

## Interview with Black Visions

*Black Visions is an anti-racism nonprofit based in Minneapolis. It aims to change the role of policing in American society. On April 7, 2021, the editors of the Special Issue spoke with Co-Director Kandace Montgomery and Co-Executive Director Miski Noor. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

WHAT IS BLACK VISIONS, AND WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THE ORGANIZATION?

**Miski Noor:** Black Visions is a queer- and trans-centering organization that builds powerful campaigns capable of changing the material conditions of our people. Black Visions engages in cultural and narrative organizing that connects Black communities and makes Black communal life more possible. We also develop and invest in the leadership and training of our folks by giving them the tools and skills they need to go and organize power on behalf of Black folks. We do this for the sake of building power for our folks, visioning forward, and really being able to dismantle systems of violence. We founded Black Visions because of our lived experience here as organizers: we believe that Black people, Black communities, and Black futures really deserve organizing that isn't just reactive to the moment and its incidences of Black death, but is actually visionary, strategic, and sustainable.

We have two focuses this year. One is our strategic planning process. We are currently updating our theory of change and our goals and strategies for the next three to five years with our membership and staff, and really getting grounded in what our vision is and how we are going to get there, which feels really exciting.

Second, we are building up our organization, which is meant to center transformative justice and healing justice while organizing through a Black queer feminist lens and investing in ecosystem building because we can't do it by ourselves. This means we're working with others to build strong infrastructure and a strong movement ecosystem so that we are winning for our folks across all issues and sectors of the work.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS AN ORGANIZATION?

**Kandace Montgomery:** Starting is a really important accomplishment. There is definitely a shortage of resourced Black organizations here in Minneapolis, especially ones that are autonomous, in that they are completely Black-led. We are 100% Black, all the way from our staff to our members, so

that is a really big accomplishment, and then to be able to do that in a way that puts queer and trans people at the center of really leading that work is really big in our local landscape.

The other big accomplishment that I would lift up is the work we have done, before 2020 and obviously during 2020, in defunding the police and calling for divestment from policing and investment in community-led safety, whether that be alternatives to police or things that we know will keep people safe like housing and mental health crisis support. In our first year leading that campaign, in 2018, we were able to move a little over \$1 million from the police department, which at the time was pretty unheard of. Police departments always incrementally grow, but we were able to subtract from that. When we started that campaign we thought that, over five or ten years, 5% from the police budget will be what we can accomplish, and just last year we were able to get about 5% divested from the police after the murder of George Floyd. We were the ones who raised the call after George Floyd was murdered to say that the only justice is defunding the police, and we are continuing that call.

We also had a lot of attention brought to our work last year, and that meant a huge influx of resources that came our way via individual donations. In less than six months we were able to move about \$9 million of that back out to Black community members, to individuals and also organizations, which most foundations are not even able to do. We were able to hear the calls for transparency and accountability when it comes to money, and then actually organize that money in a way that aligned with our values to support that ecosystem that Miski was talking about. Finally, with all the work that we have done in these last years, having our members still be a base of folks who have stuck around and are super committed to building this member-led organization is an accomplishment.

#### WHAT IS BLACK VISIONS'S PERSPECTIVE ON ABOLISHING OR DEFUNDING THE POLICE?

**Miski Noor:** There are many definitions going around, and some of them are definitely co-opting the message. It is important to be really clear and say that defunding the police is not a thing that stands on its own. Defunding the police is not something that just comes from us – we are actually building on decades of work from other organizers who have been doing abolition work and trying to move us towards a world in which abolition is possible. I will just shout out Mariame Kaaba and Andrea Ricci and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. With defund the police, we have identified that we spend too much money on police, and that they are not actually achieving their mandate of safety. With that in mind, we want that money, those resources, to go towards things that actually do make people more safe, which looks like investing in their education, which looks like investing in their community, investing in clean water and nutritious food, taking care of our houseless folks. Even right now in Minnesota, Black folks are not getting the vaccine at the rates that white people are, so there are real actual issues

of care for our people that need to be tended to, and that is why we want the police to be defunded.

Defunding the police is only one strategy to get us towards abolition. Abolition is the goal that we are trying to move towards. When we say defund the police, when we say decriminalize sex work, when we say that we want harm reduction efforts, all of these things are pathways towards abolition. We believe that abolition is necessary to actually create the world of safety and care that not only Black communities, but other marginalized communities, need. Finally, when we say “abolish the police,” and carceral systems in particular, it is because that is what is necessary if we are going to get to a world that can actually provide the space for Black life to be able to thrive, and that’s because the roots of policing themselves are rotten. Policing became an institution in order to capture Black folks who were fleeing the South and fleeing for freedom, and then it was used to bust unions because workers were trying to organize themselves for living wages. From the very beginning, the police have existed to protect property and profit over people, so they are never going to be able to fulfill a mandate of safety because that is not what they are geared to do. That is why we say “defund the police” as a strategy towards abolition and say that abolition is the goal that we are fighting towards.

