

Transcript

Speaker 1: You're tuned in to 90.7 FM, k a l ex Berkeley. My name is Tesla Munson and this is the graduates, the interview talk show where I speak with UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by scholar and amateur storyteller, lashawn daily from the Department of theater, dance and performance studies. Welcome. Thank you so much Tesla for having me on the show. Absolutely is definitely my pleasure. And first things first. Okay. Theater, dance and performance studies. But you are in a special subset [00:00:30] of that department. Correct. With the performance studies part of theater dance and performance studies. That's the graduate group within our department known as TD PS. And can that encompass a wide variety of performance? Yes. We look at everything as a performance. I mean when Shakespeare said all the world is a stage, literally we think all the world's a stage.

Speaker 1: We look at how you can perform your gender, how you can perform your race. And then we also look at traditional performances such as dance concerts, theater concerts, storytelling concerts. [00:01:00] But it's such a wide range. I mean everyone in my department is literally looking at something different, whether it's economics from insurance to Indian dance to places and spaces of hope in the community. We are really an eclectic group of scholars. And what do you focus on in particular? Yes, I focus on mostly when I try to think or explain my project, I say I look at um, black expression in terms of what it means to be a part of the folk. Um, I look at [00:01:30] early African American literature and folk tales as well as what I consider contemporary folk folk tales, such as what we see in the media. Things like, you know, the show like family matters in the 90s.

Speaker 1: I think of those as contemporary folk performances through media. I also look at dance performances too. I'm also pretty big in the storytelling world, not myself. Not that I'm big, I don't know. That's not what I've heard. But I've watched a lot of performances and also look at [00:02:00] what kind of storytellers are still telling black folk tales and contemporary times. So folk in this idea of a folktale is a word probably many people have used, but can you give us a definition of what counts is folk or a folktale? Yes. The great thing is that I got my MBA here in folklore and according to Alan Dundees who actually started the program here, he defines the folk as any two people. So we can have folk tales and folklore within families, within sibling groups, within best friendships, um, [00:02:30] all of that. Anything that's shared between two people, whether their music, inside jokes, anecdotes, all of that stuff is considered the folk.

Speaker 1: So I'm really using his definition to understand how the black community in various spaces, whether it's in dance or theater or through stories, create an understanding of what it means to be black. Basically. That's, that's how I would describe it. And Are you

talking about in the United States in particular or on a global scale? Yes. I'm mostly focused in the United States more specifically, even within the United States to south because I look at [00:03:00] a very specific kind of folk tale and I look at bear rabbit tales mostly in those tails come out of Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama. And he has made himself globally, um, known through the port system and through how we have all migrated to various states and various places. But a lot of scholars will tell you that bear rabbit is also known as bugs bunny. And so we see that kind of mediation of these bear rabbit tales being told in popular culture because we all recognize him [00:03:30] now as bugs bunny.

Speaker 2: Okay. So, you know, excuse my ignorance, but my familiarity with bear rabbit pretty much extends to splash mountain. Can you give us a summary of the tale of borough rabbit?

Speaker 1: There's so many tails, but basically he's like the trickster hero. Um, he shows up in a lot of communities, so he shows up in native American communities. He shows up in Cambodian folk tales and literature. We also see him in British literature, but most of the time he's been considered kind of the folk hero within black culture, especially [00:04:00] on the plantation. And so Barry rabbit is the kind of rabbit because he's small and he looks really innocent that you don't think that he is smart enough to outwit, you know, the stronger animals. And so basically bare rabbit, you know, if one day he's hungry and he's trying to figure out how to get into that garden without getting skinned, basically he's going to figure out how to get into that garden so he can get himself fed and get out really quickly. Um, a lot of the tales do show how he gets trapped, but because he's bare rabbit, he always knows how to get [00:04:30] himself out of the situation.

Speaker 2: Do you have a sense of when the earliest iteration of this story occurred?

