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African Americans: Stop Hatin' on Immigrants!

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A word to my fellow U.S. African Americans: Get real - and stop hatin'.

I'm referring to growing anti-immigrant sentiment in black communities in this country. After reading reports containing the disgusting news of black workers cheering at government immigrant-hunting raids, e.g., "Immigrant Raid Divides a Mississippi Town," Miguel Bustillo and Richard Fausset, [LA Times](#), August 31, 2008, seeing revolting pictures of African Americans marching side-by-side with the Minutemen (e.g., "Members of the Chicago Minutemen and African Americans Against Illegal Immigration protest Wednesday the alleged use of undocumented workers at a Kellogg's bakery in Chicago" By Scott Olson, Getty Images, originally published in "Republicans Plan Dueling Hearings on Immigration," Kathy Kiely and David Jackson, *USA Today*, June 22, 2006), and hearing too much lip from black folk against immigrants documented and undocumented, I've had enough.

There's no need for all of this hate thrown at immigrants. It demonstrates a shallowness in our thought that is unbecoming of a people supposedly seeking justice and equality for all people. The problem isn't that we're being overrun by immigrants, that they're taking our jobs away and are the cause of our un- and underemployment, or any other such hype.

The real problem is our own prejudice, our own xenophobia against immigrants, and the mind games that the racist anti-immigrant movement is running on us. We've been oppressed and stepped on; now, in turn, we find immigrants a convenient group for us to step on ourselves. In a society that is already frighteningly antagonistic against those who come to these presumably welcoming shores, too many in *our* community

have added their voice to the unwelcoming cacophony directed against those who now arrive either through formal means or through desperately-informal risks. I find this fascinating, given that our own arrival in this country wasn't, to be painfully understated, with red carpet welcome and five-star conditions offered to us by European American (white) government and business. Perhaps some of us think that our history of suffering permits us to disregard the suffering of others. Siding with the noisy voices of hate against the "other," such persons are merely monopolizing the idea of suffering, not having fully grasped the context in which immigrants find themselves coming here.

Take, for example, this whole thing of immigrants supposedly stealing our jobs. Now, there's something that is blown way out of proportion. There are, admittedly, some localized examples of job competition between immigrants and African Americans. But does it happen on the widespread basis that much of our complaining would imply? No. It is important, according to Dr. Steven Pitts of the UC Berkeley Labor Center, for African Americans to remember that the job crisis in the black community - unemployment and low-wage work - stems from a number of causes, including continued racial discrimination in the labor market, the impact of mass incarceration policies, substandard education at the K - 12 levels, and the decline of unionization. [See [Job Quality and Black Workers](#), Steven C. Pitts, **BC** Issue #246.]

Instead of focusing our anger and energy on conditions of racism and economic injustice that adversely affect our labor situation - conditions that have existed for many years - we are taking our frustrations out on groups of people who are exploited by owners to work in largely underpaid, unsafe, non-unionized conditions, solely because the economic or political situations in their homelands have driven them to accept such meager conditions for the purpose of survival. We need to chill on that. We need to redirect our attention to changing the conditions that prevent us from greater ownership and self-determination economically, and that destabilize economies and social situations in other countries, driving folk to desperate, last-resort migration.

We even get attitudes about their language, getting indignant about what or how they're speaking, just because we don't understand or are a bit inconvenienced by it. Yeah, right - as if us speaking our slave master's English gives us the right to be so holier-than-thou toward them as they speak their slave master's Spanish (or Portuguese, or French, or Dutch, or differently-accented English, or their own indigenous language, or whatever). Here's an idea: before we start gettin' all hyped about "English only spoken here," why don't we respect their cultures and linguistic traditions, appreciate the fact that the vast majority of them are already learning English if they don't yet know it (and are balancing the rest of a crazy, oft-persecuted life at the same time), and - dare I say it - brush off our high school text books and learn a bit of another language ourselves. Hmmm - how does one say *solidarity*? *Sharing? Learning from each other? All God's children?*

Consider, moreover, the situation of Afro-Latinos/as who already feel caught in a crossfire from other Hispanics whose ancestry and, therefore, appearance and features lie more along European and indigenous lines, and African (*North-*) Americans - both being groups that have, too often, made it hard for Afro-Latino/as to feel accepted. Let's not forget that there is a larger number of black folk in the western hemisphere *outside* of the U.S. than there is in it. We must remember our [history](#): less than 5% of

all slaves brought to this hemisphere we brought to the British North American colonies/United States.

