Breaking the Unspeakable Thoughts

Building Solidarity through Struggle with Love

By Manuel Criollo
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Everything I am and everything I do starts with my people and where I come from. My people are from El Salvador. My grandmother came in 1968, which was early on for Salvadoreños. Because my mother and grandmother didn't have childcare, I got to experience the world through their eyes as working-class, immigrant women. My mother worked in the garment industry in the early years of my life. I would go with her to her factory. The sound of that factory—the humming of the sewing machines is very much in my mind even to this day. Even though people had hard lives, I could see the beautiful solidarity that they had with each other.

In my family we are both Black and Indigenous. We're darker, Afro Indigenous peoples. Most Latinx people have a complicated relationship to both Indigeneity and Blackness. Some of my family tried to deny their Blackness, but it was still very present, especially when my family moved to Los Angeles. My grandmother denied her racial darkness, and yet she prides herself that when there were immigration raids, they wouldn't stop her because they didn't perceive her to be Mexican or Latina.

I was born in 1973 in Los Angeles. The first school I attended was all Black. I didn't fully speak English, but I could understand Michael Jackson singing Off the Wall, and just that spirit of living in a majority Black community. I was accepted there for the most part, although it got more tense as the Latino community got bigger and as Black folks

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were either leaving or being pushed out. It still is a very big piece of my own identity. In second grade the Black teachers showed us a film on the Youth March in Montgomery, Alabama. I remember just being outraged and angry. I could sense even my own family's little quirks and inherently racist attitudes toward Black people. I just correlated all of that in my mind, thinking, “This sucks and this is wrong.” That experience lies deep in my own DNA, it helped lead me to organizing, and I've been able to carry it forward for 30 years now.

The second thing that led me to organizing was my miseducation in school in the suburbs. When bussing arrived, I was included in the bussing program at my first school. I went to a school in a Black and Brown neighborhood with a good number of white students in the Van Nuys region. For middle school, without any consultation or discussion, I was sent to Hale Middle School in Woodland Hills—at that time one of the whitest parts of the City of Los Angeles. I thought it was hell. Tracking was very real: they put me in metal shop and woodshop classes, and I really sucked at it. In that moment, somehow it dawned on me that, "Whoa, this might be my future. If I can't even do this—if I can't even measure a box—I'm in real trouble." After that, I just never did well in school. I didn't graduate high school with my class. I had a D average.

Meanwhile, my grandmother, my mother, and my aunt cleaned houses in places like Woodland Hills. In fact, my grandmother cleaned a real grandiose house that was literally at the corner of my high school. I had a lot of feelings that I didn't understand at the time—shame, anger, resentment: all forms of self-hatred. I think that has a lot to do with school failing me.

I always say that Malcolm saved my life. When I was 14 and very confused, reading Malcolm X resonated with me. Even though I didn’t fully understand what he was talking about, I definitely understood all that alienation, that dislike that I also had for white people. He fed me well in those days. I would ditch school, but my escape was books. I was very lucky that it was Malcolm and books on the Black Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Power Movement.

By the end of high school, I had an antiracist radical consciousness but didn’t find any movements to join. What happened to my father figure, my stepdad, pushed me to go back to school. He worked at a plastic manufacturing factory. He lost his job during the deindustrialization of the late 1980s. I remember him being at home in that weird dynamic where my mother was the one who was bringing in the resources and this guy, my stepdad, was not working. It was not his fault. It was just that he couldn't find a job as an immigrant man. He finally went back to the factory and got me a job there too. He had a tragic accident where a machine killed him, and I witnessed it. I asked myself, “What the hell am I doing?” It shook me and I decided it was time to go back to school.

I went to Los Angeles City College, and that's where I met my first real organizers, folks from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Some of them were ex-combatants of the revolutionary wars in that area. It was also the first time I gravitated toward my Central American-ness. They opened up the world to me. They helped me understand the role of US imperialism. They gave me my first books by Karl Marx and my first copy of *Open Veins of Latin America* on the impact of European

settlement, imperialism, and slavery on Latin America.

Eventually I met one of their elders, Maria Guardado. She was an open communist. When I met her, she scared the hell out of me. Her conviction, her testimony, and her politics were explicitly challenging U.S. Imperialism, Capitalism, and Racism. She was a torture survivor from El Salvador, and she made a conscious decision to join the sanctuary underground and migrate to the United States to denounce the role of the U.S. in the war in El Salvador. She was incredible. When I heard her speak for the first time, it was just like when I read Malcolm. It was very liberating.

