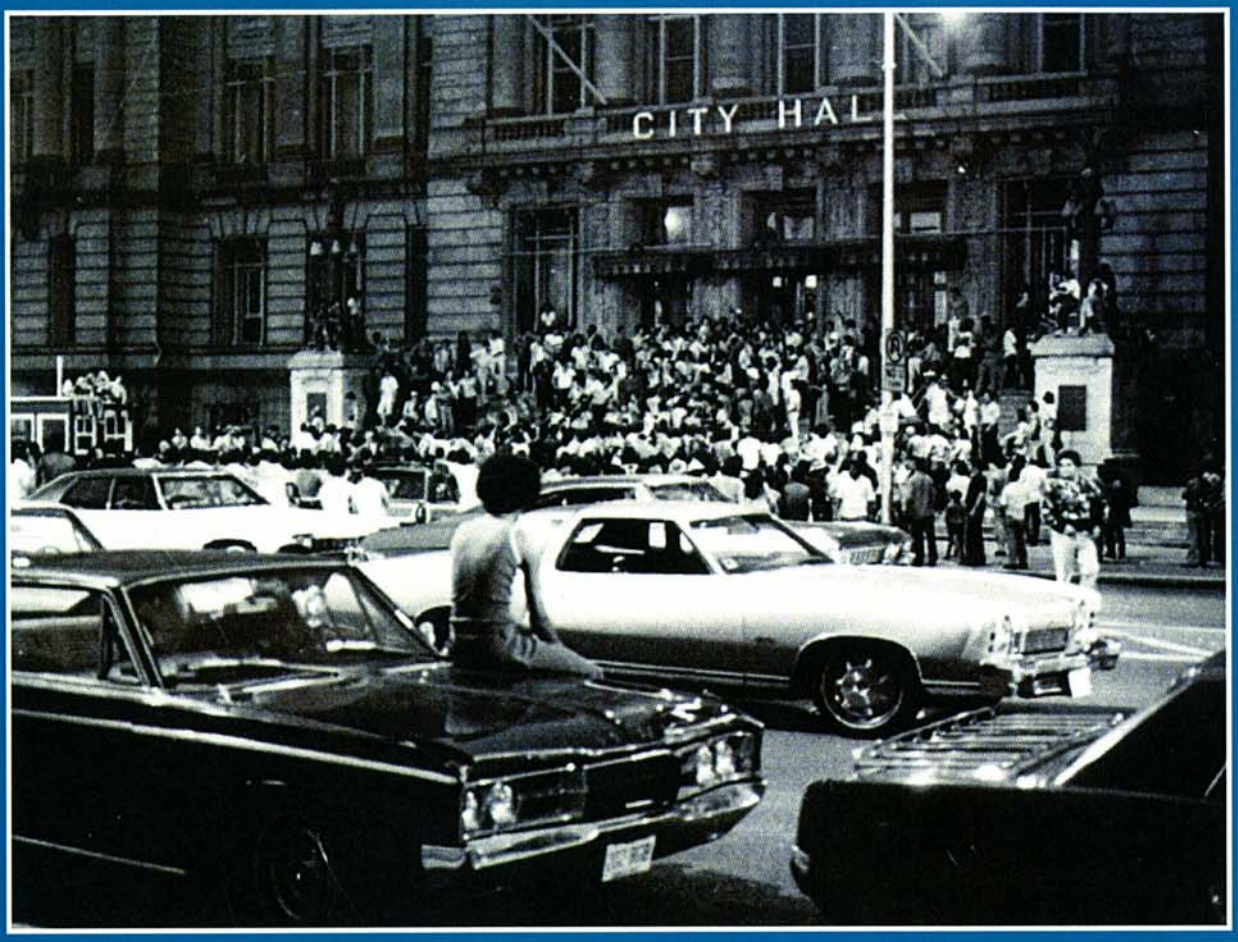

Newark '74

Remembering the Puerto Rican Riots - An Unexamined History

October 1 - December 31, 2014

An Exhibition at The Newark Public Library
5 Washington Street, Newark, NJ 07102
Fourth Floor Gallery

This exhibit collects materials that document the series of "Latino riots" that occurred in New Jersey in the 1960s and 1970s. These "riots" are a mostly forgotten period of New Jersey state history.

For more information please contact Yesenia López at 973/733-4791 or ylopez@npl.org.

Curated by Yesenia López and Elizabeth Parker with the assistance of archival assistant, Juber Ayala.

This program is co-sponsored by the Friends of the HRIC.

