Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 57: Disabled Writers

Guest: Nina G.

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

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

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

ALICE WONG: Hello, hello, hello! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is with Nina G, a comedian, professional speaker, storyteller, writer, and educator based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Nina and I go waaaay back, almost 20 years, and she's gonna talk about her second book, which came out this August titled *Stutterer Interrupted: The Comedian Who Almost Didn't Happen*. Nina will talk about what it was like writing and editing her book as a person with learning disabilities and how she learned to find her voice and take up space unapologetically as a disabled woman. It's gonna be hella fun! Are. You. Ready? Away we goooo!!! [electronic beeping]

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

ALICE: So, Nina, welcome to my podcast

NINA G: Hi, Alice. Thank you so much for having me.

ALICE: So, Nina, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself if you don't mind.

NINA: Sure. My name is Nina G, and I am a standup comedian and an author and a professional speaker.

ALICE: And Nina, we go back many years, I think maybe over 20 years because I knew—

NINA: Yeah, we do! Yes!

ALICE: It's really bananas just thinking about it. And you are a comedian, and educator, a speaker, a activist. I had the chance to record your oral history for the Disability Project several years ago, which was a lot of fun.

NINA: Yeah.

Her second book, *Stutterer Interrupted: The Comedian Who Almost Didn't Happen*

ALICE: And now you're also the author of your second book, title *Stutterer Interrupted: The Comedian Who Almost Didn't Happen.* So, why did you wanna write this book, and why now?

NINA: You know, I, uh, there's so many…. OK. So, the why now part was partially—and I haven't really talked about this, and I don't talk about it much—but after the presidential election there was just so much polarization in the country. And it just felt exhausting, and engaging in it didn't always feel like a good use of my time. And I was like, I feel that I could do something within all of this, but it's not online. It's not with my family because if anybody goes to family parties, they know how difficult that is! That it could be through writing a book to kind of give another perspective on some of the things that we don't always look at.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

NINA: So, that's why for that. And then why did I write this book? You know, I'd been toying around with the idea of writing a book for years and years and years and years, and I always had it as like, I have to integrate my learning disability in with my stuttering. And it was too hard to put both of those stories in the same book. Because my learning disability is a lot from my childhood, and my stuttering, a lot of realizations came out when I was an adult, and the voice is very different. I need to say the word "fuck" if I'm talking about stuttering. With the LD part, I didn't really start to say "fuck" till I was 15. So, it just felt like a very different voice, so that's why this book now.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Your book is published by She Writes Press, and it will be available starting August 6th of 2019. And what was it like finding a publisher and working with an editor?

NINA: Yeah. OK. So, for me, having a learning disability and dyslexia, it was a whole thing. So, there's that part, which I'll talk about. But I think for me, finding a publisher, I was thinking about going a more traditional route, and I was thinking about doing like just self-publishing. But She Writes kind of had the best of both of those worlds, which is it's a hybrid. And they don't just accept anything. You have to do a proposal, but they help you with some of the editing. They help you with the cover, and then they do all the of the other stuff, all of the shipping, that kind of stuff. So, because for me, being a woman with a disability, I didn't want the book to be dictated by a publisher who wants to make it a story about overcoming. Because a stuttering comedian might lend itself to that, and I didn't wanna be pressured in that. So, She Writes, I was like, I went with them because I didn't have to be an inspiration, and I could say the word "fuck." That was very important to me to have both of those things.

And then working with editors: I worked with all kinds. I think there was four in all, and it was like this editor is doing the front line. This one is doing more developmental editing, so it was more like I gave him everything, and then he would edit down like if I said the same story four times. 'Cause when I write with my LD, I forget what I wrote, and also my tenses are all messed up, all that stuff. So, he streamlined everything, and he was just lovely to work with. And then I had two other ones who were like the line editors. And then I had to go back and redo some stuff, and it's been a back and forth process. But yeah, that was the process! And it took, it was, I guess it didn't take too long 'cause it was two years-ish. But just writing, for me, isn't that fun, so.

ALICE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean writing a book, that takes a lot out of you, not to mention the editing process, which adds even more work. Are you happy with the way it ended up? Was it really different from kind of what you imagined it would be?

