Antiracism Inc.

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Antiracism Works: 
Interview with Diana Zuñiga

Felice Blake

Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) began in 2003 with the goal of closing down prisons. The organization is a statewide coalition of grassroots organizations that has helped defeat over 140,000 proposed new prison and jail beds since 2004. Working with elected representatives, media actors, activists, and artists, CURB continues to divert public spending from the death economies associated with corrections and policing toward life-affirming services.

Diana Zuñiga is CURB’s statewide coordinator in Los Angeles, California. In 2014 the Antiracism Inc./Works program invited Diana to speak with scholars, staff, students, and community members at the University of California, Santa Barbara about the proposed construction of a new jail and detention center in Northern Santa Barbara County. The Antiracism Inc./Works program sought to raise awareness and a discussion about carceral expansion in our community. The event generated the Coalition for Sustainable Communities, a group of UCSB scholars, students, activists, and local community members dedicated to opposing the proposed jail and to informing the public about...
mass incarceration. Felice Blake was director of the Antiracism Inc./Works program series at UCSB.¹

Blake: How do you understand prison abolition?

Zuñiga: My understanding of prison abolition is that it is the dreaming of the total elimination of prisons and jails in our world, and I think additionally it is also the reimagining of what we would want instead — so, how community members would want to address harm and violence in communities because in the world we are going to experience those things. How we would want to create systems to be able support people with mental health needs, just like we support people with health needs at the same rate. I think it’s not only the total elimination of oppressive systems and institutions that continue to incarcerate our communities, but also the reimagining of what we as folks that have experienced oppression and violence and what we could imagine could be created in our world instead.

Blake: What are the obstacles in the way of that imagination?

Zuñiga: I think sometimes people feel that they don’t have the tools to not just imagine but practice. And I think that’s the other thing about abolition in that it is about imagining, but it’s also about practically utilizing what we think could be created. And that piece of practicing takes a lot of work, takes sometimes… Sometimes we’re not successful: sometimes it takes years and with those pieces I think folks find it hard how to practically see their visions come to fruition. So I think that that’s a big piece of it. I feel like one of the things that comes to mind for me is just the ideas of transformative justice as a means to address harm and violence and sexual violence in our community. That type of transformative justice practice that a lot of people are engaging in right now take trust in community, takes trusting relationships, takes time. I think sometimes a lot of folks don’t think

¹ This phone interview occurred on January 18, 2017.
that we have that time, or are so in the crux of trying to figure out how to support their loved one with a mental health need or their loved one with a substance abuse need that sometimes it may feel easier to look at what resources the state has instead of thinking about what resources we actually have.

I can say myself that even doing the work that I’m doing, transformative justice and the idea of envisioning different things is a hard thing to do. But I do think we have a lot. We have to lean on our networks, lean on our own resources and knowledge and our instincts and intuition to be able to really think about how we’re going to care for our communities and our loved ones.

Blake: Do you spend equal amounts of time dealing with communities impacted by policing and the prison or dealing with communities that represent the state?

Zuñiga: What we spend most of our time doing is trying to move elected officials and staff members at the local and state level. So it is a lot of trying to have those conversations with people who are the decision-makers, that may not have the same experiences and realities that we have. So our work is spending a lot of time figuring out how to present messages to decision-makers that will actually move them to make different decisions that will benefit us and benefit them in the long run as well.

The other piece of our work is really the community organizing piece, which is really thinking about how we can connect our member organizations, organize new member organizations into the coalition to shift the minds of our decision-makers. Most of the organizations we work with are led by formerly incarcerated people, people of color, family members of folks who are on the inside. So we really utilize our network as a coalition to really pull up and lift up basically the voices of those folks who are most impacted and also to support their leadership development in being able to engage in a budget and legislative process at the state and local level that can be really hard and re-
ally difficult to navigate as you’re navigating all of these personal things that you’re experiencing at the same time.

So it’s a little bit of both. Those are the two sectors that we focus on the most.

**Blake:** We spend a lot of time talking about what is “going wrong” in terms of organizing against mass incarceration, but what are some of the things that you see “going right”? For example, what alliances have been built? What campaigns have been successful?

**Zuñiga:** I think some of the things that have been successful are for example:

Our grassroots power in the span from 2004–16. We’ve been able to stop almost 9 billion of prison and jail funding and construction funding, which is crazy! There has been jail and prison construction in the budget, but there would be so much more if the CURB network did not exist and if our member organizations weren’t activated to stop that money from moving forward. So that has been very successful, a huge success for us.