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NEW JERSEY COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

THE NEWARK PUBLIC LIBRARY

www.npl.org

by Elizabeth Parker

Associate Archivist, Puerto Rican Community Archive, New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library

This article is a Garden State Legacy "Special" issued on its own, separate from our regularly-scheduled magazine for two reasons.

One is so that it can be sent out prior to the closing of the exhibit currently at the Newark Public Library until December 31, 2014 (the next issue of GSL is due December 15th which is too late!).

But the other is because it tells the story of events in New Jersey's history that have not received the attention they deserve. This reflects on a theme GSL has been interested in for some time - how the NJ history community engages with (or fails to engage with) the emerging Hispanic communities as well as other often under-represented groups.

Please check out this exhibit if you are in the Newark area! But if you can't, this piece will at least give you an idea of an event in our recent history that is in danger of being forgotten at a time when we need to remember most.

- Gordon Bond
Founder & ePublisher
www.GardenStateLegacy.com

Currently on exhibit through December 31, 2014 at the Newark Public Library, "Newark '74: Remembering the Puerto Rican Riots—An Unexamined History," seeks to bring attention to a mostly unremembered and generally unstudied period of New Jersey's history. During the 1960s and 1970s, the urban centers of the United States convulsed in a series of disturbances that are most commonly referred to as "race riots." The conflagrations of Detroit, Los Angeles, Camden, and Newark, to name a few, are well remembered and the subject of a great deal of scholarly examination. What is less remembered—and in fact in some cases is almost entirely forgotten—is during the same period of time, similar disturbances also occurred in Latino (predominantly Puerto Rican) communities.

The underlying causes of these uprisings are very similar to those that lead to the African-American "race riots" of the same period, and the damage caused, both to the communities and their neighborhoods, just as dramatic—yet for a myriad of reasons, these "Latino riots" have faded into relative obscurity. As a great many of these riots occurred in the Puerto Rican communities of New Jersey, the Puerto Rican Community Archive at the Newark Public Library is exhibiting the Bloomfield College travelling exhibit "Newark '74: Remembering the Puerto Rican Riots" with additional materials added to show how this is indeed, as the subtitle says, "An Unexamined History."

It is the purpose of the exhibit to bring forth the memory of these events and to place them in their historical context in the annals of New Jersey's history. In addition to providing information on the riots themselves, the exhibit also documents how the events are slowly being confined to the ash heap of history: unremembered, unremarked, and soon forgotten unless steps are taken to preserve the historical record and scholars are able to examine it.

The Puerto Rican Riots and the founding of the Puerto Rican Community Archive

Before turning to the discussion of the exhibit and the events it documents, it is interesting to note the connection the Latino riots of New Jersey—specifically the 1974 Newark Puerto Rican Riots—

have with the creation of the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center (NJHRIC) at the Newark Public Library (NPL). In 1999, Ingrid Betancourt, the Coordinator of Multi-Cultural Services at the NPL, organized a panel presentation about the 1974 Newark Puerto Rican Riots on their 25th anniversary. One of the people she asked to participate was Dr. Olga Jiménez Wagenheim, history professor at Rutgers University. Dr. Wagenheim was not familiar with the riots, but agreed to participate and conducted her own background research using newspaper clippings and conducting oral histories with witnesses to the riot in order to prepare for this event.[1] Having conducted this introductory research, Dr. Wagenheim concluded that the Puerto Rican riots would be an ideal topic to pursue with her undergraduate students in a course called "Documenting Caribbean Communities," a class designed to teach students how to document and research the histories of communities that were under-represented in the historical record, generally through conducting oral histories and researching newspaper accounts of the disturbances. It was the result of this class's efforts that Dr. Wagenheim was able to mount her own presentation on the riots in 2000, "Recovering New Jersey's Hispanic History: The Puerto Rican Riots in Newark, 1974." Some examples of the students' work is being displayed in "Newark '74: Remembering the Puerto Rican Riots—An Unexamined History."

