




Fat kinship for love and liberation: a dialogue across difference

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ABSTRACT

Caleb Luna and Jules Pashall are artists and cultural workers who first met in Austin, Texas in 2013. After cultivating a deep friendship over the course of several years, on November 6, 2020 we interviewed one other about our kinship as fat embodied subjects across lines of difference in race, class, and gender. We discuss how our relationship came to be; fat identity and fat politics; how our political thinking is informed by our relationship; and offer reflections on how fat kinship can be a container for healing individually and interpersonally and be supportive in a larger struggle for collective liberation. This conversation is a snapshot of one moment in time between two fat artists and activists on a journey, and we offer it in hopes it can support other fat embodied subjects in their relationships with themselves and their loved ones of all sizes.

KEYWORDS

Kinship; fatness; race; class; gender

Introduction

Since 2013, we, Caleb Luna and Jules Pashall, have been nurturing a big fat friendship that has transcended geography and life chapters as well as shaped our fat politics and activist work in fat community and beyond. As our careers have both pivoted toward “professionally fat” – offering professional work and creating art that centers the fat body – our fat friendship has been interwoven into our individual and collaborative work. Beginning with co-founding PLUMP Collective and co-creating the award-winning¹ theater piece “FAT: the play” in Austin, Texas, we have continued to collaborate on performances and workshops that center fat and have also continued to individually think, write, work, and teach about fatness. Throughout, our fat friendship has been a nurturing container for us to hold private and intimate conversations as we process our respective ongoing journeys. As people who have been doing fat activist work for over a decade and staging public conversations around fatness, having a space that has been our own to have nuanced and vulnerable conversation has supported us in deepening and expanding our work, as well as the ways we relate to ourselves and others.

While we recognize that the trust and safety we have built with one other is in part through sharing a fat identity, we also note that it is through being present and honest about our divergent experiences that enables us to develop a space that offers mutual support. This space, in turn, aids our capacity to go out in the world and use our own lived experiences and bodies for public learning. We feel inspired by (2007) theorization of the power of difference within community:

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that those differences do not exist (“Masters Tools,” 111–112).

This framework of engaging difference as a generative mode of building community is expressed both in our relationship and in the conversation that follows.

On November 6, 2020, we interviewed one other about our kinship as fat embodied subjects across lines of difference, including race, class, gender, and more. While conversations exploring these themes are a consistent facet of our relationship, this specific dialogue came to fruition in response to the call for proposals: receiving it as an opportunity to collaborate in a new way, we reflected on how we have both been able to do a tremendous amount of healing through fat kinship. Particularly as people who experience an excess of relational trauma because of how our bodies are received, having fatness be a container for healing rewrites the scripts of fat relation in opposition to dominant narratives of the fat experience as one of isolation and rejection. Our conversation centers intimacy in friendship and the body rather than a romantic or sexual relationship and offers alternate templates for new ways of relating.

The medium of conversation expresses the possibility of what can happen in open, trusting dialogue between two fat people who have found kinship through fatness. Conversation offers nuance, intimacy, vulnerability, and spontaneity that is not possible to capture through other artistic and academic avenues. It is particularly important to offer models which highlight the vulnerability of the unscripted and immediate responses that occur in intimate conversations for people who publicly speak in more calculated and measured ways around fatness. We note the potential for this is only possible because we have labored to develop the trust and holding of this container. Part of what we want to highlight is the possibility for vulnerability and openness through the containment of a back-and-forth dialogue. The medium surfaces fat kinship as a space for conversations grounded in vulnerability and safety.

As Roland Barthes (2009) offers, “speech is dangerous because it is immediate and cannot be taken back (without supplementing itself with an explicit reprise).” Both the dangerous immediacy of speech and the reprisal of editing are presented here. While laboring to stay true to its original flow and content, this conversation

has been condensed for length and clarity. We discuss how our relationship came to be; fat identity and fat politics; how our political thinking is informed by our relationship; and offer reflections on how fat kinship can be a container for healing individually and interpersonally and be supportive in a larger struggle for collective liberation. This conversation is a snapshot of one moment in time between two fat artists and activists on a journey of liberation, and we offer it in hopes it can support other fat embodied subjects in their relationships with themselves and their loved ones of all sizes.

Content warning

This piece contains discussion of fat stigma, weight loss, disordered eating, and racism.

