

## **Intersectional Coalition Building: Los Angeles Justice-Centered Grassroots Community Organizations Engage in Multi-Racial Coalition Building & Movement Solidarity**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a Latina of Guatemalan and Mexican descent growing up in the west valley of Phoenix, Arizona during the era of SB1070, an era when racial profiling was deemed legal and blatant racism was at an all-time high, this injustice ignited a fire within me in the fight for justice at an early age. As a first-generation American, I witnessed first-hand systems of oppression – from the systemic racism rooted in the very foundations of the institutions that were intended to serve our BIPOC communities to one of the deadliest police forces in the nation. Witnessing this oppression of communities of color in Arizona and across the United States inspired me to advocate for historically oppressed communities as a scholar activist and grassroots community organizer. In this pursuit of justice as a grassroots organizer, I began to notice the racial tensions and divides that arose within diverse communities of color in Phoenix. I became aware of the inherently racist and flawed approach of centering the individual interests of Latinx communities and disregarding the needs of Black communities, rooted in the anti-blackness blatantly present in the Latinx community and city I grew up in. Ultimately, I found this to be detrimental to the movements in Phoenix.

Movements can often be falsely guided by individual interests, such as prioritizing the liberation of one oppressed group over another, often influenced by the lack of resources available to grassroots organizations that forces groups to be in a constant state of opposition towards one another. The philosopher Nancy Fraser has discussed the phenomenon of "politics of recognition" and how it can create hierarchies within social movements. This framework suggests that when movements prioritize the interests of one oppressed group over another, it can reinforce existing power structures and inequalities, undermining solidarity and inclusive social change (2000). Similarly, the legacy of cultural organizing in silos instead of in collaboration with one another has embedded frameworks in traditional community organizing spaces that have historically perpetuated varying forms of oppression, from anti-Blackness to anti-Indigenous, among others.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent scholar and the originator of the concept of intersectionality, has examined how social movements can inadvertently exclude certain groups. Her work emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing intersecting systems of

oppression (1989). Similarly to Angela Davis, a renowned scholar and activist, who has written extensively about intersectionality and the need for solidarity among diverse oppressed groups and addresses the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of various struggles (2016). Together, both Crenshaw and Davis' work provides a foundation for understanding the interconnectedness of various struggles among historically oppressed groups and the need for solidarity and intersectional movement building. Now as a MMUF scholar at USC, I have immersed myself within intersectional movements for justice in Los Angeles.

In this study, I seek to answer the research questions: According to movement builders and coalition participants, why is there a need for multi-racial, cross-cultural movement and coalition building in grassroots community organizations in Los Angeles? What does their practice of coalition building help us to better understand about movements for social and racial justice and the pursuit of solidarity in coalitions? I use a participatory action research design in my research, interviewing community leaders within a multi-racial coalition named the Beloved Community and involving them in the research process as active participants, rather than just subjects of the research. In addition, I engaged in participant observation through community engagement and coalition building meetings and initiatives. From this research, I concluded racial unity in pursuit of collective liberation is key to being in a shared mission-aligned purpose; relationship building is the most essential to building effective coalitions; and a collective, multi-racial reimagining of justice is critical to building movements together. Further, I discovered that our liberation cannot be achieved if it is just for some, it requires an understanding that collective liberation and justice must be obtained for all oppressed people.

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## **BELOVED COMMUNITY**

The Beloved Community is a multi-racial coalition made up of 20 Black-and Brown-led grassroots organizations reimagining justice in Los Angeles. During Fall 2020, the Beloved Community coalition formed as a carefully woven collective across L.A. County. Convened by Mike de la Rocha and Angela Rye, two social justice advocates and community leaders grounded in Black and Brown movement and coalition building, this coalition was created to develop authentic community relationships and build narrative power and capacity, a step that is imperative to advancing efforts to transform Los Angeles's justice system not just for Black and Brown Los Angelenos, but for all.

