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‘What am I... for her?’ Feminism and Disability with/in the Postmodern

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Policy at Massey University

Michelle Lunn
1997
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the women who participated in this study. Although you remain anonymous you are the co-authors of this study.
Abstract

A feminist postmodern analysis of the lives of women with physical disabilities is presented in this thesis. Postmodern feminism provides a framework through which the lives of the six women who took part in this study can be understood. Political strategies and interventions are conceptualised and interwoven with these understandings of the participants’ lives. The discursive practices operating to produce the subject position ‘woman with a physical disability’ are described and analysed. It is argued that a postmodern feminist analytical framework is appropriate in this analysis as it is sensitive to the ways in which power works to constitute particular subjects, and alive to the multiplicity and diversity of everyday life.

The production of non-disabledness as the norm and disability as the Other to, or opposite of, this norm is called into question in this thesis. The ways in which this research project, as undertaken by a non-disabled researcher, impacts upon the production of disability as Other, or the question of, ‘what am I... for her?’ is central in this analysis. This thesis examines the question of, ‘what am I... for her?’, in relation to ‘identity’, ‘the body’ and the construction of ‘the self’. A participatory research method, designed to mediate relations of power between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ provides a foundation for this study. This participatory method is designed to insure against appropriation of the voices of the research participants.

This thesis aims to contribute towards the realisation of the aims of disability politics and feminism by making links between the two bodies of knowledge that foster political interventions at all levels of the social network.
Acknowledgments

This thesis records a segment of my own feminist journey. I wish to acknowledge a debt to the rich history of feminist authorship that inspired and encouraged this journey. Feminist authors read in bed in the early 1980's, such as Mary Daly and Robyn Morgan are as much a part of this project as the postmodern feminists of the 1990's, studied, pen in hand, at my desk. In the course of this journey my feminist perspectives have continued to change and develop. The particular perspectives of the women who took part in this study have become a part of my feminist perspectives. Thank you, my journey now continues with an enhanced vision.

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