Would we have been friends in middle school?

Caleb: I don't know if I would have been friends with you (*laughs*). This sounds so brutal just coming out.

Jules: Just do it; just rip it off.

C: Well, my reasoning is: I don't think I would have been cool with a theater kid. (*guffaws*)

J: I wasn't a theater kid yet in middle school – that came in high school. I aligned myself with “popular” kids [in middle school] to try to evade bullying.

C: Oh, smart.

J: I couldn't participate in the socialization in the same way, because of my (fat) body. And my gender and sexuality, I guess. But at the time, those parts of my identity were less salient than my fatness. But I was really in there, the fat friend, adjacent to these popular girls.

C: I think middle school for me – perhaps for most of us – was a time of heightened trauma. In elementary, I was fine. I was fat, but I was still able to maintain some kind of social capital. In middle school that changed; I became disabled and started getting bullied a lot more. So, in response to that, I embraced counterculture subversion and outsider status, and became anti-authoritarian – by which I meant [anti-]popular kids. So if you were aligned with them, I definitely would not have been friends with you. But thank god we met 10 or 15 years after that moment.

J: For me- I dunno about you- from where I was located, I was one of the only fat kids and I knew not to be friends with other fat kids –

C: YES!

J: There was this thing of “They’re gonna know I’m fat if I’m friends with this person.”

C: Yeah, it’s gonna draw attention.

J: Exactly, it’s like, “I’m keeping it a secret if I just stay with the thin people.” So, for you and I to become friends, I needed to be honest and I had to say “I’m fat” out loud.

C: Yes, because we were both already fat-identified and had backgrounds in fat activism when we met.

J: Yes, and Austin was the first time I made friends with other fat people. I got to Texas and was like “Oh my god, there are all these radical fat queer people!” Before that, I was just trying to get all these thin people in college to give a shit about fat shit.

C: I think there’s probably still a part of me that seeks validation through attention from and friendship with thin people. But that was much more present for me in middle school than it is now, and now I’m much more aware of it. And aware that sometimes thin people are drawn to me because it can give them social capital to be around me. Now I can see that and it’s so unattractive. Austin was the first place where I was like “Oh, this is so weird” – all these thin people, who, in other contexts previously I would have wanted their attention, are now lining up to be my friend, and it landed so differently. It was something I had to sort out for myself. Which leads me to our next question.

Would we have been friends if one of us wasn’t fat?

J: I’m shaking my head no.

C: You don’t think so?

J: I think it would have taken us longer.

C: Definitely. In Austin, the community we were a part of initially was not necessarily fat centered, it was about a radical queer politic that was POC centered but also had white folks and thin folks (*laughs*). So, it was a very diverse space. Some of the places we met before really becoming friends – I’m thinking of that brunch before Queerbomb,² the anti-racist reading group we both went to, seeing you at the capital protesting anti-abortion bills – we were already in community in these other ways that weren’t about fatness, necessarily – but our politics were aligned. I think I would have been friends with you the way I was friends with thin people at that moment – it would have taken me longer, and definitely would not have been the same level of intimacy and commitment.

J: I don't know if you would have seen me in those spaces if I were thin because I don't know what my politics would be if I wasn't a fat person. It's a silly thought game to break up identity in this way, but at the same time, how could I have the same politics? I don't think they'd be so different – I think there would have been other things that would have radicalized me – maybe? But because I wouldn't have had a lived experience of being othered in the way that being fat where I was, being fat as a richer white person, being so othered in my community and home- and being like “This is fucked, this is all so fucked” – – which just opened me up – I don't see how that could have happened if I wasn't fat. I think I'd be liberal, like a liberal white person. I think I'd still be queer. But it would have been so different, and I don't think you would have seen me in those spaces.

C: Yeah, I don't know if my politics would be the same if I were thin.

How do our liberatory politics shape our friendship?

J: Our friendship is built from a belief that fat liberation is connected to collective liberation and there's this cool way in which our friendship gets to be this microcosm of that. I want fat liberation not just for fat liberation, but because the world I want to build is a liberatory space for all bodies. And I know that you and I are committed to that and we practice that in our friendship. Our friendship supports my internal way of relating to myself with love and generosity and accountability. That's informed by a fat politic, it's connected to fatness and fat liberation and collective liberation. That definitely goes into how I am in the world, because I have this relational space in our friendship to not only talk about ideas but also put them into a felt, embodied, relational practice.

