Interviewee: Gayle Kennedy
Interviewer: Caitlin Vaughan
Date of Interview: 27th of January 2023
Location: Online via Zoom
Length of Interview: 68:14 minutes

Transcript

Caitlin: So can you tell a little bit about yourself? Why don't you introduce yourself and what you think, you know, given that this is going to be something that's shared and publicly is part of the documentation of Disability Arts for an archive in Australia, what do you think we need to know about you, where you're from and your experiences that have led to your artist today?

Gayle: Um, I was born in 1955, in Ivanhoe, New South Wales. I am a member on both my mother and my father's side of the Ngiyampaa nation, the Ngiyampaa speaking nation of South West. New South Wales and our clan is the Wongaibon. Um, I got polio when I was two and did, spent up until I was about 12 going backwards and forwards between home and the far west for treatment and spent the ages of 10 to 12 in hospital and then went home for good. Um, I then left, left home for good at the age of 17 when I, 16 when I got a scholarship. Uh, to go to Queenwood Girls School in Mosman or Balmoral Beach really, it's right on Balmoral Beach. I've had many different jobs within the public service. Within. Um, I've run a land council. I've run, um. I've run a housing company. I spent from ‘95 to ‘98 as the Indigenous issues editor writer for Streetwise Comics and wrote, I think, about 40 stories during that time, including the entire reconciliation comic which has been seen around the world by I think over half a million people. Um, I then joined the New South Wales Attorney General's Department. I also worked on the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Overview with the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Services Secretariat which broke me to an extent.

Gayle: And so I ended up going back to Ivanhoe for five years and had a bit of a violent marriage and then got came back to Sydney and said got a job as the Indigenous issues editor streetwise and joined um, the New South Wales Attorney General's Department, which was supposed to implement a lot of the recommendations of the report. The [inaudible] Report but I just found that it was just two steps forward, three

back. Basically it was frustrating. It was annoying. It was, um, you know, and I, you know, I didn't feel like I was making any kind of difference and I was fed up basically. I was square peg in a round hole. Just didn't fit. Didn't like using all the, you know, the double speak language. Didn't like you know, being asked to dialogue with someone about issues, you know, instead of talking about problems I might have and just basically I'd had it. So, um, I just left and said I was going to be a writer and everybody thought I was crazy but, um and I probably was and I think you have to be crazy to be a writer. Um, I hope that language is not going to get me into trouble saying crazy or do I say the C word? I don't know. I can't keep up with it but, um. I decided the best thing to do would be to pit myself against other writers.

Gayle: So I started entering competitions and, and either being shortlisted, coming second or winning like the first competition I entered, I came second, which was the inner city life competition with the New South Wales Writers Centre and then next year I entered with a piece of prose called “How to Drink in the Park”, and it won and I liked the characters so much that I turned them into a book. I took “Me, Ant-Man and Fleabag” on the road and, and then, um. I entered the David Unaipon Award in 1995 with a poem pretty much like I did with the Inner city Life with a book of poetry. I never really was happy with it, you know, I don't regard myself as a poet. Um, and I was shortlisted, so I went up to Brisbane to the awards because I'd kind of figured out I hadn't won, but I went anyway and, um and I talked to the judges, you know, about the kinds of things they were looking for and, and said, “Do you write prose?” And I said, “Well, that's my preferred form of writing” and they said, “Well, enter with a piece of prose next time. You never know how you're going to go” and so I entered “Me, Ant-Man and Fleabag”.

Gayle: And everybody. Everybody said I was crazy to enter with that because of the way I'd written it, which was in the vernacular and it was completely different to anything they'd ever seen before and its structure and its format but, um, said, “well, you know, I'm going to enter it anyway. I don't care what you say or think” and it won. And so there I had my first book published and 15,000 in my pocket and I mean, it really has just been that easy. Um, my next then I got a, um a commission to write one book and one graphic novel for the Yearning Strong series for Oxford University Press and so I accepted that but what happened is along the way all the other writers didn't know how to deal with the comic format. The graphic novel format. So, you know, it started at ten.

You write another one, you know, because you know this person just doesn't know how to deal with it and said okay and in the end, I wrote all of them, all the graphic novels, and then the next series, they just didn't bother asking anyone else and I wrote six graphic novels for the next series and I've become a public speaker. I write plays, I write I I've just recently had a short four-minute film that I wrote.

