences in ways that have the potential to ignore how oppression functions across these differences. This is where we see the emergence of Melamed's "liberal multiculturalism": the lesson plans and activities often promote diversity and representation while seemingly insisting that these differences do not necessarily impact the way one relates to and functions within society. For example, one plan titled "I'm New Here" has students read a story of the same name about three different students who immigrated from Guatemala, Korea, and Somalia and who "through self-determination and with encouragement from their peers and teachers . . . learn to feel confident and comfortable in their new school without losing a sense of their home country, language, and identity."[48] In other words, the story presents an ideal and balanced assimilation narrative. After reading the story, students learn how to say *hello* in different languages to make new students feel more "at home" in their school. Students are also asked to draw maps and pictures of their neighborhood in Newark to help these new students navigate these spaces. This lesson plan not only promotes forms of multiculturalism that are grounded in affect (people may have differences but through positive emotions and effort we can learn to accept and relate to them), it also encourages students to positively identify Newark with home.

Similarly, a lesson plan titled "Mixed Me" asks that students read a fictional story about Mike, "a young mixed-race boy embracing what is unique about him." The lesson plan includes quotes from the story such as "Mom and Dad say I'm a blend of dark and light / we mixed you

---

[48] Anne. Sibley O'Brien, "Lesson Plan for Grade 1–4, I'm New Here," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://npl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ImNewHere.pdf.

perfectly, and got you just right," and "Mike has awesome hair . . . his parents love him. And Mike is the perfect blend of the two of them."[49] Lesson plans such as these, unlike the materials found in *Old Newark*, acknowledge that Newark is a racialized space. But this primarily occurs through an embrace of multicultural ideals that, in this case, verge on fetishism. Many of the lesson plans within the *My Newark Story* archive function in this way: they suggest that embracing love and respect can help one overcome oppressive forces.

Through their engagement with multiculturalism, the lesson plans attached to this archive tend to flatten the complexity of the library's digital collections. While the archive emphasizes systemic racism, cultural difference, and affective memories in a multitude of ways, the accompanying lesson plans seem to mitigate or even erase the work done by the archive. If these lesson plans are a product of the archive (they are intended to encourage engagement and knowledge production with and through the archive), then what are Newark's public school students gaining through exploring the archive in this way? How can these forms of engagement be potentially limiting, both in terms of what parts of the archive are explored and what is learned through this exploration? How do these lesson plans potentially reproduce neoliberal narratives of hard work and upward mobility that erase the role of systemic oppression? And finally, how might these lesson plans and the goals they promote return us to the child in the Amazon campaign video, himself a product and result of these forms of affective multiculturalism? These are the questions raised through examining the gap that emerges between the Newark Public Library's digital collections and the lesson plans they produce. As Melamed argues, contemporary multiculturalism is always entangled with neoliberal institutions; under neoliberalism, multiculturalism "has responded to the reconfiguration of state powers and boundaries under global capitalism by

---

[49] Taye Diggs, "Lesson Plan for Grade 1–4, Mixed Me," Newark Public Library Digital Collections, https://npl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/MixedMeLessonPlan.pdf.

portraying the United States as an ostensibly multicultural democracy and the model for the entire

world."[50] Newark's neoliberal projects must therefore be understood as wound up with

multicultural projects that may present superficial emphases on diversity. While the Newark Public

Library's digital collections offer an extensive history of the city's racial histories, *My Newark

Story*'s lesson plans and their engagement with multiculturalism tend to simplify or reduce these

histories to simple narratives.

Narrating Newark's Future

In this article, I've examined how Newark's affective histories are currently being

reproduced in the city's digital archives. *Old Newark* and *My Newark Story* are important for

understanding how affect is used by and for distinct groups—former white Newarkers and the

city's contemporary communities of color, respectively—to describe the city's violent histories of

oppression and navigate relationships to race and ethnicity. As Newark continues to serve as a site

for neoliberal policy development, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand how affective

histories are used to cast the city's communities as either violent and unruly or as helpless and

misunderstood.

These archives and their relationship to affect are helpful for understanding not only how

narratives of Newark are circulating, but also have important implications for archival studies more

broadly. *Old Newark* and *My Newark Story* raise questions about how affect functions within

archives that are intended to build community among ethnic groups. They reveal how affect seeps

into and out of the seemingly neutral and objective confines of the archive. These two archives

serve as important reminders that history's emotional landscapes should be confronted and

interrogated rather than ignored. Doing so opens up possibilities for understanding how emotions

---

[50] Melamed, xxi.

attach themselves to historical events, and how emotions differ across identities and periods in time. The two archives examined here ultimately offer a case study for how geography's transformations are often narrated through affective language and gestures, especially as these changes pertain to patterns of white flight, urban decline, and gentrification.

Shannon Mooney is a PhD candidate in English and American studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she studies contemporary multiethnic literature and popular culture. Her dissertation examines the emergence of literary and popular texts set in New Jersey at the turn of the twenty-first century.