

Organising enclaves under Black and Brown leadership in New York City: Imani Henry of Equality for Flatbush (E4F) in conversation with Ana Vilenica

Original

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Organizing enclaves under Black and Brown leadership in New York City: A conversation with Imani Henry of Equality for Flatbush (E4F)

Imani Henry

Equality for Flatbush (E4F)

in conversation with

Ana Vilenica

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Imani Henry is a founding member of Equality for Flatbush (E4F) a Black Lives Matter group established in 2013. **Ana Vilenica** is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Contact:** vilenica.ana@gmail.com

Abstract

This interview with Imani Henry of Equality for Flatbush (E4F) offers a glimpse into the grassroots organizing and struggles in New York City, particularly in Brooklyn. The conversation delves into the formation and mission of E4F, a Black Lives Matter group established in 2013, which intertwines anti-gentrification efforts with a strong stance against police violence. The interview begins with the context of a recent solidarity action for the Sanderson family, highlighting issues such as deed theft and racially-charged harassment faced by the family. Imani Henry details E4F's active involvement in cop watching, emergency response to domestic and community conflicts, and its roots in the legacy of the Black Panther Party. The conversation also touches upon the organization's broader Brooklyn-wide initiatives, including food distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic and support for local small businesses and cultural institutions. Key themes that emerge include the intersection of race and housing, the dynamics of community-led resistance, and the importance of fostering enclaves under Black and Brown leadership.

Keywords

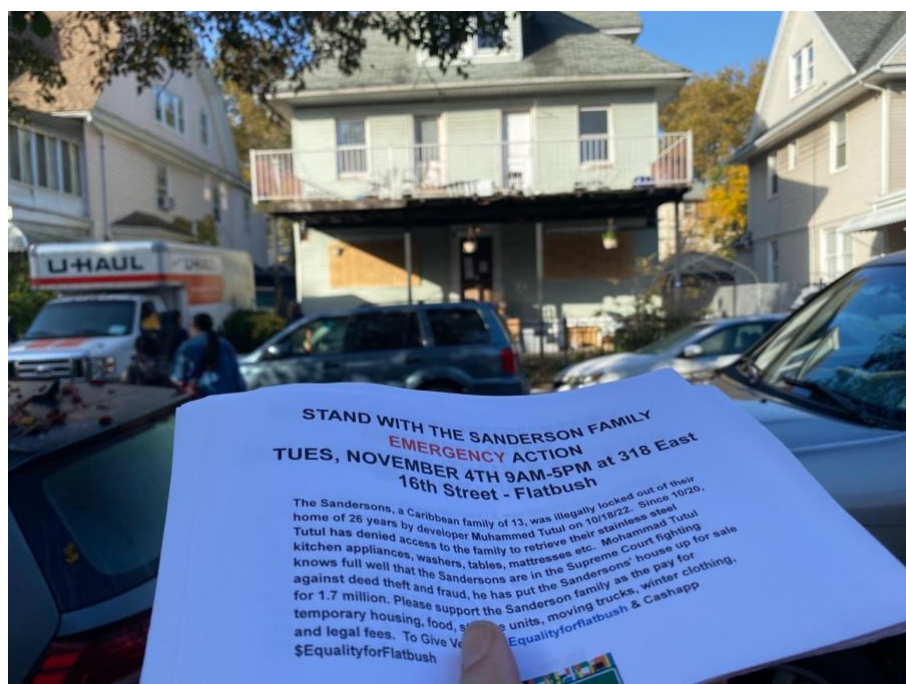
New York, Brooklyn, anti-eviction, Black struggles, tenant organizing

I met Imani Henry from Equality for Flatbush (E4F) as they were busy organizing a solidarity gathering for the Sanderson family in Flatbush, Brooklyn on October 20th 2022. The Sanderson family of 13 had been unjustly evicted and locked out of their home, where they had lived in for 26 years, only two days earlier. According to E4F's call for solidarity, the family had experienced deed theft in 2004, which led to the sale of their home. At the time of the solidarity action the Sandersons had an active supreme court case including a stay order that had been filed on 12 October by their attorney to stop the eviction. Representatives of Aydin BK Holding, Inc. and NZ Properties Group, Inc. the new 'owners', physically blocked the family from entering their home so that they could not even retrieve their essential items. E4F also reported in the call that the Sandersons have also experienced extreme harassment, including being called 'dumb N-word' by the new owners. This short conversation took place a few days later in the E4F space in the neighborhood when Imani squeezed me in between many tasks. Mary Taylor brought my attention to the existence of E4F and told me about the action that day. She also helped to edit this piece.

Ana: Can you tell us a little bit about this area? What kind of struggles have been happening here? When was Equality for Flatbush founded and what is your work here?