NINA: No. It's not that different at all. I think, like I wasn't kind of sure where to go at the end. I put some of that stuff, originally, in the beginning, but then I put it in the end. Because the call to action in it is kind of just not to be an asshole. And also to embrace your voice, whatever voice that is. And hopefully, people get that message throughout the book.

[funky electronica music break]

Turning points and the role of comedy in Nina's life

ALICE: Looking back at your own life, what are some key turning points in your own personal journey?

NINA: So, I found the stuttering community when I was like 16, 17. Yeah, 17, I think, yeah. And when I found them, and it was one night I was watching *Late Night with David Letterman*. Because part of my story in my life, but also in the book, is that comedy always was interwoven throughout everything. And one night, I was up late watching David Letterman—and this was in his NBC years—and this ad came on for the National Stuttering Project. And I was like, oh, that's in San Francisco. I wonder what that's about. And I started to volunteer. And just knowing some adults who stuttered who I met there, it just changed. Like oh, I don't have to talk like everyone else. 'Cause everything was always contingent on I had to be fluent. I wanted to be a teacher, but I had to be fluent. I wanted to be a comedian from the time I was 11 to 16, and I was like, well, I can't do that if I stutter. So, everything felt like my life would be great if I didn't talk like this. But meeting them, I was like oh, this guy's a teacher. Maybe I could be a teacher. And so, I kind of got something out of that, which was great. I volunteered at the international conference, but I was 19 years old. And the ratio of men to women who stutter is 1 to 4, and for a 19 year old, that was really hard. It was really weird to be in an environment with all those men. It was like, aaaaaaah! And so, I wasn't very active. And then I went to school, and I went to community college. And then I went to Berkeley. And I just, I didn't have a life because school was so hard, and I had to put every ounce of myself into it.

And then 20 years later, 15, 20 years after, I rediscovered the stuttering community. It was actually at Corbett's conference on queer disability that was at SF State, and that's where I got reconnected there and slowly built up. And in 2009, I went to a conference again, my second conference, and what I realized there was how much, as a woman, I had internalized. Like in conversations, I didn't talk a lot always because I was holding back 'cause I didn't want other people to experience my speech, experience my stutter. And I realized you know, women, we oftentimes don't take up that space. And I realized how much that had been internalized in so many other parts of my life, that it was in relationships, it was at work, just making myself small. And coming back from that with a reframed way of seeing my stutter. And six months after that conference in 2009, I began doing comedy, which was a lifelong dream of mine that I had given up. So, that is all part of what I think you asked me.

ALICE: Yeah. Thank you for that. And what kind of role did comedy play in your life in terms of giving you a set of skills and a platform? And how did that also kind of feed into who you are as a activist?

NINA: Yeah. So, when I first started to do comedy, like the first year, a comedian is trying to find their voice. And what quickly became clear to me was that I was an activist first and a comedian second. It's really important that I am funny, and you know, everything with disability, if you really wanna be good at it, you have to be 10 times better than everybody else because people are gonna just walk past you or see past you. And so, I really try hard to be a good comic, but I also know that I will take a cheap shot at being Italian. I will not take a cheap shot at being disabled. And that's where I know that I'm an activist first and a comedian second. And I think that has helped me well in transitioning into a professional speaker.

ALICE: Mmhmm. And being a comedian is often about, from my vantage point as somebody who appreciates comedy, is somebody who's not afraid to take risks. They keep it real. They keep it honest. And they also are very vulnerable and are open about that vulnerability. What are some examples of how it gave you strength, comedy?

NINA: You know, the practice of comedy. I think a lot of why it's such a male-dominated thing is that it's about taking up space. And in the world, we're not used to women doing that as a practice. So, there's that piece. And there's also, it's the vulnerability of revealing yourself onstage and talking about it. And what's weird is that pretty much everything—I mean there's a few kind of variations—but everything is based off of something that is true. And revealing that and telling the audience to accept that or to reject that or to laugh at that or to do something with that is a really weird process. And then on top of all of that, if you bomb, then you go back the next day or the next week or the next time that you're onstage. And for me personally, I've kind of felt that as a disabled person, the resiliency that I have learned from my disability has a direct link to being a comic. 'Cause I've fallen down a bunch in my life. Like 12 years of school: fell down every day. And to keep on going like that is such good training ground for comedy where you know you're gonna fail.

