

Ashley: You're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. My name is Ashley Smiley, and you're listening to the Graduates, the interview talk show where we interact with graduate students here on campus and throughout the world. Today I am joined by Caleb Luna, a PHD student in the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance studies. Caleb has earned multiple awards and honors, including the GSC student leadership award in LGBT organizing from the Gender and Sexuality Center at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as the Multicultural Student Leadership Award from the Community Impact Queer people of Color and Ally center. Additionally, in 2014 Caleb was awarded the Best of the Fest at the Frontera Festival for his work titled F-A-T, the play. Caleb, welcome to the Graduates. We are happy to have you here today.

Caleb: Thank you. Thanks so much for having me.

Ashley: Great. So I think we should start out by asking what you study now, and what is the process for studying your subject?

Caleb: Yeah, I'm in the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance studies. I'm doing a PHD there. I look at fatness. I am doing a fat studies project, and right now I'm really interested in the way I've conceptualized my project and my research interest is actually about bodies generally and how they come to have meaning, and how the meanings that we ascribe to them through different processes. And specifically, I'm interested in language right now, really and the linguistic component of that process.

Ashley: Okay. All right. So you teach courses here at UC Berkeley, and I was just checking out these courses online yesterday, and they fall under the realm of what is called fat studies. And you just referenced that when you use the word fatness. And so could you explain to our listeners who may have never heard of this field of study before? What is fat studies, and how do you incorporate that into your theater and performance media?

Caleb: Sure. So fat studies is a field that looks at fatness as you know, a sincere object of interrogation. It mostly comes from sociology. So historically it has been a lot about the social impacts and the social experiences of fat folks, primarily in North America. And how there's this concept called fat phobia, which is like the discrimination against fat people that we see in all avenues of life, from access to healthcare to access to pay discrimination, to hiring and weight discrimination. Discrimination as far as clothing options, the micro interpersonal discrimination, discriminating on as far as like friends and romantic partners, and sexual partners. So fat studies looks at all the different kind of social aspects of what fat people endure.

For me, the interesting part of it is as a performance studies person, I'm thinking about the performance of fat bodies. So I'm interested not just in stage performance, which I look at primarily through like the mediums of burlesque and drag and queer people of color performing those, but also through the daily performance of fatness and how fat people perform our bodies in quotidian spaces. Just walking down the street. On the

bus, through airport security, eating at a restaurant, clothes shopping. You know, what it means to be a fat person walking through this world and how your body is impacted by the people around you, as well as how you use your fat body to facilitate those interactions.

Ashley: Okay. So I've been spending some time reading. Well, I've been reading some of your web-based publications, which anybody can look up with the use of a computer, and the two sites that you mainly publish on, thebodyisnotanapology.com

Caleb: Correct.

Ashley: As well as everyday feminism. Correct?

Caleb: Um hmm.

Ashley: And something that I came across was this idea about the hierarchy of desirability, which I found very interesting because you seem to take on these huge topics that require a lot of deconstruction about these big ideas that society has continued to shape. And so my impression of the this hierarchy is that there's this idea of unequal forces driving how we value and treat individuals based on where they fall out in that hierarchy. So could you explain to our audience a little bit about what that hierarchy means, and how that can impact our behavior, and even what we could do to help change those notions of desirability? You just went into that a little bit about how you move through this world.

Caleb: Yeah. Absolutely. First, I don't know if that was a compliment, but I take it as a compliment.

Ashley: Oh, it was a compliment.

Caleb: This is what kind of one of the linguistic experiences I'm interested in is saying these huge topics with these big focuses and these kinds of metrics of size that we use in everyday conversation that I'm really interested in. And I'm really into leaning into those things and seeing what part of my fat practice, and what values there are in size. So thank you for that.

Secondly, yeah, I also want to preface this or my response by contextualizing my experiences as somebody who primarily is queer identified, right? So I historically have operated in not just LGBTQ spaces, but like queer spaces. The process of a queer identity is really intentional politics are underlying how we live our lives for the larger purpose of resisting, not just hetero sexism and homophobia but racism, anti-blackness, colonialism, classism, capitalism, so on and so forth.

So that makes this question of fat phobia feel a little bit more pertinent in these situations where we have this group of people who have kind of agreed to have kind of

accepted that we are all socialized and indoctrinated into these social forces that are really harmful to all of us in different ways, and really try to actively and intentionally combat that as much as they can to like the smallest detail. Right? So then existing in these spaces and seeing that a lot of them were still really invested in a lot of systems and categories that were going on unnoticed primarily because they remain unmarked in the dominant culture. And these were categories such as whiteness, right? Masculinity, able-bodiedness or not having a physical disability and thinness were the things. So I was in these spaces where it's primarily populated by people who although had this queer politic of resistance and counter culture, and were still usually thin, usually white, if not light skinned, not disabled. Right?

