

Ep. 8 - Birth Work for Folks of Color, Roots of Labor Birth Collective Series, Pt 1

Kai: So, this evening, I'd like to start with this quote by Asad Ashukor. *"It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."*

Eri: Thank you so much for that beautiful opening. Welcome you both to the Birth Bruja Podcast. Your work is extraordinary and I'm really excited to learn more about what you do and to share with others the work that you're doing. To start us off, I was wondering if you each could go around and introduce yourself and share where your people are from and what you're doing these days. Kai, would you like to start.

Kai: My name is Kai Shatteen Jones and both of my parents were born in Ohio. My dad was raised in Cleveland and my mom was raised in Detroit. They moved to San Francisco in the 70s, and my brother and I were born in east Palo Alto and raised in Sunny Val. Ancestrally, from my mother's father's side, we are from Ethiopia and also Blackfoot, and unfortunately, I don't know where the rest of my ancestors are from, but one day I will learn. These days, I am studying to be a home birth midwife. I am a practicing doula and I am part of Roots of Labor Birth Collective on the Roots admin team and the fairy ring which is the training team.

Eri: Awesome. Thank you. Welcome.

Kai: Thank you for having me.

Melissa: My name is Melissa and my family has roots in Puerto Rico and Poland. I was born in New Jersey, raised between the east coast and the east bay. I've been here in Oakland for the last 15 years, and my background is as an organizer and educator. I published a children's book and have also been on my own healing path for the last two decades which has included several different practices, including studying and performing Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance. I am currently studying herbal medicine. I'm in my third year at the Ancestral Apothecary Herbal Medicine School.

Eri: Yes!

Melissa: Yeah. I'm in the cohort with Batul, who you had on previously.

Eri: Yeah!

Melissa: Um-hm. And I followed my calling into birth work when I entered this healing community here in the Bay and have been a birth and postpartum doula and placenta encapsulator for the past three years. I've been a part of Roots Labor Birth Collective and I'm also on what we call the fairy ring, which as I mentioned is the training team.

Eri: Thank you. So, Melissa, what is the origin story of the Roots of Labor Birth Collective? How did it come about?

Melissa: So, Roots of Labor Birth Collective was born out of several Bay area birthing communities. It started kind of back in 2013. Alameda County Public Health Department issued a call for grants

to start a pilot program that, according to the language of it, was about spurring innovative ideas to address the needs of the adult re-entry population. And so, both Black Women Birthing Justice and Birth Justice Project formed what was called the East Bay Community Birth Support Project. They receive a good amount of funds to run a doula training that was specifically focused on formerly incarcerated and/or low-income women of color, and their response to this program was really overwhelming. It was really great. So, in 2016, this project was re-granted, money again from Alameda County to create a model project that they could replicate and out of that was the decision to create Roots of Labor, this doula collective. So, that was some of the origin and some of the groups that both helped shape the organization and I think continue to help kind of nurture and support the work that we're doing. And I was able to come in, I came in kind of right at the point when there had been a core group of people that had been really developing, visioning, planning for the collective, and they did their first really big call-out for active doulas to build the body of the collective. And actually, the training that I did came about because Elena Aurora who's also been on this podcast, she was committed to training up another, like a new cohort of doulas of color to build this collective in particular. So, it was a really exciting time to come in, and things have grown and shaped since then. But, that's how we started.

Eri: Gosh, what a story. And Kai, can you speak to us about the services that you all provide? And additionally, what is the process for folks to get involved, whether they're doulas or birth workers who want to get involved or they're clients looking for doulas?