The goals of the coalition are divided into three categories: 1) to advance healing and transformative justice among leading grassroots community-based organizations in Los Angeles County through a network that elevates the leadership of people of color-led grassroots community-based organizations; 2) to coordinate, align, and support efforts to impact the regional narrative that humanizes and centers our most vulnerable community members and scales proven solutions to keep us safe and healthy; 3) to urge elected leaders and candidates to treat poverty and violence as systemic public health issues so they can refrain from over-policing communities of color that drain funds from critical services.

Organizations in the Beloved Community Coalition include: Community Coalition, Champions in Service, Creative Acts, Dignity and Power Now, Healing Dialogue and Action, Homies Unidos, Brotherhood Crusade, The BUILD Program, Centro Cha, CD Tech, Impact Strategies (Convener), LA Community Action Network (LACAN), Los Angeles Youth Uprising Coalition, Prosecutors Alliance, Represent Justice, Revolve Impact (Convener), Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural TransLatin@ Coalition, Unite The People, Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), #YouAreEssential, and Athletes for Impact. The coalition is guided by this set of values and principles: to listen to community members as they share what has and has not worked historically to keep our communities safe; to develop a new vision of community care that is rooted in the shared and intersectional healing of everyone; to be driven by the most impacted individuals. Lastly and most critically, to build organizational capacity rooted in the work of existing community-based organizations and to generate a regional infrastructure to ensure long-term movement building power for the most impacted communities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted utilizing one-on-one in-depth interviews with members of the Beloved Community, primarily Executive Directors of the community organizations, to gather data. The purpose of using this method is to obtain detailed information about their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes on multi-racial and intersectional coalition building within the Beloved Community. The participants for this study were chosen utilizing convenient sampling as participants within the coalition were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, rather than randomly selecting participants from a larger population not affiliated with this group of organizations.

### **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

The research was conducted using a participatory action research (PAR) framework, to emphasize participation and engagement in the research process by coalition members. Also referred to as “progressive community-engaged research” ([Pastor 2013](#)), PAR requires equal and collaborative participation of community members in the research process, involving the “community of interest” in the execution of the research project up to and including exploring research questions that emerge from the group itself ([Walter 2009](#)). Therefore, community participation became central to this community-engaged thesis and ensured that these organizations were actively involved in designing initial and final research questions, determining effective data collection methods including interviews, group discussions, and focus groups, and engaging in the interpretation and analysis of the data as a collective. By developing research questions as it relates to their coalition goals and analyzing the data through community group discussions, the PAR process allowed for these community organizations to have a voice in the research and to ensure that their perspectives and experiences were central to the study.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The two individuals interviewed in this study are the Executive Directors of their respective organizations. These interviews are intended to showcase the lasting legacy and ongoing impact of these organizations engaging in coalitions and to develop an understanding for their doing so, throughout their engagement in grassroots community organizing as movement leaders in Los Angeles. The findings reported here are based on interviews with two EDs, Alberto Retana and Sabra Williams.

Alberto Retana is the President and CEO of Community Coalition, a nonprofit organization based in South Los Angeles that empowers residents to transform their communities, improve education, and reimagine public safety. As President and CEO, Alberto has developed initiatives to build Community Coalition into a mass based community organization that involves thousands of South Los Angeles residents in the practice of creating change. Sabra Williams is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Creative Acts, a Black-led organization that seeks to transform urgent social justice issues through the revolutionary power of the arts; to heal trauma, build community, raise power, and center the voices of those who are or have been formerly incarcerated.

While the Beloved Community is an extensive group of community organizations, these two organizations are representative of this coalition’s pursuits and practice the visions of

cross-cultural solidarity. As a result of the close relationships that were formed and engagement with these members, among others, through participant observation, I developed relationships and trust with these organizations that have allowed me to engage in this participatory action research approach. Further, the analysis of this data has been informed by critical race theory, intersectionality, and other sociological frameworks to understand the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that have historically shaped these movements in Los Angeles.

