
In the spring of 1976 a twenty-six year old undergraduate sociology student, Diane DeVries, entered a lecture hall at the University of California, Berkeley to take her place in an introductory course on cultural anthropology. What distinguished her from other students was not only her reliance on an electric wheelchair but the fact that she had no legs and most of her arms were missing. Gelya Frank, a twenty-eight year old teaching assistant, observed the student (“in the fullness of her womanhood”) and made certain assumptions. As she wrote, “my first impressions were of a person with enormous limitations, a victim” (62). “I imagined that she lived at home with her parents in a sheltered and socially isolated household, I supposed that she would never marry or have sex, I guessed she couldn’t even masturbate. In a short time I was proved wrong on all these counts” (2). Thus began a twenty year relationship between Diane DeVries and Gelya Frank which culminated in the publication of Venus on Wheels, a cultural biography which began with the question “what is involved in understanding another person?” (46). Specifically, Frank placed the research question in the broader context of the meaning of disability in American culture, presented within the discourse of American liberalism.

The eldest child of Irene and Kenneth Field, Diane DeVries was born in Denison, Texas in 1950 with an extremely rare congenital condition known to epidemiologists as a “limb reduction deficit.” An international study undertaken by Mastroiacovo, Pierpulo, Bengt Kallen, Knudsen, Lancaster, Castilla, Mutchinik and Robert, published in the journal Teratology in 1992, reported only four cases of infants being born with absence of all four limbs in almost ten million births. Interestingly, three other children were born with quadrilateral limb deficiencies within a two hundred mile radius of Denison, Texas between the years 1953 and 1955. However, Frank was cautioned by Richard Olney of the Centre for Disease Control about the statistical infeasibility of investigating them given that there were no statistical baselines for the local population nor geographic boundaries through which to establish the abnormal incidence of these closely spaced births.

While Diane’s maternal grandmother, a member of a charismatic Christian sect, explained her disability as “the work of the devil” and arranged for members of the Nazarene Church to perform an exorcism shortly after her birth, no known cause was identified for her condition (50). The precise aetiology of quadrilateral limb deficiency is unknown. Frank claims that it probably resulted from a disturbance of limb formation in utero due to “any number of possible environmental or genetic causes, such as vascular pathogenesis (haemorrhage of fetal limb buds)” (188). Consequently, in the
absence of any conclusive explanation, Diane “fashioned her own account of her disability from among competing explanations available in her community, and the wider culture” (50).

As the title suggests, the text Venus on Wheels: Two Decades of Dialogue on Disability, Biography and Being Female in America is a life history informed by both disability and feminist discourse. The text contains three broad arguments: firstly, that the author could “give voice” to Diane DeVries; secondly, that a life history could convey the reality of experience such as Diane’s better than any other kind of reporting; and thirdly, that studying the life of any individual raises the possibility of encountering new ways of structuring the world (11). The methodology for the study was cultural biography, which, unlike conventional historiography, includes ethnographic materials based on prolonged, disciplined, first hand observation, participation in the subject’s life, and reflection. True to the method, and consistent with the tenets of feminism, Frank has also provided a great deal of self-disclosure, including accounts of her anxiety, depression, suicide ideation, and issues related to sexuality and family dysfunction. Meticulously researched and methodologically rigorous, her study extends the theoretical framework for writing life histories as proposed by the anthropologist Dollard. By including new criteria for analysis of data, specifically reflexivity, Frank’s work allows for “a fuller analysis of the cultural processes by which biographical images are both created and propagated” (161). Writing this life history required Frank to reflect critically and to clarify her empathy, projections and transference, a process she refers to as “mirroring.” As she writes: “working with Diane transformed my understanding of my own life and a consideration of how the collaboration may have influenced the life story Diane had to tell” (2).

Essentially, the text is an “historicist construction based on selected facts and features of her life and times guided by various movements and theories written from the perspective of the discourse of American liberalism” (76).

Accordingly, Diane DeVries’ life is a story not only of disability culture, but also of American culture and its transformations. Born in the middle of the twentieth century, her life was both empowered by and an inspiration to newly emergent second wave feminism and the disability rights movement of the mid-1970s. Her goals were the right to fulfill her sexuality, to have meaningful relationships including the right to marry if she chose, and to have a remunerative career. Asserting her fundamental normalcy, Diane’s life is a testament to her resilience and determination to fulfill these goals in the presence of challenges posed by both her gender and her disability. She graduated with a Bachelor degree in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1987 and a Master of Social Work from University of Southern California in 1993. She had many relationships, including a long-term marriage and secured remunerative employment. In 1990 she successfully sued under California law for discrimination after having her employment as a hospital discharge planner terminated after one week and was later employed as
Venus on Wheels is not only a fascinating account of the life of Diane DeVries. It also presents a broad overview of methodological issues in the social sciences, including an analysis of a number of theoretical perspectives including ethnography, anthropology, feminism, Marxism, postmodernism, and psychoanalysis, in terms of their contribution to an understanding of gender and disability in the late twentieth century.

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Drawing on feminist, queer and psychoanalytic theories coupled with a cultural studies approach to classical cinema, White investigates the ways that Hollywood classical cinema in particular constructs our desire. White understands cinema as a public fantasy engaging viewers’ personal and idiosyncratic scripts of desire and identification. She performs deep analyses of various films from the period of 1930 to 1968, specifically during the period when the representation of all forms of sex perversion or any inference to it was explicitly prohibited by the Motion Picture Production Code. With the studios’ consensus this became the major control mechanism over narrative, character interaction, dialogue, mis-en-scene and so on. During this period, therefore, no explicit representations of homosexuality or lesbian characters were permitted.

Her chapter “Reading the Code(s)” provides insightful analysis of the ways that prohibitions can operate as productive in spite of their overt intention to repress. Her delving into the correspondence about the films she analyses gives interesting additional depth to her reading of these texts both within the time of their production and retrospectively from the 1990s. Such correspondence reveals the concern of producers and censors of the time in terms of how seriously they took the idea of not representing any kind of sex perversion. Despite this prohibition, or perhaps because of it, viewers are invited to read some narratives, some characters and some stars as examples of lesbian representation.

“Lesbian Cinephilia” engages with the ways in which filmic texts shape our desires through spectatorship. White shifts the focus to include experiences of self-identified lesbian viewers through anecdotal accounts of their subjective responses to particular stars or narratives. Here she explores and critiques traditional spectatorship theory where the gaze is theorized as male. White challenges this and provides evidence of lesbian visual pleasure and even