Gayle: It was shown at Flickerfest. On. Um, on. It was yesterday, actually, at Flickerfest. I've been published by, um, Black Ink Penguin. Um, Australian Author. Um, Southerly. Um. Phoenix International, the Edinburgh Literary, Literary Review. Um. Lots of different, lots of different publishing houses and Red Room Poetry, Magabala Books and I speak a lot on, a lot about my work. Um, at the Sydney Writers Festival is pretty good, good to me and, um and you know, various well, festivals or, you know, speak about disability. I speak about my writing practice, I speak about all kinds of things. I'm basically, basically, if you want me to speak, tell me what you want and I'll do it. I, um. I'm straight forward and to the point and I, I have actually found, which is really annoying, that a lot of what I say finds itself in in, in the mouths of others without any credit but, you know, what do you do? You know, what do you do? I hadn't, you know, I because I'm going to be honest with you here. I have been totally ignored and treated like a piece of shit by the Indigenous arts community and was infuriated when they had that big um, was it that big forum or whatever it is up up in Adelaide not long ago, the Australia Council, what was that called?

Caitlin: Oh, you're talking about Purrumpa.

Gayle: Yes. Yes, Purrumpa. Where they didn't, they didn't invite an Indigenous disabled person to speak, disabled artist to speak about the particular problems that we face and, and I find that, that there's a lot of ageism in the arts and I find particularly I find the Indigenous arts particularly ageist, and, you know, you're now finding people in their 50’s, getting the Red Ochre Award, you know, it's, um. You know, I mean, it seems to me that you have to be, if you're going to be an elder, then you have to be revered. You know, you have to be revered. You have to be I don't know, they don't for one thing, they don't seem to be particularly interested across the board in Indigenous arts, in supporting writers and very, very few writers have received the Red Ochre Award. I mean I think it should be their, to their eternal shame that Kerry Reed-Gilbert was never on it by them. You know, or even acknowledge that I tried for years to get a grant to

offer them to actually, um, you know, further my career and I never got a look in and it doesn't matter how much I've done, you know, I've been in films, you know, I've appeared on Compass. Joy McKean requested personally that I appear in her, her filmed, um, you know, autobiography of Slim Dusty and herself and their lives together um, you know, but I'm never ever acknowledged, never acknowledged.

Gayle: Um, they have, you know, great events and I'm never invited and was once asked if I'd like to go to a particular event in Melbourne quite a few years ago, but only as a guest. So I'd be sitting down in the audience watching people talk about my practice, my kind of the things that I do, the things that I'm an expert on and, you know, and just, you know, so I just decided that they don't want me so I'm not going to I'm not going to worry about it. I'm going to make my own way and I have without any help from them and I ended up I ended up getting a, a grant from the literature board, one of the fellowships a few years ago, $50,000, which is, you know, which has meant that I can I've been able to get a long way through my memoir, which has been a particularly difficult thing to write. I mean, I'm normally a very fast writer, but this is particularly emotional and it's difficult to get to, you know, to get that done but, um, you know, like, I look, you know, I was looking at Purrumpa and I was looking at reading the language. It's all. If every nearly every second person was Dr. Something, you know, there was there were politicians, there were doctors, there were there were people speaking about the arts and a lot of respects in an academic way.

Gayle: Which really annoyed me because and, and and a lot of the a lot of the language they used in their promotional material or in their questions or in describing the events was very academic and I felt I thought to myself, who the hell are you trying to impress? I mean, I know I'm probably going to get in, you know, I don't care anymore because I've been ignored for so long. I'm saying it right here and now. Who the hell are you trying to impress? And who the hell are you here for? You have to be young as far as I can see, you have to be young. You have to be hip. You have to be happening and if you're going to be an elder, make sure that you're an artist. That you make possum skin cloaks or that you that you are a painter of some sort and that you are revered you know but for God's sake, don't be a mouthy black woman because it gets you nowhere and they can call themselves mouthy if they like, but they don't know what mouthy is and, you know, and I don't I don't speak like this strictly for myself because I'm doing

fine. What I'm doing is I'm speaking up for all the other women, all the other black women out there who, who old women who get.

