

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Ronjaunee Chatterjee. *Feminine Singularity: The Politics of Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 250 pp.

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<1>In discussions of theories of identity and identity politics, identity is often defined through difference and similarity. The violence of identity-making is grounded on notions of self and forms of recognition. Ideologies and discourses conceive of those who “count” and those who don’t; those who belong and those who are made abject. Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *Absentees: On Various Missing Persons* explains that cultures officially recognize themselves through the process of collective “counting,” that is, through the determination of numbering their quantity. In his discussion of William Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” Heller-Roazen recognizes that counting of even a small number of persons is fraught with uncertainty (219). In a similar fashion, in *Feminine Singularity: The Politics of Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Ronjaunee Chatterjee finds that the parameters that make one a subject and individual are “multiple, fractured and contested” (1). Chatterjee’s *Feminine Singularity* centers girlhood and the feminine through sameness and difference, and offers diverse intersections of subjecthood by reading the work of Lewis Carroll, Charles Baudelaire, Christina Rossetti, and Wilkie Collins alongside contemporary theory, third-wave feminism, and Black feminist thinkers.

<2>Similar to Heller-Roazen’s approach, Chatterjee’s study asks what makes “anyone a one?” (8). While Heller-Roazen’s comparative approach charts the missing, absent, and dead in global literature, law, and culture, Chatterjee locates instances of feminine singularity in Western nineteenth-century literature as she formulates a feminine ontology, asking the persistent feminist question “How do we imagine a feminist world without collapsing into the universal female ‘we’?” (8). Reminding me of Barbara Johnson’s *The Feminist Difference* (1998), which also includes a chapter on Baudelaire and refracts historical literature with contemporary Black writers and thinkers, *Feminine Singularity* finds space-time singularities generate opportunities to question gender, race, and difference (18). With this

framework, Chatterjee creates a fresh lens with which to reconsider femininity and racial difference, albeit largely with male (white) writers and theorists. Arguing for a mathematical, serial approach to feminine singularity across literary genres, and locating feminine singularity through *similarity*, *Feminine Singularity* seeks to unsettle how we define and categorize identity and subjectivity. Working with post-Kantian philosophies of subjecthood and identity, Chatterjee resituates the liberal subject by focusing on “what is partial, contingent, and in relation, rather than what is merely ‘alone’” (17).

<3>Chatterjee’s wealth of theoretical and philosophical references and allusions is adroit: from Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy, and Spivak; to queer theorists such as Jose Esteban Muñoz, Leo Bersani, and Judith Butler; to Black theorists such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe. This toolkit equips Chatterjee with the destabilising and upending authority to undiscipline and desegregate Victorian studies. And by taking up “children’s literature” such as the Alice books and Rossetti’s work, identity-formation and the city in Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, and closing with an analysis of whiteness, race, and sisterhood in Wilkie Collins’s sensation novel *The Woman in White*, *Feminine Singularity* provides an engaging, provocative, and at times jolting account of subjectivity.

<4>Choosing the Alice books for the opening chapter grounds Chatterjee’s astute interpretation of the significance of numbering and counting as she addresses Alice’s persistent question “Who am I?” In places, the reader can get lost in the litany of theoretical references, but this style also reflects *Through the Looking-Glass*’s dizzying references to counting and Alice’s search for feminine singularity in girlhood. With this in mind, the reader shouldn’t expect a close reading of the Alice books; Chatterjee is using counting as a conceptual framework, reading the Red and White Queens, for instance, as representative of the “problem of the nonoriginary and nonessential ‘one’” (54). Rejecting a feminine collectively, Alice “seeks other affinities, other ones and twos” (54). This chapter also references Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” and similar to Heller-Roazen’s reading, argues that the poem’s pattern of counting “indexes several oppositions, including the blurring of absence and presence, a rural nostalgia versus an unimaginative urban count, and even and odd numbers” (38). Inspiring is Chatterjee’s reading of Carroll’s queens together with Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” and Hortense Spiller’s girlhood (“All the Things You Could Be...”), in order to “upend femininity,” putting into question the “myths of essential origins, of identity, and of counting ‘one’” (55). In the end, Chatterjee argues that Alice isn’t limited by math, logic, or destabilization; she finds subjectivity in singularity.

