

# Gail Jones's "light writing": Memory and the Photo-graph

LYN JACOBS, FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

There has never been a time without the photograph,  
without the residue and writing of light.

Eduardo Cadava (epigraph to *Sixty Lights*)

Photography has been used for many purposes—to memorialise, propagandise, record, lament and celebrate diverse human experience. Its status as a realist mode of representation, and as art, has been contested and dramatically revised by modernist and postmodern understandings of knowledge production and the contingent nature of personal, political and cultural perspectives. Similarly, appreciation of the camera's light-trapping magic (heliography or "writing by the sun") has been transformed by advances in science, mass commodification, the digital revolution and the surveillance industry. This reconfiguring of image-making and its significance confirms Michel Foucault's view that "[d]iscursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse," but are "embodied in technical processes" (200). Gail Jones's fictions explore linguistic and visual codes and the changing technologies of sharing perception, especially the mnemonic inscriptions of photography and film, recording past and present. These narratives present an inclusive understanding of art and affirm that "images, photographic or otherwise, operate in a dense network of relationship with other forms of representation, textual, visual and psychic" (Connor 106). Thus Jones's interest is not only in photography's capacity to precisely render historical moments (with occasion, time and place carefully located), but even more in a transcendence of fixed positions via incandescent insight.

Like the “light writing” that Eduardo Cadava speaks of above, Jones’s writing commemorates diverse lives beyond the frames of public events in the short stories of *The House of Breathing* (1992) and *Fetish Lives* (1997) and in the novels *Black Mirror* (2002), *Sixty Lights* (2005) and *Dreams of Speaking* (2006). Across these texts there is a pre-occupation with the transformative effects of light. This article traces Jones’s interest in photography/film and the ways in which metaphors of light, shadow and mirroring shape narratives.

In *Image, Music, Text*—a century and a half after William Henry Fox Talbot developed the calotype negative, insisted on photography’s objectivity, and described the camera as “the pencil of nature”<sup>1</sup>—Roland Barthes proposed that “photography exists not to represent but to remind,” that it is the “[p]erceptive connotation, cognitive connotation . . . ideological connotation and ethical connotation . . . which introduces reasons or values into the reading of an image” (29). In her essay, “The Heart Beating Across the Room (On Possessing Someone Else’s Photographs),” Gail Jones acknowledges this claim (and applauds Barthes’s non-conformity with his era’s “fashionable psychoanalysis of seeing,” his avoidance of “narcissism, exhibitionism, voyeurism or . . . the various cultural and ideological orders of scopophilia” (38). She notes that (for Barthes) photographs are proof that “this has been” but that his “subject” is “grief” (38). Jones’s essay also considers death, corporeality and remembrance, as well as transgressions between the private experience and public recording of illness—the contrary forces of “specularity” and “witness” inherent in medical imaging, photo-journalism or science. Acknowledging the shortcomings of the photograph, which may advertise lack of presence, distort memory, or, as Charles Baudelaire claims, become “an agent of forgetting” (Friedberg 182), Jones chooses to affirm the power of the “cherished image”: the way in which, when re-embodyed by the reader, intensities of experience are distilled and/or re-invested with “symbolic” meaning (41). In these terms, photography is less a sign of loss or identification and more a point of access, an emblem of potential.

#### LIGHT, SHADOW AND TRANSCENDENCE

Barthes observes that “[t]he age of photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private” (*Camera Lucida* 98). Jones’s early stories feature photography and film in relation to private and

public events and trace different experiential exposures. "Modernity" from *The House of Breathing* presents a moment of irrevocable change in one girl's life, portrayed as parallel to a significant time in world communications when "the cinema inaugurated a new order of perception" (19):

In the history of film there is a poignant tale. A young girl, visiting Moscow from her home in Siberia, goes to the cinema to see her very first movie. She is absolutely terror-stricken. Human beings are visually torn to pieces, the heads thrown one way, the bodies another. Faces loom large or contract into tiny circles. There are severed heads, multiple dismemberments, and horrible discontinuities. The girl flees from the cinema, and as an incidental service to the history of representation writes a letter to her father describing in detail the shocking phenomenon she has witnessed.