Because of the relationship forged between Ingrid Betancourt and Dr. Wagenheim due to their shared interest in spreading information on the history of the Puerto Rican riots, Dr. Wagenheim approached the Newark Public Library with an idea to create an archive to document Latino communities in New Jersey. Her desire to do so sprung from the fact that she was planning to retire from Rutgers and wanted to ensure her large collection of materials would go to a repository that could house them. Having discovered over the course of her career just how quickly the histories of these communities were being lost, she wanted to be able to make the materials accessible to the very community they documented. The Latino riots, and their almost unremembered place in history, served as an important catalyst. Thus, through the hard work and partnership of Dr. Wagenheim, Ingrid Betancourt, and the late Dr. Paul Stellhorn, also of the NPL, the NJHRIC was created, ensuring

that a repository existed to prevent the loss of the history of so many vibrant New Jersey communities.[2]

The NJHRIC is a three tiered organization comprised of the *Sala Hispanoamericano,* the largest collection of Spanish language library materials in New Jersey; the Hispanic Reference Collection, a collection of scholarly materials dedicated to documenting the history of Latino communities in New Jersey, the backbone of which is the Latino Oral History Collection; and the Puerto Rican Community Archive (PRCA), which is dedicated to collecting, housing and preserving the history of the Puerto Rican communities in New Jersey.[3] It the presence of the first tier, and the numerous services it offers to the Latino community that convinced Dr. Wagenheim that the NPL would be the ideal place to create and house the latter two tiers. It is imperative when thinking about the preservation of community history and memory that the community itself has access to their own history and community memory, and a public library offered that in a way that was potentially less intimidating than academic repositories and historical societies might be.

The subtitle of the NPL's exhibit, "An Unexamined History," is key to understanding the main thrust of this exhibit, and how it ties into the mission of the NJHRIC. As will be discussed below, the Latino riots in New Jersey remain an unexamined, and almost unremembered, chapter in the state's history. This is due in large part to the absolute dearth of materials documenting the events as well as the almost total lack of scholarship in investigating them. Riots in pre-dominantly Puerto Rican communities erupted again and again through the 1960s and 1970s all over the state, yet very few people beyond those who witnessed them or have been told stories about them have any awareness of this. It is only through collecting what extant materials remain, providing access to them and recording the recollections of witnesses of these events can historians then examine this topic and bring these events into the historical record. As it stands, there is only one article, "Hispanic Rioting during the Civil Rights Era" by Gregg Lee Carter[4] that addresses this phenomenon at all. Although there a few other pieces examining Latino riots in other cities, such as Chicago and Los Angeles, the lack of scholarship on this topic is pervasive.

Table #1

The Newark Puerto Rican Riots of 1974 have been the subject of two different classes at local colleges. In 2000, Dr. Olga J. Wagenheim, Rutgers-Newark, taught a class on documenting local communities that resulted in her students creating original research from primary sources about the 1974 Riots. This research was presented to the community at the event "Recovering New Jersey's Hispanic History: The Puerto Rican Riots in Newark, 1974," which included a panel discussion with eye-witnesses of the events. In 2014, Professor Michelle Chase, Bloomfield College, taught a class designed to have the students research the Puerto Rican Riots and create an exhibit marking the 40th Anniversary of the Newark Puerto Rican Riots. The students designed and mounted their exhibit "Newark '74: Remembering the Puerto Rican Riots" at Bloomfield College Library before it traveled to the Newark Public Library.

Pedro Regalado of Loyola University Chicago, now a doctoral candidate at Yale, who wrote his senior honors thesis on the 1971 Camden Puerto Rican Riots, commented on the lack of scholarly resources available:

> Though similar to Camden's unrest, the incidents in Philadelphia, Detroit, and Newark have gained a more prevalent focus from historians because of their African American, racially charged nature that fall under the umbrella of "race riots" during the 1960s and 1970s. The riots in Camden, on the other hand, although they occurred within the same decade, were led by a Hispanic population rather than an African American one. As a result, they have entered a state of scholarly ambiguity in contemporary records of this era.[5]

The blog he created to document his independent research "Camden Riots Research Project":

(http://camdenriots.blogspot.com)

was one of the few scholarly sources found during preparation for this exhibit. In fact, in regards to the Latino riots of New Jersey, the scholarship that this exhibit started with was produced by college students.

Student Work

Bloomfield College professor Michelle Chase approached the archivists at the PRCA in the fall of 2013, interested in examining the primary source materials on the Puerto Rican community of New Jersey to use in a class she was planning to teach in Spring 2014. Her idea was to allow her students to conduct independent research on a topic of her choosing and to mount an exhibit containing the information they gathered. During her perusal of the collections, Professor Chase came across the work of an earlier group of undergraduates in the papers of Dr. Olga Wagenheim that documented their research on the Newark Puerto Rican Riots of 1974. Realizing that September 2014 marked the 40th anniversary of these events, she determined that the topic was ideal. Like Dr. Wagenheim before her, Professor Chase was largely unfamiliar with the events that occurred in Newark, as well as in other cities in New Jersey.