C: I agree with that. I think what's very clear in our relationship, in the art we have done, our analyses, our commitment to a broader and more liberatory world, is that fatness cuts across so many different identities in this way that feels generative. I'm thinking about how when we did *FAT: the Play*,³ and you were so insistent that we were also gonna talk about our differences – of size, race, gender, class – and we were all queer but differently queer. I think queerness as a category offers something very similar, but I don't think it always succeeds in the same way. I would call our liberatory politics also very queer, and when we add fatness into its frameworks, I think it produces this fatter understanding of liberation.

What safety does this relationship offer?

C: Early in our friendship, when we were both “cis,” (*big laughs from both*) I just remember how much I learned about gender from you, and how much you called me out on my own misogyny in these ways –

J: (*laughs*)

C: – all these moments when I would say something sexist and you would call me out in this clever way and I would have this internal journey of like “Oh, wow,” and really began to understand my own internalizations around gender in more thorough ways.

J: It’s funny because I know we were both “cis” once, but I never thought of you as a “man.” I always understood your gender to be in a real question with masculinity. At one point, you were very anti-masculinity, so I don’t remember those moments. I understood you had been socialized into masculinity, but I was never like, “Caleb’s a man.”

C: That makes so much sense because when you invited me into what became PLUMP,⁴ which was for fat femmes, I remember feeling very seen by your seeing me as femme identified even if I was using he/him pronouns. That built a lot of safety into our relationship. And I say we were both “cis,” but you also always had a fluid gender, there was a journey around pronouns but there was always a conversation that your gender was more complex than a cis person’s.

J: Yeah wow. When we were “cis.” But that’s the thing, I’m like “were we?” Like, if I was not thinking of you as a man and inviting you to femme space and you always knew I had a fluid gender –

C: You’re right, and for a long time, I was trying to redefine manhood and masculinity and then make space for other expressions. Eventually I gave up on that, which was also about me searching for my place in queer male communities.

J: Something so special about our friendship is not just the big ideas but how deeply we can talk about things. I talk to you about my body and fatness and eating in a way that I don’t talk to many other people and I trust your analysis.

C: Yeah, I talk to [another friend] about eating stuff, but outside of you two, I’m like . . . do I even talk about it in therapy?

J: (*Laughs*)

C: It offers a space of gentleness, understanding, and safety to say these things that can feel really scary and vulnerable without feeling judged – at least for me – and feeling understood. And I think part of that too is our fat politic and understanding that regardless of how we became fat or our eating practices or the reasons why we are fat – we understand that thinking honestly about how

food impacts our bodies is not about weight loss or pathologizing fatness, right? Growing up, doctors would pathologize and medicalize my body so much. They sent me to nutritionists, but it was so grounded in a framework that made me afraid to engage with what they were saying. Because as a kid, I could only receive those conversations as like “I’m bad, and everything I do is bad.” But in our relationship, I can acknowledge and address these issues in a safer way because I know it is not about pathologizing fatness or a weight loss project, and it actually helps me be in better a relationship with my body and treat it better.

J: I hope I come to a place where eating just makes me feel good, paying attention to my body just feels good, and does not evoke weight loss fantasy, does not evoke disordered eating thoughts about restriction – and the high of it. Having the space in our relationship to be like “Sometimes that’s there” is a big deal. I don’t have to be the “good fat activist” – I can be in contradiction and not perform – I can be nuanced. If I am in public as a “Fat Activist” – and I try not to do this anymore, but I know historically I have come with this perfectionism – “I can’t have ambivalence about your body! The movement needs me to love my body!” and feeling that pressure where if I don’t feel good all the time, if I’m ever fantasizing about losing weight, that means I’m not good. You know those plastic toys that are filled with water and if you squeeze it the water just moves to a different part?

C: Feels like such a Jules reference.

