

REVIEW ESSAY

Relational Reading

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Ronjaunee Chatterjee, *Feminine Singularity: The Politics of Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

Carolyn Dever, *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

TWO recently published books ask the same question: How might we read textual representations of Victorian women by focusing on their relationality, not their separate individuality? Ronjaunee Chatterjee's *Feminine Singularity: The Politics of Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century Literature* and Carolyn Dever's *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field* both stress that multiple genres of Victorian writing depend upon the intimate play of tension and identification among women who are not-quite-one. They enact that idea, however, in rather different ways.

Taken together, these two books highlight what might be one of the biggest shifts in critical thinking in decades: the fall of the individual. Instead of seeking deep psychology in fiction, hunting out subtle clues to characters' buried feeling, critics have become interested in reading characters relationally, particularly female-identified characters. The Enlightenment model of individual autonomous personhood was always presumed masculine (Benhabib). So what does it mean for women to be consigned to a very different world of enmeshed, relational, affective, other-directed modes of being, encouraged not to pursue their own

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best interests but rather to align themselves toward the interests of others?

In feminist criticism, attention to enmeshed female sociality emerged as early as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's famous 1975 article "The Female World of Love and Ritual" but recently animates Alicia Christoff's 2019 study of psychological responsiveness, and, over the past decade or two, has developed in important studies of eighteenth-century ties (Ruth Perry, Adela Pinch, Nancy Yousef) and nineteenth-century affective, erotic, familial, and economic relationships (Mary Jean Corbett, Jill Rappoport, Sharon Marcus, Lenore Davidoff, as well as my own work on the marriage plot and ethics of care). Once we accept relationality as crucial to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female subjectivity, we realize that everything from friendships to gifts to marriages can be read as intimate and often ambivalent acts of mutual negotiation. And once we accord those ties their due importance, we can shift from deep dives into single characters to wider-ranging studies of the texture of those interplays over time and space.

When I originally planned this review essay, I expected to use Chatterjee's *Feminine Singularity* as the theoretical framework for understanding female multiplicity and Carolyn Dever's *Chains of Love and Beauty* as a case study of the women who composed the joint identity "Michael Field." You will not be surprised to hear that these two important critical texts did not fall neatly into the roles to which I had assigned them. They enjoy a richer, more complex interactivity; they each theorize and exemplify their own work; and in the end, in perhaps the best proof of the idea yet, they come up with similar yet not identical models of female subjectivity in relation. In the end I found it most rewarding to seek out their shared elements in order to figure out what techniques might produce successful relational reading.

Dever's monumental study and Chatterjee's bold experimental work have some crucial points of agreement. First, they agree that interactivity extends across literary genres, and they address several of those genres. The big Victorian novel obviously accommodates multiple women, particularly in serial form, but so does Victorian poetry; Michael Field coauthored their poems, and Chatterjee argues that the genre generates anonymous or representative female figures. Life-writing features such juxtapositions through the collagelike intersections of documentary fragments that characterize both Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder* (in Chatterjee) and Michael Field's twenty-nine-volume diary, the focus of Dever's book.

Perhaps most importantly, multiplicity also undergirds the genre in which we write: the critical study. For both Dever and Chatterjee read Victorian texts in conjunction with other items: contemporary films, colonial metaphors, memoirs, flowers, newspaper clippings, marital ceremonies. It is one of the great pleasures of both of these ambitious and exciting volumes that they not only discuss but also produce harmonics and transitions and tensions among many subjects.

Ronjaunee Chatterjee's *Feminine Singularity* explicitly uses this model for its own critical practice. In four concise, informed chapters, Chatterjee glides from nineteenth-century narratives to contemporary work, particularly by people of color, stopping along the way at theoretical and philosophical formations, in order to probe the question of how people imagine their own relationships to others: Do they feel singular, or repeated, or similar? As Chatterjee puts it in her introduction, "we find feminine figures who chafe against a picture of individuation" and instead embrace "what is partial, contingent, and in relation" (1). She is pursuing "a repetition that is not sameness" (87).

In chapters on Lewis Carroll, Charles Baudelaire, Christina Rossetti, and Wilkie Collins, Chatterjee argues for an expansive and alternative construction of feminine subjectivity. While men get assigned the role of the universal and omniscient figure, it is women who occupy a more subtly disturbing subjective field, shifting members of a series, not quite like one another but not differentiated either. Fundamentally relational, such textual figures as Carroll's Alice or Rossetti's Lizzie and Laura or Collins's Marian, Laura, and Anne take up lateral relations, experiencing kinship and serial iterations of the self, not defined by diachronic patriarchal inheritance. Chatterjee's elegant analysis brings in everyone from Kant and Hegel to Jean-Luc Nancy and Donna Haraway to think about female selves in this mode.