Using the materials in Dr. Wagenheim's papers, which consisted primarily of newspaper clippings about the riots, and other materials and clippings found in the NPL's New Jersey Information Center, Professor Chase and her students were able to recreate the narrative of events that led to the disturbances. Also using the newspaper clippings to identify photographs of the events, the class was able to contact the photographs' copyright holders to obtain permission to display images in their exhibit. This exhibit, initially displayed at Bloomfield College from May through August, 2014, served as the core of the current exhibit at the NPL.

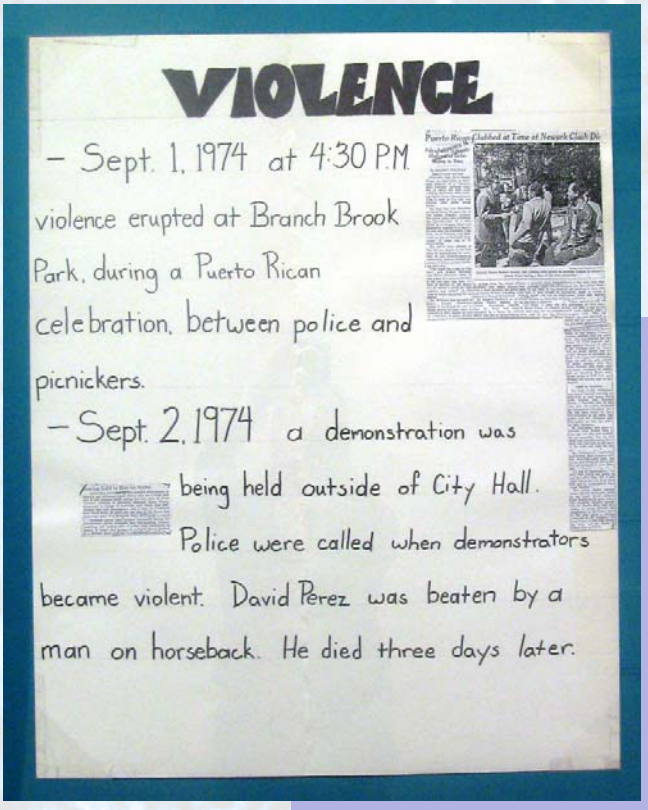
Describing the demographic make-up of Newark in 1974 and highlighting the vibrant and growing Puerto Rican community, Professor Chase's class also touched on issues such as the election of Newark's first African-American Mayor, Kenneth Gibson, and the role the Puerto Rican community played. They also draw attention to the levels of poverty, police brutality, racism, inter-ethnic tensions, and disenfranchisement the Puerto Rican community was faced with.

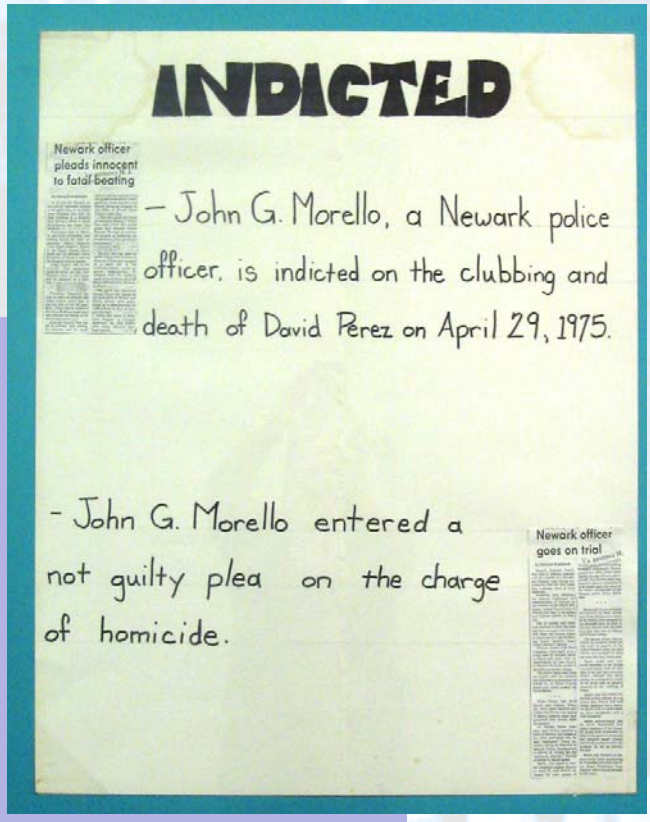
Table #2

The Puerto Rican Riots of New Jersey are a largely unexamined chapter in the state's history. On display are search results showing the dearth of information found on the topic. Quotes from Gregg Carter and Pedro Regalado offer possible reasons as to why. Most of the selected books make a brief mention of the riots but only as to how they relate to the books' broader topics.