I think, some other pieces are that we have been able to pass several different policies through the budget and legislative propositions in California. Propositions 36, 47, and 57 have

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3 California Proposition 47 (2014), the Reduced Penalties for Some Crimes Initiative. Nonviolent, non-serious crimes were reduced to misdemeanors, unless the defendant has prior convictions for murder, rape, certain sex offenses or certain gun crimes. The measure included the personal use of most illegal drugs. See https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_47_-_Reduced_Penalties_for_Some_Crimes_Initiative_(2014).

4 California Proposition 57 (2016), the California Parole for Non-Violent Criminals and Juvenile Court Trial Requirements Initiative. Increased parole and good behavior opportunities for felons convicted of nonviolent crimes and allowed judges, not prosecutors, to decide whether to try certain juveniles as adults in court. See https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposi-
been huge, have been ways that we’ve been able to decrease prison populations. And we have also been able to pass an elder parole program, which California didn’t have three years ago. That was years after years of advocacy far beyond the time I’ve been with CURB. So those are really amazing policies that have been able to bring people back to their communities.

I think some other pieces that I think are really great are these community reinvestment pieces that are happening. For example, in Alameda County the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC) and several other organizations that were part of a coalition up there were able to get 50% of realignment dollars away from basically law enforcement and into community-based services. They also created (two organizers with EBC Darris Young is one of them) a fund that was specifically for formerly incarcerated people to be able to access so that they can create and expand their own programs in their community. So that is beautiful and wonderful, and I think a real success and is something were trying to implement in Los Angeles now given Alameda County’s success.

I think the redirection, reinvestment piece is an amazing part and is really the third demand of CURB — to really redirect resources. I also think that the kind of coalition building that we’ve been successful at has been really amazing to witness. When I first started with CURB, our focus was always on state budgets, state institutions. We never really took a stance on any sort of issues around private facilities, private prisons, or jails. About three years ago we started bringing in new organizations that were really focused on immigrant justice work. And you can’t talk about immigrant justice (and now the connection to criminalization) without talking about private issues as well. There are a few members in particular who have been in a three-year conversation as to how do we think about the organizing against private and public facilities. What are the contradictions that existed? What are the barriers that have limited us from working

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_57_ Parole for Non-Violent Criminals and Juvenile Court Trial Requirements_ (2016).
together? And what are the actual examples of where we’ve been able to work together and been successful? To me, that is a huge, amazing success because it was something I was interested in for a long time with CURB and now we’re actually engaged in this conversation and creating a resource that other people can actually use as they’re trying to generate these alliances and stronger coalitions with each other.

**Blake:** As you can see, there is growing interest on college campuses in Prison Studies as well as faculty, students, and/or staff getting involved in or creating educational programs in correctional facilities. What is it you think that academics are contributing to the overall goal of closing down prisons? What things do they see or fail to see? What contributions would you want from them?

**Zuñiga:** Three things come to mind.

The first thing is, I think it’s wonderful that professors and academics invite community voices and folks that are doing this kind of grassroots work to the classes that they’re teaching these theories and these historical issues in. I think it really helps to put a face and a name and share what the movement is actually doing on the ground for students to be able to understand and access and know that this isn’t just theory or this isn’t just in the past. It’s happening right now and this is how it’s happening. This is how you can plug in. I really appreciate that and think that has been an amazing experience for me to be able to participate in. And I know [it has been] for others as well. And to be quite honest, it’s also leveraged students to want to intern with organizations like CURB, which has been super helpful in us being able to sustain a small organization. So I think that’s great.

I really appreciate the partnership in Los Angeles that we’re having with Dr. Kelly Lytle Hernandez [at UCLA]. She has been part of our LA No More Jails group for a while and basically started sensing some things that we were needing, specifically arrest data that advocates and organizers actually needed.
Through a collaborative effort with UCLA, LA No More Jails, Critical Resistance, CURB, Dignity and Power Now, and Youth Justice Coalition we’ve been able to generate the Million Dollar Hoods project (milliondollarhoods.org/), which is thriving and basically shows by neighborhood how many people have been incarcerated, how much money that’s cost per neighborhood, and what people are being incarcerated for. Largely we see again that people are getting arrested for low-level offenses, drug offenses, DUIs, things that are very low-level issues. The issue that we are seeing though, is that there are a lot of domestic violence cases, which is again why we have to figure out how to address interpersonal violence in our communities in a different way, because people are just getting arrested for them. These are people that are part of families that are again being torn apart. So those are some of the things that we’re seeing in the Million Dollar Hoods project and that’s a perfect example of the kind of convergence between academia, technology, and grassroots organizations to really create something that is helpful and beneficial for our advocacy efforts— to really think about where the money’s going and to think about how this is impacting our folks.