And we're still kind of perpetuating these priorities and our practices of who they were networking with, who were they in community with, who are their friends and who are their lovers, and feeling very frustrated that these people that I kind of expected or that had this self-professed interest in resisting these really harmful behaviors were still perpetuating it in this way. That I felt like I was on the receiving end, where being in the queer spaces was not necessarily that much different than being in the larger world, right? And I was still facing similar barriers around access to not just romance or sexual partners, but even friendship. I've had people who, and this still happens today, where people are very uninterested in me as a person, just by taking a look at me, right?

And I've been a fat person my whole life. I'm pretty intuitive and pretty empathetic, and so I can sense fairly well what people are. They're responding to me and it's not uncommon for me, in particular with queer men or like queer men who are... Queer men is like a slippery term, right? Everybody is like a male or man, but people who operate in those circles, to be not that interested in me until I open my mouth? Until I say something that is smarter, interesting to them, and then suddenly they like perk up. It's frustrating to me because I think, and not just on a personal level, but I think fat people don't have to be interesting and smart to be valued. Not just fat people, but anyone.

We don't have to be smart or interesting in order to be respected, to be nice, for you to be nice to me. For you to treat me as if I'm a potential friend. Right? And I experienced that quite a bit historically and it happens less now, but it's still something that happens. And luckily now I'm in a place where I do have a pretty substantial and consistent support system. So those things don't bother me as much, and they aren't as inhibitive as they have been in the past, but they're still frustrating experiences.

So let me think about, like you said, hierarchies of desire, and the ways that we still really invest in culturally, and this is obviously, it feels difficult to talk about this in a way as to not interpolate, for lack of a better word, interpolate everybody into this behavior because I don't think that this is necessarily how everyone operates. But I do in my experiences, it is culturally how I operate, valuing normal metrics of attractiveness such

as whiteness, masculinity, thinness, so on and so forth. Class privilege, and all these other things.

Ashley: Yeah, I can personally relate to those feelings. So something, I think a good classic example of what you're discussing right now is your pointing out in one of your articles about BMI, the body mass index, something that we all see on the wall of our doctor's office.

Caleb: Right.

Ashley: You look at it. I'm five two. Therefore I should weigh 120 pounds. I don't. And it's almost this white supremacist telling me that this is what my body should look like because this is what white bodies look like.

Caleb: Right, absolutely.

Ashley: And when you pointed out in your article that this chart was actually developed by a Belgian statistician named Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet. I don't know if that's how you pronounce his name, but that's how I'm pronouncing it.

Caleb: I've never attempted, and I commend you for trying. Thank you.

Ashley: So he used all white European men for his study to characterize whether or not your body is considered healthy. So that is very visceral, and it's something that most people don't realize. As you pointed out in your article, that we tend to accept these norms that are perpetuated onto us. So how do we identify what is coming in that is toxic? How do we make steps to change that, and realize for ourselves like, I'm looking in a mirror. This is what I look like. This is my reality. You kind of made steps towards explaining to individuals who relate to that article, or just humans in general. What activities can you do to unlearn what has been in deeply ingrained in us, such as you have to be five two and weigh this much?

Caleb: Right. Yeah, I mean, that's something that's come out of fat studies also is troubling, our understandings of these categories and our investments in them. Yeah, I think for me it's a lot about educating myself and others about these histories, and how we come to understand our investments in them. And also questioning our investments in them and being like what does it mean? For example, if I'm not healthy, like what does that actually mean? I mean, this is a question that I've asked my students. When we engage with fatness and they have so much anxiety. Everybody always comes back to this question of like, but it's unhealthy. All these health risks. And I know that it's a lot more complicated than that, and that the health risks associated with fatness have been greatly exaggerated for different reasons.

But you know, I ask them, what does it mean to be unhealthy? What is that actually? Like what are you saying when you say that somebody is unhealthy? What values are you investing in? Does that mean you can't run a mile? Okay, do you want to run a mile, first of all? And if you do want to run a mile, then go, and you can't? Then work up to it.

Ashley: Yes, yeah.

Caleb: And that doesn't mean being 120 pounds. You can run if you train your body in whatever state it's in.

Ashley: Sure.

Caleb: And obviously this has limits. Some people, their bodies won't be able to run a mile for whatever reason. And that's also fine. Maybe they don't want to run a mile. Maybe that's one reason why their body won't do it.