J: That’s what it feels like sometimes – the shame can just show up in a new place. That feeling of “I’m bad.” Before it was “I’m bad” because I am fat and then it became “I’m bad” because I don’t love my body all the time. Sometimes, in activist identity-based communities, we have this rhetoric, a party line – wow my Communist grandparents are really coming through here – and it’s “This is what we believe and it is what we present to the outside world because we don’t trust them.” So, we have to present in a certain way, which is understandable in communities where we have been harmed and violated because we want to protect ourselves. But it also hurts. In our friendship, I don’t have to do that. We have been so vulnerable and I trust you so much that at this point I feel like we could talk about anything surrounding how I’m relating to my body and it would be okay. Earlier in our friendship I wouldn’t have felt okay. Probably in part because I wasn’t being honest with myself about how I was actually feeling.

C: There’s a level of honesty we have to have with ourselves before we can be honest with others, and our relationship has provided an incubator for that honesty in myself. It is possibly the only place in the world where I can think about some of this stuff. We just keep talking about “without judgment,” but it’s true. Our relationship and being honest with each other has helped me be more honest with myself, which then becomes a circular thing where I can be more honest with you and that helps me build more honest and intimate connection with others.

Processing interlude

C: Also, what you said about “the high of restriction” felt so – this is maybe a model of how this shows up in our relationship – it feels like whiteness to me. Fatphobia has been historically narrated as “white people have the willpower over their bodies” in order to perform that sort of restriction, and they’re the only ones that can. It’s part of white supremacy, part of enlightenment, this mind-body separation and overcoming your body’s needs. Like, you’re not an animal, you’re a human in ways that other people aren’t. Because fatphobia has always been about constructing Black and Indigenous people as closer to non-human animals than white people (Strings 2019).

And I think maybe there’s gender about it. I don’t feel the high with restriction. I do experience restriction, but it comes from shame, I think, which is from my own family. Or maybe it is about race, where I’m like “I’ve already consumed so much throughout my lifetime, I must have already consumed so much throughout my lifetime, just based on my body size, why am I hungry now for a second time today?” So, my restriction comes from that place of shame and judgment that doesn’t give me a high, it just feels like it is about racist discipline. I think a lot about the way racialized fatphobia has disconnected me from my body, where I can’t even think about my body’s needs because I’ve been trained to feel like my body’s needs are bad.

J: Yes. I’m a white person, so I should be able to not eat, and I am socialized as female, so I should be able to survive on nothing. And also, as you’re talking, I am realizing that actually restricting doesn’t give me a high – it’s the imagining that it’s possible that I could restrict that gives the high. Which feels like a great metaphor for whiteness. There are obviously material realities in white supremacy as a system, but it’s also a delusional fantasy. It echoes the fantasy of “I could not eat and then what would happen?” The actual experience of “I’m hungry and not eating” is, for me, not a pleasant experience. It really is living in a fantasy.

C: Yes, so few people live up to whiteness. It’s all a fantasy. The standards are so high, nobody – very few people – actually do.

J: I feel so much gratitude to be able to have conversations around race and whiteness and our experiences of being racialized differently. It feels connected to this continuous idea that we have to be honest with ourselves to be honest with each other – and that feels really special. There’s something that we do in our relationship where there is so much honesty and it’s such a safe container. I then get to think about my other relationships, not in a comparison but with what I’ve learned in this relationship that I can take into other relationships.

C: I agree. It’s also functioned as a template for my relationships with other white people, even if they are fat. I have a very clear metric of what it requires to be friends with white people and it’s this sort of honesty and open communication that

I think is something that's not necessarily about fatness, but another thing our friendship has modeled for me- to check in with myself and ask, "can this person hold that?"

What's been hard in our friendship?

J: A lot of what we came together around was sharing so many experiences of desirability, of our bodies. So then being with the truth that we were also having really different experiences around those things that had brought us closer was a journey. I think for me, acknowledging that because I am white, a smaller fat person at different points in our friendship, and participate in dating pools that have different politics of desirability around fatness⁵ I had to change how I related to this shared story – where men had treated us like shit – because that wasn't as true for me anymore in the queer community that I was in. I felt scared in some moments. I got worried about hurting you or losing you. There was this learning curve I had to go through to build a broader awareness that we were having very different experiences, and I needed to develop a different attunement to it and not keep telling a story that we were sharing an experience anymore. And maybe we had never shared an experience, but there had been some kind of connecting around it.

C: And for so long we did relate to the same story of the romantically-rejected fat best friend, which I think also is so common for fat people. Fatness brought us together in that the wounds that we shared and bonded over are not unique to us; the details are specific but it's a very common narrative that I continue to see circulated among other fat people. But yeah, just realizing for all the reasons you mentioned that we are approaching those experiences differently now.

