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Interview with Nunu Kidane and Gerald Lenoir

Camilla Hawthorne and Jennifer Lynn Kelly
Transcribed by Andrea del Carmen Vázquez

In this interview, conducted on June 24, 2020, we asked Nunu Kidane and Gerald Lenoir to reflect on the resurgence of global uprisings against anti-Black racism, particularly against the backdrop of their decades of transnational activism and movement work across the Black diaspora.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

JK: What are your priorities right now in your activist work, in terms of this global uprising against anti-Black racism and racialized violence?

GL: This is an incredible era we are living through. Unprecedented. Probably the last time we had such a mass uprising was during the Civil War. I came of age in the 1960s, and so I was part of that uprising as a student and then as an organizer, but we have never seen anything like this. You know, a lot of the rebellions historically have come as a result of police brutality. In 1965, I was sixteen years old; I was living in Los Angeles when the first Watts Riots started. That was caused by an act of police brutality that sparked, at that time, the largest uprising in history in Los Angeles. Then in 1967, we had something like 109 uprisings in cities across the country, the overwhelming majority of them sparked by police brutality. President Johnson at that time commissioned the Kerner Commission. Their task was to find out what the root causes of the rebellions were and to recommend solutions. Well, they were extremely straightforward: the cause of the rebellions was white racism, and their recommendations were to pour literally billions of dollars into Black communities for education, job development, community development. None of those recommendations were implemented. Then in 1968, we had another round of social unrest with the assassination of Dr. King. This is when Richard Nixon was president, and similarly to what we are hearing from Trump today, this frame of “law and order” was his main mantra. That was really directed toward white constituencies in the South. Because whites in the South had abandoned the Democratic Party after the passage of the Civil Rights Bills and the Republicans decided that to capture that white constituency—they focused on suppressing the Black movement.

So now we are here. We also can't forget 1992, with the beating of Rodney King, the acquittal of those officers, and the uprising that happened in LA. This issue of police brutality is, in many instances, the last straw in our community. It's not just about that one murder of George Floyd; it's about the series of murders that have happened over the last ten or eleven years that we've seen on video. And it's not just about that. It is really about the systemic oppression of Black people in this country. What we are witnessing is a rebellion—not a riot, not demonstrations. We are witnessing a rebellion against a system that has oppressed Black people since they brought us over in chains. What is different about this moment is that it is garnering different levels of support from other communities across the world. And so, I think there's a different quality, and it's a time to really think about how we can push for systemic and transformational change in this country. That's the moment we are at. How it goes from here? We don't know, but it's certainly a whole different quality of uprising than we've seen.

NK: I definitely share everything that Gerald has said in terms of the unique moment we are in. Everyone has affirmed that this time is different. Not just in terms of the level of sustained protest and marches and demands but also of the existing grassroots groups that have been carrying this work a long time that have really lifted it up to a new and unprecedented level. I am also really, really hopeful, but also kind of apprehensive, I suppose,

and a bit fearful, even. As an immigrant, my serious protest involving police brutality was with the Rodney King affair back in the 1990s. My children were little, and I would take them with me to the protests. It wasn't just to teach them something; I really felt angry having witnessed the video. Something shifted and moved in me, which had been building up from the time my children were little and being followed in stores and all kinds of things that had happened to us as Black people. In 1992, there was also this feeling that this time was different, that we had marched in unprecedented numbers and pushed to hold the police accountable, only to have it blow up and all of the officers were acquitted. Everything went back more or less to "normal," so I'm fearful—not doubtful, but I am afraid—that we will go back to the place of complacency or people feeling, "Well, that is good. We showed them. That was a good protest," having gained an unprecedented level of not just news coverage but even members of Congress kneeling and other things that have never happened before. It has definitely opened up conversations among African communities that were holding space to tell us what is going on. So I would like to be hopeful, but I feel like I have been let down so many times before. I feel that I am a bit cynical when it comes to any type of lasting change unless some amount of violence is involved to an unprecedented level that makes this country finally face up to the injustices and brutality that have happened to Black people in the United States.

GL: The other thing about this moment is that it has been building since Trayvon Martin was murdered in 2012. After George Zimmerman was acquitted in 2013, the Black Lives Matter hashtag came about. The organizing didn't really start until Ferguson, across the country. The time from Ferguson to now has been spent by activists on the ground building organizations and reinforcing organizations that already existed and doing more political education and training. The infrastructure for our movements in Black communities is much stronger today than it was ten years ago. I think that that will help in terms of being able to sustain the movement. Maybe not necessarily the protests in the street on a day-to-day level, but *sustain* in the sense that young people stepping forward now can find a place to get the training and the support they need to continue the struggle. And so, I am hopeful that we can continue this momentum.

JK: We are curious as to how, as an organization *and* as individuals, you deal with the repetition of moments like this. I think that your poem,¹ Gerald, touches on this—responding to the question "How can this be?" with "white supremacy" over and over again. I think this point about the infrastructure of the organizing is one of those ways you confront these kinds of violent repetitions.