Ashley: So I feel like what you're saying is to reassess your own ideals of healthy. What makes you feel good. And also I feel that along with these visceral ideas about the body mass index coming from an institution, a medical institution that serves the dominant population. In addition to that, we also have media showing us everyday on TV, like look at these actresses and these actors, and they tend to portray people who are non-normative as almost deficient in some ways. They portray fat people as being tired or unhappy or rejected, and they don't allow them to develop their characters for you to have some kind of relationship with this character, get to know them better. It's always very dismissed. So that kind of brings me into our next topic about your role in theater, dance and performance.

Caleb: Yeah.

Ashley: And not a lot of people... Well, let me rephrase that. A lot of people can go throughout their whole lives without ever getting up on stage and expressing themselves or sincerely trying to communicate. And it's a big phobia for a lot of people. And I understand that you've performed in places like Oakland and Austin, Texas, in San Francisco, and even an international performance in Montreal. So that was back in 2016, and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what that experience is like, and what is it that you hope to communicate to the public with your performance?

Caleb: Yeah. I think this is actually the question that got me interested in performance studies. I kind of got interested in performance on accident. It was definitely not my proactive choice. A friend had recruited me and some other fat folks in Austin to develop a theater piece, and none of us had any theater. Or one person did. Two people, including the convener, had theater experience and nobody else did. And we kind of had this process of getting together and talking about fatness and our experiences, and eventually then

pulling out themes and volunteering to write on certain themes. We went and wrote different pieces, and then this person developed it all into a script. And at the time, when I started this process, I was like, I am a writer. I feel very comfortable writing something for this piece and supporting it in other ways.

I am not a performer. I don't want to be. I don't want to participate that way. And then after reading the script I was like, well, there's no way I can not do this. It was so good and so wonderful. And so important. And yeah, it was very terrifying to kind of to deal with that process of, not just being on stage and being in front of people and having your body then inevitably scrutinized, but also talking about something that's so vulnerable and so contested, right? It's incredibly stressful. But it also led me to think about why I was so averse to the stage, and what I had learned about my body as a fat person. I had an understanding that nobody wanted to see my body, that my body shouldn't be seen, that I should stay off the stage. I should stay out of the public eye. Out of the spotlight. Because it was just not acceptable.

And I'm fine with making people uncomfortable, but it would not only make people uncomfortable, but it would be harmful for them to see me. And so that's kind of when I started thinking more about performance and fatness, and what does it mean for people who are so indoctrinated and socialized into being invisible and to hiding and shrinking, right? We're literally emphasized to shrink ourselves away with the emphasis on diets and weight loss. And so to reject that, and to say instead, actually look at me. Look at my body. What is looking at my body do for you? I think it's very powerful. And that's where my interest kind of stemmed from. And I think you're talking about how we are all kind of indoctrinated into these experiences of seeing the BMI. You go to the grocery store. I want to say everybody goes to the grocery store, unless you're very lucky somehow and you have somebody cook for you. Or maybe you don't go to the grocery store because you don't have something to eat, or you don't have money to eat or buy there.

But most people will go to the grocery store, and it's so common to see it's just bombarded with these images of scrutinizing, mostly women's body is about their size, and what they've done, and celebrating them for getting smaller, no matter what the process for them getting smaller was. No matter what harmful and unhealthy processes that were involved in that. And then criticizing them when their bodies get bigger. And so I think that this is something that effects everybody, and it encourages everybody to be hyper critical of their own bodies. And so I do think that it's an experience that everybody can relate to in some way of this fear. Maybe not everybody, but a lot of people feel insecure about our bodies because we're trained to be insecure of their bodies, no matter what they look like.

Ashley: Um hmm. I see that, and I also see kind of parallels that you're drawing from the performance aspect of drawing attention to yourself when historically you've been taught to feel ashamed. But in the same spot, you're also writing about how individuals can do this for themselves. You know, something that I briefly mentioned or you

mentioned earlier, and also in one of your publications about normalizing yourself and ways where people can look at themselves. Take the time out of your day to glance in the mirror, not just make eye contact, but look at all the ways your body is shaped. Standing up, sitting down, lying down, putting your body in weird positions and just telling yourself and knowing that this is reality.

Caleb: Yeah.

Ashley: So that in the future, and I really love this idea, you could start to replace those notions of what your body should look like. The way that Belgian statistician was telling me your body should look like a white man's body.

Caleb: Yeah.

Ashley: You know, start to replace that and embrace reality, which is so powerful. And something that I feel growing up, I would avoid. And being somebody of color, being raised in a world where the media was filled with light colored skin people and the dominant group. So I really love that idea of kind of embracing that. And I wanted, after reading that, I want to hear more. I want to hear more of these sort of like hacks.

Caleb: Oh yeah.

Ashley: On learning some of the visceral white supremacy teachings.

Caleb: Oh my gosh. Yeah. I mean, I think that just letting go of, yeah, your attachments to these abstract ideas.