<5>Chapter Two takes a sharp turn to Charles Baudelaire's poetry as it explores a lyric singularity "untethered to aloneness or singleness" (23). This seems to be the outlier among the four chapters as there isn't a consistent continental, comparative literary approach to the volume. By reading poems of the city from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Chatterjee suggests that "a form of singularity crystallizes in his work that refuses classification under the broader tenets of urban capital and political liberalism" (23). Closely reading enumeration ("one" and "two" in terms of selfhood) in poems such as "To a Passerby," Chatterjee argues that a gendered difference is signalled by the lyric voice, and creates a portal to understanding poetic selfhood, "sexual asymmetry," and noncoincidence. The next section's analysis of "The Seven Old Men" and "The Little Old Ladies" (from *Fantômes parisiens*) reveals that a hollow, dilapidated patriarchy is replaced "by an approach to modernity that can be read as only singular and feminine" (69). The last section of the chapter intersects Baudelaire and Édouard Manet's painting of Baudelaire's mistress Jeanne Duval (of part Haitian descent), with Lisa Robertson's novel *The Baudelaire Fractal* (2020) which includes a description of Manet's painting. This discussion is brief but Chatterjee's purpose is powerful: to reinforce her reading that Baudelaire's work asserts a "bizarre" beauty, "and therefore singular, subject to transformation, and resistant to convention" (83). In this chapter, feminine singularity is defined as not having an origin; it has no center or core and can't be fixed or erased. Chatterjee's refraction of texts locates a "shared interest in radicalizing the aesthetic to explode it, and to look for different, illiberal ways of inhabiting subjectivity" (89).

<6>The third chapter returns to the subjecthood of girls, and examines affinities between nameless girls in Christina's Rossetti's work, charting sororal forms of kinships and sameness in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and her lesser-known collection of children's stories *Speaking Likenesses*. Finding singularity in sisterhood, and tracing Rossetti's poems that count, Chatterjee compounds these fascinating readings with discussions of race (putting Rossetti in context with the Indian Rebellion, for example). Surprising, is what is absent in the discussion of "Goblin Market." Here Chatterjee had a fuller opportunity to engage not only Laura and Lizzie's sisterhood and sameness, but also the incestuous and queer readings of the poem which could contribute to a reading of queer singularity. Notably, the chapter briefly refracts Rossetti's work with Maggie Nelson's memoir-poem *Jane: A Murder* (2005), uncovering the intermingling of women, female relatives, and the creation of singularity in gender likeness. Chatterjee argues that in its consideration of "sisterhood," Nelson's work dampens likeness's generative powers. This speaks to *Feminine Singularity's* larger theoretical aim which uncovers the "paradoxical mode" (14) of conceiving a feminine self through likeness. For Chatterjee,

nineteenth-century literature offers new models for the vexed conception of likeness in contemporary writing, locating this dynamic in the work of Lisa Robertson, Angela Carter, and others.

<7>The last chapter engages Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, a foundational sensation novel housing Gothic elements and tropes, a through-line from the previous chapter (though Chatterjee doesn't fully explain or analyze Gothic singularity). Chatterjee's focus is on the novel's half-sisters who "represent forms of singularity precisely because potential likeness is exactly what reveals their differences...which cannot, under patriarchy, be reproduced" (153). This left me questioning the reproducibility of the sensation novel itself. How is its form nonsingular? Are sensation's similarities the source of its differences? Another line of thinking that could have perhaps been specifically addressed is the history of queer readings of the novel (from D.A. Miller on). While the chapter takes up filial relationships and the patriarchal family, it doesn't address the characters' potential queerness or the queer family situated at the novel's end. Most insightful is the chapter's reading of race and whiteness and masculine singularity, themes Chatterjee connects to "the colonial and white 'macrostructure'...that buttresses all Victorian novels render[ing] it impossible to read blank spaces and white girls outside of the racial order shored up by that structure " (155). Acknowledging the "overlapping currents of violence" necessary to forge nineteenth-century singularity, the chapter closes with a hopeful vision of "serial, collective freedom" (155) as an alternative future for the sensation novel.

<8>The book concludes with a brief Epilogue that connects Alex Garland's 2004 film *Ex Machina* with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community grounded in plural singularities from his essay "Literary Communism." This refraction of AI with Shelley makes narrative sense, as it bookends with Chapter One which discusses Haraway's invocation of a "cyborg Alice." Unraveling "racial hierarchies that subtend Ava's particularized model of gender," Chatterjee claims that Shelley's Creature "articulates the truth of existence as a kind of being-in-common...that eludes identitarian myths of the individual" (159). Touching upon posthumanism, race, whiteness, and reproduction, the Epilogue refracts the film with the novel to demonstrate how the past and future are in dialogue. Realizing that this is a brief afterward, and that the larger project focuses on the figurative, I wish that Chatterjee had fully engaged queer and gender theory, not only in the Epilogue but throughout the volume. We are left asking how is the Creature's singularity queer, but in terms of the book's broader point, how is queer a type of singularity? Despite these lingering questions, this is a powerful conclusion to the theoretically sophisticated volume which successfully and insightfully charts

a vision to help us rethink racial and gendered subjectivity not only in Victorian studies but in current Western culture which despite its historical ideology of individuation, continues to be defined by otherness, violence, and difference.

### **Works Cited**

Heller-Roazen, Daniel. *Absentees: On Variousy Missing Persons* (New York: Zone Books, 2021).