Speaker 1: Yes. I mean we, we primarily see it in 1880 with Joel Chandler Harris, who was a white southern journalist, um, at the time. And he was an apprentice on a slave plantation and was hanging out with the enslaved. And later on as he became a journalist, he decided to write down these tails. And that's really the first time that America, I think it was on the Atlantic constitution, begins [00:05:00] to read these tails for the first time. It started off as like a little side story within the newspaper and then became this really entertaining stories, the uncle Remus tales basically or through Joel Chandler Harris. But then a few years later it became a compilation because the tails were so important really in, in us entertainment at that time.

Speaker 2: So you mentioned uncle Raymond's.

Speaker 1: Oh yeah. Uncle Ramis is the Joel Chandler Harris character that began to tell these bare rapid tails [00:05:30] to us literate communities for the first time. And that is circulated within the newspaper realm.

Speaker 2: So if someone wanted to get a literary copy of the Breyer Rabbit Tales, which one would you recommend? Oh, okay.

Speaker 1: Good question. Uh, there are just really so many compilations. I mean from the Disney versions to Joel Chandler Harris versions I have currently looked at one that I find the particular, because it was written by an enslaved person [00:06:00] from the plantations as opposed to thinking about what it means to have like a white journalist writing down these tails. And the book of the title of the book is called, I think it's like when animals talked for the first time, it's something of that nature, but his name is like William j. Full clear, not, not the sound and the theory falls near, but um, yeah, I really like his collection and he also gives a little bit of the history behind how he also hurt those tails.

Speaker 2: Okay. So stepping back for a minute, you said that you got a master's here [00:06:30] at Berkeley and core and you have another master's degree.

Speaker 1: Okay. I have a master's in fine arts and writing and that I received from Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

Speaker 2: So what are the differences between these types of fields or is there a lot of overlap?

Speaker 1: There isn't that much overlap at all really. It was kind of shocking coming from an MFA program into a Master's or an m a program because I assume that I would have the ability to use my creative, my creative work and my creative spirit [00:07:00] within the masters. The thing about Sarah Lawrence is that it is a liberal arts college and so the arts in terms of creativity is privileged there. When you come to a university like Berkeley where theory and research is the most important, you tend not to lean on the creative side. You tend to lean more on the research side. So coming into this MBA program, I assume that there might be some ways to really bridge that and I was able to do that just because that's who I [00:07:30] am, but it is research focused and research based so I had to lean more on that side so that I could really get all that Berkeley had for me. In that sense I'm, the MFA very much allows you to create, you know, a piece of your own creative work for those two years that you're in that program or multiple years depending on how long you take versus the a where you come out with a thesis based on a potentially a creative work that was created by someone else. But you're looking at it through research [00:08:00] and through a theoretical framework.

Speaker 2: So have you found that this phd in performance studies is sort of the intermediate between us?

Speaker 1: That was my, uh, way of trying to bridge who I am as a creative being. Also bridging who I am as a scholar. I mean I love the research, I love the theories, but always that creative side of me wants to come out and I felt like performance studies was the best way for me to bridge those two.

Speaker 2: So do you want to tell us about some of the [00:08:30] work, either creative or research that you did during your master's before we get to your phd work?

Speaker 1: Yes. I have been working on quite a few things. I've had some poems published before I, during that time. So there been time in between my first masters and my second master's. I graduated with my MFA in 2008 and then returned to school in 20 to pursue my MBA in folklore here and graduated with that in 2015. [00:09:00] Um, so I've had some poetry work published, which has been pretty great. I mean, I would say the most exciting thing that has come out with in recent time is my children's book. Um, I wrote this children's book about New Orleans where I was living prior to moving to here and it has really kind of changed the way I think I've used my creative work. Um, it is based on a real person. The person's name is Arthur Robinson and he is known in the city of New Orleans as Mr Okra.

Speaker 1: [00:09:30] And so, uh, because I was always thinking of what it means to be telling these stories about the folk. It was interesting for me to really, even before I had gotten into the program, really start to think about like the kind of stories that I was collecting and being a part of when I was living in New Orleans. So what inspired you to write a children's book in particular? I was working at the Louisiana Children's museum for a couple of years and I was doing marketing and doing work with the school programs and also thinking about [00:10:00] the kind of literacy programs that we had there. And we just had a lot of authors come in and we had a lot of children's books come in, come through for the programs that we were giving. And so I knew the market really well and I also knew the kind of books that were being written about New Orleans and some of them, even though I'm not a native of New Orleans, I just felt like these people don't really know New Orleans in the way that I felt like I was beginning to understand the city.