Kai: Right. So, if someone is looking for a doula, our OBC provides full spectrum doula services to anyone, regardless of their income levels. And so, we do take free births, we take paid births, sort of on a sliding scale, whatever someone can afford, because we believe that everyone deserves a doula if they want one. And to access a doula, they would go onto our website which is rootsoflaborbc.com and there's a tab that says Request a Doula. There's an information form. People would fill it out, and then one of us would get back to them and kind of talk about their needs and our services. So, that's for folks who want to access a doula. And we don't only provide services to people that have given birth. If someone needs an abortion doula, we're there. If someone suffers a miscarriage or stillbirth, we can also support them with their healing process from that as well. In terms of being a doula in the birth collective, in the Collective, you can have already taken a doula training and come to our doula circles. Now, this is specific for only birth workers of color. We have monthly doula circles where we offer support and kind of just a space to share our births that we've been attending, kind of get some support and questions answered in regard to things that are happening with our clients. And then twice a year we do have kind of like a rolling entry and orientation if you actually want to be a Collective member and we talk about what those are like at the doula circles.

Eri: Can you go a little bit deeper into what it would mean to be a Collective member?

Kai: Right. So, collectives work together. Right? And so, there are a few Collective members that are active doulas, and so that means that they are actively taking births. When we have events, we always need help with setting up or cleaning up or organizing. So, it's not just a core group

of people that are running the Collective. Like, we ask people in the Collective to volunteer and to give time and put energy and effort.

Eri: And the doulas that work with you, are they folks that do birth work full time or do you also work with folks that have jobs?

Kai: We work with doulas who are full time, people who have jobs, people who are in school, newly trained doulas, doulas that have been doulaing for years. Kind of just depends. A lot of people come to us because they're looking for other birth workers of color to connect with and be in community with.

Eri: So powerful.

Melissa: Can I just add one thing to what Kai said about how clients come to the Collective? Is that I think – and I wanted to mention this because I do think it's something that's particular and unique about Roots of Labor is that because of relationships we have with other service providers, we actually get clients referred to us who are receiving care and services from other county or health institutions and those tend to be folks that can afford doulas or don't know what doulas are and whoever they're getting care from is like, look, this I think might be really helpful for you. This is what they do. This is who they are. I think you should contact them kind of thing. Or as I've had clients, some of my clients that have come through the Collective tell me, like, oh, I thought – yeah, I've heard about doulas, but I thought they were just for rich people. But they're getting, because of these relationships that we have, folks are getting referred in who I think aren't necessarily the type of folks who would go on line and be like, I want to find a birth doula. So, I think that's something also that's powerful, right. And we definitely serve a wide spectrum of folks. But in terms of our core and our commitment to reaching folks that don't in this system usually have access to this kind of care is important.

Eri: I also think it speaks volumes that you all are getting referrals from service providers considering that I feel in probably most spaces, it's almost counter their culture. I've had OB's out here that have been doing this work for such a long time literally tell a client, oh, I'm attentive during my birth, so, you don't need a doula, not mentioning at all that she may not even see her OB and also that OBs most time come in for maybe just the last part of the process. So, it was just so – I guess, I cease to be amazed at how the disconnect between the services and value that doulas and birth workers provide and also the medical providers. So, I'm really glad to hear that. There's so much – oh, my gosh. There's so much to even go into in just what you just mentioned. But, I really want to take time to talk more about your trainings. Melissa, could you – the little that I've gleaned is that your trainings are really cutting edge in that you are fierce in acknowledging the intersections of identity, fierce in acknowledging the wide variety of experiences that can unfold within birth experiences for birthing folk and their families and their communities, and you are unapologetic in being different than a lot of mainstream doula programs. So, would you please tell us more.

Melissa: Sure. So, we offer trainings for people of color. We have been doing them twice yearly, though we're possibly transitioning to restructure that a little bit. But, what I think some of the main

