

Different / Parallel Histories / Stories

African American Migration and Latin American Immigration

by Gerald Lenoir and Miriam Magaña Lopez

COMING INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM, the relationship of African American communities and various immigrant communities in the US was undeveloped, sometimes hostile. The dominant narrative that “immigrants are taking our jobs” held sway in African American communities because the visible reality was that many entry level jobs in the service, construction and other industries previously held by African Americans were being reserved by employers for immigrants, especially those from Mexico and several Central American and South American countries. Black immigrants from African and Caribbean countries were seen by many African Americans as competitors for the few affirmative action slots in employment and higher education allotted to the descendants of US enslaved Africans.

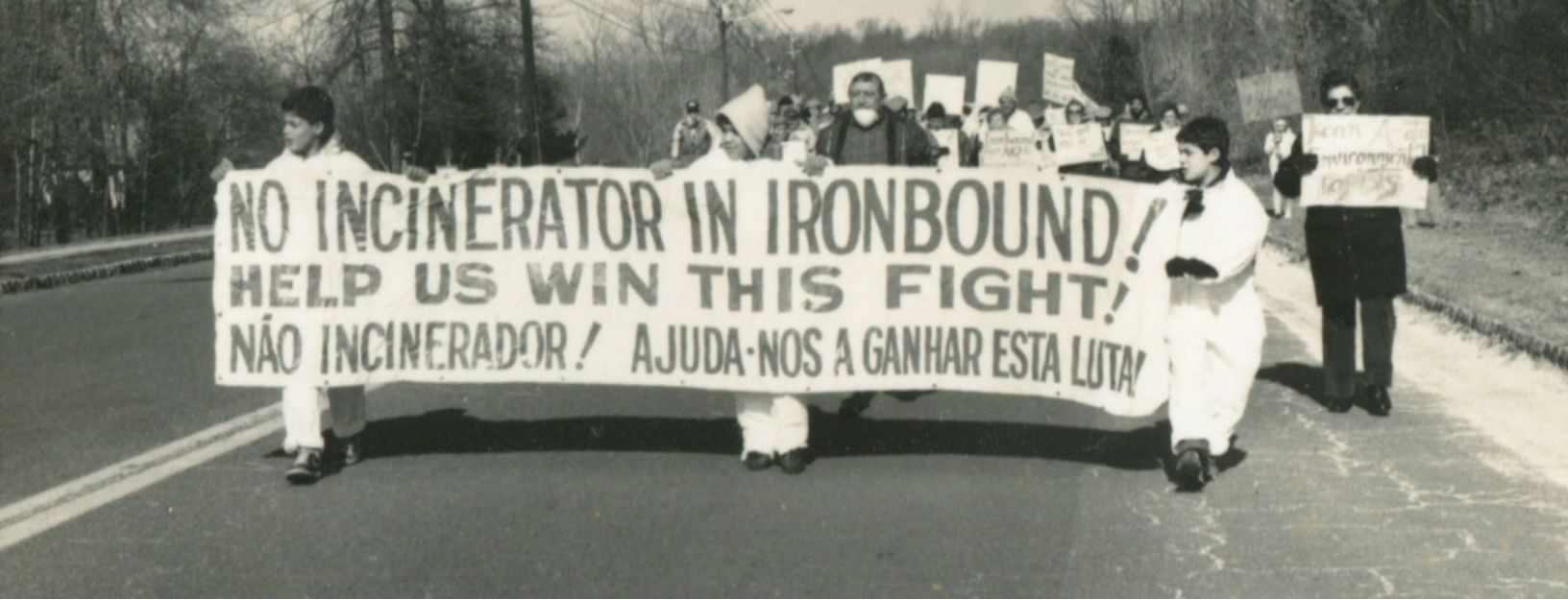
Although many of the immigrants came to the US with a sharp critique of US domination and subjugation in their countries and regions, many of them also came without knowledge or appreciation for the centuries-long battle against white supremacy that African Americans have spearheaded. Some even believed the dominant bootstrap narrative that claims that the reason many African Americans have not made it is because of their own lack of initiative, instead of the pervasive impact of structural racism.

The pitting of African Americans and immigrants against each other was a consciously devised strategy by right-wing billionaires, politicians and pundits to keep these communities separated and subjugated.