Speaker 1: And so it was actually when I left to come here, [00:10:30] it was like the second day I had moved here, I was super sad about leaving New Orleans and I sat on my bed and I just wrote this book knowing that I had the kind of literacy for for Children's book literature to write it in that sense. And I felt like it was just kind of my way of honoring New Orleans, honoring the experience that I just had at the Louisiana Children's museum and like also honoring the young child inside of me. I had been really writing children's books since I was six. That was like my first outlet for my creativity. [00:11:00] But as an adult really coming back to that passion of Children's literature and I sat down and I wrote the book and a couple of years later it's out there in the world. So okay. So now you have to tell us what it's called.

Speaker 1: Maybe a synopsis cause all I know is Mr Oakland, right? Yeah. The book is called Mr Okra sells fresh fruits and vegetables and it basically uses mister Okra song. He's so, so just to pedal back a little bit, Arthur Robinson. Mr Okra is one [00:11:30] of the last generation fruit peddlers on the city. So there used to be a milkman. They used to be a bread man. There used to be a meat man. And Mr Oakley's father was one of the major fruits and

vegetable men in the city. And when he passed away, he left his legacy to his son who was then little Okra and then became Mr Okra. So Mr OCO has the song that he calls out to let everyone know what he's selling. And he has this like very interesting voice and intricate voice that everyone knows is kind of like the ice [00:12:00] cream truck man coming through. And I was able to use that song. I asked with his permission to show New Orleans in a way that we understand it. So some of my favorite places, basically I just mapped out the city using Mr Okras song about fresh fruits and vegetables and place that into some of the iconic spaces in New Orleans.

Speaker 2: So can you give us an example of one of your favorite places in New Orleans?

Speaker 1: Yes. One of my favorite places is, [00:12:30] I have so many, well I guess one of the places, one of the first places in the book that I was thinking of is Congo Square. And remember the first time I had experienced Congo square because it was told to me as the birthplace of jazz. And I know so many cities and so many states claim that. But the interesting thing about Congo square was that it did have a history of where the enslaved would come meet on Sundays and basically have market, there would be music, [00:13:00] there would be dance and there would be the selling of goods. And so Congo Square still has that history. There are traditional, um, days in, in New Orleans such as my ofa, which generally happened over July 4th weekend, um, or a little bit earlier. It's early July where the black community will come together and dance and give reverence to the enslaved who were in that space. And it actually takes an entire trip all the way over to old Algiers point, [00:13:30] the same route that the enslaved would have been taken on to be sold in the French quarter. And so it's situations like that we're standing in Congo square, you feel the history, there's no doubt that you yeah, that you, you feel the history.

Speaker 2: So this leads into my next question when you already said the word history, but the book must cover not only contemporary places but also New Orleans history as well.

Speaker 1: It covers some New Orleans history. I mean it is a children's book. It is like 300 words. And so it really just kind [00:14:00] of marks out the places that are important to the city. Some of the most iconic places, um, such as cafe du Monde, such as the Louisiana Children's museum, such as the Mississippi River. I mean, it definitely just kind of takes you on a tour using Mister Okra as your tour guide. And it felt really important to me, not just to say that all of these places were important, but to use someone who was important to the city to guide you through these spaces. And did you get an illustrator? I did. Well the great thing is [00:14:30] that my publisher found an illustrator, so because I was familiar with the market, the publisher that I went with Pelican publishing, when I wrote my query letter, I was like, I wrote this book Free Wall.

Speaker 1: Like no one else is going to see this query letter. No one else is going to see this manuscript because I know your heart for New Orleans and I know your heart for Louisiana. They are a national book publication, but so much of their tails focus on

what's happening in the south. And so when I wrote my query letter, I said this book is for you. And it was true within two [00:15:00] months of sending that letter, they said we want the book. And we had to go through the process of getting Mr Rez permission and then from there, wow. It, it lives and breathe in the world.

Speaker 2: Congratulations. Yeah. So where could someone go to buy it? Is it online or is it in shops?