These experiences are what made me an organizer. Two years later, Maria, who had been such an important mentor for this group, became one of the founders of the Bus Riders Union. I had just returned from studying at UC Santa Barbara and was working at an immigrant-led community clinic. Maria and the Bus Riders Union had just initiated a fare strike, and I got involved with the campaign, which was overseen by The Labor/Community Strategy Center.

The Bus Riders Union: A Multiracial, Multilingual, Multi-generational Experiment

Growing up, we lived mainly in South Central Los Angeles and parts of Pico-Union. I would take the bus for an hour or two all the way to the Valley with my grandmother. I experienced what it meant to be dependent on LA buses. It wasn't some abstract idea for me. That's why the fare strike spoke to me so much.

Still, as a young person in my early twenties, my main concerns were racism, policing, and immigration. But in the mid-90s, the Los Angeles MTA moved toward eliminating the bus pass in Los Angeles. That meant people had to pay for every ride, which added up to a lot for poor and working people. One month they eliminated the bus pass, and the next week they voted to invest $150 million on a new train. That train was the beginning of the gentrification of the city in some ways. In response, the Bus Riders Union sued the MTA.

Strategy Center leaders like Eric Mann understood that transit had always been a major site for Black struggle, from Plessy versus Ferguson to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The Bus Riders Union had many Black members at its core, but it was built as a multiracial, intergenerational movement, including Latino folks and actually many Korean grandmothers. A big group of bus riders are grandmas, badass grandmas. So it was a very multiracial, multilingual, multi-generational experiment. That was my real schooling and my real education.

The beautiful thing about the Bus Riders Union is that they were able to recruit some amazing working class people like Maria Guardado and like Woodrow Coleman, who was a Black civil rights activist at that time, a hardcore, working-class guy. He probably got arrested 100 times. An early leader of the union was Della Bonner who had worked in the National Welfare Rights Organization. These were all working-class intellectuals who joined with the Bus Riders Union. The Strategy Center had its own Left Black liberation politics, so it was a beautiful merger.

As a result of the lawsuit, MTA signed a consent decree in 1996. Several years later they were ordered to buy more buses, and they were refusing. The Bus Riders Union told the MTA, “If you can't even follow court orders, then we're holding a fare strike.” They told fellow riders: “If you have no seat, don't pay. No Seat, No Fare!”

By that time, I was looking for a political home. Not only was the Bus Riders Union doing amazing work, but Strategy Center published a theoretical paper called AhoraNow, edited by Lian Hurst Mann. I just consumed everything in it. This was 1998, the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto. Eric Mann had written a really important piece about the anti-imperialist implications of Marxism. I was already a very Left person. But the problem with a lot of the Left was that they talked a good game, but they couldn’t organize themselves out of a paper bag. Strategy Center knew how to organize, and they built something very real. 75 people attended the first meeting I went to, and many of them were actual bus riders, Black and Brown working-class folks.

At that meeting, Kikanza Ramsey-Ray, a Black woman organizer, and Maria Aguirre, a domestic worker, presented the findings of the union’s participatory action research project. Union members took rides to measure how long it took to

go from South Central to Disneyland, from the Valley to San Pedro, and from East LA to the Westside. They created an amazing report that called for expanded bus service in the form of rapid bus lines and jitneys.

Kikanza and Maria were really proud to present the report because people actually did the work themselves. I was sitting next to Maria Guardado, who was one of the named plaintiffs in that original lawsuit in 1994. She turned to me with a big smile and said, “Es un transporte socialista.” *This is a socialist transportation plan.* The process was *from* the people *to* the people. It was a very creative process of imagining the city in a different way.

Maria Guardado was a key leader in Central American solidarity work, and she made a political choice to be with a Black-centric organization. She was central to the Crack the CIA coalition where Black organizers and Central American organizers got together to talk about the links between the trafficking of drugs in the Black community and US support for Contras who were selling those drugs from Nicaragua. She taught me a lot, and I wanted to emulate her.

I learned how to be an organizer with the Bus Riders Union. I was a member for about two years before I joined its staff. They kept members busy. We would go out organizing every Saturday. I was elected to the planning committee, and when I became staff, it was trial by fire. We went out five to six days a week for four hours a day, riding the buses and talking with people. I had some of the most beautiful conversations I ever had in my life. I also got cussed out, and I picked fights when I shouldn't have picked fights. I had lots of beautiful experiences that birthed me as an organizer. When you're out on the buses and you're hearing people’s experiences about how they're navigating their life, it makes you a better fighter even if you can't fully recruit them.

There's nothing that the system could throw at you that you don't have an answer to because you've been rapping, and you've been discussing it with people. Even if you don't win the argument, you are learning real skills. Unfortunately, that's one of the things that's lost right now: people aren't going out enough to talk to real people.