The last thing that I was thinking about was [education]. My uncle, for example, has been able to participate in a lot of academic programs on the inside. He’s been inside now for 22 years, but he has two AA degrees and is an amazing person who does a lot to support folks on the inside as well as himself. One of the things that happens, as a result of academics going into the prisons, is that I hear his experience. For him it has been really impactful and helpful to be able to access these classes because for a long time my grandmother had to pay for him to be able to access those classes, and that’s expensive! So this is a huge thing for a lot of people on the inside, that now these academic partnerships are being generated to actually provide access to classes.

One of the barriers that I’m seeing is that in the past, people who have completed any sort of academic achievement program have not been able to utilize good time credit. So they haven’t been able to get a decrease in their sentence although they’re participating in a positive program like academic ad-
vancement. In this year’s budget [for 2017], we see the state saying that they will have a one-time credit for these academic or vocational courses, which is great, and we could do so much more. I think that that’s where I wish academia would push a little bit more. Like, you all are providing these amazing services and these classes. You’re creating these connections with people on the inside, [but] we want to see them out [of prison or jail] sooner. We don’t want them to have to be in there. And I think that academia could advocate for good time credit to be expanded for the people that they’re supporting and teaching on the inside. And I would like to see that.

Blake: We know that when people receive degrees, the recidivism rates start to plummet.

Zuñiga: My uncle had a graduation inside of the prison, and he invited me. And to see this entire visiting room of men, many men of color, in their gowns getting their diplomas and getting their certificates! It was just really amazing to see that. For me it was also sad to see that in a prison setting. But I also heard so much laughter and saw smiles from them that I was like, “something positive is happening on the inside of them as individuals.”

Blake: How has working with CURB changed you?

Zuñiga: I started working with CURB when I was twenty-five years old. And I just turned thirty! Just to think about these past few years of how much CURB and its members have taught me and guided me and held me in these moments when this work is hard and we’re continuously being attacked on so many different levels! Even our positive reform efforts are being attacked in a way where they’re trying to create new facilities or CDC is generating different procedures for itself to change the positive things that we’re passing…those things are really hard to manage. I have definitely built up a lot more strength and understanding and connection to a community that is experiencing the same thing, that is down to continue fighting, and that will
continue to be resilient. I think that’s how CURB has changed me in my trajectory of getting “here.” At first I thought it was just my family, then I realized how many more families there were. And now I am lucky to have a community that understands exactly what we’re experiencing and is dedicated to fighting against these systems of oppression. So I feel really grateful for that community.

When I first started with CURB, it was hard to manage all of the different opinions and perspectives in a coalition and come to an agreement. [laughter] It definitely took me awhile to build up that skill. But now it excites me that we have all these different opinions, that we have these questions, that we’re being analytical, that we’re thinking about the unintended consequences of policies that we’re supporting. I think that that’s definitely built up my own awareness of the need for the critical analysis in order to get to very intentional changes, whether it’s within policy or within different organizing strategies. I really appreciate that about CURB and have really learned and changed a lot from those different perspectives.

Blake: We’ve been talking about how you’ve grown. What is it that sustains CURB, the organization and the people inside? What is the funding structure? What sustains CURB as a coalition?

Zuñiga: CURB as a coalition has a lot of different components. We have several different work groups, and that’s really how people are able to plug into our work in very intentional ways based on their particular skills or a skill they want to build up. We have a media team, we have an advocacy team, fundraising, coordinating that really deals with human resources for us and bigger picture conversations and guiding membership to really think about political issues that are popping up.

Every month we have a CURB “member call” that happens at the beginning of the month so that we can share what’s happening with our work. But we also use that space as a way to create trainings that will support leadership development for our
members or to have a member talk about a new campaign or a new strategy that they’re using. So we also use those member calls as building moments and sharing opportunities between the coalitional members to discuss what the coalition is up to.