GL: One reason why I am hopeful is because in any uprising or social movement or revolutionary movement across the country, it really has been young people who have stepped up in taking the reins and bringing us to a whole other level. Just look at the civil rights movement, in Birmingham, when all seemed like it was lost, when all adults had already been jailed. The youngsters—the junior high and high school students asked Dr. King if they could march. Against the advice of some of his top advisors, Dr. King allowed those kids to march. They were able to take the civil rights movement to another level because of those news clips of youths being bitten by dogs and hosed with fire hoses. In South Africa, it was the same thing. Soweto in 1976 was really the beginning of the end of apartheid in South Africa, when those young people—again, junior high and high school and grade school students—marched in defiance. That really was the start of the downfall of white supremacy in South Africa. When young people stepped up after Trayvon Martin, and now they are stepping up again today, it's a good sign. It's exhilarating to me and hopeful.

CH: You mentioned South Africa, which helps us think about the condition of Black America alongside different struggles unfolding elsewhere in the Black diaspora. One of the reasons why we are so excited to talk to both of you is because of your positionalities and the ways you are working together. Gerald, you are African American; Nunu, you are Eritrean. You've both worked with the Priority Africa Network (PAN) and the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). I'm really interested in hearing about how you've come to understand questions of migration in relation to mobilization against anti-Blackness. How do you understand

the connection between the experiences of those who are descendants of enslaved Africans who arrived to the United States through one particular set of oceanic routes and more recent African diasporic migrations that are unfolding under different circumstances but that still share some parallels? And how does this in turn shape the way that you think about the connection between the project of Black liberation and the advancement of immigrant and refugee rights?

NK: We credit the origins of the Priority Africa Network with convening individuals who had been very active in the antiapartheid movement. People saw that the liberation of South Africa was directly connected to the struggle here in the United States. We wanted to bring that awareness and that analysis not just in the organization but as the impetus to many conversations that we wanted to have.

GL: A lot of us at Priority Africa Network come out of that tradition of African solidarity. I grew up in the era when the last specimens of settler colonialism and white supremacy on the Continent were being wiped away. We had direct contact with liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies—particularly Angola and Mozambique, in Zimbabwe, and in South Africa—so we were able to understand what the nature of white supremacy was in those countries and what their strategies were. We were able to share with each other how we were thinking about things in our contexts and what struggle looked like in our particular countries. We had a very real sense of the global nature of white domination and economic exploitation. I joined the antiapartheid movement in 1977, and when I started, I would go to a church or community organizing group and talk about apartheid, and they were like, “Apar—what? What are you talking about?” By 1984, when the crackdown came in South Africa and the white minority government declared a state of emergency, *apartheid* had become a household word. There were very few people in our communities who didn’t know what apartheid was. There was a long period of struggle in the United States, but I think we’ve lost some of that connection in the current period. This identity as pan-African is something that I think Priority Africa Network is trying to cultivate; we are trying to create a new sense of pan-Africanism that cuts across different nationalities and identities and ethnicities. We do that in a number of ways—for instance, through what we call “African Diaspora Dialogues,” where we bring people from the diaspora (what we call the “old diaspora” and the “new diaspora”) together to talk about the stereotypes that keep us apart, our commonalities in terms of culture and politics, and how can we build a pan-African identity. That has been our work on the ground for over a decade.

When I was the director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, we co-sponsored these dialogues with Priority Africa Network. We also went into communities to discuss the relationship between our African American communities and immigrants. Then we would lay out with people what we felt was a framework and analysis that linked our fates and common struggles. Often, that would bridge different nationalities and get people to think. Oftentimes, we absorb this dominant narrative in the African American community that “immigrants, they are coming to take our jobs, they don’t like us.” And from immigrant communities, there is often this attitude of “Stay away from those Black people, those African Americans, because they are trouble.” We are trying to bridge that gap, to see how these narratives compromise the struggle for all of our communities. There is a common struggle against racism and economic exploitation that we can come together on.

This has become a lot easier with the younger generation of African immigrants—first-generation immigrants or those who were born in this country to immigrant parents. Because oftentimes, folks who grew up in this country but are also part of the culture of their home countries have this dual identity. I talk about them as a bridge to our communities. Opal Tometi is one of the cofounders of Black Lives Matter. She comes from an immigrant family, from Nigeria, and she was born and raised in Phoenix. When I left, she took over as director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration and brought that dual consciousness; she was able to speak to the commonalities in our struggles. That is part of how we try to make that bridge and try to look at the issue of migration as one of the ways US imperialism and global capitalism oppress us. That people leave their homes not because they want to, but because they are forced to. Because of internal wars, because of the

economic oppression caused by the ways Europe and the United States have penetrated and distorted their economies.