[funky electronica music break]

Disability community and stuttering community

ALICE: You mentioned earlier a person named Corbett who is Corbett O'Toole, a conference that she organized a few years ago in the San Francisco Bay Area. And she's one of these kind of badass disabled women who just have been such a big part of my experience with the disability community and somebody who I think means a lot to a lot of people. So, I'm curious about you talked about kind of discovering the stuttering community. And I wanna also ask you about how has the San Francisco Bay Area disability community influenced you in terms of what is the power in finding and being part of this community?

NINA: Yeah. And I think I really appreciate that question as a person who stutters and has learning disabilities because sometimes both of those groups don't wanna associate with you guys. [laughs] They are not there, and I think it's so unfortunate. And I talked at a high school the other day, and disability was on my PowerPoint. And one of the girls in the group was like, "I don't know why I'm here. If you have a disability, that means you're stupid." And I was like, [crying voice] "Aaaaahhhh!" Oh my god. I was so upset. And I went on to share with her that, as a person who has LD and who stutters, I wouldn't have the rights that I have if it wasn't for the people who sat in at the federal building at 504 sit-ins, and that I wouldn't have the rights that I had when I was in school to get through school and all of those things. And I don't think we see the connections between our civil rights and who fought for those rights. Because there were some people who stutter who were on the frontlines like Michael Sugarman who is an activist and goes way, way back. But we don't know what our history is, so people don't know what that relationship is. And for me, the activists in the San Francisco Bay Area, it feels like a second home. It feels like stuttering oftentimes is my first home, but the disability is my second home.

And I also thank my dad for having that experience of—he's not the same as me, but he's the same as me—and once I had that in my family, I could also have that with you. I could have that with other people. And if you just kind of start to challenge— Because when I was in high school, when I was in college, I would volunteer in the Special Ed room, and I would walk down the street with a student with a disability that was more apparent. And I'd be like, I need to be away from them because I don't want an association. And you internalize all that shit, and you have to challenge yourself with it and know what is good for you as an individual too.

ALICE: Yeah. I mean we all are a part of these multiple communities, and many of them are overlapping and they're interconnected.

Shout outs

ALICE: Who would you like to thank, give some shout outs to? People who've shown you the way, people who've mentored you, loved you, nurtured you in both the disability community and the stuttering community.

NINA: Who would I like to thank? Oh, this feels like an acceptance speech! [chuckles] Well, I think one of the main people—and she's not in any of these communities, but she understood what people from these communities need—and that was my Special Ed teacher, Ms. Bramlette who, I don't wanna tell the part that is her story, but she really challenged how people looked at Special Ed where I went to school at Alameda High. And she had high expectations of us where we didn't have very high expectations of ourselves, and she would mentally kick our asses if we acted up. And that's exactly what we needed to have. And she made that entry into those worlds a little more bearable because she acted like a disability wasn't this weird thing. It was just, she…it was diversity before we even talked about that in the 1980s. And she didn't believe in segregation of disabled kids, and that was a key part. And she was pushing in to the classroom before people even talked about pushing in. So, that, I think, sticks out to me.

And I think generally, what's really made an impact on me is women who stutter. And like I said before, women, we don't really take up that space. In women who stutter, it compounds that. And when I went to the conference in 2009, seeing other women who stutter, it really made an impression on me 'cause I was like, why am I holding back? Why am I not taking up that space when I wouldn't want that for them? And that was a changing point, and it happened on the bed in a room that we were having a party, and they had the bathtub was full of ice and beers. And I sat on a bed, and I looked around at the 30 people in this teeny, tiny hotel room. I was like, oh. That's it. And that was really an important piece of all of that.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

[funky electronica music break]

Nina's accessible writing style and why there are so few writers with learning disability

ALICE: One thing I appreciate about your memoir is that your writing is really accessible and straightforward. And it's like you're talking to me, telling me stories about your life. So, were you intentional in your writing style?