Every year we have an annual “face-to-face,” which is a two-day event when we bring together our members to really think about what we’re experiencing on the ground—how state and local policy is impacting our work. This year we’re going to talk about how the Trump administration may impact our work as well. This gives us time to see each other (because we’re all in different parts of California), to connect with each other in person, and to imagine what we want to break down or create the next year. Also, it’s a time to just laugh and eat and share personal stories with each other. Sometimes I think that everybody really loves the “face-to-face” for that purpose.

I think that those are the ways that we’re able to function. The way that we’re able to sustain financially: we have our fundraising committee that helps us figure out what foundations to reach out to. That is growing and we’re hoping that it will grow more. But because of the work we do, CURB can’t always get as much support from particular foundations, or any support from them at all. We also have built up a grassroots donor base where a large number of individuals are now donating to CURB, which is totally sustaining our work. And this past year we replicated an art auction that Critical Resistance had in 2015. For our auction, we had high profile artists and folks that are incarcerated in San Quentin donate their pieces and we auctioned them off as a way to generate revenue to sustain the coalition. It was amazing. A certain percentage of the proceeds went to the artists that requested that so we also shared resources. We always have to be creative. I think the art auction gave us the opportunity to also network with a new group of people—artists who may not normally be able to contribute to a small coalition like ours, but through their gift are able to give a piece of their work.

How are we able to sustain this personally? You know, I don’t think we have a formula for that, but we do try to laugh a lot. We do try to be very patient with each other. If people need to
take some time away from CURB or away from the organization they’ve been working for, that is encouraged and supported in order for people to be able to really take care of themselves. So I think that we’re very patient, open, and flexible with folks, and that really helps people engage in the coalition in the capacities and in the ways that they can. I do think there is a large number of CURB members who have been around CURB or around our member organizations for a long time. Their historical knowledge, but also their personal support for folks like me who came into the CURB alliance at twenty-five years old, those mentorship opportunities also support how we sustain ourselves in this coalition.

Blake: You already started talking about this a little bit, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t bring it up: the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election! What do you think about the new president-elect and yet the simultaneous mainstreaming of the discussion about mass incarceration? The new president claims to be a law-and-order president. Are these contradictions producing new ideas and energies or do we keep doing what we’ve always known to do?

Zuñiga: It is a little bit of “we know that this existed and we’re going to continue to fight and continue to do what we’ve been doing.” But I do think that there are a lot of interesting connections that are also being made. Some of the things that I see are a continued connection to the work around immigrant justice and how that connects to criminalization, mass incarceration and mass deportations. For us right now, it’s really about thinking locally. In a moment when we’re also seeing cities and counties saying that they’re sanctuary cities, how do we really hold people to what a sanctuary city is actually supposed to look like, and not just lean on the continued ways that undocumented folks with criminal convictions have been targeted for deportations? How do we generate these services and resources that we’re talking about for all community members in this moment when these cities and counties are saying that they will be a
sanctuary place? That is definitely a conversation that is popping up for us, and it’s also bringing together a lot of organizations working on both issues to really think about what type of reinvestment campaigns we have to think about, and making sure those reinvestment campaigns don’t leave people out and allow for access of services for everybody.

I do also see these new groupings of organizations coming together to create legal service clinics for undocumented folks who have criminal convictions because we know, Prop 47 for example, would impact them. That’s also really exciting in our space — Drug Policy Alliance, Immigrant Youth Coalition, and ACLU just had a [legal service clinic]. These things are really a convergence of organizations that are practicing what we want to see in our communities.

Statewide, we’re excited about the “face-to-face” that will allow us to be in a room together. It’s a little bit hard to talk about our reactions and what’s happening over the phone. We’re thinking about that [meeting] as a way to recommit to our mission and think about how this federal administration could impact that. I do think that, and we’ve been talking about this already, it leaves us with the opportunity to really continue to strengthen efforts with people working on healthcare, housing, for example, because we know that those programs will likely be cut. It gives us an opportunity to push on our state to cut corrections and move that money into the sorts of services that we know are going to be negatively impacted by federal changes.

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5 California Proposition 47 (2014), the Reduced Penalties for Some Crimes Initiative. Nonviolent, non-serious crimes were reduced to misdemeanors, unless the defendant has prior convictions for murder, rape, certain sex offenses or certain gun crimes. The measure included the personal use of most illegal drugs. See https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_47_-_Reduced_Penalties_for_Some_Crimes_Initiative_(2014).