To my mind, the most significant contribution of Chatterjee's book is its methodology. Chatterjee courageously breaks genre rules by developing a radically transhistorical and even transnational technique. These nineteenth-century British and French texts get paired with twentieth- and twenty-first-century North American work. She reads Baudelaire alongside Lisa Robertson's *The Baudelaire Fractal* and Manet's painting of Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's lover who was a Black woman; she juxtaposes Christina Rossetti with Maggie Nelson's poem *Jane: A Murder*; and she thinks about representations of Honduras when reading *The Woman in White* (1860). In the epilogue, too, Chatterjee pairs the Creature's half-made female companion in *Frankenstein* (1818) with the

female robots in Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina*. Contemporary theorists of race and gender weave through all the chapters, especially the Alice chapter, which is carefully framed by the work of Hortense Spillers.

Chatterjee is generating these radical juxtapositions to demonstrate a key point. After all, "feminist thought and method needs to be read as singular too: partial, contingent, and always formed in critical relation to the world it seeks to transform" (22). How might one perform a contingent, partial feminist thought and method? By incorporating others, by enfolding the reader into one's own train of thought, enriched as it has been by multiple readings from disparate periods. Such an experience might provide "freedom from existing disciplinary divisions," Chatterjee muses. "This disruption is necessary if there is to be a feminist theoretical conversation involving nineteenth-century literary texts that expands beyond the interests of second-wave white feminist perspectives," a conversation that also shakes loose conventional, neoliberal, literary historical categories (3).

The experience of reading this way is indeed disruptive, but it is also very fluid. In Chatterjee's mind, these texts speak to one another in rich ways, so that the reader becomes quite conscious of tracking the movements of another's mind, following someone else's associations and investments. That is, of course, what reading always involves, but the subjective nature of the endeavor can easily be masked by adherence to conventional groupings. In Chatterjee's case, the idiosyncrasies of the argument force us to be aware of being in a work of literary criticism that is, well, singular: in sync with other books and yet differentiated.

Chatterjee declares this method to be a manifesto for the future: "rather than see these movements and periods as unrelated, we could change the direction and angle of our thinking and begin to take seriously the strangeness of the nineteenth century to envision a liberatory horizon for femininity, for the subject, and perhaps for politics more broadly, grounded in that strangeness" (161). To write athwart and through our period, to create modes of thought that cross centuries and regions—this is a dazzlingly exciting vision.

With Chatterjee's model in mind, we can now turn to Carolyn Dever's remarkable *Chains of Love and Beauty*, a book that shows the rich results of the twenty years of intensive archival research and critical thinking that went into its completion.

In some ways, Dever's work seems like the opposite of Chatterjee's. It is capacious, invested in a single immense source, and deeply historically researched, rather than a brief experimental critical work addressing

dozens of texts while flouting chronological boundaries. Yet the effect of reading them together is to find that Dever's subjects fill out Chatterjee's outlines. Whereas Chatterjee's subjects are sometimes nameless, barely sketched women who function to extend and trouble the limits of the main character, Dever's subjects are profoundly moving, endlessly complex, actual women whose enmeshed lives we can follow in detail over volumes that cover nearly fifty years.

The poets Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, lovers, aunt and niece, and co-poets, merged into the joint persona of Michael Field but without ever losing their separate selves, and that paradox is at the heart of their enormous document. As Dever remarks, "sameness" "provides a vocabulary for the narrative of Michael and Field: as women, as lovers, as members of the same family, as one author" (11). As Michael Field, they were one being, but in the diary, "they are emphatically two: two voices and two bodies, figured in and by two hands. They are two writers sharing notebooks (and a bed, a life, etc.)," and those personalities emerge as "two very different people, not one, encountering each other as much in tension as in unity" (10).

Dever's subject is as fathomlessly complex as any novelistic subject—but it is a relationship, not an individual. The question for the reader of their enormous diary, *Works and Days*, is not how their family and home shaped their central consciousness, but rather how that central consciousness evolved by continually stretching out to the family and home, how the texture of those relations of rejection, introjection, affiliation, idealization, triangulation, allowed the poets to craft their greatest literary achievement: their singular, nonsingular self.

Michael Field write themselves into being in a linear form marked by ongoing years but also in discontinuous, serial chunks; in a genre supposed to be private but in fact intended for publication; in a form supposed to derive from one person but that actually records two people correcting, dictating, and adding to each other's entries, and in a time that spans two centuries and testifies to their odd temporality, both Elizabethan and modern, archaic and precocious.

Dever carefully traces two key mechanisms by which Michael Field constituted themselves. First, they worked to transform their dead into angelic spirits. For Michael Field, love derives from their passionate mutual affinity for the same people in the same shared daily home life. Their other great mechanism was triangulation. Those all-important third members included those beloved dead as well as art critic Bernard Berenson, poet Robert Browning, artist Charles Ricketts, Christ, and,

perhaps above all, their beloved dog Whym Chow. The marriage of Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley required both introjecting their beloved deceased family members and experiencing adoration for someone outside themselves. To be a couple, they had to be a crowd, internally and externally, spiritually and socially.

