Transitioning and Disability: An Interview

Text transcript

**Linda Corcoran**

Hi, welcome to our interview transitioning and disability. I'm so so happy to be joined by our guest the amazing Corin. Corin, would you like to introduce yourself you probably do a better job than I could.

**Corin**

Sure Thank you. So, my name is Corin de Freitas. I am a PhD candidate in geography at the University of British Columbia, where I study cats, gender and domestic space. I tweet under the handle of the Tweety, which is how I got to know the executive panel here. So very, very grateful for all the work that you're doing this year to put to put this all together.

**Linda Corcoran**

Thank you so much. It's honestly so great to have you here. We love your Twitter. I love your Twitter, its everything.

**Corin**

Oh this guy?

**Linda Corcoran**

Aw. Hello, cutie. I also love, I love your topic, your research topic as well. It's like cats, gender. I, I just think it's so fascinating. It's great. But yeah, I guess I should introduce myself, I did not introduce myself. So I'm your host, Linda Corcoran. I am a student in food science in Ireland. And I use both they/them and she/her pronouns. And I am with Disabled in Higher Ed. That was, should have done that first. But anyway, moving on to discuss disability in higher education, it is can be quite difficult. It's quite difficult. academia doesn't like accommodating us whatsoever. It's built completely inaccessibility. I guess, Corin, what has been your experience of being disabled in higher education? That's a big question.

**Corin**

How much time do we have I think you hit on a huge part, which is that academia is not designed for disabled scholars. In fact, it's designed to keep us out. That is how they maintain this air of exclusivity, by exclusion. And so it's it's, it's a space that's designed to accommodate particular body minds at the expense of other body minds. And so it is a challenge to be disabled in academia, it's a challenge. Just logistically navigating a situation like that, that your your needs are almost never anticipated. And when they are anticipated, it's, you know, you're viewed as an exception, your needs are sort of a retrofit. And that just creates so much additional labor that our peers don't have to do. And I don't think that there's much of an understanding of that, just how much time and energy goes into navigating academia as a disabled scholar. And we end up also having to do a lot of the labor of making a space for ourselves to, which is just one more, one more thing that on top of the extra bureaucracy that we have to navigate, just one more thing for us to do. So I think often we get to spend frustratingly little time doing the things that we're actually in academia to do, doing our research contributing to scholarly conversations, contributing to knowledge production. And that's disappointing and frustrating for disabled academics. And it's also I hate to, I always hate to be like, you know, it's, it's bad for the university because we don't, we shouldn't have to instrumentalize ourselves, we shouldn't have to instrumentalize our disabilities, but frankly, it is bad for the university. That means that our voices, our contributions, aren't, aren't included. And, frankly aught to be.

**Linda Corcoran**

100% I always, I don't like to do it. Like you said, it's sort of, we should be allowed to be here and exist as people and contribute without having to say, oh, look at all the great things I'm going to give you if you let me be here, if you let me actually access this content. But it has to be done to convince them that we're allowed to be here. It's frustrating. But I guess, when you add any minor, other minority identity on top of that, it gets even worse because academia only likes to let people have one other. And it's sort of like, you got the disability. You don't, you're not allowed to have anything else. What do you mean, you want another part of your identity to be brought in? And acknowledged?

**Corin**

Absolutely.

**Linda Corcoran**

So, I guess I don't know how much you want to talk about transitioning, I know, it's what we're here to talk about. But tell us what do you want to tell us about? I guess your story?

**Corin**

Oh, wow. That's a

**Linda Corcoran**

It's a big question, sorry.

