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Speaking of Grief
Sick Woman Theory
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black.seed collective

issue no. 19
summer/fall 2016
\$6.95 U.S./\$8.95 Canada



#BLACKHEALTHMATTERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE BLACK.SEED COLLECTIVE

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Photography by Brooke Anderson

On Monday, January 18—aka MLK Day—the black.seed collective shut down the Bay Bridge between Oakland and San Francisco as part of a national ninety-six hours of action reclaiming Martin Luther King Jr.'s radical legacy. Two months after their inspiring action, I spoke with two of the collective members, Alicia Bell and Melissa Crosby.



Jessica Lawless: For many people, the Bay Bridge shutdown may be the first time they heard of the black.seed collective, so let's begin with how the group started and how you got involved.

Alicia Bell: Towards the end of 2014, the streets were on fire in response to the call for Black Lives Matter and the non-indictment of Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo. In Oakland some Black folks were unintentionally coalescing together, mostly queer, who knew each other from socializing [and] who were feeling alienated because a lot of white straight cis men were trying to take the lead. So we came together to figure out how to channel our emotions and rage. What came out of that was Black Brunch, where Black folks go into predominantly wealthy white institutions to hold ritual and ceremony, calling out names of Black people who have been murdered and brutalized by the state. This became a tactic that was taking on a life of its own across the country and even internationally. We had to figure out what that meant for us. From those conversations, black.seed was created. So black.seed is a collective of all Black folks fighting for the liberation of all Black folks.

Melissa Crosby: I had an opportunity to go to a sunrise ceremony with a collective of folks from Black Lives Matter and black.seed in solidarity with First Nations folks. I [was] drawn to how black.seed centers Black liberation [including] queer identity, women, the earth. It's not just about fighting against systems of oppression; it's about re-envisioning and reclaiming our power, redefining what our future means, what it means to center the earth and the spirit, and trans identities, to center it all in a way that uplifts all of our humanity.

I'm curious about the lowercase and the dot in the name.

AB: Well, we were calling ourselves "The group formerly known as Black Brunch" [laughs]. We threw out a lot of ideas. One that was really salient for me was Black Pussy Supreme. We decided that might not be acceptable to everybody [more laughs]. There were also folks talking about Octavia Butler and the connections between Blackness and Earthseed. That quote was circulating a lot at that time, "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds." There is this piece about rejecting formality and

respectability, knowing respectability can be a tool and a tactic but not the only or best way to exist in the world. We make sure we capitalize "Black" as an identity, but in the [collective] name we reject formality.

How many people are in the collective?

AB: It's hard to say. Membership is defined by showing up. Any one who comes to a meeting [has] full voting rights and can voice their opinions on anything. At any given meeting you're going to have ten to fifty Black folks. The one criterion is to be Black-identified. For us Black is defined as diasporic African descent, Afro-Latino, Black indigenous, from other countries... So there will be a spectrum of blackness in our space.

How do you organize?

AB: Some tactics we use are direct action, direct services, community building, and healing. We make sure to center the voices and experiences of queer folks, women, trans folks, some of the more marginalized identities that exist within Black communities.

MC: We use a modified-consensus model. We need twelve people for quorum. It's a space where all thoughts, all dissenting ideas are honored. Naturally, when you have a diverse group of people, conflict is going to come up. Conflict is not our enemy. We take time in the meetings [to] ground ourselves.

Let's talk about the bridge shutdown. Your overarching message was "Black health matters." How did black.seed make the decision to target the Bay Bridge to get this message out?

AB: We were thinking about two different things. One was that Black folks who experience physical illness, mental illness, disability, neuro-divergence... are impacted by the state differently. For example, Kayla Moore over in Berkeley—people called the cops thinking she'd receive care, but she was killed by the cops [who responded]. So we were thinking about Black folks needing to have equitable health care and have agency in defining what that health care looks like.

The other part of it was around bringing health from this individualistic place to this collective and communal space, and [how]

1. Apparently by the Greek poet Ntinos Christianopoulos.

there are so many different health hazards that impact Black folks. Thinking about gentrification as a health hazard, homelessness and houselessness as a health hazard, police brutality as a health hazard. That's how we got to the hashtag #BlackHealthMatters.

One of the critiques of movement spaces by a lot of elders [and] people with professional stakes in these things is "these young organizers protest and have no idea what they really want." Or "They are not solution-oriented." These things aren't true. Our solutions are oftentimes much bigger than what folks want us to be asking for. What we're asking for is that all Black folks have access to healthy, thriving lives. And that's a really different ask than "pass this policy" or "fund this organization."

