



The Activist Files Episode 35: The Breathe Act - a love letter via policy

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

Welcome to The Activist Files. My name is Nadia Ben-Youssef. I'm the advocacy director at the Center for Constitutional Rights. And I am so thrilled for this conversation and this special Black History Month podcast. We've written a bit about what we're hoping to uplift in this moment and for us at the Center for Constitutional Rights and in our movements and in our communities to honor black history is to celebrate black future. And we recognize in 2021, an unprecedented opening to advance visionary, affirmative black-centered agendas. And so we want to reflect on the generation of black freedom fighters. Who've put forward liberatory, political, social and economic platforms, artists who have charted a future of freedom. And so I am thrilled, as always, to spend time with Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, dear friend, and sister, comrade, guide, and the first black woman co-executive director of the Highlander Research Education Center in New Market, Tennessee.

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

And as I was thinking about today and of introducing you. I had this endless thread of ways to describe you and the gift that you are to me and to this world, how you walk in the legacy of generations, of black, Southern freedom fighters, how you live with your heart in the South and your arms around the whole world. We met in Palestine. We've been walking this journey for years and I've been learning from you. And, um, I'm so excited to have folks listen and, and learn and be in your presence because it is transformative. You are a light and we're talking about agendas for black liberation, and this is what you embody; this freedom dream and how we all live into that. So before we begin and dive into a conversation about The Breathe Act, which folks will hear and learn more about, I wonder if there's anything else you want to share by way of introduction to our listeners.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I love you so much. I mean, I think the only thing I would add is that I am a super fan of Nadia Ben-Youssef, um, super-duper uber, like in love forever with Nadia and a long time fan of the Center for Constitutional Rights, which, you know, again, you can't tell Southern stories and not

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talk about the fact that CCR has a history of supporting The Southern Freedom Movement, uh, that it didn't start with my relationship with Vince or, you know, several, several other 21st century realities or late 20th century realities. You know, our people have been in relationship with each other, thinking about litigation as a strategy, thinking about how to defend, um, and show up in defense of Southern freedom fighters and the Ben black folks, right? That the slogan of in defensive black lives might be new, but the CCR has actually been practicing that by being committed and in relationship with the staff for a very long time. So I'm glad to be in a new generation of folks that are continuing that powerful and important relationship.

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

Thanks so much at Ash, um, and about sort of where we, this sort of generation of struggle and of being, as you said, and in relationship with one another towards our collective liberation, you know, there've been different iterations of that work and different people and communities and leaders, and at particular political moments, there's this opening where the demands are articulated in a particular way. And I'm wondering if you can say something about this particular political moment we're in why in this particular moment is something like The Breathe Act, taking hold and taking shape and moving us forward. And then we'll dive into what that is. But broadly, what is now in the history and the trajectory of the black freedom struggle.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I love this question. I tell people all the time that being a black Southern woman that was raised working class, being a part of a 21st century articulation of the black liberation movement and the Southern freedom movement, and many other liberatory movements and being at Highlander is like living in the past, present and future all at the same time. And I think that why that's important towards answering this question is I don't, I think we, we, our brains can only function if we think about this as a particular political moment, but I actually think that what we're in is, is in a back and forth of a pendulum swing. That there has been cause and effect for generations of people of goodwill that are trying to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice, winning and building power, and then white supremacist, white nationalist, paramilitary forces, fascists, authoritarians, uh, you know, folks that don't believe in beloved community, et cetera, having a hissy fit about it, right.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

The blow back happening, right? So you have the genocide of indigenous people in this country. You have the enslavement of African descended folks. You have the fight for abolition, right? You have the black led multi-racial fight for all sorts of liberatory visions, including like women's rights, et cetera, labor movement, right. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Right. All of this stuff is happening. And then you have, you know, the 1877 compromise. You have Jim Crow, you have the blow back. Right. And I think where we are now is still in the pendulum swing. Right. I think that what we saw in the last four years, it was a very, very, and let's be real. It's not even just the last four years, but in the last like 12 years, a really hard swing. Slow, maybe for some, but, but faster for others swing to the right.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And what we saw in that swing was not just like the Right gain more power. Right. What we saw is also the center moved to the right and to be real, some of the liberal forces moved to the Right.