The movie showing in that terror-causing Moscow cinema, in, let us say, the bleak winter of 1920, was a comedy. (11)

The girl's prior understanding of a solidly material world is revolutionised by filmic disembodiment, and personalised when she equates this with an imagined re-enactment of her mother's death. There is a redemption of sorts as the incident is re-constituted for the loved grandmother and transmuted by the girl's fascination with the mode of projection itself: a "cone of white light," a "passageway of floating motes, delicate, enchanting, apparently transcendental, which might after all, have somehow mystically signified the transit of angels" (19). Here light is a mode of transcendence and the story grows montage-like beyond the cinematic incident in what Slavoj Žižek has called "an effective way of producing (meaning) from the fragments of the real" (116).

A quite different response is elicited in a further story from this collection, "Knowledge." A child of two worlds with conflicting values experiences the difference between the integrity of an Indigenous friend and the so-called civilised behaviour of her missionary parents as she comes to terms with the sexual realities of her community. This reality is coloured by brief access to a foreign world glimpsed through a screened movie (possibly *Breakfast at Tiffany's*) that momentarily "transports" the growing girl. At the heart of this tale is a contestation between image and truth (symbolised by ownership of an iconic pair of white gloves) that leads to hard-won understanding. Traumatic community events cause a radical review of the girl's personal values and critically distance her from family mores (122). The child is left with the movie in her head, a diminished view of her father's authority in his sunlit church, and a very private memory of a loved woman's tragedy.

Jones's most recent novel, *Dreams of Speaking*, contrasts a contemporary audience's visual literacies with its seduction by light:

What happens in a movie theatre? There is a transitional phase between the real and the screen, in which one views ironically, with everyday scepticism. Then at some point one falls headlong into the screen—there is an occult coalescence, a portal, a transfer, where the evidence of the senses is suddenly hi-jacked into fakery and exaggeration. It is a kind of release of self, a benign absorption. (82)

This novel engages directly with the aesthetics of modernist technology by interrogating the nature of an era's artistic, social and cultural practices. A dialogue between the characters (inter-weaving thinking, speaking and dreaming) shapes and sustains the novel. Two strangers meet on a train trip and "this frail/[t]ravelling coincidence" stimulates an ongoing discourse on representation, time and life, which becomes more personal as mutual trust grows (Larkin 23). Mr Sakamoto, a biographer of Alexander Bell, encourages Alice's research on the poetics of modernist technology and shares with her details of twentieth-century modernist inventions like photography, film, television and multi-resonance imaging. Simultaneously, he offers a plethora of biographical detail about Alexander Bell (and other inventors like the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, and Guglielmo Marconi). In many instances, these stories illustrate disparate relationships between the personal circumstances that motivated invention and the utilisation of their subsequent products (the telephone evolved from a speaking tube designed to counter deafness). Sometimes incongruity between profession and invention is evident (for example, the actress Hedy Lamarr's interest in the manufacture of the radio-controlled torpedo) (108). Generally, Mr Sakamoto's biographies illustrate the longevity and persistence of images and individual memories which contrast with modernist pre-occupations with transience. As in Jones's fiction as a whole, debates about life and art are informed by a postmodern awareness of history and its evolving inscriptions, but always the importance of the personal and particular in the face of change is asserted:

The mode of yesterday, Alice wrote, is the photographic image. It is always time-bound but out-of-time, always anachronistic. In its fidelity to moments, to split-second slices, it carries the gravity of testimony and the lightness of chance. This paradox endears us: this is its clever intercession.

The photograph of a child, laughing, pushing her sister on a swing in a scene of shared play, will carry for both, into adulthood, the bright trace of their pasts. They may not

remember the moment, but it will represent them decisively, and they will see themselves thus. *There was such a moment, such a scooping of space*, even if now it lies encrypted in all that has happened since. In all the boisterous life that rushed afterwards to capture and engulf them. (36)

*Dreams of Speaking* demonstrates both private and public uses of photograph and film as modes of intercession and review.