Within the immigrant rights movement, the orientation to building a multiracial, multinational social movement for immigrant rights and racial justice gave way to an important yet narrow goal of winning legalization for 12 million undocumented immigrants. Initially, the attention toward creating relations and a sense of shared struggle with African Americans was given short shrift.

This clash of communities and cultures came to a head in **Newark, New Jersey** in 2009. Newark is a city whose population is 50 percent African American and 30 percent immigrant. It has a long history of migration from Portugal and from Portuguese colonies in Africa, especially the Cape Verdean Islands, beginning in the twentieth century. Since 2000, immigrants and refugees from former Spanish colonies — Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and South American and Central American countries have come to Newark in large numbers.

In 2009, the **Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC)** was a 40-year-old institution serving Newark’s



Residents of Newark's Ironbound neighborhood protest against the construction of a garbage incinerator, circa 1984. The multilingual messaging reflects the diversity of the activist community in the Ironbound. Photo from the [Ironbound Community Corporation archive](#).

Ironbound neighborhood, the historic home of the Black community. Ironbound is also home to New Jersey's largest garbage incinerator, one of the country's most contaminated land sites. The neighborhood has both active and abandoned industrial facilities, and is in close proximity to flight paths and active truck routes. In hopes of addressing the resulting environmental degradation, ICC organized an Environmental Justice Program in the community and engaged both African American communities and Latin American immigrant communities.

In 2009, ICC partnered with the **Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)**. BAJI is the first Black-led immigrant rights organization in the US, founded in 2006 by a group of African Americans and African immigrants. It has a mission of engaging African Americans and other communities in a dialogue that leads to actions that challenge U.S. immigration policy and the underlying issues of race, racism, and economic inequity that frame it. In Newark, BAJI focused on bridging the divide between Latin American immigrants and African Americans, as well as movement building across communities and generations.

This is an account of how one effort to bridge communities started with a tragedy and turned into a triumph.

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Identifying a Breaking Dynamic

IN 2009, THE LEADERSHIP OF ICC called upon Gerald Lenoir, the Executive Director of BAJI, to help them address the simmering tensions—what we call a breaking dynamic—between the established African American community and newly-arrived Latinx immigrants, both of which were part of ICC’s Environmental Justice Program. A recent case of an undocumented Latino immigrant who was convicted of murdering an African American man had inflamed anxiety between the two communities, and tensions were evident in the program. A grieving, angry Black community tended to turn against immigrant communities as a whole, especially undocumented immigrants. These tensions manifested in the Environmental Justice Program meetings. Some African Americans complained about Spanish translations making the meetings too long and were reluctant to listen to the perspectives and opinions of immigrant members.

A breaking dynamic exists when one group turns against an ‘outsider’ group, and the threat of the out-group can build psychological or physical walls between the two groups. In this case, a breaking dynamic existed between the African American and Latinx immigrant community members (outsider group) who were participating in the Environmental Justice Program. Members of the African American community felt threatened by the newcomers (Latinx immigrants) and its impact was clear in the way they interacted, or did not, with one another, according to Luciana Lyde, an ICC organizer.

BREAKING is a response driven by fear and isolation, when we turn inward, only to what we know and who we know.

Action Toward Bridging

IN ORDER TO ADDRESS THE BREAKING DYNAMIC, the BAJI Executive Director Gerald Lenoir collaborated with ICC on a Black History Month program and an intentional bridging dialogue. Twenty-five African American residents of the Ironbound’s public housing projects attended the gathering. Gerald Lenoir facilitated the bridging programing and dialogue.

The program was structured into three thirty-minute sections, deliberately ordered to create a safe space for conversation. The first part of the program was a thirty-minute documentary film titled *Up South: African American Migration in the Era of the Great War* about the mass exodus of African Americans from Mississippi to Chicago during World War I. It chronicled the struggle against Jim Crow segregation, racism, and economic exploitation in the US South. It also documented the conditions that African American migrants faced in Chicago—substandard housing, low-wage work, blatant discrimination, and racial othering.

During the second part of the program, Gerald Lenoir shared the story of his mother’s family’s migration from New Orleans to Los Angeles during World War II, highlighting many of the same narrative elements portrayed in the documentary film. Gerald intentionally shared his story first to begin the dialogue, knowing that many of the people attending could identify with his family’s migration story. He talked openly about his family’s struggles in order to model a sense of vulnerability and frankness that he hoped would be carried into the discussion.