J: And this is hard to say, but it's hard to watch men treat you like shit. It's not a hard thing in our friendship, it's a hard thing because the world fucking sucks in a lot of ways. It's not relationally between us. But I guess it is, because I needed to figure out what to do with my anger. I'm a Scorpio with a Mars in Aries who loves you, so I feel protective – I mean you've witnessed, you've seen it. So, for myself, I don't want my anger about how men act toward you to be invasive or, like, codependent or controlling in any way. But also, I want you to know that I don't tolerate people treating you badly, and I don't want my impulse around that to be shitty in our relationship.

C: Damn. Yeah. Thank you. That felt heavy.

J: We can wait a second.

C: I would say also that this is another interesting journey we both have been on individually and together – that is, of healing our own individual wounds and coming to greater awareness around our own traumas and how they're

showing up in our relationships. I also agree that the hardship has not necessarily been anything either of us has done, but is rather in how I compare myself so much to others. So, when we have been in different places in our journey, I have taken that really personally sometimes (*laughs*). But our relationship has also allowed space and generosity and conversation to talk about it and get back on the same page.

What's been transformative about our friendship?

C: I think you function as a model for me. You've done so much work to heal those wounds in yourself, and some of that capacity and ability and skills were part of your journey in therapy school, but I also see you as a model of how to address different traumas. There's been a lot of beautiful healing and learning and growing in watching you navigate and negotiate new experiences in ways that I feel I have learned from.

J: Something you named when we were talking about being in relationship across difference is that there's something about actually tolerating difference. Which is interesting, since this piece is about coming together around a shared identity. But at the heart of this for me, of being really close and intimate is: "I see how we are different and I love it and it doesn't have to be scary." It definitely has been scary. But the ways in which the honesty, truth and *love* that we bring has made it so much less so. I think there's a lot of love, which we haven't named. There's so much respect, love and awe that we have for each other, like "Oh my god you're *amazing!*" I feel that from you. I feel that you know me in my best light, and I hope you feel that from me. It's like, "This person really knows me and knows the gifts I bring. They see where I struggle, see where I hurt, and all of that is okay." I feel like the places where we struggle and the places where we hurt, those are where some of the gifts are, and I feel like we get to support each other and we get to help each other offer those gifts to the world.

I think a shared thing between us, that's more than fatness, is that we both are like "Let me alchemize my wound, let me take what hurts and turn it into medicine." I think that is an essence we both have, that's at the heart of us coming together, maybe even more than fatness. There's a sense of "I'm not gonna continue to hurt myself in the way the world is trying to hurt me. I'm committed to alchemizing this pain for the sake of other people and also for myself." That feels ongoing for both of us. So, just getting to be mirrored and loved in that feels like a huge thing that I don't think I've ever articulated. We obviously do that in different ways, but I think that feels really shared.

C: Yeah I'm really glad you mentioned love, I think it's true. There's a lot of love and I think that part of the gifts of our friendship has been learning how to love in a way that extends beyond this friendship and this dynamic in a way that has

helped me understand that I can be loved. I can be worth loving, and also I can show love to myself, the kind of love I deserve, and I can show it to others. This isn't necessarily about fatness, but the ways that we have been really intentional about naming and cultivating that love in our relationship, which I think comes from – I mean as long as I've known you, you've identified as polyamorous – and that's been part of your practice, and we've talked about our friendship as a practice of polyamory. But we've actually practiced it in our friendship in a way that builds a secure attachment and heals old wounds. And that's also been challenging in our relationship, too, of how we negotiate when you've been partnered and I'm feeling neglected or whatever and learning how to communicate about that, how to feel secure in our attachment in ways that, again, help me face the world in more honest and full ways, and also in ways that facilitate less harm.

