

## Review of Gregory Jones-Katz's Deconstruction: An American Institution

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Review of Gregory Jones-Katz's *Deconstruction: An American Institution*, Chicago UP, 2021

Few literary methods invite hyperbole and hysteria as much as deconstruction. Labeled an invasive reading method imported from Europe, a foreign-born assault, naysayers have portrayed deconstruction as nihilistic, subjective, and anti-humanist. Deconstructing a text apparently undermines, threatens, distorts, dismantles, and trashes not just a literary text, but criticism itself, the humanistic tradition, and the moral, intellectual, and political foundations of western civilization. Gregory Jones-Katz refreshes our memory of this subversive reading practice in *Deconstruction: An American Institution*, an intellectual and institutional history of the development of reading methods rooted to what we often call the Yale School.

The title misleads to a degree. Jones-Katz does not suggest that deconstruction is, in fact, an American institution. Instead, he explores the “complex intellectual-institutional matrix in America—the sites, settings, situations, individuals, groups, and traditions—from which deconstruction emerged and how particular conditions of possibility helped it become a distinct practice in its own right” (6). He goes beyond what other intellectual histories have ignored by

examining “the domestic institutions, publications, class experiences, conferences, pedagogical programs, and philosophical and literary-critical practices” (5). Finely grained, this journey traces deconstruction’s presence on American soil, and the story is really one of consolidation and dispersion, a gathering of fellow travelers and their ultimate dissemination.

Jones-Katz begins his exploration by discussing fissures in undergraduate literary education at Yale. With roots in the tumultuous 1960s, a few Yale professors question literature’s “sacred immutability,” its distance from contemporary issues, its isolation from other disciplines and discourses. They developed Literature X, a course that avoids positivist, sociohistorical, and formalist approaches and instills instead a “sensitivity to literature’s cross-cultural and transtemporal presence by transforming all cultural objects into a species of fiction” (28).

Ultimately, Lit X would “train students to dismantle the hierarchical oppositions between high and low, prose and poetry, and literary and nonliterary in order to focus on literature itself” (30).

Literary texts are no longer objects of veneration, but a sign system that levels forms of signification and draws attention to their own self-reflective gestures. This path leads to a form of intense close reading, but literature’s connection to real life, in the here and now, has to do with fiction making and narrativizing our lives. In short, written with precision and imagination, literary texts can be extraordinary, but Literature X maintains that literature is also ordinary, for it permeates our everyday life. Lit X seeks to foreground that pervasiveness by enlarging the definition of a “text” and undermines “the harmonic singularity and autonomy of the literature” (8), thus laying the foundation for more radical and subversive reading methodologies.

In his second chapter, Jones-Katz complicates the familiar and tidy narrative that Jacques Derrida's 1966 symposium presentation at Johns Hopkins plants deconstruction on American soil. Instead, Jones-Katz argues that this origin story tends "to obscure the foundational contributions that a group of vanguard literary critics made to the history of deconstruction" (65). He reminds us that New Criticism turns from extratextual realities to focus on literary forms. This emphasis on the text as an autonomous linguistic object enriched by irony and paradox is familiar territory, and we learn again that New Criticism fits the time period: thousands of GIs are enrolling in universities, and they bring an elementary sense of context and background knowledge. Formalism empowers them because they only need to focus on the text, a "monadic, self-enclosed, hermetic linguist form" (69). While Jones-Katz draws attention to a host of players, he foregrounds the importance of Paul de Man whose laser-like focus on a text's contradictory nature shaped American deconstruction. Jones-Katz introduces other readers as well. Influenced by phenomenology, J. Hillis Miller reads with an eye on the text as an expression of author's subjective experience. The relationship among consciousness, text, and historical context preoccupies Geoffrey Hartman. Together, these scholars "pressed against the strictures and constraints of established literary-critical practice in America" (89), sowing the seeds of deconstruction. Jones-Katz introduces Derrida more prominently in this chapter, and notes his "close attention to the linguistic contradictions that subverted an author's goals" (99). Having introduced the major players, Jones-Katz explains how a series of conferences, symposia, and retreats, as well as institutional expansion and the waning influence of New Criticism, created opportunities for new forms of literary criticism.

