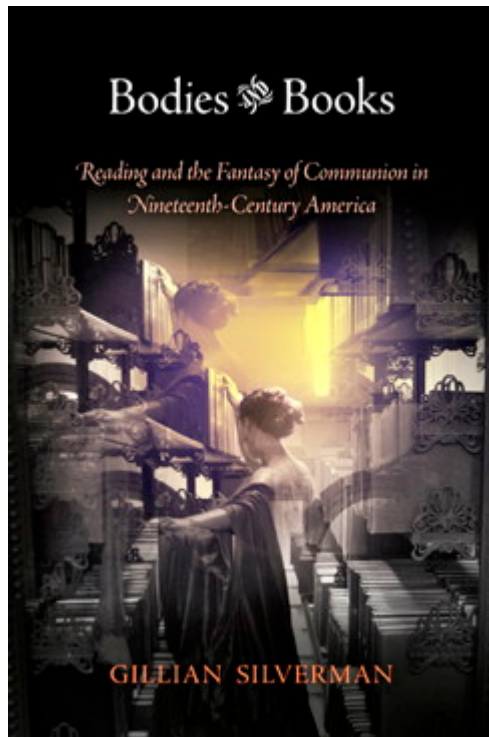


Close Reading



According to *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*, nineteenth-century reading offered rich, often therapeutic fantasies of connection that were more detailed, more corporeal, and more exclusive than has been previously noticed. Rather than the visions of abstract and anonymous community advanced by Benedict Anderson, Stanley Fish, and Michael Warner, Gillian Silverman proposes a model of “communion,” a term meant to indicate a form of connection characterized by exclusivity, intimacy, and physicality (2). Reading, she argues, was not experienced as “creat[ing] broad affiliations along national or demographic lines,” but was valued more concretely for its ability to advance “a heightened connection to a *specific* other”—most often, in the examples she provides, between an author and reader (ix-x). Rather than seeing reading as an imperfect substitute for face-to-face interactions, as a compensatory move aimed at rebuilding connections lost through the atomizing effects of the market revolution, Silverman suggests that reading instead offered the means to even deeper, submersive engagement with “otherwise inaccessible” others—the physically distant, the socially proscribed, even the dead (ix). Drawing at times from psychoanalytic theory, phenomenology, and cognitive studies—and premised on book history’s designation of reading as an encounter with “the sensual reality of the book itself”—*Bodies and Books* argues that the materiality of the book gave rise to an imagination of reading as “bodily merger,” “consubstantiality,” and “mutual ensoulment” and as a redemption of psychic loss (7, x, 19).



Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in*

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To do so, *Bodies and Books* operates at two distinct scales, the broad and the painstakingly close. The first two chapters propose broad models of reading by amassing and then quickly surveying evidence of nineteenth-century reading practices—the letters of the well- and not-known, treatises on reading, conduct books, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Henry David Thoreau’s “Reading” from *Walden* (1854), Mary Austin’s 1932 autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, etc. From such evidence, Chapter 1, titled “Railroad Reading, Wayward Reading,” develops two distinct models of reading that Silverman argues emerged in response to antebellum industrial change, and particularly to the rise of the railroad and the voluminous increase of printed texts. “Railroad reading” names the highly disciplined, instrumental, time-bound model of reading recommended in the pages of conduct manuals. In letters and journals, however, many readers described a practice Silverman calls “wayward reading,” a more pleasurable, time-wasting pursuit devoted not to the consolidation of the self but to its imagined merger with authors. The second chapter, “Books and the Dead,” offers another perspective on author-reader communion by arguing that nineteenth-century readers perceived books as animate things, not repositories of “cold type” or “‘dead things in stiff bindings,’” that fostered connection with dead authors (66, 51). Noting the resonances between the discourses of spiritualism and reading, Silverman argues that reading did not seek to replicate face-to-face interactions, but instead took the paranormal for its paradigm, a more appropriate register in which to understand how books might come alive, the dead might come close, and communion between author and reader might be achieved. In these first chapters, Silverman is concerned with reading writ large: her analysis is not tied to particular genres, genders, races, localities, or ages, as is often the case in more deeply historical studies. Instead, to demonstrate both that these imaginations of reading circulated broadly through nineteenth-century culture and that union, not difference or individuality, was readers’ goal, Silverman suspends the identifying markers that might tie these imaginations more firmly to time and place. Authors, readers, and texts therefore circulate promiscuously, if a bit haphazardly, through these pages.

After the broad survey of these opening chapters, the final three chapters constitute a dramatic shift in scale and focus, as they plunge into discrete case studies that examine the intricate imaginations of reading and writing found within literary texts while paying less attention to audiences outside the text. Chapter 3, “Textual Sentimentalism: Incest and the Author-Reader Bond in Melville’s *Pierre*,” offers one of the most cogent interpretations of Melville’s novel available in scholarship today by deftly accounting for many of the novel’s most bizarre features—its bending and twisting of language, the incest that saturates it, and the spectacular nature of its commercial and critical failures. Silverman positions *Pierre* as attempting to resolve the conflict between “Melville’s acute desire for literary originality” and “his equally consuming preoccupation with sympathetic, intercorporeal experience,”

which he believed would be found not in a mass readership but in a select group of readers attuned to his genius (85, 86). In Silverman's argument, the incest that runs riot in this novel—most notably in the sham marriage between the protagonist Pierre Glendinning and his half-sister Isabel Banford—corresponds to a vision of authorship that can be both original and profoundly connected, for incest advances intimate connections while resisting conformity and the replication of a stifling status quo. So might authorship allow for communion with readers without succumbing to the imitative quality of popular prose.