**Corin**

They are big questions. No, it's great. And I'm happy to talk about any of it. So if I get started and you're like, I'd like to follow up on that please feel free. Yeah, so it's, it's interesting because I, Oh, this cuts a lot of ways. Um, so in terms of the culture of academia, like you said, it's really hard to carry multiple marginalized identities in academia, you kind of allowed one, if that. So in a in a structural sense, kind of I know that my needs already won't be met and I have to fight for them on, on the disability front. Similarly, with respect to being trans and then there are a lot of fun things that bubble up when you bring those together, right? Which is kind of what the concept of intersectionality gets in the first place. But I started my transition during the pandemic. I it's hard to say like when I came out as trans per se because for a long time I've just been like, you know, any pronouns are fine, whatever whatever. Like I don't think for me that it clicked that I was trans until the pandemic spending a little time with myself and so I, I haven't brought this body, this disabled body and transition into the space of my department yet which is going to be really interesting. And so I'm not actually sure how that's going to shake out I, the people who I've maintained close contact with throughout the pandemic are, are, you know, friends and collaborators whoI trust and they're supportive of me etc so we have we have that sort of relationship so I don't know what that's going to be like and the question of like, what that's going to be like it's definitely something I've thought a bit about and we'll find out, you know, just based on the ways that other people's gender identities have been handled in in similar situations. And it's everything from you know, the, the contributions you make, the sort of scholarship you do, it is informed by and always is, you know, informed by agents that you carry through the world, to just like really basic stuff like, you know, being able to pee in the department. My Department in particular, were brought up for years and years they need to have a gender neutral washroom, do we have one yet? No, and you know requests for one of the nice things like oh, you can just want to like the Nest which is kind of the student building, which is across campus, which as a disabled person is a bit of an issue. Or, you know, we will we, we want, if we have a new bathroom installed, we want it to also have a shower so that people can cycle. Is that? Are those really like the same level of version, honestly. So there's stuff like that. So, like I said, this cuts a couple of ways because also, like already existing in academic spaces, as someone who's not supposed to exist in the spaces as a disabled person, also as a queer person, but I definitely feel I feel it's much harder for me, with my disability to exist in those spaces. It's a bit liberating because I kind of have nothing to lose, so like I think I would probably be quite a bit more concerned about transitioning if I wasn't already a problem. I don't know how else to say this. And so yeah the fact that kind of like I you know, I have nothing I already, am.

**Linda Corcoran**

I completely get what, I get it's like it's, it's but you have to consider the disabilities now, you make everyone uncomfortable because you'll call out their language. You insist on your pronouns, like everyone has to watch what they say around you. And I'm like, why are you saying bigoted stuff to other people?

**Corin**

Totally. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. So it's and the fact that I'm not because I know how hostile academia can be towards disabled people, towards trans people, towards you know, people of color anyone who really isn't a cis het non disabled white man. I, I have I kind of, I know what my, my prospects are in the Academy, I know that finding an academic job, finding a tenure track job is, you know, possible, probably impossible. Um, so I again, I have nothing to lose and so there it's it's, it's crushing, but also liberating.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, I know, I get having nothing to lose, though. Like when I decided to, I guess use both pronouns as opposited to just one. I was kind of, like, I'm already a disabled queer person, anyway. All right. Yeah, like I might as well be a pain in the ass as far as they're concerned, because they're not going to probably not going to give me a job anyway. So I might as well be happy.

**Corin**

Exactly, yep, totally! Which is an it's it's so the problem with that you know, that probably won't get a job anyways. So I do teach one course at a local two year low barrier institution. And the difference that it makes to my students to you know, come in, introduce myself in the beginning of the term and say that I am trans, that I am queer, that I am disabled, that I am bringing all these things into this course, into my teaching etc and that it influences my pedagogy and influences how I teach in a way that I think makes the classroom environment less hostile but also just the way that students who also carry the those identities react to that is it's incredible and the ways that it's so obvious that they haven't had the space to bring themselves fully into it into higher ed into the work that they're doing which is really, really sad to me, we're not educating whole people. And so it's one more reason why again, the university should want us because we make it possible for people to bring their whole selves into their work into the classroom.

**Linda Corcoran**

It's It's It's really sad like I know so many people say, you know, I got into this area because I've never seen anyone like me in this area. And you'd like to think it's improving but unfortunately it's not because they keep hiring cis straight het non disabled white men.

**Corin**

Yeah, absolutely. And as one thing that I've noticed as a disabled person, the Academy is that I do when I do actually see disabled scholars, you know, in tenure track positions, being researchers know, being instructors, professors, etc. It's, it's not because they came up through all of that training disability, it's often that they acquired their disability after being hired, usually after they got tenure. So the the whole and I think you actually presented on this last year, too, if I remember correctly, it was a really good presentation, but that whole pipeline is so deeply flawed. Yeah.

**Linda Corcoran**

It is. We know so little, like there's there's no research whatsoever, or very, very little. And it's sort of like where are these disabled people coming from? How many is there? Do we know? No. Because a lot of people who even have invisible disabilities are afraid to disclose it. Even if they had it before they were hired there, they're going with no accommodations, because they're being told that they're not going to get that tenure track, track contract. If they ask for them, they're not going to get renewed, they're going to get guilted, they're going to be told that, well, we'll give you that, but you've got to take on extra work to make up for it.

**Corin**

Exactly. And again, what a loss, you know, like imagine, imagine the sorts of things that folks could be doing if they were supported in those roles if they weren't having to fight against the institution, but the institution was actually supporting that. The difference that that that could make?

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah.

