

**Suffering Difference:  
The Ethics and Politics of Modifying Bodies**

by

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## Abstract

*Suffering Difference: The Ethics and Politics of Modifying Bodies* takes as its provocation the apparently inevitable dovetailing of suffering and difference in contemporary Western culture, and the modification of bodies that this justifies. Through an examination of a variety of modificatory technologies, including the use of human growth hormone, limb-lengthening, cosmetic and intersex “corrective” surgeries, self-demand amputation and modern primitive practices, I demonstrate that suffering plays a key role in the (re)production of not only the norm, but of existing social injustices.

I deploy a Lévinasian ethics to consider our responsibilities to suffering, and the inadequacy of contemporary medical science in providing such a response. I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, along with a variety of feminist and critical race approaches to his work, to explore the formation of sedimentary styles of being in the world, and the attendant production of ‘bodily tolerances,’ the transgression of which causes suffering. These tolerances, I argue, are a technique of what Foucault identifies as biopower, focussed on the normalisation of bodies. I contrast normalising practices with those considered deviant, using Rosalyn Diprose’s concept of ‘corporeal generosity’ to examine practices of body modification, showing that whilst it has an ethical character, these corporeal gifts cannot be unbound from the political (and economic) valuation of bodies. I argue, therefore, that practices of body modification function as a means of visibly memorialising, in and as the flesh, the gifts of *normal* others, and simultaneously as a way of *forgetting* the gifts of bodies that are othered. Finally, I explore the aneconomic, ethical effects that generosity has upon embodiment, contrasting the memorialising and forgetting involved in modification with the ethical response of alteration, a forgetting-that-matters. The responsible styles of being-in-the-world this forgetting produces challenge the asymmetries in the political valuing of bodies, and permit a response to suffering which reshapes subjectivity, sociality, ethics and politics.

### Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *Suffering Difference: The Ethics and Politics of Modifying Bodies* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Cadwallader', with a stylized, cursive script.

Jessica Robyn Cadwallader

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## Acknowledgements

If there is one thing that this thesis has clearly demonstrated to me, it is the impossibility of recognising the various gifts that have gone into this thesis (not to mention the questionable ethics of attempting to do so). Nonetheless, there are some whose generosity has so altered me that I know without them this thesis could not have been:

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And always, and still, Greg, whose gifts continue to resonate and alter, even after he is gone.



## **Dedication**

For my parents, Robyn and Alan,  
whose remarkable generosity still provokes wonder.





### A Note on Language

As with most feminists engaging with texts, the use of the masculine to designate the universal is not only a continual irritation, but it raises problems for my own theoretical engagements, particularly my representations of the work of other thinkers. In relation to “inherited sexism” in the language of quotations and similar from other theorists, I have selected to retain the author’s words. There are a number of reasons for this, but perhaps most significant is this: I do not wish to allow the presumption that all other identities can be subsumed under the alleged “generality” of “man.” To “correct” conceals the sexism that arose either from earlier works or their translation; the erasure of a sexist history is not its undoing. Thus whilst I do not have the space to address this issue each and every time it is raised, or to play through the consequences of universalising in each case in anything like an adequate manner, I hope that my use of [*sic*] to mark the first use of the male as universal in each quote may create sufficient critical distance that some sense of que(e)ry is sustained.



what freedom's not some under's mere above  
but breathing yes which fear will never no?  
measureless our pure living complete love  
whose doom is beauty and its fate to grow

shall hate confound the wise?doubt blind the brave?  
does mask wear face?have singings gone to say?  
here youngest selves yet younger selves conceive  
here's music's music and the day of the day

are worlds collapsing?any was a glove  
but I'm and you are actual either hand  
is when for sale?forever is to give  
and on forever's very now we stand

nor a first rose explodes but shall increase  
whole truthful infinite immediate us

e.e. cummings