NK: When I came into consciousness about apartheid, I hadn't been in this country very long. I was going to UC Berkeley in the mid-1980s and joined some of the campus activism. I had assumed that the antiapartheid movement in the United States had always been vibrant and that the connections were very easily made for Americans because you had segregation, and that history wasn't that long ago. The parallels were unmistakable. But when I got into conversations with people like Gerald and others who were active, they told me that, for example, the protest in front of the South African embassy consulate in Seattle would be like two or three people. That it picked up later, to what everyone had assumed had always been the sort of a very popular movement that it became in the late 1980s. I find that very interesting partly because as an African, people assumed that I had a better understanding or that it was somehow related to what I had witnessed or experienced, and that was actually not true. What I had learned about South Africa was 100 percent here; very few people, at least that I knew of, from the Continent, other than South Africans were involved in it.

To go back to those early BAJI conversations that Gerald mentioned: those were held in church basements, and we would be talking largely to 100 percent Black congregants about the issue of immigration and what it meant to them. They really were open to sharing with us their animosity, their suspicion—that these immigrants were coming yet again, that there had been a succession of immigrants coming to the United States that had always undermined African Americans, and that this wave of immigrants from Mexico was not good news for Black people. They would share with us very openly how they felt about it. I would be in the room, as well as other Black immigrants, and they would completely not see us as immigrants because the term *immigrant* was so narrowly defined to mean “people from across the border.” When we pointed out that I am an immigrant from Africa, there was a bit of a difficulty for them to recognize that the term *immigrant* actually consisted of people who were not only Mexican. That was not just the perception among grassroots communities that we talked to. I think it was largely the framework of the whole immigrants' rights movement, until BAJI came into the scene having to confront the very difficult conversation about how racialized the term *immigrant* had been, that it now meant someone of color and did not recognize people from Europe as immigrants.

I think these were beginnings of conversations that have evolved since then in many organizations. How do you challenge your constituency's prevailing attitudes on race and educate them about the history of what has happened in this country with regard to racism? Post-BAJI, the whole narrative within the immigrants' rights movement has changed considerably, but clearly not enough. For us, part of the difficulty has been how, looking at the history of the Black presence in the United States, Blackness was very narrowly defined to mean *African American*. We know, numerically, that the presence of Black immigrants from any number of regions is higher now than the number of people that came through the transatlantic Middle Passage. The numbers are changing; there is a huge diversity of who is Black in America now, and yet it is only very recently (and not sufficiently) that we are giving visibility to the presence of Black immigrants and the diversity of Blackness. The conservative Black group ADOS² is super challenging; they find us threatening. But I think that something absolutely needs to happen in terms of looking at who are the new Black community and having further conversations looking at intraracial relations between Black immigrants and African Americans.

GL: In the Black Lives Matter movement, what we saw from the very beginning was this outpouring of Black people across the globe coming together. This identification of, “Yes, I am an immigrant from Nigeria or Ethiopia or from Jamaica, but I am also Black.” When people step up to claim that in organizing, it is accelerated. We just had a forum where one of the organizers was a young Somali woman who was a leader in the Black Lives Matter movement. We are seeing people in LA stepping up. We are seeing, all over the country, that Black immigrants are part of this Black Lives Matter movement. Now, the orientation of the movement as a whole toward Black immigrants is not necessarily that strong, but I think that will change as

people move into leadership positions—and certainly, the leadership of Opal Tometi when she was in the lead of Black Lives Matter also helped to highlight that Black immigrant lives matter too. I think it's an ongoing process, and I think because the number of Black immigrants in this country has increased exponentially, it is right for us to begin to accelerate the discussion and the consciousness about the presence of Black immigrants, and hopefully begin to create this new Black identity that is pan-African.

NK: When young new diaspora Africans join the movement, it is celebrated. They are taking part not only in marching and protesting but also in their poetry, and they are visible, and it is absolutely fantastic. But within the Black community as a whole, the assumption is often, “Well, that is just another African American person.” You are now part of that broad Blackness, and people are not sufficiently unpacking the additional dimensions not just of Blackness but also the status of being an immigrant that this person has had to navigate.

There was an article in the *Washington Post* about the difficult conversations Latinx and Asian communities are having between the young people who are out there marching and their parents who are telling them, “Don't go out there; this has nothing to do with us. We are trying to be Americans.”³ I immediately sent a letter to the editor just to say there was no mention of Black immigrants. These conversations are happening at an intense and elevated level with young Black immigrants whose older family members are telling them, “Just work hard and play by the rules; don't make trouble; you'll be fine; this is not your fight.” The younger people are saying, “Oh, it is definitely my fight and I need to be there.” They are not only out there organizing for change, but they are also recognizing the challenges when their communities and their families tell them that this is not something they should do. The broader African American community needs to recognize where this group of young immigrants is coming from and what their stories are. There used to be a group called the Black Immigration Network that was actually part of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration. We did the Diaspora Dialogues with hundreds and hundreds of people who would bring these very difficult but absolutely necessary intrarace conversations that must be held among us.