Gayle: Overlooked time and time and time again. I mean, it was almost the last straw when I, it was not that long ago, maybe 2 or 3 years ago when I'd read that an anthology of the best Indigenous female writers from across Australia was coming out and I hadn't been approached to write anything and I just, you know, I felt really down but in the mail that day arrived, my copy of the Australian, Australian author's very last print edition and my name was on the front there with, you know, Manning Clark and you know, like all Gough Whitlam and all these amazing people and thought, there you go. What are you whingeing about, you know, there you go. You've made it on your own but there are a lot of people, there are a lot of women out there who are missing out. Older black women, every every kind of grant these days if they talk about emerging writers. All these grants for emerging artists and emerging writers are all, you have to be 30 and under or at the most, 36 or 35 but many, but the majority of emerging artists in Aboriginal culture start late. I didn't publish my first book until I was 51 so, and many of the the artists, you know, Indigenous artists don't start until they're 60, 70, 80, but they're emerging artists but where's the support for them? There's none.

Caitlin: Can we talk about that? I'm kind of keen to, you know, you talked about carving your own way and you talked about a really long career before you started your own practice. Are there things that, you know, things that really prompted you to make that leap? You talked about earlier how it was actually a negative experience. That was the ultimate trigger for that sort of propelling you into just starting to write your own work. What was what was the motivator that, you know, allowed you to make that pivot, that transition into, from the work you were doing into your own artistic practice?

Gayle: I had no choice. I mean, there was nothing else I could do. Writing and public speaking are the only things I think I've ever been any good at. I had no choice, basically. It was, um. You know, what is it? Ride or die and it worked out. I knew inside that I had what it took to become a writer. So I just thought, I'll just keep going until I get somewhere but it took no time at all and literally, I left my job at the age of 49 and had a book published when I was 51. So I don't know.

Caitlin: It sounds very much like you just learnt that dimension on the job. I mean, did you did you do any formal training at all or did you just carve your own path?

Gayle: Oh I had no formal training. I mean, when I applied for the job at Streetwise, I had absolutely no experience whatsoever and I basically conned my way into this job and, and I just read as many of their comics as I could and thought, I can do this and when I wrote my first story, I. It was fine, you know. It was something that I could do because it's mainly dialogue, which is what I'm, and dialogue is what I'm good at. Mhm. So, um. Uh, you know, just. It's just writing and I write across the board. I write plays. I write film scripts. I write short stories. I write poetry. I write essays. I and whenever I'm called for, my favourite form of writing is the graphic novel and whenever I get called on to do that, I jump at that um, but you have to be versatile. You have to say yes to everything, even if you don't know how to do it, you say yes anyway and then when you've done that, then you, then it's a mad scramble to find out how to do it and how to do it well and you know, it's all out there. You know, I'm in my. I could never sit in front of a lecturer and listen to them. I mean, I was at school. I got by but if I'd paid attention, I probably would have done really well and be a lawyer now, you know but I can't, I can't concentrate on, on people. The only way I learn is by doing so if you show me something, you say, this is how it's done um don't talk at me, show me then, you know, I'll pick it up but a lot of a lot of it for me, like nobody taught me how to write “Me, Ant-Man and Fleabag”, it's just, it just came out that way and of course, with the graphic novels, I already had that experience at Streetwise, so.

Caitlin: Yeah, about that working in a different context seems to have been something that informed your practice as well. Just the activism and your work in the public sector and in community work as well.

Gayle: Well, it all coalesces into one really, because what you don't realise until you actually are old is that you've been learning all along, that you've been that you have been educated all along. Um, I, I have a mantra where I try to learn something new every day and, you know, it may be a small, inconsequential fact, but it's if it interests me, then I'll, you know, I'll go out and, and find out about it and my education has, I've picked up a little something from every, every job I've had um, I haven't picked up organisational skills but I'm a fairly chaotic person um and fortunately through the NDIS, I have a support worker who, who organises me but, you know, I don't know where I'd

be without her, probably like picking out from a room full of boxes. I don't know, you know, but you know, it's good to have somebody to organise you. I'd like to have a secretary, but. I'm no good at ordering people around either. I think writing is the perfect, the perfect job for the for the loner.

Caitlin: Can you talk a little bit about the things that drove you, like the things that kept you going in your practice in the, in especially as you were sort of starting out? You touched on it a little bit with, um, getting some, you know, awards and recognition fairly quickly. Do you want to talk a little bit about, you know, if you think about when you first started sort of your solo practice, what, what some of those kind of key moments were that sort of helped propel things forward?