things that we are committed to in those trainings and not make them special and different than some of the other spaces that are out there is yes, we really strive to reflect the communities that we're serving. And that means when you have someone come into your life to support you in these major transitions, that it's somebody that looks like you, that it's somebody ideally that speaks your language, that comes from your culture, that, you know, all those things that are really deeply invaluable and impactful. And then I would also say we're really committed to gender inclusivity, so, we're intentional about making it a very queer friendly space and that means both in terms of welcoming folks of varying gender identities and experiences to come get trained and also so that we have the cultural competency to support queer families in this work. So, it's four days, our training. And we also, in terms of content, I think a couple of pieces I wanted to highlight are, one, we really strive to look at birth in a historical context and like a cultural context, and so, anywhere from talking about how modern gynecology was developed by white male doctors performing brutal experiments on black women and that just being one piece of the exploitation and dehumanization of black bodies in this country and the medical industrial complex. Right? That's a very real and necessary piece of the conversation when you talk about folks of color, especially black folks going into medical systems, right, to give birth. We talk about the history of forced sterilization among native people and on the island of Puerto Rican under the U.S. government. We talk about the legacies of colonization and patriarchy and racism and what they've done to both birth experiences and also birth workers. That that for us is a necessary foundation to even begin to talk about doing this work. Right? We also actively incorporate ceremony and spiritual work and we see that as part of reclaiming our medicine. Our belief that birth is a natural and spiritual process. So, in the trainings we learn about and practice some of the ways that we can take care of ourselves and also support our clients on these journeys. One example of that is doing cerradas which are traditional closing of the bones, rituals done in the postpartum period. So, we actually learn about that and practice that together.

Eri: That's beautiful.

Melissa: And then the last thing that I'll say that I really like to lift up because I think it's really special is our, because of the relationships that we have in the community, we're able to bring in a pretty and phenomenal group of guests like guest facilitators or panelists. For example, Dr. Monica McLemore who is super instrumental in getting the Collective started and is a really brilliant, kind of powerhouse reproductive justice. Advocate Francine Madrid, a traditional home birth midwife and herbalist and body worker. This year we're having Brandy Gates who is a lactation consultant and breastfeeding advocate. So, it's not just about our voices in the room, but it's really trying to connect with, bring in folks who are doing amazing work out in the community so that we can all learn together and also so that those relationships can continue to be built and grown as the Collective grows.

Eri: Yes, and this is just within the training. This isn't even considering the other stuff that you all do on a continuing education basis.

Melissa: Yes. That's within the four days.

Eri: Wow.

Melissa: We're action packed. For me, and I believe that other folks feel this way, too, what is really special about this Collective is that it's really an opportunity to build and be in community in this work. I was trained, joined Roots of Labor, and I feel like I was immediately surrounded by all of these knowledgeable, experienced, amazing birth workers of color who were like, yeah, you can call me if you have a problem. Or you're at a birth and you have a question about this, yeah, text me. Send a message on this thing and folks really doing their best to show up for each other, to share knowledge, to share support. You need backup on a client, yes, I'm available. And in a way, I feel like it's kind of unique and really special in the fact that what we're trying to do is structure the training so that these cohorts come up and then rolled into the Collective and then continue to build that for themselves and for our community I think is really powerful.

Eri: Yeah.

Melissa: Instead of, you know, finishing. I think we've probably all had the experience of finishing some sort of training or like profound experience and then you just kind of go off on your own like, woah, what do I do. I feel like Roots of Labor, what we're really trying to do is create a home for people to land in.

Eri: Yeah. Thank you for sharing. That's really beautiful. The other thing I wanted to ask you all is, throughout this past year, there has been an increased national attention given to the outrageously high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity in communities of color, specifically amongst black birthing folk. Many of the solutions offered to this crisis seems to be a top down approach where the government and/or insurance companies would agree to cover the cost of nationally certified doulas. This is a super-hot topic for a variety of reasons and, Kai, I was wondering if you could share with me some of your thoughts.

Kai: Sure. So, to a lot of people that might sound like a really good idea to have doula services covered by insurance companies or by the government. But it's actually really problematic. If I can, I'll share like my own personal story of how I can to LRBC. So, two years ago, I took a training that was created and facilitated by white people. And this organization travels around the U.S. and they just like pick a city and they're like, oh, we'll do a training here. And so, I went to the training because I actually got a scholarship for being black and queer and I was like, okay, so maybe they are down. Right? I got this scholarship. Why not? So, I go to the training and, when I left the training, I realized that I was ready to go and be a doula for a middle-aged white woman. But at the same time, I'm a black queer person, living in the Oakland area, wanting to give back to black and brown birthing people, and I had no idea how to actually serve my community. During that training, I didn't learn anything about the maternal and infant mortality death rates. I didn't learn anything about the diagnosis that black and brown people sometimes get in terms of preeclampsia or gestational diabetes. I didn't learn about some of the racial bias and racism that black and brown folks face when they are trying to receive care. And to know that there are organizations out there, standardizing trainings, and "certifying" people and then you can get reimbursed from an insurance company or from the