Speaker 1: Mine. It's in bookstores. That's even in the perk. The Berkeley Public [inaudible]

Speaker 2: wow.

Speaker 1: As I go and I just like check my checked out and like someone, some young child [00:15:30] is reading my book right now and it just overwhelms me every time. But it's at books and books inc off Shaddock there's some bookstores in Oakland. I actually don't know where it is everywhere. But you can purchase that online like any other children's book.

Speaker 2: And you said, you told me before the show that you do have some small fans, right? Cause you've been doing book readings,

Speaker 1: book greetings at elementary schools. I've been at storytelling festivals. I been at summer camps. I had [00:16:00] just it, it really is an amazing experience to recognize that. Like now my fan base is basically to t know 10 years old children and to have them want my autograph or to take a photo with me every time I hear a young child say that they love this book, it takes me back to the moment of what I thought was my favorite children's book. And that I'm that for someone and I don't know, that just blows my mind in so many ways.

Speaker 2: [00:16:30] So if you're just tuning in, you're listening to the graduates here on Calex. My name is Tesla Monson and today I'm joined by Lashawn Daley who asked to be called an amateur storyteller. But I think if you're published, you're a professional. That's the rule. So professional storyteller leshawn daily. Okay. But we should talk maybe a little bit about what you're doing here at Berkeley. Cause that sounds like an amazing project, but you know, somehow you managed to fit that into your, you know, non Berkeley life, which is amazing. It's true

Speaker 1: to also mix my creative work with my scholarly [00:17:00] work has been amazing too. Um, so I'm in my third year here at cal and I am, I'm really in a fluctuation of my project. I came in really thinking about bare rabbits tails and how to understand contemporary mediations of this tale, whether it was through literature, whether it's in dance, um, whether it's in the theater. And within that term I really started to think about like who, where rabbit is to [00:17:30] me and what he symbolizes in our culture. And because he is considered that trickster hero, I really started to think about like, what is it about this trick, sternness, this kind of like vagabond, this, this, um, this cleverness that gets

pinpointed on the black body. And then I really started to think about my body, my own body as a young girl, my own body as a dancer.

Speaker 1: I also have locks in my hair. And so what does it mean to like embody this body in a particular way? Which I know I'm read a [00:18:00] certain way. I know him write a certain way in class. I know him read a certain way as a children's book author. And so I really started to think about like all these ways in which I embody a certain image for people. Um, and so that process kind of took me into young black girlhood. What is it about the young black girl that sometimes gets defined as precocious, which for me also links to like cleverness, which sometimes then leaks to Ms Civitas snus, which then sometimes things gets too Sassy. [00:18:30] Like all these ways in which I can think about bare rabbits cleverness, which sounds like a great thing. But then when it gets mapped onto certain bodies is not so great. So my research right now is really still looking at all of these qualities in which I have found in these bear rabbit tales and really starting to think about the kind of bodies that those terminologies get mapped on them. Because I was starting with my own body, I was thinking about my young body as um, as a young black girl and what does it mean now to be a black [00:19:00] woman? Still trying to see where these terminologies gets mapped onto me.

Speaker 2: And can you give us a sense of how this kind of research is conducted? Because as a scientist, you know we have sort of this formulaic way of researching but in performance studies, what does that mean?

Speaker 1: Yeah. Well, so I leaned back into my methods that I use for my master's in folklore, which mostly is ethnography and ethnography gives me the opportunity to use my own body as a site. [00:19:30] Mostly what happens is, you know there's a difference between auto ethnography where I am solely the site, but to recognize that when I do come into a space and as a researcher we all know that like we changed the space. So I think with ethnography what's been helpful for me is to know that when I do come into a space or when I perform these tails myself, even though I'm looking at the tails, but I am being read a certain way because I'm telling the tales. So for the most part ethnography has been used as like my number one research method. [00:20:00] I mean I do go into the archive because I'm not always looking at my body in the space versus like other black females who perform these tails. But also looking at like, well it's already online. The kind of literature, the kind of reviews that were given to Joel Chandler Harris, let's say, and why he's considered the kind of father of rare rabbit tales mostly because he was the first person who wrote them down. But when we think about like what it means to do oral history or oral storytelling versus kind of the literary storytelling, like how do we privilege [00:20:30] that and how do I privilege that as both, you know, this storyteller and also this writer.