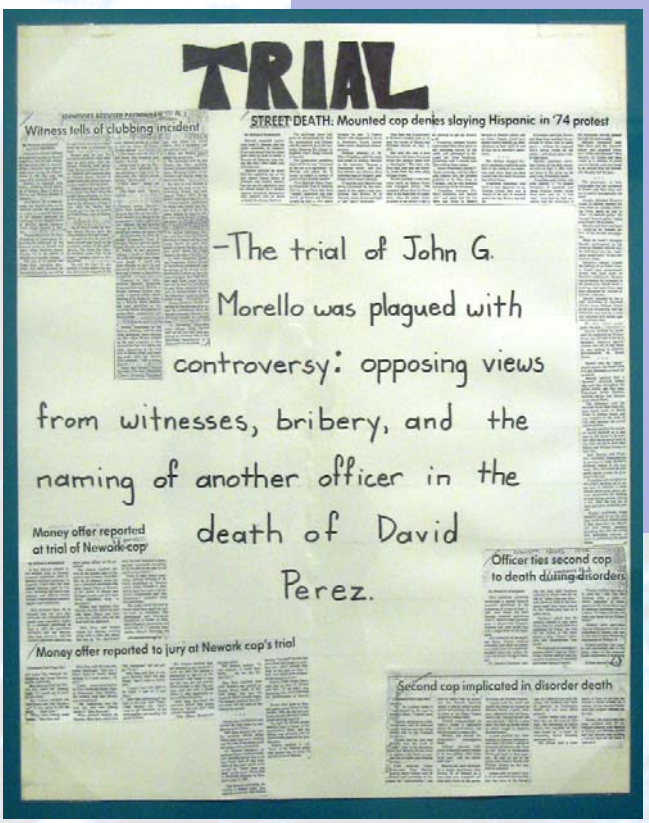
In September 1974, the bubbling frustrations of the Puerto Rican community finally erupted at a celebration, *Fiestas Patronales,* at Branch Brook Park, familiarly referred to as *el Parque de Leones*—Lions' Park, because of the stone lion statues by the lake—when mounted park police officers rode into the midst of a crowd, overturning a dominos table, and, according to a rumor that quickly spread through the crowd, trampling a little girl. Things quickly spiraled out of control, with the police reportedly attacking any person they identified as "Puerto Rican" while the festival attendees tried to either escape the chaos or stand their ground against a force which, to many in the community, had trampled over their rights one too many times. Seeking to avoid a repeat of the catastrophic riots of 1967, Mayor Gibson sped to the park to stand between the police and the festival attendees. He promised to hear the complaints and grievances of the community, and they marched to City Hall to begin the process of negotiations. The march was successful; the negotiations were not. As tensions continued to rise, violence between the protestors and the police erupted, and four days of violence followed.

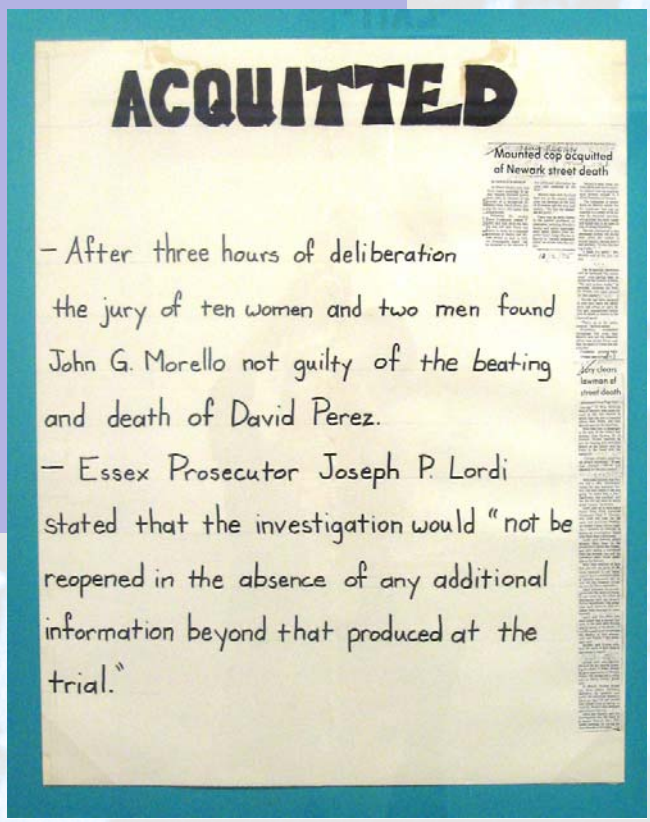
The materials chosen by Professor Chases' class document key moments during these events. However, wanting to place these materials in the broader historical context, the staff of the PRCA selected materials from their collections and conducted research in other sources to locate additional items to do so. The Newark '74





Student posters created for Dr. Wagenheim's presentation on the riots in 2000, "Recovering New Jersey's Hispanic History: The Puerto Rican Riots in Newark, 1974."