**Corin**

Yeah, it's super disappointing. And I recently had a conversation with a tenure track professor, who is not out as disabled, in, you know, their day to day life, but who had said that, even on Twitter, they were uncomfortable for a long time liking my tweets about disability in the academy, because they were concerned that it might out them as disabled, like those, those are the stakes. That's how that's how careful people feel like they have to be. They feel like they'll be punished for being disabled.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, it's very societal ableism into internalized ableism. The same way that societal homophobia and transphobia and racism can go into internalizing hating your identities. And it can happen with,

**Corin**

Not being able to safely assume those those identities to

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, it's, it's really, really sad. It's I hate it.

**Corin**

Yeah, me too. It's the worst!

**Linda Corcoran**

It's very, I guess, I, I have spoken on this a bit myself, because as a person who has had disabilities from birth, but wasn't diagnosed until teenage years, there was a lot of internalized ableism there .There was a lot of nearly also my parents projecting ableism onto me, it's kind of like you can't associate with those people. Do you really want to be there? You're not one of those. And it's like, you have to unlearn that.

**Corin**

Definitely. We see that too. And in the academy, the folks who made it, oftentimes make it at the expense of disabled colleagues and students. And you know, that that need to kind of perform non disability as a disabled person in the Academy, I think some of the some of the worst experiences I've had have honestly been with disabled scholars who are trying to distance themselves from those identities from their needs.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, it was someone someone once said to me, I can't remember who it was. I remember afterwards, my link, they said that, it's the only way that, the way that people are surviving in the academy when they have a minority. identity, especially disability is saying that they are the special one, they have overcome everything, they. and it's a great way to help yourself survive.

**Corin**

Yeah, yeah.

**Linda Corcoran**

But It also is so terrible to everyone else around you.

**Corin**

Yeah, it's, it's completely, it's completely understandable, given the circumstances. But like, once again, what a loss, you know, like, if-. Imagine if those folks were willing to share some of their strategies, you know, we're willing to do and, again, the work of mentoring often falls to the folks who have the least amount of time to do it. Because they're, you know, fighting for their own space, institution, fighting, fighting against the institution, etc. But I've often had the thought of like, the difference that it would make if I had a mentor who's like here's how we navigate this, etc. And I'm really lucky that I have an amazing supervisor who, and this, this shouldn't make her amazing. She's amazing for a lot of reasons. But one thing that that I really value about having supervisors that she will go to bat for me, and I think a lot of folks don't, can't count on that and aren't able to even be fully transparent with their supervisor about their needs, etc.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, no, I've had, I've had people speak to me and they're like, I have just got my supervisor to accept one of my identities, and it's like bringing another one in. Now we have to address pronouns. That's not gonna go well.

**Corin**

Right?

**Linda Corcoran**

I've literally just got accommodations.

**Corin**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Exactly.

**Linda Corcoran**

It's, it's very, and I know, you know, it kind of very much depends on your own journey, where you are as a person, mentally, mentally, in your life, because it's so hard to have the capacity to take on all this when you are so in a bad situation when you don't have that person to go to bat to you, and you are fighting against everyone.

**Corin**

Yeah, absolutely, definitely.

**Linda Corcoran**

But I guess, why don't, why don't we say? What has been your favorite thing so far? about transitioning?

**Corin**

Oh, my God, that's so hard. There's, there's so much, it's so hard. I don't know. I mean, like, I got, I got top surgery two weeks ago. So like, that's been, that's been the big exciting thing. But there. I know, there's so many it feels. I don't have good words.

**Linda Corcoran**

I mean, there's too many good things to count. That is the message.

**Corin**

I think my favorite thing about transitioning thus far, has been not maybe not my favorite thing, the thing that I that I want to highlight, I guess is that, I have literally had no interactions with my community. No negative interactions, like everyone has been so aggressively supportive, which is amazing. And I know that that's not something that everyone gets, but I, I really, really value that and it's, it's talking about it because it's the that's the thing that has made the difference. Sort of throughout my academic journey has kept me I'm not supposed to be here still, in, in the academy. And it is just because of its its, its not for lack of desire, determination, or whatever, it's just too much for one person to carry any one person. And so that I have a really great community of colleagues, my supervisor, my students, are incredible. And just, so that's why I guess I want to highlight the support, and it should be like that, it should always be like that, like, support trans people. But I didn't anticipate how supportive folks would be, and it has been so incredible to really be able to just feel helped and carried by, by my community. And that's, that's something that I want for, for everyone. And it's unfortunate that that has to be kind of a survival strategy, that has to be sort of, you get that sort of care against the wishes of the institution, against the wishes of, you know, academy, the culture of the academy. And again, like, imagine if that's just how it was built that we, you know, we, we supported people to, you know, be themselves do their best work, etc, would be incredible.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah. And it's, there's, there's so many examples, and honestly, that is that is so great that you have that support. I'm like, internally, I'm like screaming, cuz it should be the norm, but it's not the norm. And it's very much but we'll still highlight it and we'll be like yay. But like there's so many examples, when you look at the academy of things that could have been made so much better. And so much it generally they're an easy fix. They're a very easy fix, and they've just not done it because it's not the experience of the people who are in charge. It's not the experience of the majority. For example, the name changes that are just coming in, those policies like, it's just been policy of don't change your name. Doesn't matter what and like it not even just trans people, people who are getting married, it's like, just don't change your name.