Gerald then invited the audience to share the migration stories of their families. African American participants opened up and told their stories without much prompting, chiming in one after another without much silence in between. It was a cathartic moment, with many of the participants detailing the oppressive conditions their families faced in the South and the racial othering they were met with in Newark.

The session was extraordinary in that many African Americans typically avoid recounting these stories. Oftentimes the unspoken code is: What happened in the South stays in the South. Because a safe space was created for the dialogue, folks shared the scars of segregation and the wounds that white supremacy had visited upon them and their families. Speaking about their personal history allowed African Americans in the group to feel heard and understood by others who shared similar family migration experiences. Additionally, it brought these stories to the forefront of the conversation which set up the next part of the programming.

On the third and last section of the gathering, Gerald presented on the topic, “Race, Immigration, and Globalization.” He compared the reasons why African Americans left the US South to why immigrants leave their home countries—violence, poverty, and

economic exploitation. He talked about the impact of globalization on African American communities, including how deindustrialization in the US in the 1970s coincided with the relocation of factories to Asia and Latin America, throwing many newly-hired African Americans out of work. He compared that with the impact of globalization on countries of the Global South, emphasizing how unfair US trade and aid policies, foreign and military policies, and US corporate dominance have distorted economies, supported repressive regimes, and forced people to migrate. He also talked about the common struggle the two groups have against racism and white supremacy.

The overall message was that African Americans have a different history, but also *parallel stories and a linked fate with Latinx immigrants and other immigrants of color.*

BRIDGING is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines. It addresses a breaking dynamic in order to develop a ***cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive “we”*** that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice.

To “bridge” involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines (such as race and/or power dynamics inherent within those social structures) of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity.

The new “we” need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a ***shared empathy and lasting stake in one another.*** All its members should also experience an authentic sense of belonging. Bridging rejects all strict “us versus them” framings, but without erasing what is different and unique in each party.

Gerald Lenoir (right) leads a group through a workshop on bridging dialogues.



Outcome — Moving Toward Belonging

THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM was immediate. The participants received the message and internalized it. This was evidenced by the ICC organizers reporting that the very same folks who complained about how long the Environmental Justice Program meetings took because of the need for Spanish translation were now the ones asking for better translation so that they could understand their Latinx neighbors. In addition, many of the African Americans began joining the marches and demonstrations against the building of a new immigrant detention facility in the county.

The intentionally crafted program and dialogue changed people's mindsets and heartsets. By combining story telling with political analysis,

African Americans were able to “see” their Latinx neighbors. Although not outlined in this written case, a similar process was conducted with Latin American immigrants, which focused on the racial exclusion and the positive contributions of African Americans in Newark. Their shared identity as migrants and their shared experience of racial othering and economic exploitation brought them to see their common ground, to see that they belonged to each other, despite their differences. ICC staff continued the political, social and cultural education to further the bridge building.

BELONGING describes values and practices where no person is left out of our circle of concern. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen or feeling included. It means that every member has a *meaningful voice*, that their *well-being* is considered, and that they have the *opportunity to participate* in the design of political, social, and cultural structures.

Belonging includes the right to both *contribute* and *make demands* upon society and political institutions.



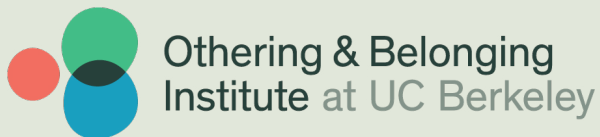
Gerald Lenoir (left), Nunu Kidane (center), and Rev. Kelvin Sauls (right) are the founders of Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). Gerald Lenoir was the first executive director of BAJI and facilitated the case outlined in this study. Photo courtesy of Nunu Kidane.

Further readings and resources

- For a rich written record of Black migration from the South during the twentieth century, read **Isabel Wilkerson's** *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2010) in which she tells the story of three individuals who left the South between 1937–1953.
- *Up South: African American Migration in the Era of the Great War* is a documentary by the American Social History Project which combines archival footage and moving narration to tell the story of solidarity, escape from the South, and racial violence in the North.
- To learn more about the work of the **Black Alliance for Just Immigration**, as well as their local struggles, campaigns, and coalitions, please visit their website at BAJI.org.

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“Brief History of the Ironbound” mural by Eder Muniz and Nicole Schulman, located at 413 Market Street in Newark, New Jersey.