Riot was not an isolated incident, but part of a larger series of little-studied disturbances that took place across New Jersey, making it necessary to find the records to document that broader context for the public.

Photos from the *Sister Deborah Humphreys - Papers and the El Club del Barrio - Records* depicting damaged, abandoned houses in Newark being rebuilt by the community after the riots in the late 1970s.

First, the materials from Dr. Wagenheim's class that inspired Professor Chase were examined and selected for inclusion in the exhibit. The materials from this class that are included in the exhibit include photographs of student work and of the panel presentation that Dr. Wagenheim and her students put on in 2000. The panel discussion was between witnesses Raúl Dávila, Sigfredo Carrion, and William Sánchez. They provided their personal recollections of the events and their involvement as community leaders. Additional materials from this class include a timeline of events, displayed on posters with newspaper clippings, created by the students.

Scholarly Research and Community Images

One of the biggest hindrances to curating this exhibit, or even of studying these riots in any depth, is the dearth of scholarly research on the subject. Performing a cursory search in an academic database such as JSTOR, it is quickly discovered that it is easier to find information on Ancient Roman magical practices than it is to find information on these events. This is best illustrated by the results of any extant research on this topic. Displayed in the exhibit are a number of local histories together with brief summaries of how they describe the "Latino riots." Unfortunately, in almost every case, the riots warrant no more than a few cursory paragraphs, if indeed they are mentioned at all. The one exception is Robert Curvin's book, perhaps because he was a community activist in Newark and very familiar with the events of 1974.

As for other scholarly resources, searches also prove fruitless. Using major academic search databases such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Project MUSE, only one article on the riots, mentioned above, was discovered.[6]

Photo from the *Eliu Rivera - Papers shows a P.A.C.O. (Puertorriqueños Asociados for Community Organization, Inc.)* community outreach activity in Jersey City, 1970, the year of the "disorder."

Part of the difficulty in researching these events is a lack of consistency in how people and sources refer to them. This is especially germane given that the sources that exist to study the riots are primarily oral histories and newspaper articles that demonstrate a wide variety of terminologies to discuss the events.

What must be remembered is that even though the scholarly community may have overlooked the study of these events, and the general populace has let them fade from their minds, the communities that experienced these disturbances did not have that luxury; included in the exhibit are some photographs of Puerto Rican communities in Newark and in Jersey City that document that reality.

Why Not Call it a Riot?

One of our best resources for studying the riots are the people who witnessed them. By interviewing people and creating oral histories, historians are able to preserve first person accounts of these events. Part of the NJHRIC's Hispanic Reference Collection, the Latino Oral History Collection: http://www.npl.org/Pages/Collections/njhric/LatinoOralHistory.html contains oral histories of prominent members of the Puerto Rican community that witnessed these disturbances and were willing to document their experiences in recorded interviews. One fact that becomes apparent when listening to the oral histories, and is supported by reading contemporary newspaper accounts of these events, is that there is no common terminology for these events. They are referred to as riots, disturbances, disorders, uprisings, and violence. This is one of the factors that make it so difficult to research. When searching through online databases or newspaper

Table #3

One of the best resources for studying these events is the people who witnessed them. By conducting oral histories with these eye-witnesses, we are able to capture their memories of the riots that would otherwise be lost to the historical record. Each narrator has their own recollections of what they witnessed (full audio clips of their narratives may be found on the Newark Public Library's website), but taken together they form a more holistic view. One of the themes that emerge when talking to witnesses, and in reading accounts from newspaper clippings, is that the "riots" are called many things including "disorders" and "disturbances." Even the witnesses themselves vary on how to refer to these events. A lesson about insurance liability learned in the aftermath of the 1967 Newark Riot might provide one answer to the question, "Why not call it a 'riot'?"

archives, trying combinations of these different terms will result in reports of different events each time. The "Latino riot" that took place in Jersey City in 1971 is a "disorder"; the "Latino Riot" in 1970 in Hoboken is a "clash." [7]