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Right? So you saw the development of The Tea Party. You saw the election of Donald Trump, you saw the appointment and election of other, you know, problematic Neoliberal folks, um, and Right wing folks, right. You saw folks getting more explicit. Like what, what was maybe under the Obama administration were dog whistles became very overt statements, supporting white nationalism., But even before then, right. We saw massive numbers of particularly folks of color being deported from this country. Right. That swing didn't start with Trump. And so what matters in this, this moment, or, or really what's more, maybe less of a moment is more of like a positionality in the pendulum swinging is that the left moved. Right?

Ash-Lee Wordard Henderson:

We actually got proactive. We actually made some decisions that we were not going to be siloed and sectarian that we were going to build the biggest way that we could, because we got scarily close to fascism. Right. We didn't get all the way there. Right. Like if we were all the way there, I'd be locked up for the conversation I'm about to have with you. Right. So I think we should also put it into like an actual perspective. We had a coup attempt maybe, right. But we're not all the way there yet, but we've gotten dangerously close. Something that some of us had been predicting for ages and something that some of you listening might be like, God, I never thought that that could happen. He really can. And we've been, we're screaming it. We've been the canary in the coal mine telling you that there was an issue. And so now that we've come dangerously close, we've now built some infrastructure that we had to, for the sake of the survival of our people. And for the sake of the survival of our freedom dreams, right. It's like we actually had to get out of our silos and if we were going to build a mass movement, big enough to meet needs of our people in this moment and not just what we would concede to, but actually what we deserve. Right. Which is, is really how The Breathe Act came to be.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Wow, absolutely. I mean, there's so much richness in that reflection and analysis, particularly the push-back on this moment as something that stands alone, right. That, that it's somehow ahistorical that it's exceptional. That it's not just a continuation. Both of, I think what's important is that you situate the resistance as what you're focusing on. It's a continuation of that struggle and our collective struggle towards freedom. And it's, we have a lot to learn from history about how those in power will respond when they're feeling like power is being chipped away, that they're losing grasp. It feels to me so often that, you know, this is the swan song of empire of white supremacy in many ways where it reacts in this way. And I like the idea that this is the affirmative vision. And I think you've taught me a lot about that. That it's not just, you know, we resist the world that we have, we concede to what the powerful will offer but In fact, we demand what we need.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And then the last piece that I'm holding is that The Breathe Act is a response primarily, and in first point and maybe agendas for black liberation broadly, the first demand is about survival. It's, it is, we have to make this demand because the ultimate dream is, is about thriving is about living full and healthy and beautiful and rich and joyful lives. But unless make that clear demand now, and that we're forced to make that demand, it's really, it's helpful to situate it. So maybe to talk about The Breathe Act now, so what is that? Maybe just tell us a bit about The Breathe Act to start, and then we'll, we'll dive into the legacy that it's advancing and sources of inspiration.

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I mean, Breathe is a love letter via policy. And I, and I say that, I mean, that is, you know, better than most that I was like, that policy stuff is conformist. Like not Revolut-, that's not my jam. Right. Um, and now I, you know, I come to this space, is it like a leader in the policy table leadership team with them for Black Lives and one of the folks that helped us orchestrate The Breathe Act um, knowing that this is in fact very real, it's not symbolic, right? This is very literally a love song. A love letter that was, was written in relationship with, you know, 25 plus 26 plus million people that were in the streets over the last year, screaming that the, the thing that our communities need to build healthy, sustainable and equitable communities is defunding the police, a demand that arguably was told to us was a pipe dream, you know, before the summer of 2020, but it's very much being actualized all across the country.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And I think, you know, what is The Breathe Act to me is like an opportunity to imagine what our communities deserve and what they would be like beyond policing. Imagine if you go to our website, it talks about this. It's like a bunch of opportunities to imagine, right? Imagine schools that were free of police, but were full of counselors that are fully trained and restorative justice programs and practitioners where all of the kids that we love are safe, right. And where their needs are actually being met. Right. What would happen if we had easy access to train trauma-informed interventionists that could respond and be called on if there was domestic violence happening in our neighborhood, someone was having a mental health crisis, like what would happen if those folks were actually fully invested in and were on call to be able to support us.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And not only in the immediate, the de-escalation, but also along the, and facilitating the long-term, healing that is necessary when something like that happens. What would happen if they were fully funded to be able to prevent those things from happening in the first place? Imagine if 911 operators dispatching unarmed mental health experts instead of police in situations involving behavioral health crisis existed. And I could tell you some of these things we're already seeing come to fruition, right? So I don't even have to imagine it anymore, but imagine these things right. Imagine how it would actually make me feel safe. Right. I think particularly having this conversation after January 6th of 2021, we know we've exhausted administrative remedies and we've done enough investigation to prove and live long enough to see that police officers being in a place to not keep us more.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