Speaker 2: So performance studies, you are doing some performances, right? You mentioned a little bit, but you actually have one coming up and I'm sure you can engage in other performances here at cal. Can you tell about that? Yes.

Speaker 1: Who formed? Um, and a few things. I had the opportunity to perform in BDP, which is the Berkeley dance project. That dance experience came out of performing and [00:21:00] the Choreo. So I went in as a dancer and was able to work with an amazing undergrad choreographer name Jose. And he has graduated last year. But so that experience of working with him had been, our piece got picked to be on the mainstage last spring. But I also have written a play for the new play reading series, which I'm in graduate student faculty on. So we work with undergrads as a decal. So these decking up and coming actors [00:21:30] or undergrads who are looking for acting experience can come in and basically do a dramatic reading of a play. And I saw this as an opportunity to really explore that other creative side of me who was never really written a play. But because I look at theater and storytelling, I've read quite a few and quite a few black plays. And so I thought about, well what does it mean to quote unquote write a black play? And that's what I did. At least that's what I think I did. It's called the Carter sisters and it is going to be [00:22:00] dramatically right here and one lb four on September 13th from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM.

Speaker 2: Okay. And so how do people get to, so that's what they want to know.

Speaker 1: Free. You don't even have to get tickets. You just show up. There is information on our TTPs website but the room fits 50 and I'm hoping to pack it out and you know, and it is an open forum so it's my first draft or maybe my second or third draft, but really the first time [00:22:30] that is being seen and I'm looking forward to people, I'm having a conversation about this. The interesting thing about this piece was it was hard to find black actors. Um, we are in a space where the amount of black students is, is less than some other colleges and universities. And so even with the director, we were like, it's going to be interesting if we can't find enough black actress to cast in this piece. Thankfully we were able to have [00:23:00] some, uh, black female actors come through, but now the entire cast is basically black female. Even though there are other male characters within the place. So it'll be interesting to see how it's red and how we take it up with these with with an all female cast.

Speaker 2: And can you give us like the one sentence synopsis or summary?

Speaker 1: The one sentence synopsis is that it is about two sisters, Lorraine and Tiana whose mother has just passed away and these sisters are really grappling with their grief and also trying to understand [00:23:30] what their sisterhood means without their mother.

Speaker 2: Okay. And because you are so talented, you've got this children's book, you've got this play on September 13th and you also have a podcast. I do, I have a podcast call

Speaker 1: stories in slams and it again came out of my work as a folklorist. I was listening to all of these tales, I was seeing people perform tales, I was performing tales and I thought well this is a really great opportunity to start collecting some of my own. And so basically

friends and families, sometimes [00:24:00] even professional storytellers have come through and recorded five minute tails. So if anyone's interested, I am open to also hearing it. It basically is a podcast for everyday tails. Everyday stories. You can come and sing, you can read your favorite passage, you can read your favorite children's book. I'm really open.

Speaker 2: Okay. And remind us the title of Allen. Again,

Speaker 1: it's called stories and slams. So you can either go to my website, lashawn daily.com or a stories and slams.com or even on [00:24:30] Twitter hashtag stories and slams and then formation will come up.

Speaker 2: Okay. Mr ochre sells fruits and vegetables, the Carter sisters and stories and slams. Okay. I'm got make sure the audience remembers all that. Uh, so, uh, we're, we're, you know, coming towards the end of the program and I would love to hear if you have any advice for younger generations of students or people who are interested in performance or folklore, what advice would you give them as they think about their future and education [00:25:00] or their career?