government, knowing that they're not teaching really how to serve the people of the community is a problem. And so, for me, I kind of was like, well, wait a minute. I don't know anything about advocating for someone who is black or brown that has suffered trauma. I don't know how to make sure that the doctors are actually listening to my clients when they're trying to describe their pain levels, right, because our clients are not listened to. And so, for me to know that there's certain, only certain training organizations, if you're certified by these people, you can get reimbursed. That's like, one, it's capitalism because those trainings are really expensive. The certification process is really hard, long and expensive. And then on top of that, they're programs that are created by white people. So, even the reading lists of the required books don't have any books written by black or brown people in regard to pregnancy or childbirth. And for me, that was not okay. And it's not okay that the government will reimburse a doula if they've been training by only this organization. Because since those organizations cost so much money, they make it inaccessible for low-income folks to be able to go to their training and get a potential reimbursement.

Eri: Yeah, I appreciate you sharing that. There's actually a lot of similarities to this dynamic, is the conversation around the professionalization of indigenous healing modalities. We're taking something that was originally communal cultural based and trying to spin it to exist and to sustain itself in this capitalistic society. Continuing your acknowledgment of the administrative and financial hurdles that surround doula training, I'm really interested to know what you guys as an organization do to help make the doula trainings more accessible to birth workers.

Melissa: Sure. I can speak to that. So, first off, I will say that we definitely get more requests for financial support than we can handle as a small collective. We would love to offer these trainings for free. We believe that they should be. One, because of what I think you already named, which is this idea that this is work that our people have been doing, that our ancestors have been doing for generations, and it's no one's to hold, no one's to own, no one's to charge for. Ultimately, in our hearts that's what we believe, right? And we live in a capitalist system. So, there is like a tension with that, right? And we're committed to making them accessible so ultimately the ideal thing would be to be able to do them for free, and we're not there yet. We're working towards that. And right now, you know, it takes money to put all this together, renting a space, providing food, printing materials, all those things. So, we mostly do this as a labor of love, but we also as folks facilitating the trainings or as the folks that we're inviting in to come and share their skills, we need this work to be sustainable for ourselves here in the Bay area. So, we stipend our trainers, we stipend our facilitators. So, that's just the reality of the work right now. And we do our best to make it accessible, so what that means for us is we have a sliding scale and, when we do work trades, we do payment plans. And we're actually really deep in a conversation about how much capacity we have to support all that. Like, how much capacity did we have to support the amount of scholarship requests that we get, to support the amount of work trade requests that we get. We want to honor it all. But at the end of the day, we are also working in lots of other ways and again, needing this to be sustainable, we don't want to burn ourselves out. We don't want to create an organization that is not sustainable beyond us, too. Right? So, again, our vision is that in the future, with funding we could offer these free trainings every year. For now, I would say people can contact us to sponsor a doula

to take an upcoming training. For \$1,000.00, you can cover all the costs for an undocumented, formerly incarcerated and/or loan for a person of color to take the training, and we've had that before. We've had somebody sponsor someone and we have folks who are ready and waiting who are eager to do the training. But we're at capacity for this upcoming one in terms of being able to offer those scholarships, so we'd love to be able to plug these people in. And a really big need that comes up consistently for us for the Collective is in our immigrant communities, people who don't speak English, they are coming to us and needing doulas and it's predominantly right now Spanish-speaking folks. And so, we would really love to get more and more folks trained up who are native fluent speakers of languages besides English. So, we're holding that as a priority too in all of this. Yes, sponsor someone to take the training.

Eri: Yeah.

Melissa: Reallocate the resources.

