
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America* by Gillian Silverman

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Since Benedict Anderson claimed that “community in anonymity is the hallmark of modern nations” (1991, 36), studies in book history have focused on the ability of print media to foster impersonal connections among strangers. In *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*, Gillian Silverman counters this narrative by considering the book “as a technology of intimacy” (19). Silverman draws on an impressive array of textual and contextual evidence to show how “the creation of impersonal community was hardly the most significant aspect of nineteenth-century reading practices” (15). Silverman focuses instead on the book’s ability to foster unique, intense attachments among particular individuals, which she claims is a transhistorical property of print that became particularly important in the rapidly industrialized nineteenth century. By analyzing accounts of reading left in journals, letters, autobiographies, and novels, Silverman shows how nineteenth-century subjects often experienced reading as an opportunity for a type of ecstatic communion.

Silverman’s is a theoretically ambitious study that threatens to take on too many discourses simultaneously. Though Silverman’s book makes an intervention in the field of book history, her argument comes out of debates in psychoanalytic criticism about paranoid and reparative modes of reading. In particular, Silverman’s thinking is indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003) and Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s *Forms of Being* (2008). Sedgwick’s work questions the agonistic model of reading, in which a reader struggles to master a text’s meanings. The paranoid reader, in Sedgwick’s framework, attempts to defend against epistemological surprises and to control her experience of a text, while the reparative reader is open to alterity and to non-binary modes of thinking and feeling. In a similar vein, Bersani and Dutoit argue that psychoanalytic criticism has been too focused on how individual egos are consolidated and defended, and has thus missed the ways in which self-disavowal can allow for a radical openness to difference.

Silverman regrettably does not spend much time unpacking these dense arguments. Instead, her first two chapters attempt to establish an empirical basis for the claim that the act of reading can create profound and surprising bonds between readers, books, and authors. Silverman draws on phenomenology, cognitive science, linguistic history, and book history to establish that different approaches to reading “authoriz[e] and activat[e] different subject positions” for readers, and that some of these positions involve an extreme openness to other

individuals (24). Silverman's search for objective ground in the study of affective connection seems beside the point, especially given how strong her claims about reading in the nineteenth century ultimately are. She goes on to point out that studies of novel reading such as D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) and Nancy Armstrong's *How Novels Think* (2005) have overemphasized the ways in which novels help to discipline and consolidate the modern bourgeois subject, and that our critical paradigms (in which author, text, and reader are kept rigidly separate) contribute to this sense of reading as an agonistic struggle for mastery of a text's meaning.

This observation has far-reaching implications for critical studies of individual authors, and Silverman is at her best in her chapter-long readings of Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and Susan Warner. Silverman argues that Melville studies have focused almost exclusively on "Melville as [a] transgressive literary pioneer" who was opposed to popular sentimental literature (88). But Melville was also interested in the intense personal connections that texts could foster, and Silverman demonstrates that his investment in "author-reader attachment," which she calls "textual sentimentalism," tempers the "staunch individualism expressed by Melville at other times" (85). Silverman provocatively contends that *Pierre*, which is most often read as parody, is in fact more closely related to sentimental fiction than to any mode of literary irony. She argues that this novel uses the trope of incest as a way to imagine "the intensity of author-reader relations," and to picture "subjects bound to one another in deep sympathetic reciprocity" (102). The evidence Silverman uses in this chapter is occasionally a little thin; small passages of Melville's correspondence are made to do much heavy lifting in support of the chapter's claims. Yet this chapter's point is ultimately convincing; Silverman shows that the fantasy of textual communion was a powerful force that did, in some measure, influence an author who was seemingly committed to an ideal of authorship as an individualistic enterprise.

Silverman's fourth chapter is similarly interested in adding nuance to critical discussions of Frederick Douglass's authorial persona. Silverman argues that accounts of Douglass's works have focused exclusively on his struggle to gain authority and self-possession through literacy. While Douglass was obviously invested in authorship as a mechanism of power, Silverman argues, his search for authorial mastery was "consistently tempered by a fantasy of mutuality or author-reader union," particularly with his white readers (106-107). Silverman demonstrates that for Douglass, the textual realm provided a space to imagine more ideal interracial relations than were possible in the phenomenal world. Silverman is aware of the limitations of such an argument when it comes to an author who was a member of a disenfranchised group, and is careful to stress that Douglass's literacy was certainly bound to his struggle for autonomy. Still, she compellingly argues for the complexity of Douglass's understanding of what textual relations could accomplish.

Silverman's discussion of Douglass is often necessarily (and admittedly) speculative; much of her argument focuses on Douglass's unexplained decision

to change his aunt's name from Hester in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to Esther in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and on Silverman's own interpretation of a document that we know Douglass read, the "Dialogue between a Master and Slave" from *The Columbian Orator* (119). In imagining how Douglass might have interpreted this dialogue, Silverman performs a modern type of textual communion with a historically distant reader. This is imaginative, vital scholarship, but it is also provisional and conjectural.

If Silverman's studies of Melville and Douglass challenge the idea of the isolated male author, her final chapter on the popular novelist Susan Warner complicates ideas about self-effacing female authors. Warner pursued demanding programs of reading and writing in order to discipline what she feared was an idle and wayward mind. Silverman examines Warner's "punitive literary practices" to show that this seemingly constraining model of readership in fact activated the reading subject in psychically satisfying ways. Silverman demonstrates that Warner "embraced those [literary] practices that diminished the self while producing emotional connections and physical correspondence with others," and that "this state of self-diminishment importantly allowed for . . . affective communal bonding" (147). As Silverman herself notes, there is nothing particularly groundbreaking in "observations about effacement in the nineteenth-century woman" (125). And yet, this chapter serves as a necessary reminder that politically suspect readerly poses can still be productive and meaningful. The self-effacing nineteenth-century woman could access a type of subjective agency through her very effacement, just as the autonomous nineteenth-century male author could access strong interpersonal bonds through an individualistic act of writing.

Ultimately, this valuable study joins a growing body of work interested in restoring a sense of the variety of possible relations between readers and books in the nineteenth century. As Silverman argues, reception studies have come to frame reading as "fundamentally antagonistic," so that reading becomes a matter of "'poach[ing]' or 'appropriat[ing]' meaning . . . from the author or the established tradition of reception" (16). By focusing on scenes of reading that complicate these models of critique and resistance, Silverman gestures towards a more complicated dialectic of author-reader relations. Like Meredith McGill's work on the transatlantic circulation of unusual print objects, Patricia Crain's studies of the figure of the child reader, and Mary Loeffelholz's examination of groups of female readers, *Bodies and Books* destabilizes our notions of what textual encounters can look like. This scholarship puts our own critical reading practices into a larger historical context, and helps us to rethink where and how affective connections can be formed.

WORKS CITED

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