Speaker 1: My number one thing has just been to go for, and I know people say that all the time, but I, I, the reason why I feel like I've spanned all of this kind of creative work and scholarly work is because not that I was like so confident in myself that I was like, you know what? I can do anything. I mean, yes in that sense, but it really was because I was inspired by other people who were doing work that I felt I wanted to try. I basically just had been trying [00:25:30] my whole life and some of those moments of trying has really got me to succeed in that, um, and that venue. But really I just say, just go for it. Like calm the fears, try not to focus in on what you think other people are gonna say or other people are going to do because you are now expressing yourself creatively, but just to like be, and to recognize you're alive and that we have so much creativity and we have so much brain power to get a lot of [00:26:00] amazing things done. And not to say that we always have to be productive. I think that there's time for rest and I think that there is time for silence. But for me, all of that coming out of the rest and coming out of the silence always just makes me yearn for more creativity. And that's just basically what I've been doing since I was a young child.

Speaker 2: Well that is excellent advice. And what about for the general public who might be interested in seeing more performances? I mean besides yours on September 13th in terms of what's happening in [00:26:30] our department or, or in the bay more generally, what, what sort of venues would you recommend for people who are interested in this area of storytelling or play? Right.

Speaker 1: Yeah, the, there's um, Tuesday nights at the, it's telling on Tuesday, I believe it happens once a month. That's a great storytelling venue. There's also performances of the moth that happens throughout the bay. I know that there's some in San Francisco, there's also

some too at the frightened salvage here in Berkeley. Um, unfortunately the bay area [00:27:00] storytelling festival was in its last year. It hit 30 years. So that's no longer, I'm in tow. But there's also so many storytelling festivals like just around the bay. There's the Sierra storytelling festival that happens in the Vata city during the summer. Um, there is the national storytelling festival that happens in Jonesborough, Tennessee. That's the largest one. I've been to one in Canada, the Winnepeg international storytelling festival. I mean if you just Google storytelling festivals, there's so much is going to come up and they're swaps and slams [00:27:30] and yeah, there's just so much throughout the area. Yeah,

Speaker 2: lots of resources and stuff. Okay. And in this last part, this is where I like to let my guests, you know, I, I call it the soapbox segment, but basically just free rein to say what you want to say to the public about your work. Because a lot of this interview is structured around your research and your experiences, but now is there anything that you think the public should be more aware of about your work or your discipline?

Speaker 1: [inaudible] I think more and more even I tend to question [00:28:00] like, what am I really doing and for whose purpose? And I feel like it just always comes back to me. The more passionate I become about my research, I realize it's just me trying to explore like who I am in this world. And so I'm always just looking up for open dialogue and open conversation in terms of my research expressing when it becomes to to black girlhood, this is really a new discipline that's coming up. I would say within the past 20 years came out of black feminist thought. I'm also in a working group that's [00:28:30] also looking at and imagining what black girlhood means and also thinking about black womanhood. And so I think in terms of like what we see in the media sometimes in terms of what we see in our own families and communities, what it really means to not only be a child, but to be a woman and to be a mother. And so yeah, I'm just really grappling with what that means for me. But I think that it's really important for all of us to stay open and to engage these conversations with honor and respect because we're all coming [00:29:00] at it from different perspectives. And for people to recognize that I am coming at it from a very distinct perspective, which is my own and my own experience of, you know, my own mother and my relationship with her and my relationship with my sisters and my relationship with my community.

Speaker 2: Well, that's excellent. I mean, one of the goals of the show is to, is to, I was going to say broadcast diverse perspectives, but to, you know, give, give a platform for diverse perspectives and just to hear about the, you know, the different fields of study here at Berkeley and the different [00:29:30] ways that people end up at Berkeley. And so of course it's been great having you here today. Uh, Yep. That's it. We're out of time, uh, on the graduates. Of course. Of course. The Shawn, so again, has been the graduates here on KLX Berkeley 90.7 FM. My name is Tesla Monson and today I've been joined by Lashawn Daley of performance studies. She was telling us about her children's book, Mister Okra. She was telling us about her work here at Berkeley in performance studies in her upcoming play on September 13th. It's free in which [00:30:00] hall is it? And

again, Nell Hall in the basement before. Okay. You said five to 7:00 PM to 7:00 PM it's a free performance. So everyone should definitely check it out. And then also her podcast stories and slams, and I'm sure that we will see in many more creative works from you. You seem like you're very talent and you've got, you know, got wide reach with your expression. So again, this has been the graduates and we will be back in two weeks with another episode. Until then, stay tuned. You're listening to KALX Berkeley.