GL: One of the flash points in this emerging consciousness around being Black in America was the murder of Nipsey Hussle. Nipsey Hussle's mother is African American. His father is Eritrean, and he was claimed by both communities. And so when he was murdered, our communities came together in a way. I was at his funeral, and people came from all over the country, from all different ethnicities and nationalities, to pay homage to him. He was a unifying figure in our communities. Unfortunately, he is not with us, but you can see the potential of this kind of new consciousness about being Black that is still growing.

CH: Thank you for that anecdote. It's fascinating, because the dynamics that you are talking about really parallel what I have been following in Italy—a generation of people who came to Italy as young kids or who were born and raised there and who were starting to realize, “My parents might be Nigerian, Ghanaian, Eritrean, Senegalese, but we have this shared experience of being Black and being racialized in a particular way.” This relates to the question Nunu raised about how to forge a pan-African, collective sense of Blackness while also still making room for the diversity of Blackness within that category. I have another question on this theme before we move on. We have been witnessing the mainstreaming of abolition in this particular moment. To what extent can abolitionist understandings of policing and prisons, which of course come from a long line of Black feminist thinking, also become frameworks for linking Black and immigrant struggles? How can we extend abolition to think about the immigration apparatus, border regimes, and migrant detention?

GL: There is an immigrant rights movement to abolish ICE. I absolutely think those two things have to be linked. When we formed the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, our whole approach was this bridging framework. We have to bridge these struggles, and we have to bridge them through an understanding of how our lives parallel each other—how our stories overlap. For example, when I talk to African Americans about immigration, oftentimes I start with the African American Great Migration to make the parallel between why we left the South and came to the North and the West versus why people cross borders to come to the United

States. For many African Americans, that is illuminating because migration is something that we all have experienced, either ourselves or our families. That becomes a unifying theme, similar to ICE oppression and police oppression. That is a critical piece to develop—that abolitionist link between the oppression in our communities and how that state apparatus, whether that be ICE or the police, is there to keep us in our place, whether we are immigrants or whether we are African Americans.

NK: I remember how Reverend Phil Lawson responded to the really strong African American voices in one of the church conversations we were having about the people who are coming “illegally,” and the necessity of making sure that people get the proper documents. He said, “We could not go from plantation to plantation without having the required pass.” On the issue of citizenship (because the demand around comprehensive immigration reform was “Citizenship now!”), Reverend Lawson said, “Trust me, you don’t want to start with just citizenship. We have been citizens for four hundred years. This is not a demand you need to make. You want to make the changes that need to happen about civil rights and the protection of existing rights”—as if citizenship was the end all be all.

We drew a lot of the parallels to what had happened in the United States to Black people as the basis of the history for immigrants to know, because this history is not covered when immigrants come to the United States. Most of us come believing so profoundly in the ideals of this country. This happens long before we even land here because of the propaganda machine—the films and the books and all that build up to it. So coming here, the expectation is that my rights will be protected, that this is a fair country, it is inherently a good country, and if you play by the rules, you will be OK. This is an incredibly prevailing notion that most immigrants believe very deeply and profoundly. When you are an immigrant from Africa or any Black country of origin, it is different when you believe those to be truths and then you experience everything from being disregarded completely, to being undermined, to outright police brutality. During the African Diaspora Dialogues, I cannot tell you how many times people shared with us the experience of being stopped by police, and how traumatizing it is because you don’t have the context, the mental framework, to understand that this not just about you, that this been happening to Black people for years and years, but you are seeing yourself as an immigrant and as someone who is not part of this country. The assumption is that if it *does* happen, these things happen to “Black people that belong to this country, to African Americans. They don’t happen to me.” So it’s incredibly traumatizing for many to undergo that and to share with us their experiences. But it is one thing for people to share their anecdotal experience, and is quite another to make the leap to understanding the broader historical framework in order to say, “Oh, there is a pattern here, there is a preexisting history that is a Black history that I need to know.” In any of the textbooks or the conversations that are happening in immigrant rights’ spaces, none of this Black history is covered. So we can’t make those parallels and connections unless they become part of the curriculum and part of the conversations between immigrants and African Americans.

JK: Thank you all, especially for these conversations about parallels that don’t collapse difference. Our special issue is trying to think through organizing, movement work, and scholarship that connects global struggles like those we have talked about in terms of apartheid and abolition, as well as global struggles against militarism. We would like to hear about how you underscore these questions in your organizing but also the kind of advice you can offer about how to do transnational work that doesn’t collapse difference but is instead able to think through really concrete parallels and shared tactics of different settler-colonial contexts, different racialized militarisms, and shared technologies of surveillance and confinement.

