

# Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 85: Fat Liberation

Guest: Alice Wong

Guest Host: Caleb Luna and Max Airborne

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## Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey, hey, hey! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversation on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is all about fat liberation with Max Airborne and Caleb Luna. Max is an organizer for collective liberation, rooted in fat liberation and disability justice. They co-founded Fat Rose and is an organizer for the No Body Is Disposable campaign. Caleb is a performer-scholar-activist. They are a Ph.D. candidate in Performance Studies at UC Berkeley, where their research focuses on historicizing performances of eating and cultural representations of fat embodiment. Max and Caleb will talk about their lived experiences as fat people, the hate, violence, and oppression toward fat people, and what fat politics and liberation is all about. Are. You. Ready? [electronic beeping] Away we goooooooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Caleb and Max, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

MAX AIRBORNE: Yay! Thank you for having us.

CALEB LUNA: Thank you so much. I'm so honored to be here.

ALICE: Well, I would love us to start with maybe both of you could introduce yourselves.

MAX: OK, so my name is Max Airborne. I got introduced to fat activism as a teenager. I had been hospitalized for being fat by my family, and when I got out, I got introduced to fat liberation, which was a pretty new thing at the time. And I kind of haven't looked back. I stopped dieting, and I learned that it was OK to be fat. And it just really changed my whole life [chuckles]. And I credit being alive with having learned about fat liberation. And so, pretty much whatever I've done, I've tried to include fat liberation in my work. And so, right now, I'm working with an organization that I started with my partner called Fat Rose, which is about politicizing fat people and making connections with other social justice movements and trying to bring fat liberation into the agendas of other social justice movements. And also to also just bring us all together in every way, 'cause fat people are everywhere. [chuckles] Fat people cross every social group.

ALICE: Wonderful. Thank you, Max.

CALEB: My name's Caleb Luna. I'm a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at UC Berkeley. I'm an activist. I'm an artist, performance artist, poet, writer, essayist. And yeah. So, I have a bit of a scholarly background and an approach to fatness and fat liberation, but also definitely try to pull from activist roots. And I love what Max does. My sort of impression or interpretation of Fat Rose—and feel free to challenge this or expand on it, Max—is sort of merger of radical politics, radical left politics, with fat politics and making clear their affinities and their overlaps. Which I really love and appreciate and is like, I try to incorporate a similar framework into my scholarly work, into my artistry, and my activism.

MAX: Yeah. That's beautiful. Thank you, Caleb.

CALEB: Thank you!

MAX: I feel like there are a lot of movements who have ultimately a view about collective liberation. What I really want is to make alliances with those groups so that we all understand that that includes fat. [chuckles] And that, you know, so that fat liberationists understand that our liberation is tied to Black liberation and disability liberation and freedom for all people. I want us all to be looking at each other and forming one giant coalition that includes fat.

[chill dubstep music break]

### Defining fat liberation

ALICE: I'd love to learn how both of you describe or define fat liberation. And how does it look to you? How does that kind of manifest in your own world?

CALEB: I think similar to what Max is saying, for me, fat liberation is connected to the liberation of all peoples. I worry that part of the barriers for people to understanding fatness as a marginalized group is, well, one, I think that people actually get a lot of access to power and privilege through thinness in ways that are really culturally normalized and valorized and celebrated, even when thin bodies are produced or maintained in really violent ways. For me, it's actually central to how histories of race and colonization has materialized on this continent. The scholarship that goes and looks at the journals of the original colonizers on this country, on this land who, including Christopher Columbus. There's a book called *The Body is a Conquistador* by Rebecca Earle, and she does this. And it's very clear that for colonizers, the body size of the Indigenous people who were living on this land was a problem, and it was a site of a lot of anxiety for them in order to maintain their white European idealized bodies because they were afraid to eat the food, the foods that were indigenous to this land. Because those then produced Indigenous bodies, right?

