

Reception, Difference, and the 'Documentary-Collage'

Manina Jones. *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing*. Buffalo, N.Y., Toronto, Hertfordshire, U.K.: University of Toronto Press, 1993. viii + 198 pp.

Manina Jones's new study provides a useful summary of a wide range of criticism about the re-contextualization of historical texts in contemporary writing. It also contributes some interesting insights into a number of English Canadian texts written over the last twenty-five years, while managing to organize, subsume, and simplify various divergent theoretical positions. Jones makes some difficult theoretical formulations accessible to readers who might be without an extensive background in recent critical thought. The book would make an ideal resource for an upper year undergraduate, and a useful supplement for readers already familiar with the literary and theoretical texts in question. Of course, the danger in a book like this is over-simplification, but Jones manages to make clear and accurate summaries of complicated ideas without being reductive, and without sacrificing complexity.

Stylistically, Jones follows the common poststructural trick of fragmenting words into components: poem and source text are "reverse-ible" (53); faces are "de-scribed" (132); and documentary-collage is an "alterna(rra)tive project" (138). Jones uses this by now standard device in an amusing manner, and avoids the tediousness that can result from its overuse. On the surface, the large body of research that Jones has collected appears to carry on an intertextual dialogue that might be read as formally consistent with the nature of collage. Yet these quoted intertexts do not subvert each other; rather, the continual juxtaposition of critical and theoretical texts is used to support authoritative claims. While one might desire a monologic argument in a critical study, the text is not open to multivalency of meanings that Jones argues for the documentary-collage as a genre.

Unfortunately the book's title, *That Art Of Difference*, is overly vague, especially given the text's frequent use of poststructural theory. For Jones, difference is inscribed when the formal strategy

of recontextualizing historical documents subverts the authority of both the writer and the reader, thereby "opening a gap in authoritative speech for the circulation of alternative discourses" (19). The active rereading "put into play by formal repetition, with a *difference*" (19) brings about a negotiation between writer, reader, and historical material. Jones's *difference* is based on Bakhtin's early conception of the dialogic relations that exist among inserted genres "such as letters, found manuscripts, parodies of high genres, and parodically reinterpreted citations" (14). Reading documentary-collage in terms of the manner in which these disparate genres subvert one another's authority is certainly tenable, although Jones does not account for Bakhtin's more radical developments of dialogism. In "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" (1959-1961), he writes that "even direct authorial speech is filled with the recognized words of others" (115); in the later Bakhtin, dialogic relations "are always present, even among profoundly monologic speech works" (125). The dialogue — and the difference — are always in existence, and for this reason the term difference has become too broad to be useful, especially if we consider the frequent citations to poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, and Foucault that run through this text. Is not one of the central tenets of poststructuralism the notion that meaning (or lack of meaning) is composed according to differential relationships between signifiers, since signifiers both defer to and differ from other signifiers? If the texts analyzed by Jones make up an art of difference, what type of text would not be an art of difference? How would one construct an art of in-difference? Is there an art of sameness?

Jones clarifies her object of study by proposing the term "documentary-collage" as a label for the type of writing that makes citation its central gesture. The term "documentary" is borrowed from the vocabulary of film analysis, and the term "collage" stems from the visual arts, where it has been associated with "fragmentation and radical recontextualization" (14). The book is especially useful for its survey of the history of the documentary form in Canada from the early days of the National Film Board, through Dorothy Livesay's important 1969 article "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," to more recent writings on documentary poetry by Robert Kroetsch, Stephen Scobie, Frank Davey, and Barbara Goddard (among others). Jones presents concise and reliable summaries of these important critical texts. The text's survey of the development of the documentary-collage as

a genre is also valuable, especially as a guide for readers who seek a tradition in which they might situate some of the individual writers of the genre. Beginning with the post World War I Dadaist "ready-made" or *objet trouvé*, a form that questioned the status of aesthetic creation by posing problems of artistic definition, Jones uncovers the relationships between found art and literature. "Ready-made" art objects were commonplace objects that were given a title and displayed as art, such as Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (a snow shovel) or *Fountain* (a urinal). While Jones does not provide any clear examples of Dadaist literature, she claims that Duchamp made an integral link between language and visual art through the use of puns and word play. "For Duchamp," she writes, "language itself is seen as a found object that produces multiple 'ready-made' interpretations" (26). Her reading (or visioning) of Duchamp is consistent with established criticism on the subject, although the inclusion of a Dadaist found poem would certainly clarify her discussion, especially for readers who are not overly familiar with early modernist visual art. Jones's historical narrative next moves to the neo-Dadaist movements of the 1950s and 1960s with citations to the found poetry of John Robert Colombo, F.R. Scott, and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. The found poetry of these three writers is placed within the social and political contexts of Canada during the 1960s. This survey provides an excellent guide for further, more detailed research, and gives Jones a good starting point for the discussion of the contemporary documentary-collage, a genre that uses elements of the found poem and combines them with other literary forms. By focusing on examples from several different types of writing — including lyric, long poem, drama, novel, and prose poem — Jones suggests that the documentary-collage places clear-cut generic categories in question.