Such a massive self-narration is highly modernist. Like Proust, like Joyce, the form of their text is the study of the development of the artist over years. But unlike Proust and Joyce, the key moments include things like finding nice mustard pots, worrying about unfashionable hats, getting a pet, grieving for parents, and hosting guests. In that sense, perhaps the novel that it most resembles is Dorothy Richardson's enormous *Pilgrimage*, an autobiographical novel in thirteen volumes exploring a woman's life in the early twentieth century. In their focus on the domestic and familial, then, Michael Field, like Richardson, write the epic of female life in the transition to modernity.

Dever's record of transition, Chatterjee's hope for horizon: both of these texts trouble boundaries in important ways, ways that may teach us new critical techniques. For those of us who want to write relationally, what lessons can we learn from Dever and Chatterjee?

First, genre doesn't matter: the complex relationalities move across poetry, prose, fiction, drama, life-writing, theory. What does matter is to keep moving, to keep adding third figures, more nonsingular types, different years in the diary, alternative texts. Relational reading has velocity. Whether we emulate Chatterjee's fluid interface in which she is constantly invoking other writers, or Dever's deep dive into a gigantic manuscript, we need to see our subjects in relation to one another and also as altering over time. This is neither deep nor surface reading; it is a form of reading that moves over time and space and accommodates all.

Reading relationally also means being aware of ourselves in relation to the text. I was aware of my own outsidership to the texts and transitions in Chatterjee's mind. I was also aware, in Dever's book, of my status as reader of a diary meant for publication. As she explains, "far from serving an intrusive function, the reader of *Works and Days* is the audience that commands the tension of witnessing, that in turn affirms the coupledness of Michael Field. They need to be seen to be believed, and under those terms they invite us in" (16). At the same time, I often wanted to get further outside, to find out how Michael Field looked from, say, Berenson's or Rickett's point of view, or to connect the diary writing more intimately to their lyrics and dramas. If Chatterjee sometimes swept me along before I was ready, Dever sometimes made me linger longer than I

wanted—and in both cases, this experience made me aware of my own expectations for the rhythm of critical work, and my own challenges in adapting it to the texts at hand.

Finally, chronological play is a crucial aspect of relational reading. Whereas Chatterjee moves across centuries as a critical practice, Michael Field did so in their lives. As Dever puts it, “across these situational experiments, I track the complex politics of time, space, and cognition, and argue that Michael Field create—and realize—a strategy for futurity from new materials” (35). Whereas Chatterjee jolts us into recognizing the kinship of Victorian and contemporary texts, Michael Field themselves identified simultaneously as Elizabethan, Victorian, and modern, creating a dissonant temporality that marked them as both archaic and disconcertingly avant-garde.

They are, as I have mentioned, very different kinds of books, but they land on the same themes: temporal skew, nonheteronormative relations, kinship ties. Sometimes, even, they speak to each other. Chatterjee writes that Christina Rossetti’s quest for sisterhood “demonstrates a specific desire for a lyric, feminine singularity that these [marital, heterosexual] pairings can never produce” (94). It was Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley who produced such a lyric sisterhood pairing—and Bradley, in her very first diary volume, defines herself as a poet by alluding to “Goblin Market” (Dever, 47). Chatterjee’s line about “a laterally organized chain of kinship” could speak to Michael Field, enchained as they were with their own sisters, even though she is actually referring to *The Woman in White* (153). *Jane: A Murder* is about a niece’s relation to an aunt and how that reverberates through the family, something that the Cooper/Bradley household certainly knew, and I also thought of *Jane: A Murder* when reading about Cooper’s father, missing and presumed dead, perhaps murdered. In spite of this violence, both books center on the meaning of loving a sister or an aunt, the erotic, familial, and identificatory rhythms set up by finding one who is similar but not the same.

These two works echo each other, and I do mean echo: a single utterance sending out multiple reverberations, reflections, interestingly distorted versions of its original self through time and across space. To read books not as singular but as engaged in a mutual project is to make oneself the kind of space where such echoes resound. Echo was cursed because she pursued Narcissus, the man so enamored of himself that he died staring at his own reflection. No better emblem could be found of the dangers of valorizing unique individuality, the singular

great man, versus the female presence that rebounds everywhere, sending up uncountable new versions of herself.

The relational works of Dever and Chatterjee challenge us to become the kind of critics who prize resonances. I come away from these two studies believing that we should enshrine nonsingularity as a goal for ourselves, not just as a mode of describing historical authors. If we try to write relationally, what would that do to the star system, the cult of the great critic, the sage-on-the-stage model? How might we usher in an academic era in which we prize acknowledgment rather than originality? Can we aim for connectivity rather than disruption, for fruitful juxtaposition rather than siloing eras? These two books help us imagine a liberatory horizon for our own field. Chatterjee and Dever demonstrate that enmeshed personhood is not just a retrospective identification for Victorians but a prospective hope for Victorianists.

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