We saw that in the Capitol in January. Right. So what does that mean for The Breathe Act? It essentially means that it's a, it's a letter in response to the demands that came from the streets, right? This was not a moment where we moved from protest to policy. That's not at all what happened, right? This was a moment where protests and policy merged. Where the fight for electoral justice and legislative transformation merged. And The Breathe Act essentially is an opportunity to do radical re-imagining of public safety in this country, from the federal level down right, to talk about community care and to talk about how we spend money as a society, budgets are moral documents. You get what you invested in the movement for black lives has been talking

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about divestment from systems of harm and investment into our communities and the community control solutions.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Since 20, since 2014, we formalized it in the vision for black lives in 2016. Right. And, and are we articulating that in the second version of the vision for black lives? Right? So The Breathe Act was our way of responding to the demand of Defund on the federal level. And I want to be clear that though it is a federal omnibus bill. That's what we're proposing that we also, we're not naive that this will probably have to be introduced to go through committees that might split it up and bring it back together again, at the end, we know that. And so we've done the work to talk about what we expect as the bill does end up having to go through those committees. And even more exciting to me is we've figured out ways that we can articulate the demands of The Breathe that go the state and the local level, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

So we've seen like shout out to the comrades in Illinois who have been working and putting political pressure on The Breathe Act black elected officials, particularly in Illinois to say, we need an Illinois Breathe Act. And what we just saw was that folks agreed, right. We're seeing them, you know, eradicate their State of Cash Money bill, right. Probably the first to do so. We're seeing them ban police officers from being able to purchase bayonets and grenade launchers, right? Like all sorts of stuff, right. That, that only would happen if there was a people-centered movement that was resources supported on the ground in Illinois, to be able to say, "Hey, we are using our protests. We're using our advocacy on our own behalf to be able to make these demands". Right? And so the tapping on the state level, and then what we also know is that The Breathe Act is, is too big for most municipal governments to be able to pass in full, right.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

So we are building the tools out to be able to show folks like these are the demands that you would give to your City Council, your County Commission. These are the pieces of The Breathe Act that you might want to ask your school board. These are the demands that you might want to ask the other regulatory bodies in your community government to be able to move. And we're also not leaving out the real desire that we have to build alternatives to the systems that are already failing us, right. That's what the vision is for. That's what the policy table has been leading on. And so if I was summing it up in a sentence, what The Breathe Act is, is an articulation in federal legislation that is being articulated now and in state and municipal formations. That is a response to the demand of defunding the police and other systems that are governed by the federal government in particular, because we started it with a federal bill.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And it's our first, it's our first federal bill in response to what our communities have been saying all across the country in regards to defunding and demilitarizing police in all of its many formations. And so I feel like the period on the sentence is like, who are you talking about when you say beliefs, right. And Breathe makes that very clear, right? We're talking about like actual cops, we're talking about ICE, right. We're talking about like the militarized industrial complex that shows up in many

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different forms in our communities, but does not, has clearly technocratically failed and its obligation to protect and serve. So that's, that's the work of the breathing

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

Remarkable work and the sort of radical imagining that you're, that you're speaking about, that, that this makes possible that it illuminates that movement makes possible. Right. I think the movement created that opening and the possibilities of really having completely different conversations and this recalibration of our priorities as a society is so urgent is also so simple. Right? I think there's so much about when we talk about the radical imagination, these are not complicated ideas, right. It really is centered on what does it take to create a people-centered policy? And we know what it takes. We know what a sort of necessary, the necessary conditions that we need as a community to survive and to thrive and to make that so clear is an exciting piece. And then the way that you've broken it down federal level state, local is, is because that's where the fights are, right?