And so, there's always been this sort of colonial anxiety about body size. And that coincides with theories and perceptions of race and racialization, particularly with Black and Indigenous people. There's more scholarship, recently, a book called *Fearing the Black Body* by Sabrina Strings talks about the ways that fatness was produced as ugly through its imagined association with Blackness. And that one of the ways that settlers and colonizers justified their colonization and genocide and enslavement of people is through producing their bodies as ugly, as primitive, as inferior. And certainly not all of that process was about fatness, but at least some of it was, right? And so, since contact on this land, there has been fat hatred and fat stigma in order to maintain white supremacy and settler ideals.

So, for me, fat liberation is very integrated into Black liberation. It's also integrated into Indigenous sovereignty and material decolonization of this land.

MAX: Caleb, it's amazing to start to understand the history of fat hatred. It's so ubiquitous that fat is just assumed and promoted as a horrible, unhealthy thing. It's become all about health. So, the origins of it are absent from that understanding. So, I guess what I would say about fat liberation, I feel like fat is considered bad from the moment we're born. We're given this idea that the body has to be a certain way. And we know scientifically that babies actually need body fat. [laughs] And yet, there are even parents who are instructed to give their kids low-fat diets, which is a terrible thing to do to a baby. And so, it begins there. We all grow up with some version of this information, that we have to maintain this particular thin body or try to achieve this particular thin body in order to have any access to life, really, to life.

[chill dubstep music break]

I grew up being told by my father that if I didn't lose weight, nobody would ever hire me. And that ended up being kind of true. It's very difficult to get a job if you're fat! And so, to me, fat liberation is about kind of coming to understand both the personal, internal experience of fat that we learn and apply to ourselves. This sort of surveillance of the body by the culture that we internalize, and then we're always watching ourselves to make sure that we're not eating too much, or that if we are, nobody sees us. And then it's also about looking at what the culture is doing and how the culture and the systems of the culture are impacting us. So, the discrimination that we experience in life and the access issues that we experience in life: the fact that chairs are not made for bodies that are larger than a certain size.

And then there's even larger things like fat people get denied medical care every single day. Doctors won't touch fat patients a lot of times, or they'll refuse to do surgery on them because they're afraid, they're afraid of liability. So, a lot of fat people end up not seeking medical care or seeking medical care and not getting it. You know, I have a friend recently who had some polyps in her uterus, some fibroids, and they wouldn't do the surgery needed to remove them. They turned into cancer. By the time she realized she had cancer, it was Stage IV, and she died. That is a direct result of fat hatred. And so, fat liberation seeks to sort of attack all of these fronts: the personal and the cultural and the systemic.

### More examples of fat hatred and our culture's narrow ideas of beautiful and healthy

ALICE: Yeah, I mean, our culture that we're living in has such narrow ideas of what is considered normal or beautiful or healthy. At this results in incredible trauma, violence, and abuse to all kinds of bodies, especially fat people. So, in addition to the things that you just mentioned, I'm kinda curious about what are the other kind of very visceral examples of fat hatred that you've seen or experienced?

CALEB: What feels very present for me is trying to participate in specifically queer of color community, right? Which is a community of people that are organized around shared identity in terms of race and sexuality, that also, in organizing around race, has a fairly clear anti-racist politic, right, and is pretty attendant to the ways that whites supremacy and anti-Blackness show up in community. I don't think that we're always successful at resisting and not perpetuating those things, but I feel like it's on their radar in ways that I feel like conversations around size and ability are not that feel really frustrating.

You know, most of my friends in this community, like most of them, are thin. Most of them don't actually do fat people or befriend fat people. And that feels like somewhat low stakes, but also leads to lots of isolation and lots of loneliness. I've written pretty extensively about the experience of being in these communities and not feeling like I have the same levels of care extended to me in terms of dating opportunities. So, I feel like that would be my first answer.

ALICE: Yeah. 'Cause I think hatred sounds overt, but I think so many times, as Max mentioned about, the fact that there aren't chairs or benches that fit Max, these are very often very subtle and insidious ways that environments and systems and individuals perpetuate hatred.