In other narratives light is a tool, a medium of discovery and a link between people and generations. Memories, photographs or film trigger reflection, or images are conjured to ameliorate the displacement of travel, isolation or cross-cultural alienation. Solace is also found in the magic of evocative light-filled words, like "[r]uby," "bioluminescence," "scintillating," "mother-of-pearl" or "halation," as these luminous images serve to "open up windows elsewhere" (*The House of Breathing* 71). To be effective, these subtle patterns of light demand a necessary, relational "darkness" and Jones observes that "in the dark room of becoming everything is reversible" (39). This insight is confirmed by the photographer in *Black Mirror* who insists that "photography takes its power from attention to shadow, rather than the mere capture or registration of light" (138).<sup>2</sup>

Jones dramatises changing emotional states by juxtaposing words and images, or by orchestrating symbolic descriptions of fluctuations of light. The latter is evident in "The Astronomer Tells of her Love" (*The House of Breathing*), which charts a relationship, initially premised on an idea of shared love and knowledge, that is gradually extinguished by darker forces. It begins in the bright heat of desire with the focus on the male lover's body, glazed and burnished, enjoying his central place in the astronomer's field of vision. Initially he draws on her expertise to learn about phenomena unknown to him, like sunspots and *faculae*. But as time passes, communication dries up, his attention wanes, and distaste of her "greedy eye" grows. Eventually the couple cease meeting in daylight and their relationship is diminished to the point of his dismissal of her knowledge as "pedantry." When (for the last time) she holds his sexual attention, her sensuous shedding of clothes is interrupted as she impulsively names an emanation of light (a "prominence") glimpsed in a flung silk scarf. The man's reflexive "turn to the wall" is a most definite eclipse (27).

In the more expansive space of the novels the compositional effects of wave-like patterns of light less overtly signify emotional barometers yet still

underpin textual designs. For example, in *Dreams of Speaking* Mr Sakamoto's observation of magnetic fields and "rays of emanation" are central:

"Voice; it's really all about voice. It's about ripples in the air, patterns of ripples, as in a Japanese raked garden. Do you know the raked garden? Have you seen them in photographs?"

Alice nodded.

"The raked garden always looks to me like an image of sound waves. Gardens, ocean, the beauty of energy transmission.

*Telephone*: sound at a distance." (89)

Alice and Mr Sakamoto come to recognise self in the other through a "shared fabric of knowing" (103). They are kindred spirits, radically different in age, experience and cultural heritage but well matched in their mutual interests. Like Lucy in *Sixty Lights*, Alice discovers in her encounter with a stranger both a friend and mentor, and an intellectual affinity that has formerly eluded her. Despite family and intimate friendships, Alice's way of seeing the world to this point had seemed singular. It is one of the paradoxes of this journey, involving private and global catastrophes, and proximities and distance, that Alice can speak of Mr Sakamoto and of her affection for him only after his death in a one-way call to his recorded voice on a now silent answering machine. The aged writer of haiku had used the telephone as a confessional medium when calling his father-figure, Uncle Tadeo, to liberate himself from the silences of his Nagasaki trauma. Alice witnesses the photographs of his city's destruction, not only as the silent testimony of a scarred nation, but also as an indictment of nuclear solutions:

The photograph of catastrophe halts us. Or it ought to. If there is a necessity to this technology, it is to abet troubled remembering and to drive us to other futures. Shadows infiltrate as surely as light. Do I need to describe these images? They are bleak and indelible. They are detonations. We carry them like tattoos that say "twentieth century." (37)

Alice speaks of the photograph as "folded time," uses images of the past to remember and to reconsider future possibilities, and establishes points of rapport (like shared responses to loss) that temper differences of language and background (37).

Susan Sontag's observation that "photography is an elegiac art . . . a twilight art" (15) echoes Barthes's claims that "the photograph tells me death in the future" (*Camera Lucida* 96). But the photograph Alice sends to Uncle Tadeo is selected precisely because her subject "did not look at all like a man who had a few months to live" (209). In his meditations in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes

argues that a photograph is a "certificate of presence," but that mere likeness rarely captures the essence of the loved being (87). In this instance it is the suggestion of recognisable "essence" that determines Alice's selection of image: "He looked solid, enduring and charmed by life. A quality of mirth played at the corners of his mouth" (209). Beverley Farmer argues in her essay "Seeing in the Dark" that "[t]he photograph has its full being in the instant of exposure. The rest is aftermath" (101). Barthes speaks of memory and the legacy of photography in a similar way:

A trick of vocabulary: we say "to develop a photograph"; but what the chemical action develops is (the) undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze). This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku. For the notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an intense immobility: linked in detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph: neither the Haiku nor the Photograph makes us "dream." (*Camera Lucida* 49)

This analogy between photograph and haiku is apt to a discussion of *Dreams of Speaking* since Mr Sakamoto shares his love of haiku and old films with Alice.