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

Like where the movement is, where the power is to make this happen. I mean, to, to celebrate, I think, to the work of a movement, like defund and the legacy of abolition that it lives in, we have everything that we need to imagine that future. And I think part of what's interesting too, is how often this has happened throughout the course of the black freedom struggle. How threatening it is, how threatening it is when we can clearly see and demand the future that we deserve and need. And how quickly that can be co-opted by those in power, who will say, we see your freedom dreams, and we give you crumbs to kind of circumvent your energy and to take the wind out of your sails. And so I'm just wondering, kind of as a keeper of stories, as you are the history and the legacy that The Breathe Act is advancing and the less, both kind of the sources of inspiration of the past, where this has happened before. Um, and of course there's something fundamentally different about the form of The Breathe Act and the federal legislation that you're advancing, but other agendas for black liberation that you turned to as a policy table, how they've inspired this work and the lessons learned will be really interesting to hear.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Absolutely. I mean, I think that's been one of the greatest blessings of being connected to the movement for black lives is being in a relationship with discipline and rigorous movement builders who believe in reaching to the past and studying, and being in principled struggle and debate with each other, not only with, you know, figures but with like everyday people on the ground that are making these demands whose lives are directly impacted by the decisions that are made in this movement. It's why the vision for black lives is so transformative is that we struggled for years to name what we really meant. Like we literally fought over definitions at glossary, um, about what is black, what do we mean when we say black? What is transformative? What is reformist? What is nonreformist reform? Right? Like we really struggled to make sure that we got to a place of alignment and unity around what we believed, what the bottom lines were.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

So we looked at lots of things, right? We looked at like South Africa and the ANC, right. We looked at the, the, the black radical Congress, right. We looked, uh, shout out to the Electoral Justice Project of the movement for black lives. We went back some of us and studied the Black National

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Convention in the US back in 1972. And then the Electoral Justice Project of the Movements for Black Lives then hosted the first black national Congress. Uh, since that, since 1972, uh, back last year. And so I think we, we studied lots of things. And I think as we were developing The Breathe Act, what resonated with me, it was hearing elders and young people and historians talking about like, Oh, this, this uprising moment has made it possible for us to pass a 21st century, like civil rights act of our generation, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

This is, this is our opportunity. And I think that like, what's real is that that's totally possible. Right? The only thing that could keep us from building this and implementing this, seeing come to fruition, this 21st century civil rights act is not believing that we could win it when we're actually very powerful. Right? I think that we, you know, lots of people that are listening to this podcast were like, man, I'm concerned Biden's gonna win Biden-Harris is going to win. We're going to flip the Senate. And then people are going to be like, whew, we did that. We can rest now. Like we can chill. Those are our homeys, whatever. Like we don't have to really put pressure on them. When actually many of us, even in Red States have been living under Neoliberal Democrats who have been just killing us slowly with regressive policies.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Reformist policies that actually don't change anything. So now is the moment where we need to put even more pressure on, right. The opening is there. We made that possible again, like just to, to again, remind people, make the absurdity obvious. Is that what happened on January 6th? Wasn't just a temper tantrum, right? It wasn't just the next step in the long, last gas of energy, uh, that white nationalists and white supremacists are giving it. Wasn't just like inarticulate, you know, working class hillbillies that like Trump, that threw a temper tantrum at the Capitol. That's not what happened. Right? What happened is that they intentionally made a plan and likely colluded with law enforcement and members of Congress to try to stop the certification of the results of the popular vote. And what that means is that they were literally trying to stop the execution of the plan that was developed and won by a black-led, multi-racial working class rooted united front forces that said we demand that Trump not get a second term.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And to do that, we will elect Biden-Harris, not because they're our savior, but because we're voting for conditions over candidates, right. And we want to be able to control the conditions that we're in. So we will pick our next target. And that next target is Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. That's what happened. They said you black, brown and API working class, white people do not get to decide who the next president of the United States is. And they had five hours or so where they really thought that was going to work. Right. And then it failed. So The Breathe Act to me is like, if the vision for black lives is not a holy grail, right. It's not a holy grail. There's lots that's missing from it, but it was a first step, and an articulation of 21st century demands of black people in this time.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

At a moment where people were saying, Oh, those kids, they're just, they're just mad about everything, but they don't have a vision. Right. We called it the vision for black lives on purpose.