Bus Riders Union members had incredible commitment. We met in the middle of the city in Koreatown. People came all the way from the South Bay and the San Fernando Valley. That meant you had to wake up at six to get to that meeting at nine. These were all moms, grandmas, unemployed folks, and young people. That was so powerful to me. One of the things that I loved about Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union is that we took that job seriously. We had a school where young organizers spent four hours in the field and at least another three hours on the phone. Thousands of people came through the Bus Riders Union. We trained incredible organizers, but also regular working-class people who were the heart of that formation.

I eventually became the lead organizer for the Bus Riders Union, and we had major victories. We won about $2.7 billion in new funds for mass transit. We saved and restored the Monthly Bus Pass that MTA eliminated, we won a ten-year fare freeze, and we secured the massive overhaul of a toxic and environmentally destructive diesel bus fleet to the cleanest largest Compressed Natural Gas fleet in the country. In the end, the bus fight was a race, class, gender, and environmental fight. We used to say that the Bus Riders Union was at the intersection of civil rights, the environment, and transportation.

The Community Rights Campaign: Solidarity Organizing

After the Bus Riders work, my second life at Strategy Center came through the Community Rights Campaign. We became well known for this campaign because we took on the LA school police and were some of the first in the country to challenge the intersections of policing and

schooling. That project, however, actually started as a Black reparations group with a large and powerful group of key leaders, including Damon Azali-Rojas, Eric Mann, Woodrow Coleman, Patrice Cullors, and Mark-Anthony Clayton-Johnson. We were profoundly influenced by the United Nations' World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. The US and Europe were finally being confronted with their historical linkages to slavery and its afterlife with many countries in Africa and the Caribbean demanding reparations.

Strategy Center director Eric Mann went to Durban and was very moved. He came back saying that there is an entire international community that we need to engage. We created a Black reparations group, and very quickly, one of the ways that we perceived the afterlife of slavery was the incarceration system and the policing system. We envisioned Black self-determination. We imagined Indigenous self-determination. That's why we called it the Community Rights Campaign. It was our way to say Black, Indigenous, and Brown.

We decided to target policing and make it a Black-focused, Black-centric demand. We included Brown people too, but we wanted to speak about the specificity of punishment and incarceration in the U.S. through a Black lens. Some days we did it really well. Other days, it remained a race neutral slogan that only demanded to "stop the school-to-prison pipeline." In the best of days, it really did try to describe the specific forms through which Black children were being punished in school and the deliberate disparities that were happening in arrests. For example, one of the first big campaigns that we took on was the fight against truancy ticketing in Los Angeles. It was mainly Black and Brown public school students who were ticketed, with Black students almost four times more likely to be ticketed than white students.

We spoke to the specificity of how incarceration and policing impacts the Black community. That was our frame. We were pushing back against the concept of the prison industrial complex named by academics, not because we didn't believe in it. We wanted to acknowledge that George Jackson and leaders of the Black Panthers were speaking about this a long time before the current interest. The Black liberation movement was our foundation.

The prison industrial complex also seemed too race neutral. We struggled for a better term, calling it the racist re-enslavement complex at first. We were trying to figure out how to talk about the afterlife of slavery in the ways that Black life has been undermined.

We brought that analysis and Black-centric focus to our work also with the Latino community. We were organizing in East Los Angeles, which is a heavily Latino and Mexicano community. We talked with folks about the 13th and 14th Amendments and how slavery was being reproduced in new forms.

Building a multiracial movement was critical for us. We didn't speak about an imagined cross-racial solidarity without the specificity of how critical Black liberation is to understanding the history of the United States and fighting for a new world. We taught that anti-Blackness is the linchpin for how racism works in the United States.

We found a very specific form of oppression, which was truancy ticketing, where LA police officers would stand on the steps of schools and ticket students arriving late for school. In six years, almost 70,000 students had gotten hundreds of

thousands of these tickets. The vast majority of them were Black and Brown students, and the impact on young people and their families was devastating. Many had to pay a thousand dollar fine or risk getting their driver license suspended. Every policing agency in the city was going after poor, working-class Black and Brown communities. We were able to articulate why this was wrong and link it to something much bigger.

In other words, we were educating young people that the ticket was not the problem. The ticket was just a symptom of something much deeper about the history of this country, about who's resisted these kinds of things in the past. In other words, policing is counterinsurgency against us. We were trying to explain to people that it's not about you—whether you get ticketed or not. You should care because it's part of something larger that represents one of the gravest civil rights and human rights violations happening in the world. That was its heartbeat.