As for the witnesses themselves, they also refer to these events with a variety of terms. Carmen Martínez, a social worker, said in reference to the Camden Riot in 1971, "I think people blame the Puerto Rican community for that [the riots]. I was there the day the riots started . . . I mean, if it was going to be a riot people wouldn't have [brought] babies and carriages and all. It was a group, it was peaceful . . . All of a sudden cops came out throwing tear gas. And we, I was there that day and that was not to be a—that was not [meant] to be, este, un riot . . . I experienced it, nobody told me, I was there, and I got on my knee and I started to shake because my two girls were with me, you know." [8] Judge Joseph Rodríguez, also discussing the Camden Riot of 1971, called it both a "Puerto Rican riot" and "the Camden Disturbance of 1971." [9] Felipe Chavana, an attorney who worked on behalf of the victims after the 1974 Newark Riot called the event "police riots,"[10] while Miguel Rodríguez, a mayoral aide at the time of the Newark '74 riots, called the event "*un pequeño motín* [a little riot]."[11]

But, the observation of William Sánchez, witness to the 1974 Newark Riots, should be noted:

> The 1974 riots in Newark [New Jersey]—and there are people still today who say there were no riots in 1974. Obviously, no one wants to—can explain the trampling of people by policeman and horses, the people who died in the streets . . . But because of what happened, '74 became a simple disturbance. It wasn't a simple disturbance, it was a riot . . . So a lot of people got arrested, people got hurt, people died. But to then turn around and say there was no riot; that's the part I don't get. What do you mean there was no riot? There was a riot, you know, okay, maybe it didn't take the whole City of Newark, but a large portion of the Puerto Ricans that were out there, wouldn't be out there if there wasn't anything—if they weren't upset about what happened in the park . . . No, there needed to be an action taken. The action meant that somewhere, somehow, the city had to give back. [12]

As for why officially, these events are not referred to as riots, Ronald Porambo, the author of the book "No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark," an account of the 1967 Newark riot and its aftermath, has a possible answer: insurance. The liability of cities and insurance companies is highly dependent upon what an event is referred to, and after Newark was forced to pay huge sums of money to property owners after 1967, the instinct to refer to these events by names other than "riot" may have been strong and financially motivated.[13] On the other hand, the lack of a well-known narrative about these events may also be attributed to the community itself. At the two events celebrating the opening of this exhibit at Bloomfield College and again at the NPL, audience members of Puerto Rican descent commented that they had never heard of these uprisings, and that their parents, in one case, had intentionally kept them uninformed. This may be due to a point raised by Robert M. Zecker in his article, "'We Never Locked Our Doors at Night': Newark on the 'Net, Minus the Mob":

> Memory is communally created by ethnic and religious groups. Yet buried within the consensus historical narrative these communities create are often silences on matters too shameful or painful to confront.[14]

Table #4

Puerto Rican communities formed around industrial and agricultural towns throughout New Jersey. Although the communities may have been geographically diverse, they each faced the same economic, social, and political issues that eventually led to a 'riot' in the '60s & '70s. Primary sources, such as newspaper coverage of the riots that were occurring provide the most comprehensive coverage. They demonstrate the broadest view and scope of the riots that took place throughout most Puerto Rican communities of New Jersey during the 1960s and 1970s.

Newspaper Clippings—Where were the riots?

The final piece of the Newark '74 exhibit is helping to demonstrate that this was just one of many "Latino riots" that occurred across New Jersey. Because examination of these events requires the researcher to delve into primary sources using a variety of search terminology, it is hard to determine an exhaustive list. Gregg Lee Carter, in his article "Hispanic Rioting During the Civil Rights Era," gathered data on a number of "Latino riots," but his time frame stops in 1971, and is by no means exhaustive. Additionally, as he was comparing the "Latino riots" and "race riots," his interest is in mapping the social conditions in which the riots occurred and the timing of the events. In addition to the Newark '74 Puerto Rican Riots, there were uprisings in the New Jersey communities of Lakewood (1971), Long Branch (1973) and Elizabeth (1975, the Cuban community), as well as a second round of disturbances in Hoboken (1971).

Additional disturbances can undoubtedly be found by researching local newspapers in municipalities that had a significant and established Puerto Rican/Latino population. Even for the relatively well known and large scale uprisings, such as Camden '71 and Newark '74, the best sources for research other than speaking to witnesses are the newspapers of record, the Camden *Courier-Post* and the Newark *Star-Ledger.* However, unlike the *New York Times*, these newspapers have not been digitized, so

any further inquiry into the events requires that the researcher physically travel from place to place and then dig through microfilm copies of the papers. While this certainly needs to be done by any scholar interested in doing in depth research, it does create yet another barrier to the more casual student of history, making it that much more likely that these events will fade into obscurity.