In Chapter Three, Jones-Katz focuses on how the Yale School institutionalizes deconstruction as a mode of reading. De Man and company “highlighted a text’s figurative language and linguistic devices, often to show how a Möbius-strip-like paradox or contradiction subverted said text’s hierarchies of meaning” (126). Jones-Katz again describes de Man’s contributions in particular, but he adds Harold Bloom to the mix, noting his keen interest in a “psychoanalytically informed attention to the figural dimensions of the text” (152). The chapter describes the demise of Johns Hopkins as a *loci* of activity surrounding literary theory, the malaise of many whom deconstruction threatens, and the presence of a particular style of “rhetorical reading” in the classroom. We gain an imitate sense, thanks to syllabi and assignments, of the pedagogical project at Yale, and Jones-Katz returns to Literature X, but also describes Literature Y and Z. Jones-Katz ends on a dour note. We read of deconstruction’s heyday in Yale’s comp lit department, but we also learn about fissures in the group, discontent within the discipline, and a degree of disenchantment among its disciples.

Chapter Four describes the ripple effect of deconstruction among feminists, the “Brides of Deconstruction,” who shift the focus from “rhetoric, rhetorical terminology, and the self-subversion of hierarchical oppositions in ... prose and poetry toward the troping of gender, sexual difference, race, and psychoanalysis in a wide range of texts” (191). Jones-Katz traces the opening of Yale’s doors to women, the misogyny, the struggles to establish a Women’s Studies program, and, above all, the ways feminist scholars apply deconstruction to literary and social texts, dismantle gender binaries, and reveal the feminine Other that texts and traditional reading strategies repress. Jones-Katz reminds us of the work of iconic feminist scholars whose work paves the way for gender studies, queer theory, postcolonial theory, trauma theory, cultural

studies, among other affiliates. In short, feminists and fellow travelers use their ability to subvert “masculine dichotomies” in the name of cultural reform. Transcending deconstruction’s early post formalist preoccupations, feminist-inspired pedagogy and publications intervene socially and politically.

Paul de Man plays a pivotal role in the work, and in Chapter Five Jones-Katz addresses the “de Man affair,” the discovery of de Man’s WWII articles revealing his Nazi sympathies. Jones-Katz explains how this revelation leads to a cascade of “I told you so” critiques linking de Man’s intense focus on the irreducibility and undecidability of the text with his desire to “avoid responsibility for his repressed past” (266). Ardent supporters defend de Man in various ways, Derrida notable among them, but interpretive acrobatics run aground in a critical environment where reading with an eye on socio-political context is ascending. Simultaneously, key scholars literally move to the west coast, making UC Irvine the hub of deconstruction. Meanwhile, defenses and critiques break friendships, undermine reputations, but fail to stop deconstruction from becoming ubiquitous in our classroom and culture.

Jones-Katz concludes his intellectual history by ruminating on conversations about post history, the socio-economics that financed the heyday of literary studies, and the fate of the iconic figures who made the Yale School and deconstruction famous. In one last reframing of deconstruction, Jones-Katz suggests that while paying attention to the inherent contradictions of a text may have rattled the chains of the literary world, a specialized reading strategy does not compare to the cultural logic of late capitalism that co-opts the subversive power of deconstruction and neoliberal logic that “continues to be the greatest threat to higher education” (297). This parting

shot undermines the value of Jones-Katz's own work to a degree, for he asserts that debates surrounding deconstruction pale in comparison to the "massive erosion of the financial and cultural support for the intellectual communities" (298). Why worry about deconstructing binary oppositions when Rome burns? No one will disagree.

*Deconstruction: An American Institution* is a dense read, for Jones-Katz often channels the discourse and linguistic trademarks of deconstruction's iconic figures. He habitually repeats rather than clarifies specialized language. Discussions of structuralism should play a larger role as well, but Jones-Katz minimizes its importance. And while Jones-Katz hints at the various ways deconstruction influences, shapes, and even invigorates other reading practices, we can't shake the feeling that we're missing something significant about the way deconstruction develops in locations beyond Yale and its most famous disciples. Jones-Katz completes his history soon after de Man dies, and as a result, we don't learn about how deconstruction weaves its way into almost every discourse and encourages a radical new understanding of language itself that cuts across every discipline. As a result, the work might more appropriately be titled *Deconstruction at Yale*.

Pedagogically, the work is useful in a variety of ways. We gain a solid grasp of what defines Yale-infused deconstruction, and time and again we encounter keen summaries of paradigm-shifting scholarship. Above all, Jones-Katz helps us recontextualize what we thought we knew. He helps us go well beyond the common narratives that plague discussions of deconstruction's origin in the US. His desire to "illustrate how local traditions, distinctive networks, and curious personalities offered a dynamic place for culture to flourish and in turn be venerated and

challenged” (297) is largely successful and engaging. Jones-Katz does as well as anyone could when it comes to capturing a moment in time, not too long ago, when readers could experience a kind of *frisson* as they reveal a contradiction that subverts a text’s hierarchies.