Gayle: Well, the, it was it was coming second in the Inner City Life. It's you know, it was a it was when it was going a highly competitive, um, competition and it had a brilliant lady running. It then called Irina Dunn and she believed in me right from the start and even though I didn't have a book or anything published, she, she got me on onto panels and everything, and I started sort of learning the the art of public speaking, you know, and the and of keeping things short not, you know, I mean, I might be rambling on today, but when you're in front of a crowd, you know, keeping their interest getting on and and, and getting off in a goodly amount of time. So I learned a lot from Irina in, in how to to grab a crowd, how to hold a crowd and when to let go of the crowd. So. I learnt from Streetwise I learnt brevity. Um. Don't go blabbing on, you know, keep things sweet and short and, you know, there's a lot of people that, um, they're fairly, I mean, they get away with it, you know, like, they write long, convoluted sentences and they mess a little bit too much with metaphors um, when a simile will do, you know. Um, so it's about vivid, you know, it's about brevity. It's about clarity. It's, it's about, um, thinking about your audience as well, you know, um, Umberto Eco in “The Name of the Rose”, I remember his endless, endless descriptions of things and I was thinking, this does not enhance the story at all.

Gayle: It's just you showing off and you've gotten away with it because you're Umberto Eco, and there's a lot of writers like that that get away with these kinds of things because they are who they are and will not accept the advice of an editor. And so you as a reader find yourself yawning and I know there are a lot of people out there who, who do yawn through a lot of books, who are bored by a lot of books but will never

admit it because to admit that they, you know, that they find a lot of what Umberto writes excruciating, um, to admit that would be to somehow be a failure in the eyes of their supposed peers but I, you know, I know what I like to read. I mean, I think someone like Peter Temple is fantastic and you need to do your research. So I learned that with Streetwise that you really need to do your research and your research is a lot about listening very carefully to how people speak. What's important to a particular group of a, particular group of people that you're speaking that you're going to be writing about? My first book involved Vietnamese and Middle Eastern kids and at the time, there was a lot of a lot of trouble going on between the two groups. So it was it was a matter of talking to them both, finding out what they disliked about each other, but then looking for a common ground. So I learnt, I learnt that.

Gayle: And all of the books that I've written for kids. I do go out and speak to kids um because I need to know what they're thinking. I need - mean things have changed since I started writing. I mean, there's, there were no mobile phones when I was writing for Streetwise. So things have changed for kids over the years and so you've got to be, you've got to keep abreast, but I try and make things timeless if I can so that you can still down the track read these books and not, and not feel like you're missing out on anything, you know? I try to use as little technology within the story as I can um, so but it's all as I said, it's all about you. That's the number one thing, I think is research and it's not poring over books. It's, it's, it's talking to kids and then it's talking usually over a cup of tea or something with older people when I was writing this, the Yarning Strong books, it was important to find out what parents wanted their children to read. What, what did they want in a book? How did they want to see themselves represented? And that was really important. So, you know, like you just take notes, take notes and then develop stories and characters from that but it would have been impossible if I just tried to like, like “Me, Ant-Man and Fleabag” wrote that just off the top of my head but you can't do that when you're writing for kids. I think you've got to be….

Gayle: Um I mean, if you're writing for kids for something like Yarning Strong where you're trying to teach kids, but in a really interesting way.

Caitlin: Has there been any continuity for you in terms of the people that you've worked with? You mentioned with working with Irina Dunn, and you've also talked about working

with, you know, different groups of young people. Have there been people, collaborators that you've had throughout your career?

Gayle: I've had one consistent collaborator, and that's a graphic artist, a comic artist called Ross Carnsew, who I worked with at Streetwise and then when it came to writing the graphic novels for O.U.P, I called him in to, to draw all of them for me because he understands me and I understand him and I trust him. You know, sometimes I may have written a scene and he goes, “look, it's not going to work that way.” I mean, I had to learn very early on in ‘Streetwise’ that if you're going to have a fight scene in a graphic novel, that one punch can go over several frames. So you've really got to, to think about things like that and, and trying to explain what I want to other - I mean, have worked with other artists. Frank and Steve and McLeod were both brilliant Aboriginal artists. Frank McLeod was an amazing collaborator, but I'd lost touch with him when the ‘Yarning Strong’ came out. Otherwise, I would have utilised him as well for half of the books but Ross has been my most consistent collaborator but usually I just I work alone as a writer, along with the editor but they pretty much leave me alone once they realise I know what I'm doing because I get really cranky if they're constantly at me, you know? I like to write it and then, and then we, we start to, you know, whip it into shape.

Caitlin: So would you say that your works influenced your collaborators too?