While Mr Sakamoto uses his haiku for therapy, Alice, who is both research scholar and dreamer, partially resists the claim Barthes makes when she imaginatively reaches beyond the containments of "seventeen syllables" or "meticulous image" to incorporate dream and reality in her meditative journey. "As she wrote each day about the objects of modern life, those things wired, lit, automatic and swift, Alice began also to be overcome by memory and dream" (47). Mr Sakamoto supports Alice's academic examination of modernity (embroidering facts with his biographical expansiveness) by acknowledging the importance of her dreaming or reverie. He also teaches her to observe "the tiniest things: the nervous vectors of a single sparrow, the mottled colours and arrangement of fallen leaves" (103). With wry humour he reminds Alice, the child of "a city of light" that:

"the difficulty with celebrating modernity," he declared, "is that we live with so many persistently unmodern things. Dreams, love, babies, illness. Memory. Death. And all the natural things. Leaves, birds, oceans, animals." "Think of your Australian kangaroo," he added. "The kangaroo is truly unmodern." (65)

Much later, in Australia, Alice will remember the link developed between her and Mr Sakamoto as “a vibration that [I] took to be the sound we had established between us...” (213). Despite their closeness, the novel illustrates radical distances between Japanese and Australian experience.

Jones’s earlier short stories examine cross-cultural difference, which, when tuned by experiences of home, project illustrative two-way effects. The narrative, like a camera, becomes an instrument of witness: “Touching Tienanmen,” “Knowledge” and “Other Places” from *The House of Breathing* explore relations between travellers and local inhabitants, and serve a commemorative function—personal tales lead to political reconsiderations of the Tiananmen massacre or the Balibo Five’s last days in East Timor; and “Dark Times” canvasses the despair of an imprisoned man condemned to death for his sexuality and poetry. In the story “Veronica,” a “tourist and beggar exchange short, swift glances; they meet as it were, within the transit of a gaze” (39) before this photographer/tourist is brought down when an act of instinctive empathy sees her become the victim of sexual assault (115). In “Touching Tienanmen,” words fail to convey intention and cross-cultural barriers leave the traveller and the local Chinese man at odds despite shared concerns. The stories of *The House of Breathing* employ metaphors of light and dark, and nuanced patterns of remembered response to juxtapose familiar and foreign cultures.

In *Dreams of Speaking*, Alice’s visit to Japan is negated by Mr Sakamoto’s absence, his lost “touch,” and her alienation. However, in the novel *Black Mirror* distance is overcome by lovers who defeat cross-cultural dislocation by meeting physically on the neutral ground of mutual strangeness (272). In their congruence Anna Griffin and her Jamaican lover, Winston Field, (who has a family at home)

join their two faraway and respective countries. They improvise an international pact of diplomacy, trade, negotiate, exchange consignments of raw and valuable materials, sign, with the wordless movements of their bodies, some document or other of treaty and concord. The earth’s globe dissolves and is reformed to their design; in this upheaval both lovers become tropical and dark. (98)

Winston will refuse to be her “black continent” and eventually follow his sun. But rising in the night in London, the strange city, Anna’s isolation seems forecast: “If she could see herself in the mirror she would be half-eaten by the dark. She would be negated and phantasmic” (589). Throughout

*Black Mirror*, European and Australian experience, Surrealist and Modernist representation, and contrasting racial and class distinctions are refracted in portraits of personal, cultural and artistic identity.

#### MIRRORING

In *Black Mirror*, two women of different generations, temperament and experience, but from the same Australian mining town (Kalgoorlie), meet in London: the surrealist artist (Victoria Morell) and her biographer (Anna Griffin). This is a double narrative and there are intersections, reflections and resonances between the stories of the women. Anna's vision of Victoria is amended as the story proceeds but she "suspects that Victoria confabulates" (120) and finds that her "subject" is elusive, that she "is unresolved and imprecise, like a photograph not properly taken" (58). Paradoxically, Victoria finds that "over-exposure and under-exposure are both forms of invisibility" and the novel testifies to how little known she is, despite the public performance of her life—an idea also pursued in the stories of *Fetish Lives* (116). As Anna traces the origins of, and grants new meaning to, this dying woman's art, she not only re-creates a life but redefines both her country's past and her own future.