MAX: There are a couple cases that I've been thinking about recently where fat hatred, because it's so not questioned, has been used to kind of smokescreen other oppression, right? So, what I'm thinking of is the case of Eric Garner: you know, fat Black man killed by police who then tried to blame his death on obesity. And Kayla Moore: fat Black transwoman also killed by the police who blamed her death on her being fat. And I recently learned about a case in West Virginia that happened last year, and it just totally slipped my radar—because I think that this kind of thing often slips people's radar 'cause it's pretty ubiquitous and not remarkable to most people—but there was a case of some company that was poisoning a river. There was then a lawsuit against them for having poisoned that river. And they basically argued in their case that a level of acceptability of poison needed to be dependent on the particular community. And because West Virginia has a community of people that is fatter than average, and fat bodies can handle more poison, they should not be held to the same standard, [laughs] right?! I mean, I'm laughing, but it's horrifying, you know?! So, this is a way that fat gets used as this smokescreen for other issues and a way to kind of get around doing crappy things to poor people and Black people.

ALICE: Thank you for that.

[chill dubstep music break]

### Fat identity and fat community

ALICE: So, both of you identify as fat people. And I think I'd like to talk a little bit about the importance of this as both a personal and political identity and how being identified as a fat person also led you to community.

CALEB: I'm a lifelong fat person. I started getting fat in like 1st grade. But it wasn't until I was almost 20, like my late teens that I really started identifying as fat. And it, at first, was a way, I think, for me to undermine the power of the word when it was used against me. Because it was used against me my entire life as an insult, as a slur. And it still is used against me. But there is, I remember one instance where I was working retail, and I was a manager. And there was a disgruntled customer. I think she was treating one of the employees really badly. And so, I kicked her out of the store. And in response, she called me like a fat something. And the employees were all so horrified and we're checking in on me as if I were, like, asking if I was OK. And I was like, "No, it's fine. I literally know that I'm fat. It's not something that can be used against me," you know. So, I think that's part of the personal part of it.

And then I guess I found fat community in I would say 2013. And that was so, so healing and so special. I think in a lot of times in fat spaces, we kind of operate under the assumption that we're all fat, and so therefore, we all experience the same thing. This particular community was very clear that we were different sizes, we were different races, were different genders, and all of those things informed our fat experience. And so, it was a really beautiful context to think about what was my fat experience, and how did it differ from others? I think especially being a non-Black Latinx person who is pretty light-skinned and male assigned at birth in this kind of moment where—and this is not an unique critique by any means—but many times, issues of fatness or fat community are dominated by cis white women, usually straight. And I think that there's a reason for that. But being able to enter into a community that was aware of the different gendered and sized dimensions of the fat experience is really powerful and really important.

And so, I...wish that more of us would be more self-reflective and honest about, you might be fat, but what's actually like impacting us directly?

MAX: Yeah. You know, Caleb, I feel like a lot of times, we get hooked into wanting access to privilege, right? We've grown up fat. We want something. [laughs] And so, people get hooked into narratives around how they can get access to privilege, right? So, there's the good fatty, right? "Oh, I'm fat, but I'm healthy. I'm fat, but I'm fit," you know. "I'm fat, but I whatever. Here's the ways that I am good. And so, therefore, being fat is OK," if you're fat in a way that allows you to have access to [laughing] privilege. Yeah. I'm in a lot of fat spaces where that really plays out, where there's like the good fatties or the cool fatties or the young fatties or the small fatties. And if you're old or if you're super-fat or if you're disabled and fat, you don't get access. You're separated off.

ALICE: Yeah! I love this. Thank you so much. I guess, how did you come about to identify as fat? And how did that give you, led you to finding community?

MAX: Hmm. That's interesting. I'm not sure that identifying as fat did lead me to find community. I feel like I'm not sure I remember not identifying as fat 'cause I really have been fat since I was a baby. I was always called "fat," so that I didn't feel like there was even an option to not identify as fat. I guess I do feel like claiming it in a sort of politicized way did give me access to other people who wanted to do that. So, yeah, there was, I guess, some finding of community in that. And I feel like I have certainly been, as more of an older adult, I have definitely been part of creating communities that were centered around that and joining communities that were centered around that. And that's been both helpful and sometimes tiring. [chuckles] You know, I've had phases of my life where I got a little bit tired of everything being about fat! And I just wanna talk about something else for a minute, you know! And then kind of leaving fat community.