Gayle: I don't know. I don’t know. Um. Not my collaborators. I know that, I know that there's been a couple of people who've paid homage shall we, shall we say certain things I've written? But, you know, I just, I had a good talk to the, the, the Australian writers and which I'm a member and that union and we just decided there was, you know, it was going to be a, it was going to cause too much trouble. So I've just left it, you know but um.

Caitlin: Shall we talk about what you're working on right now, like what, what, you've had quite an extensive practice. You know, you've talked about it, and it's covered so many different forms. What is your motivation today? Like right now? What's driving you?

Gayle: Well, right now, I'm, um, I'm collaborating with a musician Greg Arthur, who's a beautiful singer and he wants to actually put out an Australian, an Australian Christmas

album of all Australian Christmas songs, original Christmas songs and so I'm working with him. I've just about finished one, one song for him and um, I'm also, um quarter of the way through a radio play which we hope to actually turn into a television series and 'The Dress', which was a short film um, because I won um twice the Monologue Adventures. I was one of the winners of that and last, the last one that I entered that it, the stories were actually turned into short films with artists from, women from around the world, oh, no, no, women from the USA and Australia and that has won awards around the world and various um, short stories, um short films from the whole collection have won independently and so I've had somebody who's interested in turning my story into a film so I'm meeting with her and also one of the major theatre companies is, wants to talk to me about turning it into a stage play, which will basically be probably a two hander in a monologue form, rather, you know, rather than doing the whole stage set up and everything, but we'll see how it works out. So they're the things I'm working on and I'm still working on my memoir um which became difficult when my mother died last year so you know, I was on a roll for a while, but I'll get back to that you know, I just need to deal with a few things.

Caitlin: Yeah. Are you, um. Are there other areas? It sounds like you do have your hands full, but are there - It sounds like some of the drivers and opportunities that you're talking about, - there's some that you've sort of generated yourself and you're following and others are sort of responding to opportunities that come in. Are there other areas where you're kind of keen to present or extend your practice if you had that opportunity, or can you see other benefits or is it, have you got a full plate right now?

Gayle: Um. You know I don't, I don't really know like, but things just sort of seem to roll along. I find one thing in my life has led to another um, from the beginning, you know, I mean, in the beginning it was generated by me, but once I'd written that first book everything has stemmed from that. It's all rolled along from that and I haven't and I'm going to be absolutely honest here with you. I haven't gone out and pitched anything to anyone, um, because I don't know, I don't know maybe I'm, you know, I'm a fairly half-arsed person, you know, like, I don't, I don't really, I don't really care to, to stress out over things and I've got enough going on in my life. If somebody says, can you do this? I'll go, yes, I can and, and I'll do it but, you know, I have never I've never in my entire life gone out and pitched an idea to anyone so I'm highly unlikely ever to.

Caitlin: So it's an interesting thing to think about in terms of the things that are driving and enabling, you know, your, your practice and how you work. You talked a little bit about your audiences and that, that especially that early stage when you were talking about speaking on panels, engaging with, with audiences and actually I remember you reading, I heard you read me ‘Antman and Fleabag’ many years ago and it made such an impact just and being able to read to hear your voice when I read the book and I just, can you talk a little bit about that interaction that you have with audiences? Um, how important it is in that interaction and the feedback that you get.

Gayle: I love being on stage and I love interacting with an audience. I feel completely at home on stage and I love it when it comes to the Q&A. You know, that's from the audience. It's one of my favourite parts. Some of them get shy, but once they get going, you know, they're great and I love interacting with the audience. I like interacting with the other panel members. Um, I like, that's one of the great things I love about being on stage and being on panels and even just being a one-on-one thing. I mean, or just speaking straight to a camera for things. I like, it's just something I like to do. You know? I'd like to do more of that, I suppose but it kind of comes down to the whole disability thing and, and a lot of festivals um being unwilling to, pay for things like a support worker to go with you, you know, to travel to and from and you know, pay, you know, pay for their airfare. I mean, I'm not asking them to pay for their work, you know, obviously I would do that but it, you know, it would be great if they'd at least pay for their airfare and you know, cough up a little bit for their accommodation and, and they're unwilling to do that and I used to think, oh, it's, it's because they're broke, but, you know, and then you find out that they're, they're flying people in from all over the world quite often business class and you think surely they could have found a couple of hundred bucks for an airfare? You know, as I said, I'm not asking for them to, you know, well, even, even to pay for the accommodation but surely they could cough up for the airfare and a lot of them I found, when I got to them were, were not really cognisant of what, of what access means so it often turned into a really frustrating and