You're saying, "Here is a simple message everyone can understand," and then the concept of health becomes the umbrella to challenge state violence, state murder, the failings of the mental-health system, the prison industrial complex, all of it? And the Bay Bridge shutdown was the launch of this message?

AB: Yes. One of the ways we referred to the bridge action was as a narrative-building action. People are dying, whether it is physical death or spiritual death. We looked to our history, to what our elders have done when there were drastic circumstances. [We looked to] the march to Selma across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. We felt like we needed to make as bold a statement because these things are impacting us are as big as it was then.

We were channeling that iconography of bridges—bridges as connecting people, as connecting spaces—because we were connecting all of these issues. We knew it needed to be something dramatic that was going to impact people's lives. The Bay Bridge was a place that would force folks to look. We were visible to people on land and in the air to engage folks in this conversation around how we create a world where Black folks have access to healthy, thriving lives.

I'm curious about the decision to dress in Sunday Best in relation to what you said earlier about challenging respectability.

AB: As we thought about how to dress for MLK Day, we thought about making a shirt with specific messaging, or all wearing a similar color. Then somebody threw out the idea of Sunday Best. We were thinking about some of our historical icons and the performative nature of marches, rallies, and direct actions. Folks could play with it and figure out how it felt in their bodies and in their gender identity and gender expression.

MC: For me, it was definitely a felt piece of connecting to the '60s lunch-counter sit-ins. They organized those to eliminate opportunity for the dominant white narrative to co-opt their message. It was not about trying to fit into a mainstream idea of what power looks like because I was wearing my queer uniform. That's who I am. For me, the message that really shined through was around Black health and a transformative kind of love. Of course the media has made it about the traffic!

Many pictures I saw highlighted queer femininity. Was that intentional?

AB: I try to be intentional about my hand motions. I use really hard, angular hand motions when I am wearing dresses and skirts, to play up the way masculinity is associated with angles and harshness, while femininity is associated with softness and curves. So I will put a dress on and put my fist up with a locked elbow. Or I'll have my hands behind my back in a strong stance associated with militaristic stances. I like to play with roundness and angles when I'm embodying femmeness in direct action, especially militant femmeness. I can do all the things that

are stereotypes of femininity. It's in my fanny pack of navigating the world, but there are other things in that fanny pack.

Like going into a direct action expecting to get arrested and wear a skirt?

AB: Uh huh. It is about queering militancy.

I had so many emotions simply witnessing the bridge shutdown and looking at Brooke Anderson's photographs on social media. What was your emotional experience of it?

AB: I thought about this a lot in the week following the action. You know, I'm not currently out on probation, I don't have any warrants out for my arrest, I don't have any children. Because of those things I feel I am able to act in a way that not everybody is able or comfortable with acting. When there is an ask of folks to put themselves on the line, I feel that so long as I can, I should. It's very much that internalization of that Assata quote, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom and it is our duty to win." In the same way I should help somebody when they fall over, I should engage in direct action.

So you were able to just be in the moment without being nervous or hyped-up?

AB: In that moment there was a lot of rushing and using our peripheral vision to make sure everybody was on the line, to make sure that everything is okay. There are people there supporting us. That [lets me] take off some of the pressure I put on myself.

On the bridge, the person beside me was someone I've done a lot of actions with. And I have been in a lot of creative art spaces with another badass femme on the bridge. I felt very lucky that those were the people directly in my area of the bridge. I felt held by those folks. It was also amazing having really strong femme folks around me.

Our connection to one another was very frustrating for the CHP. In holding, we were coming up with games to play. [We] figured out with the zip ties how to massage each other's shoulders. We figured out how to sit down so somebody could lay their head on somebody else's lap. There was a lot of taking care of each other, even when we were in holding.

Sometimes after a big project or action I can feel "postpartum." I was going to ask if you experienced this, but it sounds like that didn't need to happen because there was a shared process going on before, during, and after.

AB: Yeah, it was really miraculous how it happened. The last hour or two we weren't able to communicate with our folks outside, but when we got out, people were there with snacks, drinks, hugs. It was incredible. Somebody had called up a friend who runs a community space and that space was opened up for us to have dinner. So people were cooking for us while we were in [holding]. We got out and we got to have dinner and dance a little bit. There were several layers of being held in different ways by our community.

As I listen to you talking about the action, I'm thinking that blackseed is live art. It isn't that art is a separate activity but art is what you are doing.

AB: Yes, definitely. The creative process is in imagining the world we want. We do the thing. We workshop it. We critique it. And we do it again.

I love that because there never has to be a final piece.

AB: Right. We have our current piece. A Black Brunch a year ago looked different than what it all looks like now. But they are both very beautiful imprints and images of the whole.