Ashley: So you're also in a really great place to explore these ideas here in Berkeley, California, and I was kind of curious of how you decided to choose Berkeley? You're coming from the University of Texas at Austin. Correct? What made you make the general movement from Austin to the Bay area?

Caleb: Yeah, There's actually, oh, ton of history of fat activism in the Bay area, and there's a very expansive and rich community of fat people here who are doing really wonderful things. So it was really sort of just as a fat person, I wanted to be a part of it. There's such an intricate network of folks who teach classes for fat people, who teach access into dance classes and yoga and movement classes, and who have clothing swaps and just fundraisers, and all these different things. They're happening today, that are really advancing the deliberation of fat people. So it was really exciting to me to come to the Bay area, to try to get involved with those communities. And there's people that I've met over the years who live here and I haven't been able to participate as much as I would like to, because turns out grad school is very time consuming. I just have absolutely no time or energy beyond finishing up course work right now.

So hopefully after that, I would like to be more involved with these activities. And at the same time, I had a lot of anxiety about coming to California as a fat person. I grew up in Texas, and I lived in Texas all my life, and I was like, oh my God, California hates fat people. I have visited. I do not enjoy going into San Francisco at all. It's one of the most fat phobic enablers places I've ever been. And I had visited it years ago, and I was like, this is a cute city. But I don't feel welcomed here. I don't feel wanted here.

Ashley: Yeah, that's so interesting. And I've heard that a couple of times in more than one instance. And it's interesting because of this national, as well as international impression of what it means to live and be in San Francisco. It's sort of this outdated idea that it's so liberal, so accepting, and it's like a safe haven for artists. But it's changed. It's changed a lot. And it is interesting to hear you say that. So where can the general public go in the Bay area if they are wanting to participate in or learn more about performance? What kind of safe spaces are there? Is that something that's transitioning more into Oakland? Because I know you said you don't like to go out to San Francisco. Where do you go when you want to engage in a supportive community?

Caleb: Yeah, there are awesome, great things in San Francisco. There's this production that's an all disabled cast doing performances called Sins Invalid. I don't actually know when the next production is, but that's something to get connected to those other places. Or there's other groups in Oakland, a group called Dance EmFATic, emphasis on the fat. There are instructors, Ifasina. I'm forgetting her last name, but she teaches dance and movement class for fat people. At the Ed Roberts campus, there's I think Thursday nights at 7:00 PM, there's access centered yoga. Beyond that, I don't know of any consistent regular events other than keeping an eye out for Facebook events and what's coming up.

Ashley: Yeah, sure. So we're getting close to running out of time. And I wanted to ask, do you have any advice for students getting interested in dance theater or performance? Anything like that?

Caleb: I think if you're here at Berkeley, it would be good to take a class, first of all. There's also over at the TDPS office. It's in Dwinelle, on level C. There's a program. We regularly host productions. If you're interested in seeing a performance, we teach dance classes as well. I have friends who take dance classes, just to start their day off and get their bodies moving. And yeah, just look on the website, at the calendar on the website to see what programs are coming up. There's always, always something.

Ashley: Great. So this brings us to our soapbox section, which is an opportunity for you to bring up any issues that you feel the general public should be more informed about. We shout out.

Caleb: Yeah, I guess my big issue is to kind of be aware of the discrimination that we perpetuate around bodily difference. And when I say a bodily difference, I don't just mean fatness,

but I mean racial difference. I mean gender difference, gender presentation, sexualities. I think that the body is the site where all of our oppressions kind of come through, and to understand that we all have bodies. We're all doing the best we can. We're all here together, and to have kind of gentleness and compassion with each other on that. And to not... To kind of question these assumptions that we have, not just that being fat is unhealthy or unattractive, or lazy, or all these other things. But that women are weak, right? And that people of color are here because of affirmative action, or whatever.

Ashley: That's something I hear all the time.

Caleb: Yeah, it's obviously absolutely not true, but these are these assumptions that are perpetuated about our bodies that just really, really needs to be checked and taking a step back and be like, wait, why am I actually thinking this way? What do I know? What is informing this, and is this actually consistent with these bodies experiences? And they're usually not.

Ashley: Well, thank you so much for coming in today, and I think that's gong to do it for us today.

Caleb: Awesome.

Ashley: You've just listened to the Graduates 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley, where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work. Today we spoke with Caleb Luna, a PHD student in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance studies here at UC Berkeley. If you're interested in learning more about Caleb, please check out their multiple web-based publications via the bodyisnotanapology.com as well as everydayfeminism.com.

Caleb is also in the process of writing a collaborative book titled Body Sovereignty, Fat Politics in the Fight for Human Rights. That's it for today. Thanks.

Caleb: Thank you so much for having me.

Ashley: Absolutely.