Imani: Equality for Flatbush (E4F) operates in Brooklyn, and we have a particular focus on Flatbush, East Flatbush and Crown Heights. That's where our police watch, or cop watch, work is. Equality for Flatbush is a Black Lives Matter group. We founded it in 2013 at the same time as the rest of the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in 2012, 2013. We decided to focus on gentrification and displacement, but to add police violence to that focus, because by about 2012, in the Black Lives Matter movement and the housing movement in general, we were looking at stop-and-frisk. Stop-and-frisk is a New York

Figure 1
Solidarity action
with the
Sanderson
family, New
York, October
2022. Image by
Ana Vilenica.



City police department practice to stop people and frisk them, in other words, to ask you to put your hands on a building while they look for pot or detain you. You might just be sitting on your porch, and they're coming to you to do this.

The bottom line is that the movement started to talk about the increase of policing in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Police were the foot soldiers of gentrification. They were coming on the behalf of landlords. We've had situations where landlords are stealing property from Black people and evicting them. When we got them back into their homes with the help of lawyers, they found their passports, all their clothes, all kinds of things they left in the apartment. The police are right there, and they call these two Black elders liars. They say to them: 'You're lying'. A white man can punch a Black woman in her stomach, and they won't be arrested, but if a landlord calls them the police will be there, because that's the rule, to protect private property. This is why we rapidly respond with the alternative program to 911. We rapidly respond to domestic violence, elder abuse, anti-LGBTQ abuse, anti-Asian abuse, disputes between neighbors or roommates, or to people in emotional distress with existing mental health issues. People are murdered by the cops when they call 911. We've seen, for example, illegal lockouts by landlords. With our efforts we managed to force the landlord to bring a locksmith in the middle of the night and let people have the medications that they couldn't have access to.

We have to do a lot of work to get the police to do their job. We have to have witnesses all the time, train people to do cop watching, and negotiate with cops. They are not here for Black and Brown people. Policing in the United States comes from slavery. Its origin is in the slave patrols. Our people have always been criminalized. My people are from Jamaica. Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean and South America were places to break enslaved Africans. In my country there was a 200-year war, the Maroon War. Indigenous and Black people fought together to stop the British violence and end slavery. We could also talk about Haiti. These are all part of our history. People that are indigenous to North America are bullied on their own land, and that has always been like that.

Ana: How do you do copwatch here?

Imani: We do cop watch with the understanding that we are the descendants of the Black Panther Party. They patrolled Oakland with guns. In Flatbush we only have our cameras. That whole thing is about community control. We don't have to partner with politicians. We've been doing this on our own since forever. Since 2012, we have had nine people murdered or shot by the NYPD just in our little sector. And that's why we copwatch for these neighborhoods.

Ana: But you also do Brooklyn-wide work?

Imani: We rapidly respond to all of Brooklyn. During the pandemic this was the space from where we did food distribution. We fed 30 neighborhoods. People and places are interconnected here. We're just a tiny grassroots organization, but we're here physically. During cop watches we come to tenant associations meetings and connect them with other tenant associations we are working with. When we partner, we get to have a lot more resources to organize tenants.

Ana: How did you become part of Equality for Flatbush?

Imani: This was a project that started out of my own share of frustration. You know: Where do I channel this anger and rage? I've lived in New York since I was 22. I'm in my fifties now. I came here after college. This is where I became who I am in political struggles. I'm originally from Boston. I'm the first to be born in the United States in my family. Before gentrification started, we were the majority here. The white people didn't come to downtown Brooklyn unless they were Hasidic Jews or working-class people.

Ana: What does it mean for you to organize with tenants here in this area of Brooklyn?

Imani: In 2013, the rates of tenant harassment increased. But the landlord harassment has always been there. I lived in buildings where it was a normal thing to have your landlord call the police when you're having a tenant meeting. He would say that there's a big party. We have revealed that on social media. We've made people famous on the internet for calling the police on elders sitting in a circle. We go to tenant association meetings as invited guests. That's how people get to know each other. Landlords are now getting rid of spaces in which people can meet. They lock courtyards and basements for instance.

Ana: Who are the landlords here in this area?

Imani: Over the last ten years, a lot of so-called management companies have come to the area. We do investigative research and sometimes it's the same people, but they just create other LLC,¹ to hide who the real folks are. A lot of our work has been to find out who is your landlord. There is for instance a family that lives in a private house at the moment. They've been there for 16 years. The landlord was also Caribbean like them but the house was foreclosed on and the new entity is now evicting this family. Generally speaking, elsewhere, landlords are landlords. They don't do repairs, they turn off the water on us, they harass us regularly.

Ana: But you don't work only with renters?