In this chapter, Silverman labels the intense author-reader bond that Melville describes and desires in *Pierre* "textual sentimentalism," but that term is not applied to the similarly intense bonds that characterize other reading relationships throughout *Bodies and Books*, nor to the subject of the fifth chapter, one of the most sentimental of nineteenth-century books, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). Indeed, the general absence of the mediating terms of literary history, including sentimentalism and sensationalism, contributes to the polarity of scale in *Bodies and Books*, while raising the question of whether the prominence of these genres in the nineteenth century contributed to the fantasies of reading that Silverman catalogs.

Chapter 4, "Outside the Circle: Embodied Communion in Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative," covers familiar territory. Silverman argues here that Douglass perceived reading and writing as embodied practices and, consequently, as a way of drawing physically close to a northern white readership—not all of that readership, but to "a select group of sympathetic readers, whom he imagines as psychic and bodily extensions of himself" (105). The pursuit of this argument follows digressive paths, including a discussion of Douglass's relationship with literacy and Sophia Auld, the mistress and mother-figure who began to teach him to read, with a detour through the family romance theory of Jacques Lacan, and an extended consideration of why Douglass changed his aunt's name from Hester in the 1845 *Narrative* to Esther in the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The latter point includes the claim—repeatedly acknowledged to be speculative—that Douglass changed his aunt's name after reading *The Scarlet Letter* (1852) out of a conscious or unconscious desire to divorce his Hester from an association with Hester Prynne's errant sexuality. As the chapter's argument winds along these paths, we do not glimpse the white readers with whom Douglass imagined himself to be so profoundly, radically connected. In this chapter, *Bodies and Books'* often implicit tension between fantasy and embodiment, imagination and materiality becomes more striking, as the communion that Silverman argues they combine to achieve never fully materializes.

Chapter 5, titled "'The Polishing Attrition': Reading, Writing, and Renunciation in the Work of Susan Warner," argues that Warner disciplined her reading practices—limiting the time she spent reading for pleasure, forcing herself to read more difficult material, and trying to remain still as she read for hours on end—to paradoxically heighten her appreciation of reading's pleasures. For Warner, reading's satisfactions were obtained through self-

regulation: embodiment is experienced through the bodily aches that follow from keeping still, and the letter read after a long wait offers a deeper thrill. Silverman also traces the link between asceticism and pleasure in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, in which the protagonist Ellen Montgomery's initially unruly reading practices are disciplined through religious devotion: her "Bible lust" becomes "Bible love" (140). While books are most often understood in this study as simple repositories of text—or of their authors—the material book re-enters to great effect in this chapter, as Silverman traces the pleasure Warner (and Ellen) took in the materiality of novels and Bibles, reveling in the outline of a book felt through a Christmas stocking or agog over gilt and colored leather bindings. This case study, as well as the two preceding chapters, will reward those interested in the specific texts that Silverman examines. However, while each chapter traces how particular authors understood reading as offering fantasies of communion, their insights specify but don't further develop the strain of reading that Silverman argues was so endemic and valued in the nineteenth century. The connection between the central argument of Silverman's book and its expression in these final chapters therefore often seems attenuated.

Nevertheless, *Bodies and Books* offers a valuable supplement to the models of reading that condition our understanding of historical and present-day reading practices. Dramatically shifting the scale of affiliations that reading might create from publics or nations to, for the most part, dyads of authors and readers, from communities to communion, allows us to look through the eyes of individual, nineteenth-century readers at the books and the people they saw through them and to reconsider how impersonal the mechanism of print was perceived to be. However, something is also lost in this dramatic shift in scale. In building a model of reading as intimate communion, Silverman suspends a consideration of how affiliations develop among groups of readers, large and small. If one problem with theoretical models of print publics is that they ask reading to do a lot of work—even creating nations—perhaps Silverman is asking reading to do too little by providing a vision of reading that doesn't allow for communities beyond the scale of the paired reader and author.

While Silverman positions herself against the anonymity and abstraction that characterize theoretical models of print publics, those qualities nonetheless infiltrate the author-reader dyad at the center of her study and, in some measure, make possible its fantasies of intimate and exclusive communion. In the author-reader relationships that occupy much of the book, we often see the imagination of communion originating from author or reader, but we rarely see an answering imagination that would confirm that relation: authors and readers therefore remain anonymous to each other. When communion between readers receives mention, that communion does achieve more material expression, but isn't created by a shared experience or imagination of reading. Instead, reading becomes the occasion to strengthen or maintain relationships that already exist: the sympathy between Hawthorne and Melville is strengthened by Hawthorne's appreciation of *Moby-Dick*, and the Warner sisters bond over books.

Indeed, while the title of Silverman's book names two material entities—bodies and books—her emphasis falls more surely on the rich, detailed, satisfying imaginations to which bodies and books gave rise. Silverman argues that the ability of books to spur the imaginative collapse of real distances (even the separation between the living and the dead) enabled reading to play a therapeutic, valued role. *Bodies and Books* therefore contributes a resolute focus on the importance of readers' imaginations to their own satisfactions, and it also deftly brings that focus into the present. Silverman's epilogue takes up the question of how historical practices of reading can illuminate how we read today—including the digital reading experience in which you, dear reader, are currently engaged. Her welcome attempt to loosen academic reading's stranglehold on how we understand and value reading surfaces throughout *Bodies and Books*. Scholarly work, Silverman points out, depends on a model of reading characterized by poaching, resistance, and suspicion and "hinges on our ability to differentiate ourselves from the text and its prior receptions ..." (16). Practicing this kind of reading might cause us to miss—or misinterpret—the vision of reading as intense and intimate, spiritual and bodily, that was so common and so valued in the nineteenth century—and today. Among its other achievements, *Bodies and Books* draws attention to the gap between the models of reading that premise critical writing and those that offer other deep, sustaining satisfactions, making the resonant point that there is more than one way to close read.

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