Conclusion: My History Too

In GSL22 (December 2013), Gordon Bond wrote a piece called "My History Too: Introduction" in which he discussed how the New Jersey history community needed to take into consideration the ways in which the diverse communities that live in this state interact with its history. He specifically discussed the various Latino communities in New Jersey and how, in his opinion, there is a "disconnect" between the Latino populace and the history community. In response to his call for a greater examination of this issue, I wrote a piece from GSL23 (March 2014) about a prominent New Jerseyan who also happened to be a Puerto Rican, a lesbian, a feminist, and community activist ("Hilda A. Hidalgo, PhD., Puerto Rican, Latina, Lesbian, Feminist, New Jerseyan"). In his article in the same issue ("My History Too: New Wave"), Mr. Bond quoted a question I posed in my article: "Perhaps the question that should be posed to the New Jersey history community should not be how to address how the Latino community will affect it, but rather why this group has been so thoroughly excised from the historic narrative and how alienating that has been to the Latino communities of New Jersey."[15]

The "Latino riots" of the 1960s and 1970s in the state of New Jersey are a major and important event in this state's history, yet they remain unexamined, unstudied, and almost forgotten. One could, in fact, say that they have been "excised" from the historical narrative. While I do not make any claim that this is an intentional or malicious oversight, it does speak to how the perceived "otherness" of those communities that are not white can influence how their history, which is New Jersey's history too, can be relegated so far into the background that it can seem as if they were never part of the narrative at all. Having arrived at this realization, perhaps the renewed focus on these events can serve

as a "call to arms" about how we examine the historical narrative and where we can turn our focus in the future.

1. Wagenheim, Olga Jiménez. (2011). *Rescuing Our Latino Legacy, The Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library: The Community That Made It Possible.* Newark, NJ: Friends of the HRIC, 2—3.
2. Ibid., 3—4.
3. For more information on the NJHRIC at the Newark Public Library, see http://njhric.npl.org.
4. Carter, Gregg Lee. (1992). "Hispanic Rioting during the Civil Rights Era." *Sociological Forum, vol. 7, no. 2.* Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/684312.
5. Regalado, Pedro. (2014). *End of Days: The "Puerto Rican" Riots of 1971* (Unpublished Senior Honors Thesis). Loyola University Chicago.
6. Database searches performed by author in August, 2014 using database access from the NPL and Columbia University Alumni Access to Library Resources.
7. "Jersey City tense after disorders." (6/13/1970), *New York Times.* "Hoboken remains tense after clash between Puerto Ricans and the police." (8/29/1970), *New York Times.*
8. Interview of Carmen L. Martínez by Yamil Avivi, 11/18/2007; Hispanic Reference Collection Latino Oral History: Latino Life Stories, 23–25.
9. Interview of Hon. Joseph H. Rodríguez by Yamil Avivi, 12/17/07; Hispanic Reference Collection Latino Oral History: Latino Life Stories, 11—12.
10. Interview of Felipe Chavana, Esq. by Karlha Matta, 3/30/2012; Hispanic Reference Collection Latino Oral History: The Justice Project, 11.
11. Interview of Miguel E. Rodríguez by Blanca Vega, 9/17/2007; Hispanic Reference Collection Latino Oral History: Latino Life Stories, 18.
12. Interview of William Q. Sánchez by Karlha Matta, 4/14/2012; Hispanic Reference Collection Latino Oral History: The Justice Project, 2–7.
13. Porambo, Ronald. (1971). *No Cause for Indictment: An autopsy of Newark.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 324—325.
14. Zecker, Robert M. (December 2008). "We Never Locked Our Doors at Night": Newark on the 'Net, Minus the Mob. *The Journal of American Culture, vol. 13, no. 4,* 368.
15. Parker, Elizabeth. (2014, March 23). Hilda A. Hidalgo: PhD, Puerto Rican, Latina, Feminist, New Jerseyan. *Garden State Legacy, 23.* Retrieved from http://gardenstatelegacy.com/files/Hilda_A-Hidalgo_Parker_GSL23.pdf, 3.

Newark '74 is a traveling exhibit and will available for hosting by other institutions after December 2014. If *your* institution would like to host/display this exhibit, contact co-curator and project archivist, Yesenia López at ylopez@npl.org or (973)733-4791.