GL: I think our whole framework is what you just described—to emphasize our commonalities without collapsing into sameness. That is really important. I remember Nunu and I were invited to do a workshop with the Afrikan Black Coalition, during one of their annual meetings at UC Merced. There were probably forty people in the room, all Black, predominately African immigrants or young people whose parents were immigrants but who were born in the United States. When we started talking about issues of identity, several

people shared this experience that they had of being with Africans or going to the African Association meetings and hearing them talk negatively about African Americans, and then going to BSU [Black Student Union] and hearing them talk negatively about Africans, and feeling caught in the middle. They were trying to reconcile what their identity was. So when Nunu talked about having an identity as Eritrean and as African American, you could feel the sighs of relief in the room. That it was OK to have that dual identity. That it was normal and natural to have that dual identity. I think it's really important to acknowledge that, and to acknowledge not only that it exists but to also acknowledge the strength of it. That it's not a liability; it's an asset that you can move in different cultures. You are bicultural, you are an asset to both communities—that is really, really critical for folks in that situation who have a dual identity. As I mentioned earlier, folks like that are the key to bringing our communities together. Because they know both worlds and they know white supremacy.

NK: I remember doing research a few years ago and coming across some of the original documents of Nkrumah, Azikiwe, and one or two other people who went on to become highly prominent in independence movements and subsequent state formation in Africa. They were all educated in the United States and they came into consciousness, recognizing the connections between what was going on in terms of colonialism in their home countries and the reality of segregation and life in the United States. I think it was this realization—that it was the same struggle with the same culprit—that enabled them to be agents of change in their home countries, as well as becoming prominent in terms of the global reframing of the liberation movements subsequently. I think you said it right, Jenny. Any struggle—from the Palestinian struggle, to struggles for liberation and self-determination, including from the feminist theories—must absolutely make those connections.

And it does not mean that you have to have this struggle first, and then the other one—which has always been the pushback to the feminist agenda historically: “Well, let’s just take care of this first, and then we’ll come to you next. Just sit back and wait.” This includes the abolitionist movement in the United States, all way back in the 1880s. It has always been, “We need to do this first, and then the other things.” It’s all interconnected, so when it comes to the current state of demands, it isn’t just to hold the police accountable—it’s also about recognizing that the power infrastructures that are built are existing because of the economic inequities that exist. Black people are dying from COVID-19 at disproportionate numbers. In fact, my friend Frances Beal doesn’t call it disproportionate; she says these numbers are catastrophic. You don’t call it disproportionate when you are 10 percent of the population, and 70 percent of the deaths. Those numbers are called catastrophic. It’s about recognizing that these are not separate conversations—that they are connected. What is going on right now is not only about holding the current police accountable and getting rid of choke holds. Choke holds should never, ever, have been approved, period. How do you take away something that should never have been, and say, “Here, we made amendments. Are you happy now?” I think young people do see the connection and recognize that this is a bigger question—and their demands are equally as big.

GL: You mentioned Palestine, and I want to comment on that. I think that the Black liberation movement has a responsibility to the world. A lot of us take that responsibility very seriously. Palestine is one of the issues that needs urgent attention. In 2008, I had my first trip to Palestine with a people of color delegation organized by the Third World Coalition of the American Friends Service Committee; it was organized by a group called Interfaith Peace-Builders, which is now Eyewitness Palestine. When I came back, I joined the board of that organization. I organized our first African heritage delegation in 2011. We took fourteen African American and Black immigrants to Palestine to witness what was going on, and we came back and did press work and media work and organizing. I’m still connected with that organization, although I’m not on the board anymore. Some members of the Black Lives Matter organization also led a delegation to Palestine a few years ago.

SNCC⁴ in the 1960s had a very powerful statement about Palestine. In the 1980s, during his presidential campaign, Jesse Jackson had a very powerful statement on Palestine. In fact, I lived in Seattle at the time. I was a floor leader at the King County Democratic Party convention in Seattle for the Jackson campaign. We

introduced a resolution that said that the PLO⁵ was the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. That resolution lost, but it lost by five votes. So I think there is a real responsibility that we have been given, with the way US imperialism has manipulated the situation in Israel/Palestine—all over the world, for that matter. We have that responsibility to draw those parallels between our struggle and the struggles in Palestine, and all over the world, and lift the consciousness of people in the United States about the United States' nefarious role in the world.

CH: Jenny is publishing a book on solidarity tourism in Palestine—what an incredible point of connection!

JK: Yes! I just got back from Palestine a few months ago. I research the tours and delegations, and I've been going on them since 2012. I interview tour guides and delegate leaders in Palestine, and the last one I went on was the Eyewitness Palestine delegation from the summer. One of the things with delegates, broadly, is having them be able to look at what they are witnessing in Palestine and see similarities, but not in a way where they only care if it is about *sameness*. So it is not just "I recognize it, and so I subsequently care about it." It's to ask themselves, "As someone from the United States, how do I think about US empire, how do I think about global militarism, and how do I think about these shared technologies?" I see that, too, with the policing conversation now, because there is a tendency—even with the best of intentions—to point out the way the United States borrows from Israeli policing, which is true, but the US didn't need to learn racialized policing from Israel either.