IS DEFUNDING THE POLICE A PREREQUISITE FOR ABOLITION, OR ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO GET THERE?

**Kandace Montgomery:** Defunding the police is not necessarily a prerequisite, as in it does not need to happen right now in order for abolition to manifest, but it is a key and critical first step, simply because of the amount of money that we have put towards policing and categorized as our public safety dollars. If 99% of our public safety dollars are going towards policing and not going towards alternatives, then we are never going to actually have the resources to scale up alternatives or scale up deeper approaches to community safety to really see an impact. So it is definitely very necessary, but defunding the police is only one piece of it. Decriminalization is another key element, and reducing the interactions that people have with police officers. In general, that includes moving positions, and responsibilities, away from police, which some would see as inherently a process of defunding, but the police are tricksters, and so that is still necessary. But all of those things are also part of that nourishing by making sure there is actually government infrastructure and resources to really figure out the public safety that we want for our future.

RECENTLY THE CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS REVERSED COURSE AND BACKED DOWN FROM THEIR OWN PROMISE TO DEFUND THE POLICE. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE NEXT STEPS GOING FORWARD TO KEEP THAT MOVEMENT ALIVE AND ACTUALLY MAKE THE CITY LIVE UP TO THEIR PLEDGE TO DEFUND?

**Miski Noor:** Yes, I love a question that is about our cowardly electeds.

Honestly, one thing I love to tell people is that a couple of weeks before George Floyd was murdered, Kandace was talking about how we got \$1.1 million out of the police department in 2018 and got that money moved towards the Office of Violence Prevention, and that two weeks before George Floyd was murdered, the City Council was planning on giving that money back to the police department. And I say that to just illustrate that it is really organizing the community that gets them to do what needs to be done. Because I do not think they had any plans to shift that quickly and say that they wanted to defund the police. It was really exciting that we were able to get \$8 million out of the police department in this last budget, but we also know that is not enough.

I also want to point out the ways in which the city has over-militarized in the last few weeks because of the trial [of Derek Chauvin]. They spent \$35 million on barricades and fences, furloughing workers, and making free speech zones. They are actually doubling down on the violence that we experienced last summer instead of listening to the calls for healing that the community has named. And that is where we are working and what we are moving towards: what is actually going to create the healing, because that is what the folks of Minneapolis are really trying to do in this moment and over the last year. First, we launched the “Yes For Minneapolis” campaign with a bunch of other partners, which is about getting the police out of our city’s charter-- effectively our city constitution. We were moving a charter amendment last year when the unelected and appointed City Charter Commission got in our way, and what we are hoping to do is not have them get in our way this time. We have been collecting petition signatures to get our new amendment on the ballot, which we feel really excited about. This year we are able to draft language that is much more aligned with our values and what we are trying to create in the world. We reached our goal of 20,000 signatures for this charter amendment, so we feel really excited about that and are celebrating that this week. Importantly, this petition would remove the police department by removing the requirement that the city of Minneapolis must have a police department and would then create a new Office of Public Safety which could decide on the different ways we have to be ready to respond. For example, if somebody is in the middle of a mental health crisis, we send a mental health responder. If somebody is having an overdose, we actually send a medical care professional. That office would have the power to make those necessary decisions and interventions.

The other thing that I am very excited about is launching a series of PMAs - - People Movement Assemblies. That is a tradition that comes to us from both the U.S. South and the global South. The way I like to describe it is as concentric circles of alignment building, and asking folks to start in constituency groups. Whether it is Black queer youth or Somali elders or essential workers or houseless folks, they are getting together and answering the questions of what the safety means to us, and building some consensus around that. And then asking folks to get with their neighbors, and then by their blocks, and then by ward, and then having a citywide PMA so that we have a mandate in Minneapolis and alignment built around what safety looks like by the end of the year. This is

crucial so we can take that into the future as we move towards a police-free future in Minneapolis over the next five years, because we really do believe that is possible. But we have to engage as many people in Minneapolis as we can around that vision so we can build that together.

BLACK VISIONS RECENTLY RECEIVED A FAIR AMOUNT OF MONEY. WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR SPENDING THAT?

**Miski Noor:** We received about \$30 million, which is a hefty, hefty amount of money and resources. This meant that we had to figure out a lot of things really quickly, because this was a huge moment and there are a lot of folks in our community who are trying to respond. One thing that we did was redistribute about \$9 million of that, as Kandace mentioned earlier. That went to everything, from an emergency fund, to a partnership fund, and about \$1.1 million went to legal and mutual aid, and then about \$6 million of that went directly to Black-led projects, formations, and organizations that are doing work specifically not with the police, that are interested in organizing a new future, transformative justice, and creative and economic business opportunities for Black folks. We are really excited that about one-third of that has already been out in our ecosystem and that some of that is coming to fruition and will continue to come to fruition over the next year, because these are seeds that have been planted that are abolitionist, so we are very excited to see what happens with these projects and how this investment turns out.

