Jessica Alice:

So I'm going to invite our next speaker, Gaele Sobott, to talk to us a little bit about the project and the residency, which she's been working on, as well as working as a writer.

Jessica Alice:

So, Gaele Sobott, from Sydney, she's a writer and producer. Gaele's published works include, Colour Me Blue, My Longest Round, and recent short stories in Hecate, Verity La, Meanjin and the anthology, Botswana Women Write. She was commissioned by Urban Theatre Projects to write for, Home country, Sydney Festival 2017 and has written poems around the subject of waterways for Flow, their 2019 series of dance performances by Linda Luke.

Jessica Alice:

Gaele facilitated the Access2Arts Embody projects for disabled writers, the Writing Me project, and the Thank project in Adelaide. Gaele is co-editor of /dɪsˈrʌpt/, an online platform for deaf and disabled writers, with Verity La.

Jessica Alice:

She was the founding director of Outlandish Arts, a disabled-led, not-for-profit-arts organization, which focuses on words as the catalyst for experimentation and improvisation across various art forms. Gaele served on the board of Access2Arts and currently sits on the State Library of New South Wales inclusion advisory committee. She has a PhD in literature from the University of Hull, England. Please welcome Gaele Sobott.

Gaele Sobott:

Thank you. I'll start with the social model of disability. I'm just going to start there because it informs the way I move through the world, basically. It's very central to everything I do, including my writing. And, to put a broad view on it, I'm constantly aware of the need and my own desire to build a world where physical attitudes, communication, and social environments reflect experiences of impairment as an expression and expected expressions of human diversity. It's, I believe something that adds to our world.

Gaele Sobott:

I choose to read writing that assists in creating a world that's enriched by this type of diversity and all diversity, especially writing by disabled writers. I've neither the time, energy or desire to read work that supports and perpetuates dominant views of disability or tries to make impairment and the resulting disability palatable to non-disabled audiences. Having said that, I think it's also good to read books before dismissing them, so to do the timeline thing.

Gaele Sobott:

Disabled writer, Amanda Tink recently published an essay in Sydney Review of Books called, A History of Reading, Alan Marshall and Helen Keller. She talks about Alan Marshall's book, I Can Jump Puddles, as it was one of the few books available to her in braille at school. She couldn't finish reading that book because she felt that as much as the main thing was telling the truth about his childhood experiences, but he was also according to Amanda, was also probably lying by omission. His life as a child with polio during the 1920s, she felt, in-fact any disabled child's life then or now could not be that relentlessly cheery. If you go to the website of Marshall's publisher, Penguin, the blurb emphasises that this is a story of a happy child-hood in which, despite in inverted comma's, despite his crippling poliomyelitis, Marshall plays, climbs, fights, swims, rides and laughs.

Gaele Sobott:

Amanda recently decided to take another look at Marshall's writing and she read the book, the whole book for the first time. She writes that, Marshall does in-fact, placate non-disabled audiences, but there's a lot more there. Especially in the last piece of the book where after a year of trying, he's portrayed as having triumphed over his impairment because he learns to ride a horse. I'll read from the book "I moved my seat a little to the right in the saddle, then thrust my left hand under the saddle flap beneath my leg. Here I could grasp the surcingle just where it entered the flap after crossing the saddle. I could bear down upon the inner saddle pad to counter a sway to the right or pull on the surcingle to counter a sway to the left. For the first time I felt completely safe. I urged Starlight into a canter. His swinging stride never moved me in the saddle. I sat relaxed and balanced, rising and falling with the movement of his body and experiencing a feeling of security and confidence.

Gaele Sobott:

Amanda Tink points out that "Marshall's breakthrough comes, not as re-tellers of his story, would have it, despite or when he overcomes his impairment but when he gives up, trying to ride horses in the standard way, and he develops a method that utilises his impairment as a resource". This worked for Marshall when riding a horse and probably in a lot of other areas of his life. And, I believe utilising our impairment as a resource works equally as well when applied to our writing. What this means, in our writing practice will vary considerably. It may vary according to our impairment and our particular experiences of disablement. It may vary according to form or genre, for example, life writing by disabled writers lends itself to writing directly about disability as a context.

Gaele Sobott:

Carly Findlay's book, Say Hello, says in bold letters, one whole page, "I am a proud, disabled woman and I will speak about it. I'll make you uncomfortable with my politics and my pride". Harriet McBryde Johnson, a writer, and a lawyer, Ive got it here somewhere, I'll get it later. [She was from Charleston in the United States and she was active in more than 25 years of the struggle for social justice and especially disability rights. She writes in her book, Too late to die young, but she resists formulating narratives of disability, when she's telling her stories. She resists narratives that don't aim to satisfy the general curiosity about what it's like to live in a withered body like mine, or feed the public appetite for inspirational pep. Like all stories, they are most fundamentally a chance to ride around inside another person's head and be reminded that being who we are and where we are and doing what we're doing is not the only possibility.