Imani: We organize our enclave, not just tenants. We organize homeowners too. Sometimes it's tricky because they are landlords too. We work with small businesses, Black and Brown institutions, cultural institutions, tenants and street vendors. We want to have a holistic approach. If they build a luxury high rise, it will impact the taxes of everybody around. That's been our big thing, the fight for the enclave. Here are the things that we do. We have saved about five small businesses. Largely Black folks. We started providing legal services in 2016, and it was about having trusted lawyers because we can't rely on the large non-profits.

¹ An LLC is a Limited Liability Corporation that shields owners of said corporations from personal responsibility. In state of New York, LLCs also had the function of making it difficult to discover who the beneficiaries are. People can use multiple LLCs to shield themselves from the discovery of their real estate portfolios. Some of the important work that E4F has done is to uncover through research the names of owners hiding behind LLCs involved in properties in the neighborhoods where they work. In 2023 New York passed the Limited Liability Transparency Act, which requires disclosure of the beneficiaries.

Figure 2

Solidarity action with the Sanderson family, NY, October 2022.
Image by Ana Vilenica.



Ana: I heard that there was a struggle around the autonomous transportation system here. Can you tell me something about it?

Imani: What is beautiful about Flatbush and why I love it so much is that we are an engaged community. We have our personal transportation system here: the dollar vans. Van drivers were regularly getting \$5,000 fines. We worked in solidarity with them and we managed to change the narrative. They were saying that they are all illegal, but after we did research we discovered that they are in direct competition with the MTA, the subway system, and that this was the reason for the harassment. The dollar vans save 30 to 45 minutes on your commute. Even people with monthly Metrocards, will spend an extra \$2 to get on a dollar van. I'm one of those people. The other thing is that this is the Black-owned industry. It is largely owned by Haitian and Caribbean folks. There are also women that drive, many of them mothers, the mothers of the dollar van system. There are other bus systems like this like the bus system from Times Square to New Jersey. I've ridden on those, but they are not policed. If you use the dollar van the police are going to pull you out and throw you out of the van. Gentrification increased this violence. Yes, of course people got tickets before, but it wasn't a battle like this.

Ana: When did that gentrification process start here? You call it the new colonization, right?

Imani: For Brooklyn, an important year was 2010, when the Barclays Center [multi-purpose indoor arena] was built. Lots of people were pushed out at that time and some came to this neighborhood. White folks that had bought homes near the Barclays Center were offered a large amount of money to move. Black and Brown folks who had to move got less. That is what inspired Equality for Flatbush to start doing anti displacement, anti-gentrification work.

Ana: You were also a part of the Brooklyn Anti-gentrification Network?

Imani: We initiated the Brooklyn Anti-gentrification Network (BAN) in 2015. We were always wondering how not to work alone in our neighborhoods. We saw that everyone

was fighting luxury high rises and gentrification around us: Black people, Brown people, Asian people, Latinx people. At the beginning white people called them beautification projects. This network brought together mostly POC-led organizations. One of the things that BAN did is an annual march against racism, gentrification, and police violence. We would go to different neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and the local groups in each neighborhood would make the program in their own places. We had multiple stops. We always stopped at a police precinct. There were a few hundred thousand people marching through Industry City, a big redevelopment in Sunset Park, on a Saturday when all the white people were eating and they were told off. It was not always nice. I got attacked by police in Bushwick at a community board meeting, for example. Undercover cops grabbed my dreads. They came to the meeting and started pushing and hitting us.

Ana: The network doesn't exist anymore. Right?

Imani: I think we are definitely in the process of reformatting. We still get a lot of calls, so still function in a way. We talk to reporters as BAN. We haven't had a march since 2019. In 2021 we just focused on food distribution. We couldn't do anything else. In 2020, E4F was recognized as a front-line group. We distributed food, we did rental assistance, and we paid for funerals.

Ana: How did you finance your work?

Imani: In one month, we raised \$100,000, and in the second month, for the rest of the year, we raised another \$500,000 in 2020.

Ana: And you got this space at that time too?