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Right. But they don't have demands. Right. Power concedes, nothing without a demand. Right. Okay, cool. Here they are. Right. And, and over the last four or five years now have been in deep consultation with, with movements, multisectors right. Movements from all over this country from all sorts of sectors, reproductive justice, disability, justice, gender justice, all over labor, right. Economic justice. We've been talking to those folks to sharp, internationally, right? Having conversations with our comrades and Palestine, they were like, what did y'all say? Right. Talking to our comrades all over the world to make sure that we are articulating the demands of black people in this time, in a way that is articulated is clear about whether or not it's harm-reductive or transformative.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And quite frankly, it's not just coming from folks that sit on national thrones and is articulated down to the ground. The point of The Breathe Act is that it came from bottom up very literally right. Shout out to folks like Gina Clayton, who envisioned that this was the next intervention, right. Is that we don't need, we don't just need, you know, saviors and elected positions to articulate what our legislative strategies should be. That we respond to that we actually, if we could write the vision for black lives, we could write our own bill. And that's absolutely what happened. Right. And so what do we do then? Right. What do we do? And I think that the real is like, we've got to be able to clearly articulate what's in it. Right. We've got to tell people, so they see themselves in the bill and we've got to be able to tell people concretely how they put political pressure on to make sure that it gets through.

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

I'm so stunned just by the scope and the breadth of this. And, and also what it means to rewrite in many ways, the game, right? I think part of, you know, what, what it means to work in these kinds of systems like legislation or in the courts, or in systems that are not designed for us that are not designed to protect our rights that are not designed to give us what we need to thrive. These are systems of exclusion. These have long been systems that have extracted and exploited, consolidated power away from the people. So the fact that the movement for black lives that this mass movement is finding a way to have such a public conversation about power, about the realities of our world, about our priorities as a nation, as a society, what repair looks like, where our values are that it's, it's shaking.

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

It's- it's a shattering intervention in a space that has been so desperate to keep that kind of vision out. Because if we say yes to The Breathe Act, if we say yes to people-first, rights-based legislation, our society, as we know it is transformed, our priorities are transformed. Our communities are healthy. The- The structures, the corrosive structures of white supremacy of racial capitalism, our legacy of colonialism, all of that is uprooted when we put forward the demands of what we need, rather than what we think we can get in a system, that's not going to give us anything willingly. And so The Breathe Act to me and the body of work and of dreams that it holds is our key to a transfor- it's part of the work, right? I mean, I think you said it at the beginning that the policy work like litigation, like any other intervention is just part of that, but there is something really breathtaking.

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

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Uh, the pun is, was unintended, but it's, it's true about this. And I'm, I'm, you know, as we kind of close, if you want to say something about that transformative change, if you want to respond, even supposed to have to, to the possibilities and the promise of this particular agenda in this particular moment. And then one thing that we might want to go back to, but is, is what the COVID moment, the COVID experience as a community that has been both unspeakably devastating and has shown that transformative moves are possible, you know, in, in the way that we've seen it, it's been transformative moves in the benefit of corporations and in the benefit of power. But the idea that we have the capacity to leverage our public wealth with such urgency, that if we are able to do that, this is possible, The Breathe Act is possible. That's what's so exciting.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Well, yeah, I think that, like we were saying earlier in that idea, like there's, there's who is required in this moment to build a transformative movements that are necessary, if we're going to be able to survive and thrive. Right. And then once you've identified that even once, like, as you're identifying the who it's also like a form follows function in terms of the strategy, right? And I think what we've nailed in 2020 and hope to continue to get right in 2021 is like the, who is big, right? We need a black-led, indigenous-led, Latinx-led, otherwise marginalized and targeted communities led. Right? Multi-racial multi-sector big "We.", Right? That's what one, that's what, that's, what helped us survive a COVID-19 reality is we built networks of mutual aid all across this country that were rooted, not in charity to communities, but rooted in solidarity to communities and as a form of direct action, as we amplified the absurdity of the failures of the state, when we most needed them, whether that was keeping us healthy, I live in a state that didn't expand Medicaid.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