I love what both of you are saying about foregrounding commonalities, not collapsing difference but also demanding historical frameworks. Right now, we are organizing to have a K–12 ethnic studies curriculum in California that is inclusive of Arab American studies, broadly, and Palestine specifically.⁶ One of the things we are confronting is the willingness to talk about Palestinians as refugees, but not to talk about how Palestinians *became* refugees. So insisting on looking at parallels but also insisting on the specificity of historical frameworks is crucial, and this is so clear in how you are talking about your organizing.

NK: Jenny, have you had the chance to look at the experiences of Black Jews, particularly the large settlement of Ethiopians in Israel—their experiences, and some of the activists really pushing to connect the Palestinian question with race?

JK: Absolutely. One of the things that is so interesting about having studied the delegations between 2012 and now is that now they used to be so confined to the West Bank. Now they are really trying to make connections around questions of global anti-Black racism that are not just about Afro-Palestinians but are also about Black Jewish, Ethiopian, or Eritrean communities in Israel, and thinking through the parallels between them and Afro-Palestinians. I think the thematic delegations that are bringing Black delegates, like Dream Defenders, are working on that, but with other more mainstream delegations, it is missing.

CH: This all relates back to the question of how to engage in coalitional struggle—how to forge solidarities without collapsing difference. Another place I saw this happening was during 2015 to 2016, at the height of the most recent Mediterranean refugee crisis. Certain activists and scholars, particularly from the United States, were very quick to say, essentially, that this is the Middle Passage happening all over again: the smuggling of human cargo, a maritime passage, detention, labor exploitation. You would see the infamous schematics of the slave ship *Brookes*⁷ juxtaposed next to aerial images of boats in the Mediterranean, for instance. There are certainly similarities in terms of the fact that these are two kinds of forced migrations. Of course, the implicit question of agency here—of voluntary versus forced migration—is a very complicated one.

I remember attending a Priority Africa Network event on the Mediterranean refugee crisis in 2015, and I know that Gerald and Nunu were part of a fact-finding mission to Italy to understand what was happening with these African refugees crossing the Mediterranean. So I wonder, how do you see these struggles as

interconnected, and where do you see important differences? I am reminded of Dr. Angela Y. Davis, who looks at these questions through the lens of empire and capitalism. She argues that policing and mass incarceration in the United States are connected to the architectures and technologies of settler colonialism in Palestine, which are connected to the architectures and technologies of refugee detention and surveillance in Europe.⁸

NK: It does pose the question of whether this is voluntary migration versus involuntary, because clearly there are some very disturbing parallels, but there also differences that cannot—that *should* not—be overlooked. How can you call it voluntary when you don't have any chance of making a living or a future—so when you make a decision, it is no longer “voluntary”? It's not like, “Oh, let me go see what is going on the other side of the world.” You really have very few choices for your life. There are forced circumstances that are leading you to take that step.

When we did that investigative journey in 2007, we were on our way to the World Social Forum in Nairobi. I wanted to reframe this to say that this wasn't, “Oh, let's go see, let's raise some money, and make it happen.” We really didn't have a full understanding of what we were undertaking at the time. We were invited to an international conference—the Global Forum on Migration and Development in Brussels—and so we decided to take a detour to Italy and take this on. We got to the detention center in Lampedusa and met with the people who were there—not only those in detention but also the organizers who were responsible for them and all that. Collecting those testimonials from individuals from Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and various other places was mind-blowing. It really shook us as individuals in terms of what we were hearing when we met those young people. Once we started writing about it and putting it out there, we were rather surprised to see that very little existed in terms of websites and available information, so people started calling us and contacting us to say, “We would like to talk to you about this.” So that was early on.

Of course, subsequently, a lot more stuff has come out. But in many ways, very little has changed in terms of the whole Mediterranean framing. I think they use the same image of young Black faces over and over again. It can't be the same people over and over again, even when they tell you statistically that Afghans and Syrians are making these cross-Mediterranean journeys. It is the same rickety boats with these pitiful-looking young Black men—or menacing-looking, because they are “terrorists.” So we are either refugees that should be pitied and supported, or we are potential terrorists that should be blocked off and detained. That narrative, that framework, really didn't change all that much for a very long time. Even when the numbers are showing that, by far, the kinds of people who are making this trip are actually not the poorest of the poor, that it takes tremendous resources to take these trips, support from families in the diaspora, and all that. The racialized version of this is unmistakable, so I can see how the parallel with the Middle Passage can be made. But I am a bit troubled by it.