## **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this research was to investigate why there is a need for multi-racial coalitions rooted in racial solidarity in grassroots community organizing and to identify its potential to address social and racial justice in Los Angeles. The findings of this study are based on data collected from interviews with multi-racial coalition leaders, specifically executive directors each representing their respective organization. When asked about their initial interest, engagement and pursuit of being in the coalition, participants in this study cited several motivations for engaging in multi-racial coalition building, including a dominating desire to address issues of racial injustice by building solidarity across racial lines. While there were not many challenges mentioned in the interviews as present in their engagement in coalition building within the Beloved Community, the impact of historical and current racial tensions as the first theme was a deeply relevant factor in their origin stories as organizers. For instance, the legacy of Black and Brown racial tensions in South Central Los Angeles present in the 90's riots is an upbringing many referenced and incorporated as a central and underlying notion that informed their definition of solidarity and incorporating their perspective into practice on multi-racial coalition building within grassroots organizing spaces in the broader Los Angeles communities.

### **Racial Unity in Pursuit of Collective Liberation**

In this study, organizations within the Beloved Community coalition demonstrated a clear alignment with the idea that racial unity in pursuit of collective liberation aims to create a society where racial justice and equality are achieved through the collaborative efforts of diverse racial and ethnic groups, dismantling oppressive systems, and ensuring the liberation of all individuals, and that this is abundantly present in the formation and ongoing engagement of the Beloved Community. Through my participant observation at the Beloved Community's Community Forum at USC, it became clear through the coalition member's testimonies on just how powerful and necessary racial unity is in the pursuit of liberation. One Beloved Community member as

founder of the organization #YouAreEssential, Ashlee Marie Preston stated in her testimony, “My ability to thrive is only contingent upon cross-cultural solidarity that yields dignity, safety and access for all of us.” In her community forum testimony that centered her identity as a Black trans woman, she expressed the importance of being in a multi-racial movement that is inclusive and supportive of all identities, across racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, and class status. Her testimony echoed the significance of racial unity recognizing that the liberation of one racial group is intertwined with the liberation of all marginalized communities and emphasizes the importance of building alliances and coalitions across racial lines. It involves recognizing the interconnected nature of racism and other forms of oppression and working together to create a more equitable and just society. Alberto Retana, Community Coalition’s President and CEO, expressed his strong belief in the concept of racial unity as well and how it is integral and necessary to not only having and preserving coalitions, but to remaining grounded by unity on the path towards liberation for all communities of color.

“Unity can exist without division, it can’t be built without struggle. Unity is an acknowledgement of those differences. Whether in the Latino community there’s difference, whether in the Black community there’s difference, in the context of Black and Brown coalitions. Unity is not a natural state of things, conflict is a natural state of things, so you have to struggle to unite. If you struggle to unite, then you struggle for liberation. Unity is a concept I deeply believe in, it’s a concept that I try to take in everything that we [CoCo] do. To assume difference, and not be afraid of it. To acknowledge it, to embrace it, and to work towards unity, not to ignore people’s distinctions or unique histories; never at that, but to build power. I don’t believe we can win, I don’t think we can advance liberation by ourselves, no one really can.”

Retana’s insight builds upon Patricia Hill Collins’s work, affirming the important role of racial unity and multi-racial coalition building for collective liberation. Collins argues that in order to challenge and dismantle systems of domination, it is crucial for individuals and communities to come together, recognize their shared struggles, and work collaboratively towards social justice. It also involves acknowledging and respecting the unique experiences and perspectives of different racial groups while finding common ground to work towards a more equitable and just society. She highlights the concept of "interlocking oppressions" and emphasizes the need for multi-racial coalitions to address the interconnected nature of racism, sexism, classism, and other

forms of oppression. Collins's work not only provides theoretical insights into the dynamics of power and oppression but also offers practical strategies for building alliances across racial lines. She encourages the development of coalitions that are inclusive, intersectional, and committed to transformative social change. Sabra Williams, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Creative Acts, expressed the presence and importance of unity broadly, across race and ethnicity, within prisons as a guiding force towards liberation.