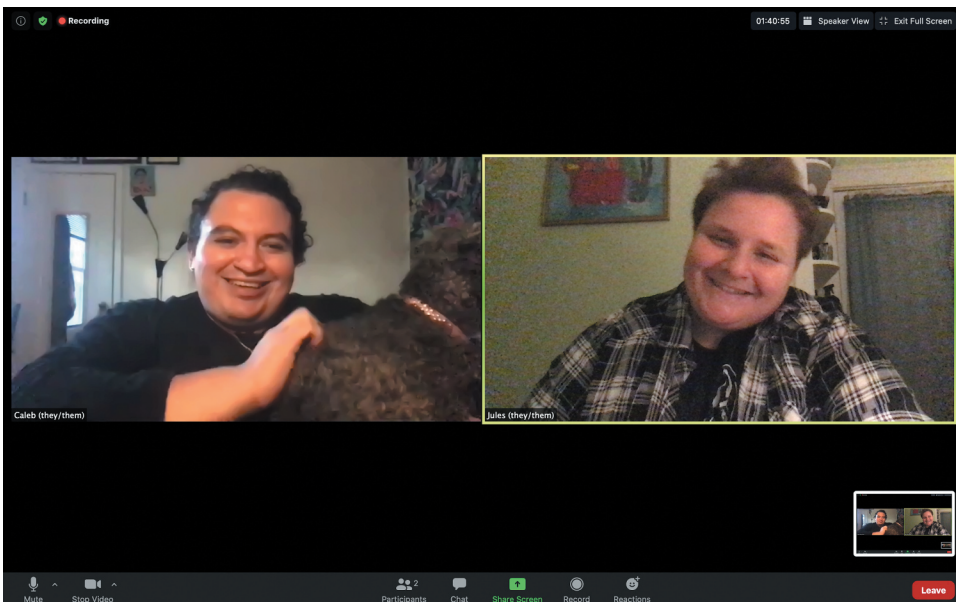
J: Beautiful.

C: Chef's kiss.

J: Gold star for everybody.

C: Beautiful.

C: Can I take a pic of us before we leave? Can you smile? I'm art directing this.



C: Thank you so much for this.

J: Yeah, this was so beautiful. I feel like this gets to be a celebration of our friendship.

C: Me too, and I'm very excited for it, and I think there's a lot here. I'm excited for others to get to experience it.

Conclusion

This six-month process of conceptualizing and executing this piece has deepened our love for each other. While of course there was a lot of love in our relationship before this process, being so open and synthesizing our friendship in this way has offered a space to reflect and integrate how much we have been impacted. It has laid out an open line of gratitude and appreciation.

Building a friendship around a shared experience of fatness allowed us to feel comfortable enough to explore our differences. From that, trust was built, and we developed a relationship where both of us could feel loved and known. This ripples out and impacts our public work on fatness as well as our other relationships.

Our commitment to a collective liberation which includes identities that neither of us hold invites readers to consider their own embodiments – as well as those of the people they are in close relation with – across power and privilege, including but also beyond fatness. We hope that this supports fat liberation as a cause on its own and inspires fat liberation's potential to support other liberatory causes for readers.

We hope that by making this conversation public, it can help to normalize honest and reflective communication between fat people, so we can continue to explore how fatness informs and creates relational space, as opposed to common narratives in which fatness leads to isolation and disconnection.

Notes

1. Best of the Fest 2014, Frontera One Act Festival. Austin, Texas.
2. Found in 2010, Queerbomb is an alternative to corporate Pride celebrations that occurs every June in Austin, Texas.
3. FAT: the play was a production put on by PLUMP. Its initial form won Frontera Festival's Best of the Fest 2014 for one act plays. While it ultimately became a much more egalitarian and collaborative process, we were originally convened by Jules, and they acted as unofficial producer and director.
4. PLUMP was an art collective of fat femme queers living in Austin, TX active from 2013–2015. It was the creative force behind FAT: the play.
5. A topic often discussed in our friendship is the differential fat politics in dyke-centered dating and community spaces as opposed to queer male-centered dating and community spaces.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Caleb Luna is a fat queer (of color) critical theorist, writer, and performer. As a Ph.D. candidate in Performance Studies at UC Berkeley, their dissertation focuses on the intersections of race, sexuality and size in contemporary U.S. media and cultural production. As an activist political thinker, they are interested in engaging embodied difference as a generative resource toward fatter understandings of collective freedom.

Jules Pashall is a white, fat, trans Jewish somatic practitioner and facilitator who holds an M. A. in Somatic Psychology from California Institute of Integral Studies. Their offerings are built from the belief that undoing how violent hierarchies live in our bodies is foundational toward the path of collective liberation.

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