Gayle: Ultimately demoralising experience for me and, um, you know, I'm, and I don't like being defined, you know, like “Me, Ant-Man and Fleabag” is comedy. It's comedy in the form of all comedy is bittersweet or comedy has sadness and it was just lumped in with the Indigenous books. They were all lumped in together, you know, like it's the ghettoisation of literature and art that can destroy an artist's ability to move forward, you

know, to get any kind of audience for their work because they think it's just Indigenous, you know, and like, you know, that's not putting shit on my work is obviously Indigenous. I'm Indigenous, my it, it informs everything I do but the book found its way to wider Australia on its own. It managed to crawl out of the, the ghetto and, and, and have a life of its own um.

Gayle: And, and I don't want to be you know, thought of as just a disabled writer because that that was never anything. I mean, I didn't actually come out, if you will, as a disabled person until a few years ago and I did that because I could see that there are a lot of changes that need to be made and maybe I can have some kind of, um, impact. Um, you know, my main - one of my main things is to make sure that disabled artists value themselves and their work - what they do and you can't do that unless you put a price on it because society values and respects um, a price that they want to see a price on it. You know that, You know, they don't want to see something that's been given away for free. They have no respect for it and I've tried to, I've really tried to, when I first started out, I really tried to get that into people's heads and now a lot of, a lot of people have taken that, that course up. You know, you don't, you don't do stuff for nothing. The people that are asking you to do it aren't doing it for nothing, you know, they're getting paid and this is not a hobby. This is not some kind of therapy. This is your life. This is your livelihood and you need to value what you have to offer to people and

Gayle: The thing that they respect, as I've said, is their respect and monetary value and you need to you know, I started out asking very little but I always asked for something and, you know, over time you get well known and people start to realise that they're going to get value for money and you can ask a higher prices for your work but it shouldn't, you know, there should be some sort of base rate when you're, when you're getting people to do stuff for you. You know, and it, it infuriates me when people, you know offer a pittance for my experience, and not only for my, but for my friends' experiences and so many of them will just take it because they, they think that that's all they're worth and so it, that was a lot of the stuff that drove me towards activism in the disabled arts community. I mean, I've been active within the disabled community for years and in terms of things like access and, and equity but it's only the last few years that I've become specifically involved in disabled artists and the disabled arts movement.

Caitlin: Have you seen a change over that time? In you know, in what, what was it like the last 20 years?

Gayle: I mean, I've seen a great change in the last few years with artists, disabled artists demanding and getting payment and I've heard them speaking at conferences or writing about the value of being paid so I've seen that and people who ask them are offering them now the same as they would an able bodied artist and we should all be considered as artists um and the whole art scene is, is and has been incredibly, there's been an incredible lack of equity, an incredible lack of access and to and you know, it's heartbreaking for an actor in a wheelchair to watch an able bodied person playing someone in a wheelchair when they can do it very well. I mean, obviously there are instances where you're going to need an able-bodied person to play. Someone in a wheelchair because they started out as um

Gayle: As an able-bodied person. So, there are you know, there are certain instances where it's not practical, and I can understand that but watching a couple of years ago. Um, an actress, I think. I think her name was Ellie. She won a Tony Award for her performance in “Oklahoma” and it was, there was no access to the stage for her to receive her award and so she was left sitting down the front of the stage while all the rest of the cast were up on stage and I thought, where's the unity? Why aren't all these cast members, you know, why aren't the directors, the producers, why aren't they down there with her side by side? and even more importantly, why weren't the organisers of these events, why didn't they realise that they needed to make the awards accessible just in case she did win if she didn't win, fair enough but you know how many able bodied actors and actresses have you seen stumble up and down stairs to receive awards? How nice would a ramp have been for them? You know, so that really, that really disgusted me and I've experienced the same kind of thing, you know. So it's time that the arts community got their shit together.

Caitlin: Can you tell - you've talked a bit about your own work. What about your peers? You know, you've talked about advocating and working with other artists – are there people, artists that you've worked with, um, who, who do you think should be known about? People who aren't as well known, perhaps that we should know about?

Gayle: Um. Most of them that I, that I work with are pretty well known, like Carly Findlay is very well known but I think, because I work with them on the stage of, you know, like major festivals they've already got, got a voice. So I haven't really come across anyone that people wouldn't know about that I can think of at the moment and as I said, I tend very much to write, write alone, yeah, work alone.