We were losing rural hospitals before COVID we were in trouble pre COVID, right. And as a black person from a place that has the highest concentration of black people that were disproportionately impacted by COVID right. That was real, right. So mutual aid not only was how we survived, but it was also how we said we can build alternatives that are self-governed to argue that the state will not be the thing that saves us. That was real Georgia. Also we flipped Georgia, not because national organizations flew in and saved us. And shout out to those that did come through and did follow the leadership of local folks, particularly black women who - that's, who flipped the Senate. Right. It was a big "We", right? People forget Mahinte and GLAR and all of these local base-building organizations, political education organizations, direct services organizations talked to every Latinx voter in the state.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

If I'm not mistaken, there were like 190 counties in the state of Georgia. Right. It's in the largest geographic region in the United States, API votes blew it out of the water, right? Like it took that multiracial, working-class-rooted black-led movement to flip the Senate. Right. So there's a consistency about the [inaudible]. Right? Black-led, multi-racial, working-class-rooted movements, united fronts, coalitions of forces win. Period. Right? Doesn't mean, we always agreed on everything doesn't mean it was without this difference and disagreement, right. Doesn't mean that everything was always easy, but it was worth building those relationships. Relationships, some that were built overnight. And some that have been decades and generations in the making. Right. So there's the who. And then there's the how, right? And the how to me is, is sometimes frustrating because it feels like we make finger painting into rocket science, right?

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson :

The, how was that? We built multi tactical strategies, multiple entry points for our people, multiple opportunities to be absorbed into organizations and political homes, movement homes, multiple opportunities to plug into being full work. Why does that matter, Ash-Lee? I'm glad you asked. It matters because it wasn't a one tactic over another tactic moment. It's still not. Right. What's real is that you don't get electoral justice without political pressure that is created through direct action. And you don't get progressive legislation. If you're [not] electing movement candidates from the ground, right. These tactics are not dismembered from one another. I think that's the biggest lesson of the 20th century, right? Is that we believe that by any means necessary means by all the means, right? So to say, when the uprisings around like cops killing black people started is silly because it started when the first slave catcher, you know, got beat up because he was, you know, was, was trying to like force a, a free black person back into enslavement, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

This fight for abolition is long-going, but when it exploded in 2014, it's not shocking. But then you land a Cori Bush in 2020, right. It's not shocking that you get a Stacey Abrams when you've been building the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, right. When you've been building the fight for voter reenfranchisement, right. It's not shocking to us. Right? Because that, that work right, that political pressure on the ground, that, that long-going fight for electoral justice, that long-going fight for, for folks like Thurgood Marshall, to fight for positive litigation for black people or Bayard Rustin to be a brilliant strategist or Septima Clark, to be an incredible teacher that trained over a hundred thousand people, black people when there was no internet or cell phones, right. It's not shocking that then we build a bigger squad in 2020, right. It's not shocking that we remove Trump.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And we put in Joe Biden, but what's real the lesson here too, to me. So it's like, who, right? We need a big "We". It's how we have to have multi tactical strategies that influence and relate to one another inside and outside is not a derogatory term, right? It's how you can win. And even more have to build those alternatives, going back to the mutual aid example, right? We've gotta build- This is about power. It's about how we exercise. It is about self-determination and governance. Right? We have to learn how to govern. We have to learn how to execute power in ways that are not extracted and harmful to our people. Right? So the Breathe Act gives us this one opportunity duty to practice, right? To practice listening into our people and trying to re articulate their demand in the streets to a federal piece of legislation. To create the tools, to educate both policy makers and community makers about how we do that together.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Right. And then we'll see, as it gets introduced, like, what is the practice of using this system to try to get what we want. Right. And what we know is that we have tried to do the "just train the cops". We tried the body cam stuff, even when we disagreed with it. Right. That's what, that's, what was offered to us is the wind. Right. And we saw that fail miserably, right? So the 2021, one demand is the articulation of what we deserve. Not just what we would concede to. It's divest the federal resources from incarceration and policing. We mean that when we say defund, we mean exactly that right. Period. I've heard a lot of people say what M for BL means by defund. I'm just telling you

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straight up. That's what we mean. We're abolitionist, right? We mean divest and invest. We said that in the vision, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