So it's particularly curious that, when our Afro-Latino/a cousins do get here - under whatever circumstances - we too often fail to welcome them fully.

Perhaps the most twisted part of this drama is the fact that the static so many of us are throwing toward immigrants is being fueled by a decidedly racist, xenophobic anti-immigrant movement - one seeded by hate-group money and propagated by organizations and leaders who seem but one or two steps removed from wearing white hoods and burning crosses. [See, for example, information from the [Building Democracy Initiative](#).] After these ultra-conservative vigilante and anti-immigrant groups finish barricading U.S. society against incoming folk, what do we think they'll proceed to do with those of us of color who are already in? My, how we sometimes seem to long for, and trust, ole Massuh's benevolence...

Yes, I know there are prejudices, stereotypes and generally bad attitudes among many Hispanics against African Americans. [See, for example, "[Roots of Latino/Black Anger](#)," Tanya K. Hernandez, *LA Times*, January 7, 2007.]

Such negativity is unacceptable. We should note that it is, at least, partially due to the rampant anti-black racism in Latin America which, no doubt, has influenced the imagery many immigrant folk have seen and the perceptions they've formed. There also seem to be some very real tensions between African Americans communities and communities of African continentals, e.g., Somali communities and other recent immigrants from the African continent. Sad, isn't it? Half the time we can't even get along with folk from "home." And all of this is to say nothing of the longstanding friction between African American and Asian American communities - friction which is exacerbated by a lack of clear communication about the immigration situation.

Indeed, Latino/a, African continental, Asian and East European leaders must foster self-examination and dialogue within their communities about anti-African American sentiment - examining the existence of such, exploring the roots thereof, and working toward its eradication.

However, let's sweep around our own front door before we sweep around theirs. Unless we examine, with honesty, our own susceptibility to unfounded assumptions and needless negativity toward immigrant communities - and act to change such - we have no moral high ground to speak from. We need to learn their stories, striving to walk a mile in their shoes before condemning them. (A great way to start is by reading the powerful compilation [Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives](#). Peter Orner, ed.)

We must also be astute enough to see the divide-and-conquer campaign of the anti-immigrant movement for what it is. If we don't resist this racist ploy, not only will immigrants continue to be oppressed, but our own civil liberties will be under increased threat. [See "[Are African Americans Missing the Point on Immigration?](#)", Eric K. Ward, *Imagine* 2050, August 6, 2008, and "[Attacks Against Immigrants Attack Black America](#)", Eric K. Ward, *Imagine* 2050, June 21, 2008.]

I don't mean to imply that the entirety of the African American community has

responded negatively toward immigrants. On the contrary, many have supported immigrants' rights, understanding M.L. King's assertion that "an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Additionally, a growing number of African Americans are realizing the peril that anti-immigrant propaganda and legislative manipulation poses to our community. The *Which Way Forward: African Americans, Immigration and Race* initiative, for example, is a network of black/African American leaders that seeks to educate and organize the African American community on the impact of anti-immigrant public policy and grassroots activities. Even if (weirdly, to me) one is not fully on board with the idea of immigrants' rights, one *surely* must be, as an African American, greatly concerned with the endangering of our civil liberties. For information on the initiative, contact the [Center for New Community](#), a human rights group working to build community, justice and equality.

Personally, however, I have to take it further than that and reiterate: let's get real, and get over it! Immigrants - documented and undocumented - are here, and will continue to come. It will be a shame and an indictment against us if we, with our painful experience of oppression in this country, allow the oppressors to divide and conquer us in such a way that that we can't strive for justice and economic advancement together. Let us, as African Americans, challenge ourselves to learn to live with our immigrant neighbors, work with them, commune with them, and ally with them in the Struggle - in other words, respect them as the fellow human beings they are, and allow them to get to know us and respect us. Stop the hate! We can't afford to get played like that.

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, *Kenneth R. Brown, II*, is the Director of *Which Way Forward*, a program of the [Center for New Community](#) in Chicago, IL. *Which Way Forward* is a national strategic discussion with African American leaders and organizers from around the United States, addressing the impact of anti-immigrant activity and public policy on the African American community and on U.S. Civil Rights gains of the 1960s. *Which Way Forward* seeks to build a coordinated response by African Americans to the growing anti-immigrant assault on Civil Rights. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Brown.

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