Caitlin: So what for you? You know, you talked about coming into the arts and disability space quite recently, but you've been someone who's advocated for a long time. Are there some key milestones you think need to be acknowledged in? You know, I guess the trajectory of arts and disability practice in Australia that you think are really important?

Gayle: Well, you know give us a space. Make room for us. I mean that's you know. It's really important. Why can't you have, have a secretary in a you know, or a, or a major player in a wheelchair? Why not? Why not have somebody with cerebral palsy or um or, or with, with some kind of intellectual disability in your shows. Why not? What, what, what's stopping you? I mean, it's taken years to be able to see Indigenous people on the screen, you know, in ads for Milo or a car or something, you know, and but what's, you know, like disabled, disabled people have spending power and I don't think that people understand this. I mean, I did a reading at the, at the Sydney Writers Festival a couple of years ago for the "Growing up Disabled in Australia" Book. I'll have a story in that and we sold out one of their major stages. We were right next door to a reading by Paul Kelly, and we sold as many tickets to that event as he sold to his and it was, it, it was because disabled people could go to the writer's festival and see themselves up on stage and that's what we want to see and we want to see ourselves in movies. We want to see ourselves in television and, you know, we need people that don't have disabilities that are major players in the arts field to collaborate with us, work with us and be our allies um you know, be you know, stand with us, wheel with us, walk with us, whatever you do but, you know, um there's a lot of incredible artists out there. Incredible actors, singers, comedians, writers, all kind, you know, across the.

Gayle: Board who just need you know, just, you know, step aside a little and let them in so that they can stand beside you. You know, they can be beside you and you can work together. You can collaborate. You need to, you know, we're all people. We're all trying to do the best we can and make a, and make a living in a very small pool, which is

Australia. I mean, I think there's some slow inroads being made and there's some slow inroads being made in the States, but not enough. You know, you know, fuck Daniel Day Lewis. There's plenty of actors out there that can, that can play you know a disabled role and stop writing shit where the disabled person has to die in order for the hero or heroine to finally realise herself or himself you know the inspiration, you know, inspiration porn, they call it. Stop it. You know, when, when Stephen Hawking, no matter how you bloody well look at it was one of the greatest minds of all time and it.

Gayle: And completely and utterly disabled but his mind was a beautiful mind and, and free to roam and come up with incredible theories and, and, and, and, and work that, that will live, live on forever but when he died, it was like the able-bodied world all swooped on him and claimed him as their own and how they did that was they had him leaping up out of his wheelchair looking like Don Draper from Mad Men in a suit running up the golden staircase, you know and he was finally free. He wasn't free, he was dead and, you know, stop it with this nonsense, you know, and, and respect the man for what he was, and what he is and in all his, you know, in all his beautiful, you know, I don't know his, in all his beautiful ugliness or, you know, whatever it is, you know, like he wasn't pretty to look at, but what came from him was extraordinary. He was an extraordinary man, no matter how you look at him and I thought, how dare you come in and do that? How dare you come in and put all your crap on him, You know, and he has said many times that he actually felt that being disabled gave him the freedom to wander around the universe unhindered and not, you know. Society wasn't constantly asking him for things. I mean he, and eventually he will, he became I mean I guess he became guess it almost a cult. You know, when you when you appear in The Simpsons, you become a cult but you know. It when he died it was just, I know that he would have been absolutely furious at what they did and I know I was and people couldn't understand when I bent it. When they posted crap like that you know I mean how dare you? And the fact that these intelligent, well educated people couldn't see just how stupid their actions were was infuriating to me.

Caitlin: It's probably a good moment to ask about identification. You know how you like to frame it or communicate it or ways in which you see it being received.