That next section. Yeah. It's coming. As we, as we relaunch the 2.0 version of the Vision for Black Lives. So we mean like, invest these resources that are going to incarceration and policing into new, non-punitive, non-carceral approaches to community safety because we know that when we do that, we shrink criminal legal systems and we center the protection of black lives, including all the marginalized black lives, right? All black lives, black mommas. Black transgender, nonconforming, and intersex folk right. Black women, black working class people, right. That we can allocate new body- like new pots of money to build these healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities that we've always deserved. Right. This isn't about what we want. This is about what we always deserve. It's not even just about a need, right? It's about what we deserve, period. We're not, we're unapologetic about. And last, like it's our opportunity to practice holding political leaders accountable to the promises that they make.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Right? Is if they actually believe in Liberty and justice for all, then they have to pass the Breathe Act. There's no way for you to essentially absolve yourself of the contradiction. If you believe in the liberation of black people. If you were quoting Martin Luther King on King day, then the only way to reconcile what he called the three evils is to eradicate this country of the three of white supremacy of militarism of capitalism, right? So this is an opportunity for us to enhance self-determination in black communities and hold those political leaders accountable. What we need to make The Breathe Act a reality is for us to champion it in the streets, in our churches, our synagogues our mosques, at the club, right. With our elected officials. And what we need is to hold those elected officials accountable, to being the champions that we deserve.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And so that's, that's the, that's what we're in, right? It's like, what can Joe Biden give us in executive action in the first hundred days? What can this new Congress give us? And, and as they, you know, continue, and we've already seen some incredible stuff, right? We've seen Jamal drop, uh, really incredible words. We've seen Ilhan Omar continuing to be the, the incredible leader that she's always been destined to be. We've seen Corey Bush out with a fire, talking about expelling these members of Congress that had been holding up the banner of white supremacist, nationalist, harmful and violent interactions with our people. So I have great hope, right? And that hope that is rooted in, you know, naive optimism. I have informed optimism because we've built the largest social movement in us history because there's so many opportunities to engage so many more people and helping bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice here and globally, right.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

White nationalists are building globally. We have to. If we want to actually be able to stop white nationalism and fascism and authoritarianism here in this country, it's our responsibility being in the belly of the empire to be thinking about that and having an internationalist politics. Um, and I, and I've seen the wins, right? I, I know we can do it that come from a faith tradition and a cultural tradition with black church folks in the South where my elders and ancestors would sing a song

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called Victory is Mine. Right? I know the end of this story, cause I've seen black people win. That's actually, our inheritance is folks of Goodwill, right? I know the victory is mine, right? Cause we tell all those bad - bad folks, those folks that are doing bad things in our community that we're actually going to put that behind us.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

That's our past. But where we're going is this beloved community where we have healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities where everybody has what they need. So there's no harm in the first place. And I'm seeing us practice that reality now, right? We don't have to wait for some swivel of a pen from the legislative branch or some decision from a higher court. We can actually practice that. I think if I've learned anything under COVID, is that the power of people with a vision, a vision that is good for people to work, quite frankly, a vision that is harmful to our people, that people with a vision and the, the ability, the interest in the dedication, discipline and the rigor to actually actualize that vision can make it possible. Things happen if they come together across their differences to make it so. And I think that's the responsibility of those of us with Goodwill, whether it's The Breathe Act or the Thrive Agenda, the Working Families, parties people's charter or any of these incredible, like the Red, Black, and Green New Deal that is coming from folks like Colette Pichon Battle, Valencia Gunder and Dara Cooper, and so many incredible people. Like this is, this is our moment. It's a time to put more pressure on. And I think that if we do that, we're destined to win

Nadia Ben-Youssef:

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson. Thanks. So, so much for that. For believing in victory, for imagining it for us, for building the reality, the roadmap, the containers, um, the relationships, for inviting everyone to be part of that beloved community, to be that champion, to champion this work and this, this freedom dream. We'll drop links for our listeners about where they can get more information, how they can stay up to date on The Breathe Act and what's happening in the Movement for Black Lives. Um, thank you so much for being with us. This was an extraordinary conversation and we are so thrilled and honored to be a part of the struggle with you.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I love you, Nadia. I love CCR. Thank you for your work.