The texts studied are drawn from a familiar syllabus: Robert Kroetsch's *The Ledger* (1975), Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), James Reaney's *Sticks and Stones* from *The Donnelly's* trilogy (1983), Lionel Kearns's *Convergences* (1984), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1983), and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988). For the most part, each of these texts is situated accurately in terms of its critical reception, and then developed by Jones in an engaging manner. Kroetsch's *The Ledger*, for example, is analyzed as an economic exchange between collaged fragments and personal annotation, a formal strategy that Jones reads as a means to incite the reader's ambivalence about the monologism of received historical discourse. She writes that *The Ledger's* represented account

is a repository of both financial and literary 'deposits.' It registers the historically given quality of inherited language, but its give-and-take structure also implies that the language's reader/heir must contribute to the (interpretation of the) historical record, participating in a discursive *exchange* with past writing.

(58)

Jones foregrounds the dialogue that takes place among writer, documentary-collage, and reader in each of the texts she examines. However, the study does not merely push these texts through the reader-response machine in a mechanical way, for it deftly brings out the subtleties and individual characteristics of the writer-text-reader dialogue in each specific case.

Particularly interesting is Jones's analysis of Billy's fictional trial in Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. After discussing the role of photographs and their inability to document the "truth" about Billy's career, Jones points to the testimony of Paulita Maxwell, a character witness who describes a photograph that is not reproduced in Ondaatje's text:

Paulita Maxwell's account describes the way the excluded photograph 'constructs' Billy: '*The picture makes him rough and uncouth*' (19). Her own version of Billy is quite different, and, as an 'eyewitness account,' seems at first to supersede the photograph: '*his face was really boyish and pleasant*' (19). That testimony is itself, however, equivocal, subject to its own interpretive agenda. The phrasing of the complete quotation subtly suggests that it is not the objective, unmediated expression on Billy's face that was boyish and pleasant, but '*The expression of his face*,' Paulita's expression of it, perhaps, in her own description. (79)

Jones sets up extremely close readings of the poem, as in this passage, and then reassembles those close readings into a coherent theoretical framework. By calling attention to Paulita's re-interpretation of Billy within the poem, she demonstrates the *Collected Works*'s lack of a single authoritative voice. For Jones, this lack orients the reader's reception of meaning, since the untrustworthy documentary sources ensure that both the reader and the writer exist in a relative space without recourse to empirical truths: "the poem's reader cannot assume a position of absolute authority since she or he acts both as judge and 'conspirator' in the production of the narrative" (77).

Reaney's *Sticks and Stones* is considered by Jones in terms of the link formed between its reception and its use of collage technique, a device that undermines "the dramatist's traditional position as originating, imaginative subject" (91). For Jones, this de-centred approach makes the audience participate in the construction of meaning, since viewers must evaluate and dialogue with several divergent narratives. While this may be the case, her claim that the play's multi-styled and multi-voiced scenes refuse "to offer narrative as a consumable product" (102) is highly questionable. *Sticks and Stones* performs a carnivalesque disruption of the Donnelly story, but I would argue that it is still a literary and dramatic commodity. The process-oriented dialogism of the documentary-collage is applauded by Jones for its subversion of historical discourse, yet the economic and social structure that supports and legitimates this type of writing is not at all called into question. Is there, perhaps, a problematic relationship between the academic institutionalization of politically "subversive" writing, and the absolutely pervasive cognitive and economic power structures that make this type of acritical study possible?

In *Obasan*, Kogawa constructs a collage of letters, personal narratives, and government documents, a technique that Jones reads as a means to interrupt the "classic or expressive realist illusion of complete, coherent reality" (122). Jones ties this device to postmodern writing's formal and political problematizing of traditional narrative structures (123). Yet the assimilation of *Obasan* into postmodernism is a somewhat debatable effort; as Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin remark in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the absorption of texts by writers from cultures who have been dominated by the West into the literary category of postmodernism

invokes a neo-universalism which reinforces the very European hegemony which these works have been undermining or circumventing. Thus the so called 'crisis of (European) authority' continues to reinforce European cultural and political domination, as the potential relativization of European systems of thought acts through such labelling once again to make the rest of the world a peripheral term in Europe's self-questioning.

(173)

Nevertheless, Jones's argument that the novel presents an alternative history to established official history, an alternative that is written on the textual bodies of its characters, is definitely

supportable. The gruesome disfigurement and death of the central character's mother after the atomic blast at Nagasaki is read by Jones as a bodily re-inscription of history. This narrative occurs in a letter written in Japanese and translated for Naomi, the central character, who is unable to read the language of her parents. Jones writes:

Naomi's mother is literally *disfigured*. She is, as horrible as it may sound, de-faced, her flesh is eaten away. She has also been dis-figured, displaced from figuration, from signification, because her story, like the story of the Japanese-Canadians, has been suppressed; it is in excess of the recuperative structures of monologic historical narrative. Even this climactic telling, however, is itself an enigmatic displacement that resists finality. Nesan's face is accessible only as type-face. (137)

What might appear on the surface to be merely facetious wordplay and punning by Jones is actually a sobering reminder about the repressive effects of monologic historical discourse. As in the other texts discussed in this book, Jones uncovers the way that collage fragments place the relationship between writing, power, history, and interpretation under scrutiny.

There is much to be admired in this book, yet it does leave a couple of questions unanswered. Representations of the body are foregrounded by Jones in her study of Kogawa and Marlatt, but not in any of the texts by male writers, even when those texts contain a significant amount of body imagery. Why? Also, of the six writers discussed in the book, three work on the west coast, and one lives and writes on the prairies. Is there a regional basis to documentary-collage? This question is touched on briefly by Jones in her discussion of Kearns's relationship to the TISH group, but it is not adequately answered. However, these questions are minor, and I would recommend the study for several reasons, including its interesting negotiation of research and theory, its lucid style, and its accessibility.

Works Cited

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