Gayle: Oh, look I don't know. You know, I don't, I don't really know, I mean, I just am, why can't we just be? Why do I have to identify as anything? You know, like, you know,

one minute I can have a, I can be talking about Indigenous issues, I could be talking about disability issues, I can be talking about them both together or I can simply be talking about writing or, or things that are happening in society. Um, I don't like being pinned down to anything and I, and I particularly dislike um being sent manifestos by both groups telling me what I can or can't say or, you know, like it, it becomes infuriating to me because no white writer um, it's put onto such, um like there's so many strictures placed on them. You know, like they, they rail about the woke, woke society and how people tell them what they can or can't write but you try being a black writer, you know and, and work under the strictures that we do, you know, like where you have people saying, well, you're from this group, you can't write about that group or, you know, and you know

Gayle: You can't, you can, you can't use that word because it belongs to that group and you know it and it's, and it's the same with disability. You can't have a character that maybe, I don't know that is autistic, you know, because you're not autistic but you can and you do it in an honourable way. You talk to autistic people, you ask them how they want to be represented in your, whatever particular work you're doing. You know, like I feel quite

Gayle: Comfortable in, in that I would be able to write a deaf character as long as I had spoken to people from the deaf community and asked how they wanted to be portrayed, you know, but it just becomes where you just, you know, like it became for me, a never ending, changing manifesto and what do I call myself now? You know, it was one thing, one week, now it's something another week and it just you know, it was first it was person with disability. Now it's disabled person, you know, like I don't know anymore and get things mucked up because you know I am and I've seen a lot of change and it's it's hard to keep up with it so I just, I don't even read it anymore and I will write

Gayle: What I want to write and say, what I want to say and do what I want to do and if people don't like it well you know, they're quite free to ignore me and sectors have successfully done that for 20 years now so I don't see why they shouldn't continue on as they have begun so

Caitlin: Thanks Gayle. You're always got something fresh and insightful to say. I just thank you so much for just sharing your stories. Is there anything that I haven't asked

you about that I should have? Um, that I should that we haven't touched on, that we've missed?

Gayle: I can't really think, think of anything I just -

Caitlin: I skipped over a few questions, mainly just because you sort of were, you know, I felt like a lot of it was things that we covered already. Yeah. Um, but, uh. I think the main things were like, have we, have we I guess, covered enough about that journey, the things that enabled and inhibited or perhaps the, the things I think you talked about, the enablers are the things that you wished or that got in your way or that you would have liked to have seen changed at at a particular moment in time that could have made things different.

Gayle: Well. The same problems that I encountered in the beginning are still there. I mean, for the first time ever last year I was invited to be part of a, of an Indigenous Writers festival in um in Adelaide, but couldn't do it because I was taking care of a, of a dying person and I just couldn't do it but um I don’t know look -

Caitlin: We covered a lot, you know, just a lot.

Gayle: You know, just. I don't know. I want

Caitlin: What about the future then?

Gayle: The future. I want it, I want these things to change. What I've spoken about. I want Indigenous arts to take a long, hard look at themselves in the future and start, not just Indigenous arts, but the arts across the board to take a good hard look at themselves and how they view disabled artists and how they view Indigenous artists. I think they need to take a long, hard look and acknowledge the fact that they are ageist across the board. Um. They need to acknowledge and make no excuses for a lot of their, the lack of insight, foresight, their lack of communication, their basic not ignoring, but not even realising that we're out there. You know, um and there can be more than just one person, you know, like Australia tends to want to have just one person doing one thing. You know, there can be many. So I don't know down the track and down the track I'd like to see in major festivals I'd like to see more audiences feeling comfortable.

I'd like to see more Indigenous people in the audience of, of, of Indigenous people, people of colour in the audience, disabled people, a mixture of people who feel. I'm comfortable at these events are made to feel welcome and that things to put in place so that they're made to feel welcome. This needs to happen down the track. It would be good to see people not just feeling that they have to go to a particular thing because it has their particular group in it. You know, we're people and, and we're Um despite, not despite but, but even though we're Indigenous or we're Greek or we're Arabic we're, we're Australian, and, and that means that we are entitled to everything that being Australian means we're entitled to it and it's time that we started taking advantage of those entitlements. Yes, I, I will use for the most part an Aboriginal medical centre but if I need help, I don't, I don't feel like I only have to go to an Aboriginal or an Indigenous service or is it First Nations? Now I'm not sure, but or to a service that's strictly there for disabled people and the reason I do this is because when I do use these services, it's because. I want to hold those services to account. Like hospitals are the most dangerous and the most inaccessible places of all for a disabled person and in many, many, far too many instances, are the same for First Nations people so

Gayle: We need to start using these services and holding them to account and viewing us as Australian citizens who are entitled to everything that being an Australian citizen entails. We need to stand up for ourselves and stop allowing people to infantilise us. You know, let let let's be grown ups, people.

Caitlin: Well, that sounds like a call to action. Gayle. Thank you so much for your time today and for sharing so openly and fearlessly as you do. And I will just shall we wrap up and I'll finish the recording.