Second, we are still thinking about what further distribution could look like, and we are in conversation with community members about what it means to seed some of these resources so that abolition organizing is funded for the long term. What we do know is that these are not the kind of resources that come to abolition organizing, even once in a lifetime. What does it mean to dream forward and vision forward so that abolition organizing continues in Minnesota, not just for the next year, or five years, but for the next ten and fifty years as well?

Third, we are doing the work to dream of what we want our future to be. Black Visions needs to continue to be a visionary, strategic, and sustainable organization, so we are thinking about investments in our future, and how to collaborate with folks in community governance where that is possible. But we are also getting to be stewards of a vision ourselves--what does that balancing act look like?

EDITORS: HOW DOES THE ROLE OF AN ACTIVIST DIFFER FROM, OR OVERLAP WITH, THE ROLE OF AN ATTORNEY IN ADVANCING LEGAL CHANGE LIKE DEFUNDING THE POLICE?

**Kandace Montgomery:** Movement lawyering is something that I have been really interested in. Folks who are able to throw in that support are incredibly important to the movement. Movements have lots of legal issues, it turns out,

and these movements need folks who are savvy and really understand the law and are able to support activists who are on the ground and organizers who are trying to figure out different strategies. There is also a lot of support needed around radical policy development. Everybody can be an organizer in a different way, which can depend on how you want to use your expertise towards this common goal and vision. That could be for attorneys, but that also could be for artists, and should be for both of those. But it could also be for doctors, physicians, and nurses.

What matters is how you look at an issue and the work that you are doing. How you see the socio-political and economic conditions, patterns, and cycles that are part of that, and approach the work from there, from those places of knowing, are some of the ways I see that overlap. Especially when it comes to public safety, so much of that has been really jargonized inside of the “criminal justice” system that it is hard for folks who have not spent years going to law school to understand that. So helping to synthesize and decipher those things so people can make really good decisions and move that work forward is critical. I have experienced this working with lawyers on this charter change--people who really know how to look through a charter and make sure we are capturing the right language. The other things that I have seen are really exciting. I have some comrades in DC who have been doing and supporting participatory defense, because when we think about the work of policy change and system change, we also have to be meeting people’s immediate needs. Actually getting people out of prison is an act of political resistance, so that is how I have seen some of that overlap in our particular lane.

EDITORS: IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, THE TERM “DEFUND THE POLICE” HAS BECOME HIGHLY POLITICIZED, ESPECIALLY ON THE RIGHT. WHAT RESPONSE SHOULD ACTIVISTS HAVE WHEN DEALING WITH THAT POLITICIZATION?

**Miski Noor:** Grace and patience. Now, I am not saying grace and patience for white supremacists. But if somebody is genuinely confused, how do you actually have a conversation around political education? You give them the information that they need in order to make better decisions, or more informed decisions, or for them to get clear. You think about how you can get curious and get into conversation with this person, or with anybody, while also having discernment around what is actually helpful here. I say that because discernment allows you to be in a space of critical thinking and engagement with our folks, and that is a really big thing to actually be building with other people, especially right now with misinformation and disinformation everywhere.

When we do that, what becomes possible is actual transformation, and actual struggle for the sake of getting clarity and unity as community members about what makes sense for us, instead of just getting lost in the sauce of language and schematics. How are we actually getting clear with people and moving beyond just buzzwords and towards clear understanding? When people define “defund the police” for themselves, that stokes a lot of miscommunication and confusion,

and then anger with our folks. These conversations are about anchoring together with them so transformation is possible because that is what we are up to: the transformation of self and therefore the transformation of community, like Grace Lee Boggs teaches us.

THE TRIAL OF DEREK CHAUVIN IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW. IF HE IS FOUND GUILTY, WHAT WILL THAT MEAN FOR THE MOVEMENT GOING FORWARD?

**Kandace Montgomery:** From my perspective, it means we keep on going forward. As a person who wants to support the family's calls for justice, it is important that they get that sense of justice from this. And for us, we know that this doesn't stop another George Floyd from happening. It may or may not even set a precedent, given that there is a deep history of a total lack of police accountability, even when there is precedent. This verdict is important to recognize as a turning point, if nothing else, for this individual family, but it is also important to continue to say to folks that this does not upend police violence. We have even had officers and the chief of police testify to the ways that Derek Chauvin was using excessive force, but it was not a one-time situation. This was a man who had multiple excessive force complaints against him, and in that we see a pattern that we need to eradicate. That is important for the movement to celebrate and then keep moving forward.