And I actually had an experience where I really was tired of fat community. And so, I left it on purpose. And I went, and I became part of another community that was very much about diversity and inclusion and social justice. And I was like, huh! This community could include fat, you know. I could maybe be OK here. And I got really involved in that community for 10 years. And ultimately, they really couldn't. They really could not get it about fat being OK. And I ended up basically coming back to fat community because of that 10 years. And so, now I'm kind of trying to be like a bridge builder between the two. And so, I'm really invested in making connections with different movements and trying to just bring people together.

And I've been really invested in trying to connect fat and disability community and to do things together. It's interesting 'cause there are stigma on both sides. You know, there's ableism among fat people, and there's fat hatred among disabled people. And some fat people are disabled, and some disabled people are fat! And if you use the social model of disability, well, all fat people are disabled [chuckles] 'cause we lack access. And so, trying to kind of make these connections and support people in overcoming their stigmas about the other groups or the fear of adding more stigma to their own identities, it's really interesting work and difficult.

ALICE: And it's such necessary work. I think that's another thing that I just appreciate so much of both of you. And it's a tremendous amount of emotional and very real labor that so many activists and artists are doing.

[chill dubstep music break]

## Working toward liberation

ALICE: I don't think any of us have the answers, but how can we all work toward liberation? Whether it's fat liberation or just all the different types of liberation? But what are some very real, concrete ways that everybody can work together toward liberation?

CALEB: Something that I try to make clear in my work is that both the Black liberation and fat liberation is all of our work, regardless if we're not Black or not fat. That these are legacies that we have all inherited. And so, I think understanding ourselves as the inheritors of these legacies and making decisions about whether, like how we wanna hold those legacies and whether we want to work against them or whether we want to perpetuate them is really important. Also checking in with yourself and challenging yourself on maybe your own actions or your own thoughts or your own feelings is really important as well. The final part of my answer would be, or how I do this, is through what I would call an anarchist framework that tries to work against all social hierarchies and recognizing that there, of course, are hierarchies. There are hierarchies of race. There are hierarchies of gender, of citizenship, of nationality, and also sexuality and of size and ability. And making choices that align with that framework of the evolution of social hierarchies, right? And moving in a way that doesn't see any sort of social body as more important or more deserving than another. And understanding that we're all fundamentally...I guess equal I would say, even though it feels like a little bit of a strange word. But, right, I think it's been tainted with like gay rights rhetoric around equality. But I do think that we're all fundamentally equal beings that deserve the same kinds of love and care and access as one another.

ALICE: Aw, thank you for that. How about you, Max?

MAX: Yeah. I'm thinking of No Body is Disposable. It's really true. You know, we need to recognize that. And I agree with everything you said, Caleb. And I feel like one of the things that feels key to me on a personal level is what we can do is listen to other people, listen to ourselves, obviously, and also listen to other people and believe other people and learn to get out of the mindset where you have to compare what everyone says to your own experience so you can try to understand it through your own framework. "Cause sometimes we don't have a framework for understanding someone else's experience! And yet it's important that we try to understand it. So, connecting with other people, whether we actually share the same issues or not and believing people when they say they're being harmed. And caring about that, you know. So, we need to think about each other's fights and each other's struggles and each other's liberation as connected to our own. And so, while I fight for fat liberation or queer liberation, I need to also fight for Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty and closing the concentration camps and climate justice and everything. It's really, it's really connected, and we can't separate these issues out simply by identity. We need to be working together.

ALICE: Yeah, that's what solidarity and liberation is all about.

MAX: Mmhmm.

ALICE: I wanna thank you both so much. I'm listening, I'm learning, and I'm full of gratitude to share this time and space with you two. [chill dubstep music plays until the wrap-up]

MAX: Oh, thank you so much for having us, Alice. What an honor.

CALEB: Yeah, thank you, Alice. It truly is an honor, and I'm so grateful to be here.

ALICE: Well, the honor is mine!

## Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at [DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast](https://DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast).

You can also find out more about Caleb and Max on my website.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!

♪ Rocket to the blast off  
Stop, drop dance off ♪