NINA: Yeah. Yes, because I think it's similar to my comedic voice. And what I wanted was a disability studies book that would be accessible by anybody because I think one of my pet peeves about disability studies is we use these great big words to describe people being assholes. And if we could just say, "Yeah, sometimes people are assholes, and we're all gonna be assholes every once in a while. But it's a matter of remediating that and being humble and doing something with that," which we use these big words to say all that stuff, we don't need to. We can just say it, and then everybody can access that. Including people who have dyslexia! Because I don't hear dyslexic voices much in disability studies and in the disability culture online.

ALICE: Yeah. I think that you mentioned earlier about these kind of inspirational stories.

NINA: Mmhmm.

ALICE: And I think there are memoirs by disabled people, including people with learning disabilities, about this overcoming, but there's really not a lot in terms of just either scholarship or just different kinds of narratives. And why do you think that is, where there's such a lack of stories by people with learning disabilities? I mean obviously, the challenge often for a lot of people is the actual writing and processing language, but what else do you think is a factor?

NINA: Yeah. I mean it's a processing language part, but then also not having the technology, not having the access to the process too. And for me, years ago when I was thinking about writing the book, I dictated it into my phone and sent it to a friend who dictated it out, and she wrote it out. And she wrote it out in an essay-like quality kind of thing. And then I went back, and I swished it around. And then I revisited that, and then I gave it to my developmental editor who helped me through, said, "OK, now we're gonna make it like this. We're gonna make the voice consistent." And that cost hella money! And I dedicated a lot of money to this project, which is why, people! Please buy it! Please! And a lot of it was I used the money from my speaking engagements to pay this. And I know that I could've gone a GoFundMe route and stuff like that, but I didn't. So, that's why the responsibility is on everybody to go buy the book now so I can make my money back like that.

ALICE: Yeah. At least break even, right?

NINA: Yes, something. And I also know I can sell it at speaking gigs and all of that. And so, I know that I will get my money back in 20 years or so! But it was really something I wanted to do because you know, I complain a lot about what's out there, and it kind of felt like it was time for me to do something instead of complaining about it.

ALICE: Thank you for that. So, I don't know about you, but I think there are a lot of forces out there that silence disabled people literally and metaphorically, that keep disabled people from being their full, authentic selves.

NINA: Mmhmm.

Finding her voice and self-discovery

ALICE: What did you discover about yourself once you found and valued your own voice? Because that is a major theme from your book, but what did you learn about yourself once you really got it?

NINA: Yeah. You know, I think what's been interesting for me—and I don't know if I learned anything from it—but I think one of the things that I appreciated about the process was in comedy, people are pretty much themselves. And I talk about this in the book where somebody is being a dick, that you could be a dick back to them, that it's the micro-aggressions that you experience or micro-aggressions on 10 instead of micro-aggressions on 3. And so, you can respond to that at 10 instead of on 3. And I appreciate the opportunity to know when someone is being a jerk around an ableist thing. But everyday life, you can't do that. You can't. You know, if someone looks at you funny, you can't be like, "Are you looking at me funny?" But in comedy, the person just says something horrible, and you can call them out on it right there. And it's a sparring that like, I kind of feel that, as a disabled person, I have a black belt in karate, and I am the person who walks down the street—especially when I do comedy—that I walk down the street just hoping that someone attacks me so that I can use my black belt karate on them.

ALICE: Yeah, like don't fuck with Nina G.

NINA: Yeah, yeah. [chuckles]

ALICE: Yeah!

NINA: [laughs]

ALICE: I love it. I love it. I feel like it's been just a pleasure knowing you and just seeing your evolution and just the fact that we've been able to have this friendship for so many years, which is just really unique, I think.

NINA: Yeah. I think we've like grown up together and had these parallel lives of telling stories. And so, it's just so cool to see the things that you are doing from where I saw you 20 years ago.

ALICE: Same here. The feeling is just so mutual. You are a badass! And I wanna wish you all the best with your book and whatever else you do in the future because I think with more of us out there unashamedly using our voices, telling our truths, that hopefully, future generations are gonna have less of a traumatic time growing up! That's the hope, right?

NINA: Yes, exactly.

ALICE: Fingers crossed. So, thank you, Nina, for being on my podcast!

NINA: Thank you, Alice!

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.

You can also find out more about Nina's book on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Play. You can also support our podcast for $1 a month or more by going to our Patreon page at Patreon.com/DVP. That's p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP.

Well, thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!