GL: I see it as an involuntary, forced migration, but I also see agency for immigrants. It's more nuanced. There is a tremendous amount of agency for people to risk their lives to cross a desert and a sea to get to a place where they can earn a living. On this notion of it being a Middle Passage: I think what happens is that many times we see events in the world, and we see them from a lens that is our lens and not the lens of the people who are experiencing those events. We tend to understand phenomena through our own lens. I think more and more, we have to be in dialogue with people so we can see their experience from their lens. It's really important. Just as an example, in 2007, when I was at BAJI, we led a delegation of fourteen African Americans to the US-Mexico border. We met with activists and faith leaders in Tucson, and then we went across the border to a little town where migrants were gathering to meet the coyotes to come across the border. We went around asking people, “Why are you leaving your country and risking your life to cross the border?” That was a very eye-opening, gut-wrenching experience for us, but we were seeing it from the lens of people who were making that trek. We weren't seeing it from our own understanding of migration or immigration—we were seeing it directly from people as they were about to embark on that perilous trip. Oftentimes, African Americans do this. We see the world from the lens of US imperialism and white supremacy in the United

States. It is very difficult to see it from the point of view of people in different countries who are struggling under different circumstances, but I think we have to. This is where we need storytelling and dialogue—we have to bring people together so that we understand the similarities in our struggles but also really understand, in a very nuanced way, why an Eritrean would get up and leave to go to Sudan, then get to Angola, then get to Brazil, and then walk through Central America, through Mexico, and get here.

NK: Gerald and I have done multiple international delegations to the African continent and to Europe, and one of the most difficult things has been confronting the imperialistic tendencies of African Americans outside of the United States. They are seeing through that singular lens that says, “This is my experience, but it takes precedence over yours, and let me tell you what your experience is.” It has been very difficult for us to witness when we are in that space. Gerald, do you remember that time in Kenya when that African American got up and was telling this farmer, “OK, this is what you all have to do now”? If there were a hole, we would have crawled into it. It was just really difficult to see folks saying, “You know our struggles as the underdog, and we need equity and social justice here,” who in turn have these super imperialistic tendencies when they are abroad. They become, for lack of a better word, “the ugly Americans.” So I think it could be that—seeing through a lens.

CH: That is something I also encounter in my work. I work for the Black Europe Summer School (BESS). We are always navigating this tension; it is really complicated, and even in the field of Black European studies there are ongoing debates about African American “hegemony” in the diaspora. With BESS, we often have African American students who are traveling outside of the United States for the first time. I remember one year, I was talking to this young Black woman who said that this was the first time that she felt like she had privilege. This was the privilege that comes with being an American: stepping outside of the United States and being in Europe and meeting Black Europeans. It was an incredibly disorienting moment for her. It is true that we African Americans have been, in a very bizarre way kind of way, conscripted into US empire. It is something that we carry with us, whether we want to or not. The diasporic dynamics of it become so complicated.

GL: And unless we lift it up and talk about it and confront it, it sits dormant until certain moments when it comes out. It can be really ugly at times when we presume to know others’ struggles or the solutions to other people’s struggles. Even describing another peoples’ struggle for them is very problematic. I just think it has to be something that is on the agenda of the social movements to become aware of and to address.

JK: This same phenomenon happens on delegations and solidarity tours in Palestine, where tourists of color are racialized differently in Palestine and find themselves confronting the ability to move through checkpoints in a way that their guides can’t—and so I’m thinking of how those experiences shift in space and what happens if you don’t name them or talk about them.

And building on what you shared with us: a lot of our contributions to this special issue deal with the construction of the refugee, also in terms of this dual construction, either as “refugee” or as “terrorist.” A lot of our contributors are thinking through the politics of these rescue narratives and what that means for doing work around refugee crises and refugee routes *and* confronting the images around refugees.

Finally, a lot of times when organizers are interviewed, they are never asked what they *wish* people ask them about their work. And so, we would like to ask: What questions do you wish people asked you about your work?

NK: In the conversations we have at Priority Africa Network, we try not just to be about civil rights and human rights and political fights and what should be out there but also about the realness of us relating as human beings. Being there for each other—the concept of Ubuntu.⁹ We used to do these annual celebratory galas called Ubuntu. That’s very much what it is about: trying to bring in, in a real way, the changes we see out

there. We want to be part of those changes and to manifest them in real ways, by caring for one another and being authentic and truthful.