We captured the imagination of a lot of folks. We dared to challenge the LA Police Department (LAPD), calling back then for all the things people do now: divest or defund the police and invest in communities. That campaign was so critical because it was maybe the first time that LAPD was on its heels. The information was so damning that we were able to organize so many different kinds of people in that fight. It took years, but eventually, led by Strategy Center, Youth Justice Coalition, and Public Counsel, won that fight and derailed truancy ticketing: in December 2015, a judge granted amnesty to nearly 250,000 pre-2012 tickets issued to youth under 18.

Challenges to Solidarity: Breaking the Unthinkable Thoughts

In order to challenge anti-Black racism and settler colonialism, we have to reject the premises of how we understand the United States. For myself as a Brown person and as the son of an immigrant, it's easy to embrace the immigrant narrative: *we pick ourselves up from our bootstraps, we do the job that nobody else wants to do.* So for me, step one is to ideologically challenge those things.

What's the premise of "We do the jobs that no other person wants to do?" They're not talking about white people. They're talking mainly about Black folks, or some variation on the denigration of Black folks. We live under the domination of white supremacy, and ideologically, that shapes the ideas that emerge. As a Latino man, it means a lot to try to challenge my own community's ideas. If they only perceive it as, "I came here and I made a life for myself," they are not seeing the big picture. Meanwhile, they pick up popular racist notions of Black folks through television, through very superficial interactions with them, and, more importantly, from our own legacy of racism and colonialism in Latin America.

Black and Brown unity is critical and necessary, but we need to address the denial of Blackness and Indigeneity in our own communities. The myth of Latinoness is our denial of our Blackness and

Indigeneity. We can maybe imagine an Indigenous past; but we don't even imagine a Black past or a Black present in Latin America, which of course is part of who we are.

I read the Strategy Center's *Immigrant Rights and Wrongs* early on. I learned that while our analysis could be very centered around Black folks and Black liberation, it doesn't mean that Black folks themselves are not subject to dominant ideology. They can understand anti-Black racism but also be nativist and anti-immigrant. Meanwhile, many Black folks feel like, "We built this country and now we're being displaced." The system separates us and pits us against each other. Grasping this pathology of racism is a very deep issue for me.

We spend a lot of time talking with folks and reeducating our people to a deeper understanding of history. We can't just say, "Well, we're natural allies." Even as we center anti-Black racism, we really need to speak about specific demands for each community. We need to address the specific forms of oppressions that they face, be it racial, immigration, joblessness, or whatever and then find specific demands to address them.

The problem now is that we have a form of activism that shames people about having certain bad ideas without understanding that bad ideas come from the system; they don't come intuitively to people. There is also a false notion that just because I'm Black or I'm Brown, I'm impervious to any kind of bad politics or bad ideology. We have to win our communities over, and that's not going to be done by beating them upside the head, calling them an anti-Black racist or claiming they support the settler nation. No, we have to take the time to understand who they are, talk with them, and debate with them.

In order to challenge the community, we have to be out in the community and be in relationship to the community. Another false idea in US organizing culture is the assumption that the community will have the answers to the issue already. Yes, the community has answers, but the community also has been indoctrinated in deep racist, classist ideology. At Strategy Center, we used to say that we have to be prepared to break the unthinkable

thoughts, and to do that means being in relationship to real people.

Struggle from a Place of Love

This kind of deep work with and among the community really comes from a place of love. It might make people a little bit uncomfortable about their own positionality in society. But it's done not from a place of shame and how dare you and you don't understand anti-Blackness. No, it's done with a lot of love and with a lot of struggle.

Ella Baker said that the everyday action of trying to win people over is essential. We're losing that art. We want fast spade work and expect instant results. We expect intellectual purity. But that is a false notion for us to have if we don't do the work ourselves with the people.

To build a movement, we need to unite the many against the few. To do that, we have to struggle with whatever racial, gendered, class barriers exist that don't allow for full solidarity. We need to ask: what is our unity about and how do we re-envision the world? Does my vision include Black self-determination? Indigenous sovereignty? Does our view of society put very central women in the factor of history? Those are key questions to finding working unity among ourselves. It's also creating a vision of the future in practice, in doing the work itself. Even if it's at a small scale, we can start imagining what society could look like in our movements today.

I look at all the young people that have emerged as leaders of movements in the last 10 or 15 years; that is amazing. One of our Bus Riders Union leaders became a big leader in the street vending fight in Los Angeles. Others lead environmental justice work. To me that is the outcome that we should all strive for: that we're leaving this world with more people who are doing this work, believe in this work, and want to do this work. This is the biggest lesson that we can learn. ❖

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