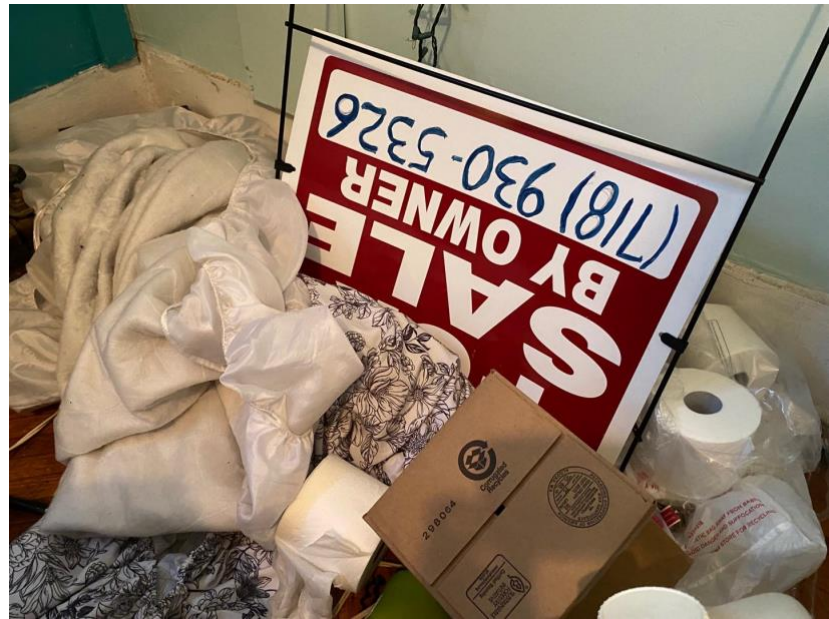
Imani: The space we are in right now, and that we can barely afford, was rented during an emergency—because of the pandemic. A lot of grassroots groups are run out of people's homes. And we're used to that too. We've had occasions where we had to meet at McDonald's because it was so dangerous for the tenants to organize in their building. They were afraid of their landlords. It is good to have a place of our own.

Ana: How were you able to handle all the work during the pandemic? I am aware that many groups faced hardships.

Imani: We were divided in two groups: an outside group and an inside group. I was in the streets and we had other people who have no interest running around. They kept up the food work. There was an explosion of folks in need of help. At the same time this was a peculiar time. We never encountered such a strong sense of white supremacy. At that time we issued a new statement against racism. With BLM everyone's consciousness rose, which is a great thing. But there was also a lot of white supremacy that we needed to handle. We had reporters asking us things like: 'Take me to the places in Flatbush where people are dying.' Really insensitive kinds of things. There was a reporter who asked to go around and ride with us. White women in the housing movement have taken control of Black and Brown women's lives on multiple occasions. There were so many white

Figure 3

Solidarity action with the Sanderson family, New York, October 2022. Image by Ana Vilenica.



people that wanted all of a sudden to do something about the things that were always there. It was similar to when Trump got elected and people were like, we need to do a migrant defence and there needs to be an ‘underground railroad’. Those things already exist.

Ana: Did you try to do any kind of political education with these newcomers?

Imani: We had a joke during the pandemic about the people coming with S's on their chest. We're here to rescue and save. We had white people literally telling us what we should do. We know the crisis. We are New Yorkers. We get it. In this Caribbean neighborhood people know each other. People were already doing it. In the church, people organize their blocks. People organize their whole buildings. We didn't have government funding. We didn't go to any food banks. We didn't do any of that stuff. We didn't want any regulation.

Ana: Who are your group members?

Imani: Our criteria for membership is: ‘Do you live here?’ Recently we had a lot of white people trying to start tenant associations. And we helped to manage that situation. If you are not a tenant here, you can't be part of the leadership. The problem that we struggle with in New York is the accountability of white people for their race and privilege. Our thing is that we want to have white people with us because we do believe in a multinational force, but one that is under Black and Brown leadership. The Black Lives Matter movement in New York City has been historically multinational. We're not interested in white guilt. We like angry white people. We like angry white people that are angry at the system, angry white people that are angry about how racism impacts their own life.

Ana: Are you connected to any similar struggles internationally?

Imani: National and global work were very important for us when we first started. There is always news around victories and struggles all over the country and the world. We

connected in this way with people in Australia fighting for public housing in Sydney. There are groups in LA that came to visit BAN. We like their stuff. When they disrupt the city council meetings, that goes right up on Instagram. We supported Mothers for Housing when they took over homes in West Oakland. We discussed at BAN to have a national meaning of anti-gentrification groups. But that is something we've had to leave behind.

The others are coming. It is better to pause this conversation now.

Ana: Thank you so much Imani for your amazing work here. And thank you for your time and this conversation.

About this Conversation's participants

Equality for Flatbush (E4F) is a people of color-led, multi-national grassroots organization that does anti-police repression, affordable housing and anti-gentrification/anti-displacement organizing in Flatbush, East Flatbush and Brooklyn-wide. Founded in June of 2013, Equality for Flatbush was created as a direct response to the increase in tenant and police harassment due to gentrification. We have only two goals: to End NYPD murders and to Stop the displacement of low-to-middle income people from our community. We organize our communities for social change and justice through street outreach, social media campaigns, political advocacy, and direct action.

Imani Henry is a resident of Flatbush and a second-generation Jamaican migrant. He describes his work as a social worker at housing works and activism against police brutality through Equality Watch, cop watching, BLM, and Standing Rock. As an elder in the transgender community, Henry is focused on organizing and leading the younger generation. He is a founder of Equality for Flatbush.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organizer from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab and a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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