**Corin**

Right?

**Linda Corcoran**

That could have been fixed years ago.

**Corin**

Right? Right. Yeah.

**Linda Corcoran**

That shouldn't have been a fight.

**Corin**

Exactly. Totally. Yeah. The thing I do not understand is like, it could be good. labor. Why? Why don't we want it to be good? Why don't we want people to have it good. I just continually I'm asking that question. Whenever I have to.

**Linda Corcoran**

Oh, it's very much, it's very much aca-. They're like the academy should be free thinking and pushing the boundaries. But inside the box, you have to stay inside the box, you're allowed push the box a tiny bit, but that's about it. You're doing free thinking wrong.

**Corin**

It is crazy how conservative the culture of academia is, especially, you know, I am in a department that's known for, you know, really critical, radical scholarship. And the the disconnect between the scholarship that makes people famous, frankly, and like their actual politics and practices of it's vast, it's really, really quite shocking.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, no, it is. I've definitely been, like I like I forget sometimes I think it's, I think it's the ADHD, I just, I assume everybody is the same as the people I surround myself with, who are just great. Like, I meet someone, and they say something bigoted, and I'm like, uh. And then they continue, and I'm like, Oh, no.

**Corin**

But again, you know, good job finding, finding those people.

**Linda Corcoran**

But still like Yeah, yeah, It's disappointing.

**Corin**

It is disappointing. It's deeply disappointing. And it could be better. And like you said, it's, it's generally not a terribly difficult fix. And often, it's just a matter of asking folks what thing and for some reason, we don't do that.

**Linda Corcoran**

No. The academy is supposed to be devoid of emotions. It's it's logic, there is no emotions in logic.

**Corin**

My University, the University of British Columbia when I started the, that's not like the motto but kind of their PR catchphrase was a place of mind. I was like, oh, we don't have bodies here. None of us are embodied on this campus. How does that work? You know? Yeah.

**Linda Corcoran**

Just a bunch of brains walking around

**Corin**

No gendered bodies, no racialized body, ni disabled bodies. Yep. Yeah. And I mean, that's, that's the, the legacy that we're having to actively work against in order to make space for, you know, our brains, our bodies, our body minds.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, absolutely. But yeah, I guess. We've been talking for quite a while. So. Is there anything else that you think is really important to bring in? I know, we've touched on a lot of topics.

**Corin**

I mean, they're there. There's so. so much to say we could go on for hours and hours. I'm sure I'm gonna pick up stuff afterwards.

**Linda Corcoran**

Yeah, totally. 100%. Thank you, so so much for being my most amazing guests, and for being super open. Thank you so much to your cat for being an awesome guest too.

**Corin**

And thank you, thank you very much to you and all of the the other folks doing this DEHEM. You've done an amazing job. I'm really excited to see it happening again this year. I really, really appreciate it. I think it makes a big difference.

**Linda Corcoran**

It that's that's our goal. That's what we want. We're we're very much blown away by the amount of people who are taking part. Like even just with the roll call, we were like, oh my god it keeps going?

**Corin**

I guess. Okay, so there's a thing to add, like, we're already here. You know, it's like, make it possible for us to stay here. You know, make it possible for people to be out and open about all of their identities. Because yeah it's, nobody's nobody is doing their best work if they're not able to show up as themselves, if they're not able to get the supports the thing to do that work, right. So and it shouldn't, it should not all just be about the work. But to have like good work-life balance, etc., and I know academia makes that really, really hard. And we're supposed to collapse our identities in into the work that we do and how much we can. So I don't want to I don't want to get into that. But like people being able to show up as themselves and be supported. Anywhere makes for for happier people doing more interesting things and being better to the people around them. And again, it could be good, why don't we want it to be good?

**Linda Corcoran**

Absolutely. No, I 100% agree with you. And yes, thank you so much for being awesome. We are going to end it here. And thank you to everyone who listened and watched and this has been Transitioning and Disability: An interview with the amazing Corin and make sure you follow him on Twitter.