“In our project, we sought to have all the different races in the room to make change, and that had never been done in the prison before. To make racial unity and community became critical, because it’s so segregated. We see what happens when people of all races work together, and what happened was incarcerated folks began to express how people of other races within the prison develop more of a brotherhood amongst one another, than with their own gang for instance, resulting in a culture change in how we see coalitions across races being built.”

Sabra provided a clear representation of what the power of racial unity entails and how this transcends traditional community organizing spaces and into alternative spaces that are influenced by the forces of mass incarceration and yet still the racial unity present transcends the traditional structures of oppression that are designed to divide. She went on to express that the dismantling of such oppressive forces and structures also requires a commitment to organize collaboratively and in community with one another, against the powers that seek to divide.

“Ending white supremacy, and challenging white supremacy, won’t come without us working collaboratively with everyone who isn’t white, and maybe some white people. It won't, it's just impossible, and that’s why they try to divide us, otherwise, it’s never going to happen.”

### **Relationship Building is Essential to Building Coalitions**

Relationship building is essential to building coalitions as it forms the foundation for trust, collaboration, and effective collective action. It involves the development of connections, understanding, and mutual respect among individuals and groups with shared goals, interests, values and principles. Strong relationships in community organizing not only foster open communication, cooperation, and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for the success and sustainability of any coalition, but it allows for stronger, more intersectional and inclusive movements that are guided by the pursuit of building a more Beloved Community, towards

shared solidarity and justice as a collective. When asked about why she decided to join the Beloved Community, Sabra Williams from Creative Acts shared:

“I always loved the idea of the Beloved Community, you know, from history. I also knew there would be integrity to it because of [the founder] and not the influencer culture that puts movements second. I knew it wouldn’t be like that and I knew the people involved wouldn’t be like that. So I knew it would be all good, I knew we’d be creating value.”

Similarly, Alberto from Community Coalition shared:

“It’s mission aligned, it’s purposeful, these are our people. That’s why, because it makes sense. It’s people that are committed, that’s why we’re there. And because he [founder] asked. As much as this is about the values, it’s about the person and the engagement. If you pull him [founder] out, we all have great values but that doesn't mean we’re going to come together. You remove the organizer, you remove the cohesion. So that’s why; it’s the values and the person who organized.”

In both interviews, they expressed their reason for being in the coalition and the ongoing driving force for remaining there is ultimately through the presence of the relationship of the organizer. They both addressed how this relationship became central and critical for their continued involvement and being values aligned in a manner that has allowed them to not only all be in a shared community together. Further, it is through the relationships themselves that a coalition forms, that the trust emerges and that the organizing and pursuit of justice occurs. Without a strong foundation, trusted relationships and collaboration, the formation and construction of a coalition could not be formed.

### **Multi-Racial Reimagining of Justice**

Multi-racial reimagining of justice is built upon the principles of cross-cultural solidarity and collaboration. It involves fostering meaningful relationships and trust among individuals and communities from different racial backgrounds. By working together, sharing resources, and supporting each other's struggles, coalitions can advance a shared vision of justice for all.

Multi-racial reimagining of justice involves dismantling oppressive systems, centering historically oppressed voices, recognizing intersecting forms of oppression, cultivating solidarity, and engaging in transformative action. It is a continuous process that aims to build a more just and inclusive society for all racial and ethnic groups. Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn addresses the concept of multi-racial reimagining of justice in coalitions by exploring the



intersections of race and justice and highlights the importance of coalition-building across racial lines (2004). Community Coalition's ED shared:

“For me, reimagining justice is everyday people defining the future. Having the power, and the confidence, the belief, values and ability to achieve purpose. It's liberation at the end of the day, and liberation to me is to have the freedom again to achieve purpose as a person and as a community, and right now we're not able to. Well we are able to, but it takes a lot. It takes a lot. And at what cost?”