Eri: Yeah. So, money obviously is arguably the most helpful resource to share. Are there other things such as food or space or rebozos or anything else that could be helpful?

Melissa: Yes, all those things.

Eri: All those things? Okay. I just wanted to encourage folks because sometimes people get caught up on money. And as we know, since you're on the Bay, a lot of feelings about money. But I just want to encourage, especially allies to consider how you can support this epic organization. Sometimes even literally just writing and asking what they need. Maybe you all need hands to fold up chairs or maybe you need access to a printer to print off like, you know, 500 flyers. I just want to really encourage people to think outside the box about ways to support your work. Melissa, my question for you is, there's a lot of folks listening who are white and/or identify as allies to this work. And what are the best ways that they can be allies in this work?

Melissa: Thank you for that question. I think that, and I appreciate and honor what you said about it not just being about the money. That there are ways that we can show up for each other and give time and energy and space and food and all those things, yes. That's awesome. I think for me at the heart of supporting folks is, one, yes, really listening, really being humble. And honestly, because we do live in a capitalist system, sometimes it does just come down to the money. And I think it's awesome when folks talk about doing a birth for free and those kinds of things. I think that people can also donate to Roots of Labor and support a person of color, support a formerly incarcerated person, support a Spanish-speaking doula to be able to be the doula for somebody who can't afford services otherwise. Or that somebody can donate to Roots of Labor and support these trainings to get more folks trained up and out in the community doing this work. So, I think that it's really important. And I think the other thing is like, yeah, that it's really important to just kind of think about and be conscious of one not just offering what can feel like a charity service, but getting a little bit deeper into, like, how do I support the building of these institutions that are created by and created for people whom most need them? How do I support the building of those institutions? How do I support the ongoing service and care that really meets the needs of folks in this moment?

Eri: Thank you. I'd also like to challenge white folk in the Bay that are getting clients of color that are willing to pay, especially full price. I'd like to challenge folks to consider receiving those clients, saying thank you for reaching out, I really appreciate it. And these are my services, and if it is important to you to consider choosing a birth worker that shares your identity or your cultural background, here is the link to this amazing organization which includes an amazing array of birth workers of color. Obviously, maybe put that in your own language, maybe put that more eloquently. But that's really walking the walk, also, and as you mentioned, not approaching working with people of color as if that's a charity work, which I think is also tokenizing in the Bay, especially the way that folks talk about working with "diverse communities." So, thank you for that. And in closing, I love to invite guests to share any words of wisdom, advice or guidance for those that are listening today.

Kai: Yeah, I always get asked how to become a doula. Almost once a week somebody inboxes me on Instagram. It's like, how do I become a doula? And I really love answering people and I love that they come to me, you know, because I'm like, I don't tell them, no, don't go take that white training. I tell them, look at the mission and values of the organization that you are potentially going to take a training from and see if it actually really aligns with who you are as a person and the people that you want to serve. And really don't just jump at the first training that you see. For me, it's really important that other birth workers of color find each other and create community. There's like an online community. There's, you know, certain cities have different Facebook groups. And I think it's really important to be involved with other birth workers of color because we are the ones that are making change and difference in our own communities and without each other change can't be made. And so, you know, if you're living in a city that doesn't have a lot of people of color, feel free to reach out. You know, there's a Doulas of Color Facebook group that has like 20,000 people. We're all over. And I just want other birth workers of color to know that they're not alone. Their ancestors have their back. And we have to do this work and we can do it together.

Eri: Yes. Thank you.

Melissa: For me, when you asked this question, what came to mind was one of my teachers recently said, we were talking about all this chaos in the world and this moment that we're in that can feel at times apocalyptic. And what she said that she actually received from one of her teachers was that the most important thing to do in this time is to find your people and hold them close. And I think that working in collective structures, I feel that way about the people that I work with in Roots of Labor, and I feel that way about the importance of doing this work from that place of like really just deep commitment to your people and like holding them close, whether that's your colleagues as other birth workers, whether that's the clients that you're serving, like all the ways that that manifests. I think that in the chaos of this world, that to me is like the best advice that I've heard.