Gaele Sobott:

Fiction writers and poets may deliberately write visibility as content. Nalo Hopkins, an American writer, Jamaican; in her book , Sister Mine, tells a story of a pair of conjoined twins, Makeda and Abby. They're daughters of a demigod and a human woman. When the twins are surgically separated, Abby is left with a permanent limp, while Makeda is deprived of their family's defining characteristic, the ability to work magic. An ability, which for Abby takes the form of an unearthly skill with music and rhythm. I've got some of Nalo Hopkinson's work here, she's a disabled writer and she has numerous books which include, disability as context and also as I'm going to talk about a little bit later, as style, other ways of looking at disability in writing.

Gaele Sobott:

Gayle Kennedy, who will speak soon. Her book, Me, Antman and Fleabag. Antman is a cancer survivor and Fleabag the dog has a physical impairment. When we write against disablism, we may make the point of choosing not to use disablers language or not using impairment as a tool to create villains, or shallow and pejorative metaphors, or neuro-divergent coded characters as comic relief. But there may be more to utilising our impairment as a resource, than writing about the specifics of biology or impairment or the material experience of disablement.

Gaele Sobott:

The guest writer for Australian women writers challenge, Honey Brown. She writes when we create we're tapping into our most private self, we're making our own rules and we're revealing our uniqueness. My first completed manuscript reminded me of who I was. On the page in front of me, not spelt out in memoir fashion, but in the subtext, in the descriptions, within character reactions, in the ideas fuelling the story, each manuscript revealed a little more of me.

Gaele Sobott:

And I think we can start reading disabled writings a bit more closely and seeing this. And, as writers, we can start feeling comfortable with the way we do this. Our embodied experiences of the world with disabled writers may also reflect the way we organise sounds and silences, symbols and spaces, rhyme, assonance, meter, alliteration, the pace, narrative structure, imagery, and the rhythm of the text, even the grammar and the spelling. I'm suggesting that disabled writers may both consciously and or without realising it, been concrete and imprecise traces of our bodies and condition to our style of writing, to the logic and aesthetics of our writing. Our writing has the potential to disrupt, encourage, lliterary expectations.

Gaele Sobott:

Bessie Head was a South African writer, who experienced the damages of apartheid and fled to Botswana where she lived for 15 years as a refugee until she was granted citizenship in 1979. She went through long periods of depression and mental distress. Her book, A Question of Power, demonstrates something of the disability aesthetic that I'm talking about. She writes about mental distress and her narrative structure is not a rational account of madness, but hectic and sometimes illogical, paranoid and delusional, I'm not using those words in inverted commas, in terms of the conversations between the main characters and Elizabeth hallucinates during it in various ways that often don't make obvious sense to the reader. Elizabeth sees people in her life who are not real, but they're real to the reader as they are to Elizabeth. Dan and Sello of the brown suit and Sello in the monk, and Medusa, and they fight really noisily about power, evil and the nature of God. The novel connects insanity, madness as two sides of the same coin with sanity, so called sanity. Bessie Heads book challenges and makes a really unique contribution to African and English language literature and it is a disabled aesthetic.

Gaele Sobott:

Our writing is important to imagine other ways of being human, but disrupt and transcend current limitations. Our writing will hopefully encourage cognitive and radical reading which in turn will feed back into our writing. I really encourage writers to read and reading the writing of our peers and other disabled writers, especially.

Gaele Sobott:

Not all disabled people represent themselves in a way that is required by disabler's laws. And I think we should feel comfortable with not doing that, or with doing that, not representing ourselves that way. I encourage collaboration where it's needed. We should know and learn how to meet our access requirements as writers and that may mean very different things to different disabled writers.

Gaele Sobott:

And I also encourage us that while we're learning and crafting our material to develop the confidence to write from an embodied experience, so, to relax into our experience of the world.

Gaele Sobott:

I'll quote from Nalo Hopkins here, so I'll pop over to the back end of your screen. "I struggle with every day, the mental diligence and stamina needed to sit in front of the computer, open the file, start writing and to keep doing so, word after word until I've created the next story. A combination of learning disability and chronic health issues, make that the hardest thing for me. And, if I can't write, I'm not a writer. I know that's imminently survivable, but still I can scarcely bear to contemplate it. So I'm constantly coming up with new strategies, for getting to the mental place where writing is so joyous and playful that I almost can't help putting the words down., I encourage all of you to get to that place".

Jessica Alice:

Thank you so much Gaele. That was fascinating. As a poet, who's very interested in concrete forms, yeah, that was fabulous. So Gaele, so just to maybe summarise a few of the things that Gaele just spoke to us about, was about utilising impairment as a resource in a kind of stylistic way, in a literary way, in a way that refers to writing from embodied experience. So thinking about how the experience of the body informs the aesthetic decisions you make with your writing and the existent formulate depictions of disability, which can be shallow, reductive or just not very interesting. So, thinking about all the literary ways to use the experience of being in a body, thank you so much, Gaele.