In suggesting that liberation is the end goal with everyday people having the ability to define their own futures, Retana demonstrates that in order for justice to be reimagined, it requires us and the pursuit to be intentionally multi-cultural. Creative Acts's ED shared:

“The other thing I think that's urgent that I don't hear people talking about is, ‘what work do we need to do to not become the next oppressors?’ Because eventually we will have power, but it's the human condition to oppress others. So there's nothing special about us as Black people, Brown people, Asian people – there's nothing special about us. So if we really want change, we have to be prepared to do our own internal work, and that's the piece people don't want to do. Because when you're in a movement, it's very easy to not self-reflect because you're constantly pushing on the outside. But if we don't also do the internal work and have the tools to know how to do that, because in American education those tools don't exist.”

In answering the question of ‘what does reimagining justice mean to you?’ Sabra highlighted a particularly interesting finding in that the goal to create a new vision of justice that is multicultural requires us to understand that we cannot become part of the problem, and instead must first address our own biases before we can take action together. In acknowledging the role that oppressive systems that have resulted in the desire of justice have had on communities of color, it becomes clear just how important it is to identify that we do not also become part of the problem and instead closer to the solution.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This sample may not be entirely representative of the larger population being studied in the coalition and this sample may not accurately reflect the characteristics of the population, leading to biased or inaccurate results. Similarly, there was also potential for self-selection bias as participants in this convenience sample chose to participate in the study based on their interest

or motivation, leading to self-selection bias. This could have impacted the validity of the study if those who self-selected have varying views from those who did not participate. Lastly, another limitation includes selection bias as individuals who were more likely to participate in the study were chosen. Convenience sampling can introduce biases into the research findings, as the sample may not be representative of the larger population being studied. Therefore, it is important to approach the limitations of this sampling technique when interpreting the results and findings of the larger population with caution.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a young organizer grounded in movements for liberation and justice for all oppressed people, this research has fueled a fire in me to not only continue my research on the importance of multi-racial and intersectional movements, but also to fill in the gap in reassessing how we can allow pursue our scholarship with an intersectional lens. By researching social movements beyond one particular group or communities, this research has informed the need for cross-cultural scholarship as well, through comparative ethnic studies and beyond. Through these findings of racial unity as essential for collective liberation, the importance of relationship building in coalitions, and reimagining justice as a multi-racial collective, this scholarship is addressing the significance of organizing across racial groups and it informs the future of coalition building through shared solidarity and the pursuit of liberation for all.

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## **Appendix: Interview Protocol**

**Research Questions:** According to movement builders and coalition participants, why is there a need for multi-racial, cross-cultural movement and coalition building in grassroots community organizations in Los Angeles? What does their practice of coalition building help us to better understand about movements for social and racial justice and the pursuit of solidarity in coalitions?

**Introduction:** “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today about your experience as a movement builder and community leader in the Beloved Community coalition in Los Angeles. This will be more of a conversation than a formal interview, and I want you to feel as comfortable as possible. There are no right or wrong answers since I really just want to hear from you about your perspective, experience and opinions. If you don’t want to answer a question we can skip it, and you can stop me at any point if anything is unclear. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?”

### **Section One – Demographics / Organizing:**

What is your racial / ethnic background?

What identities do you identify with? What is your age?

Are you from Los Angeles? What is your connection to the city?

How and why did you get involved in community organizing?

How did you find your way to your current position and organization? Why here?

How did you personally get involved in a coalition-centered approach to organizing?

How did your role as a movement leader evolve beyond traditional organizational frameworks?

What was a defining moment when racial conflicts or racial tensions arose in your organizing and how did you navigate it?

### **Section Two – Multi-Racial Coalition Building:**

What is the mission and vision of your organization?

What population does your organization seek to serve?

What racial / ethnic and gendered population does this organization target?

Why does your organization participate in this coalition?

What is the composition of this coalition?

Why is your organization part of this coalition?

What is this organization's ongoing role in coalition building?

How have you navigated the different racial and ethnic experiences in coalition building?

How does your organization's mission relate to the values of this coalition?

Has your organization been involved in other multi-cultural movement building spaces?

As it relates to one of the tenets of this coalition, what does reimagining justice mean to you?