When you asked us at the beginning how we were feeling and what is this moment, a poet that I was reading about put it really well: she said that we don't give each other, as activists, moments to mourn, to just sit with it. I'm thinking particularly about the early days when the George Floyd video was playing in a reel, one after another. There is no other way to put it except "trauma." You cannot be a Black person and witness that and not feel something. Then on social media, people started sending all these other videos of police abuses, as if we needed to prove something we did not already know or be convinced of something. It was just really, really difficult emotionally because you have to be with family, you still have work to do, and yet you don't stop to take a moment to say, "Emotionally, this draining. It is really difficult." When I was younger, I would go out there and march because it was a release to be angry, to be shouting, to be out there protesting. It was a release in itself—and to see friends and allies and just feel like, "Yeah, they are in this fight with me. I'm not alone, this is something that is shared by many others." It gave so much hope and life. Now, with COVID, we are not out there shouting and protesting. You see it on video, but it's not the same. You don't have that release, and that moment to mourn. I'm not a super religious person, but I do believe in the necessity of having a space to be spiritual and to just sit with something. How can you let love grow or be there for one another when you are in pain? All these things are difficult because they sound very fuzzy and soft and unnecessary. But that is what the struggle is about. We want to leave something better than we have had it, and it's all about the interconnection. It's about Ubuntu.

GL: For me, in my work, what I have been focusing on a lot is cultural connections. In this work to forge a new pan-African identity, I think there has to be a very strong cultural component, because we connect in so many ways across the diaspora around music, songs, dance rituals. I think it's a way of communicating with each other and lifting our consciousness. We have a lot that we share, so I think we need to bring cultural workers into the spaces where we bring people together. Priority Africa Network is working with a group in Oakland that is directed by a Nigerian woman; she brings together immigrants from the diaspora with African Americans in a fellowship program that I had the opportunity to do two sessions with. In those sessions, we were really beginning to forge this identity that cuts across nationality. The cultural piece is really important to bring to the fore.

This has been happening since I've been on the planet. Just think of our leaders in the civil rights and Black Power movements—Stokely Carmichael came from the Caribbean; even within BAJI, there is Reverend Phil Lawson and James Lawson (who is his brother). James Lawson was one of the primary trainers of the young sit-in activists in the 1960s in Nashville, Tennessee. He trained these youngsters in nonviolent direct action. His grandfather was a runaway slave who made it to Canada. His father was a Methodist minister. His father was born in Canada, migrated back to the United States, and married a Jamaican woman. Both Jim Lawson and Phil Lawson were ministers, and both were active in the civil rights movement. Harry Belafonte was from Jamaica. So there is this hidden history of immigrants who have been part of our history from the very beginning of our struggle. The cultural and historical pieces of our struggle have to be unearthed, uncovered, and really brought to bear in the current situation.

NK: We did that once at BAJI: listing people who have immigrant histories, like Shirley Chisholm, whose parents are from the Caribbean. We did a listing just to say: *we are you, as part of this history*. It's not as if it's "immigrant out there, American in here"—Black people, again, can show you the parallels.

GL: We can go on in this conversation.

NK: This should have been over a meal.

JK: Yes! We should have a meal once everything is over and we are allowed to have meals again.

Everyone: That would be wonderful.

Nunu Kidane is director of the Oakland-based organization Priority Africa Network (PAN). She writes and works on migration and the experiences of African migrants in the United States and beyond, as well as the ways these issues intersect with race and gender.

Gerald Lenoir is the founding executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, or BAJI (2006–14), and a founding steering committee member of the Black Immigration Network. He was the executive director of the San Francisco Black Coalition on AIDS (1989–95) and cofounded the HIV Education and Prevention Project of Alameda County. He cofounded Priority Africa Network in 2003 and has served on the board of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights since 2006. He is also a former board member of the Interfaith Peace-Builders and led its first African Heritage Delegation to Palestine/Israel in 2012.

Andrea del Carmen Vázquez is a graduate student in education and critical race and ethnic studies at UCSC. Her work outlines geographies of anti-Blackness as lived by students in agricultural California. You can learn more about her work by following her on Twitter at [@_LaVazquez_](#).

Notes

1. Gerald Lenoir, “Poem: Once Again,” *Othering & Belonging Institute* (blog), May 31, 2020, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/poem-once-again>.
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2. ADOS stands for “American Descendants of Slavery.” For more information about ADOS, see Farah Stockman, “‘We’re Self-Interested’: The Growing Identity Debate in Black America,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/us/slavery-black-immigrants-adol.html>.
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3. Sydney Trent, “Young Asians and Latinos Push Their Parents to Acknowledge Racism amid Protests,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/young-asians-and-latinos-push-their-parents-to-acknowledge-racism-amid-protests/2020/06/21/97daa5f2-b193-11ea-856d-5054296735e5_story.html.
[Return to note reference.](#)
4. SNCC stands for “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.”
[Return to note reference.](#)
5. PLO stands for “Palestinian Liberation Organization.”
[Return to note reference.](#)
6. For more on this campaign, see the Arab Resource and Organizing Center at <https://savearabamericanstudies.org/>.
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7. “Diagram of the ‘Brookes’ Slave Ship,” British Library, accessed August 28, 2020, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship>.

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8. Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

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9. *Ubuntu* is a Nguni Bantu term that refers to the interconnectedness of all humanity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained Ubuntu as a philosophy in which “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.” See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999; repr., New York: Doubleday, 2009), 31.

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