Confusions about parentage, the disparate lives of half-sisters (one white, one Indigenous), lost lovers and children, and the horrors of rape, occupation and suppression (a "black-coloured forgetting")—all fuel Victoria's self-immolating actions (215). Victoria Morell is of a colonial family in a country living a lie. She is the token *Australienne* in modernist art circles but becomes a woman who claims that when she looks in the mirror, "darkness looked back" (272). After the loss of her photographer lover, Jules, depression is her constant companion. When she dies, Anna, who had become an essential and trusted listener rather than simply her biographer, returns to her own (and her subject's) past to establish a future. This reconciliation involves "mining" silence and shadow, disinterring personal and national truths, and acknowledging "memorialising light" as a grace (300). Anna's visit home reveals family secrets and stolen stories of the Australian nation before a return to Paris to allay her grief. Within this labyrinthine text, the increasingly evident schism between known and unknown, seen and unseen, and things "vanished" and restored, ultimately transforms the biographer's reading of the artist, as well as her central image—a painting entitled *Black Mirror*

(of a woman on fire). The catalogue reading of this work, with its clinical analysis of detail, serves as a footnote to the novel, but by the time Victoria has shared her life story, the symbolism of this painting has acquired new meaning. The detail, described by the art critic in “strange and meaningless conjunction,” is located as a highly coded visual representation of her life. The historical assessment of her as an artist is a further demonstration of exposure that simultaneously conceals.

Barthes argues that there is a central paradox in the fact that the same century invented History and Photography. But History is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolished mythic Time; and the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony. (*Camera Lucida* 93)

In several novels Jones’s biographers interrogate the idea of history as “pure intellectual discourse.” As they document rapidly changing worlds, evidence like the photograph’s so-called documentary legitimacy, or residual texts like Victoria’s painting, become problematic emblems, the kind of “fugitive testimony” suggested by Barthes. The short stories of *Fetish Lives* also trace personal histories and are sequenced to bring into proximity disparate lives with similar obsessions—they “echo, shadow and reflect each other in subtle inter-textual ways” (Jacobs 22). These characters seem haunted by the past: performing in contemporary worlds, they repeat past actions and, like photographs in an age of re-production, cannot seem to evade repetition. Between them, Jones establishes “an inconsistent federation of pasts and futures” (106). For example, Eleanor Marx, Karl’s scholarly but romantic daughter, translates Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and identifies with the tragedy of that heroine’s deteriorating relationship to the point of suicide. This is a paradoxical outcome in a story that begins with a stated ambivalence about the power of words.

In this collection Jones interrogates the nature of a society that so determinedly fetishises lives and ascribes to public figures the artificially spot-lit positions of celebrity or reputation. Writers, artists and scientists like Anton Checkhov, Walt Whitman, Marcel Proust, Madame Tussaud, Marie Curie, Mata Hari, Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso and Frida Kahlo—all are examined and their identities or “place” in the cultural imagination interrogated. Jones creates a “dreaming between the lines” to problematise and humanise her subjects as she again indicates the distances between public reputation and the inside story of her subjects’ lives. For example, she says of the “exotic” Kahlo: “She was the virtual icon of their fantastic

desire, they mistook as a single emblem what she knew to be truly *et cetera*" (167). Jones rejects commodification and confirms Proust's understanding of the "unfixable nature of people's existence":

People never stop changing position in relation to us. In the imperceptible but incessant movement of the world, we regard them as immobile in an instant of vision too brief for us to notice the moment which is propelling them. But we have only to select from our memories two pictures of them taken at different times, but similar enough for them not to change in themselves, at least not perceptibly, and the difference between the two pictures is a gauge of the displacement they have undergone in relation to us. (82)

Characters constrained by others' more limited views people the meditations on presence and absence in *Fetish Lives*.

In that collection of stories the photographer who insists on the significance of shadow, the astronomer whose vision is under-valued, and the skiagrapher determining the refractive power of the eye (while photographing bodies like her predecessor Marie Curie)—demonstrate imperative relationships between body, word and image and the effects of the past on their lives. Mourning her lost love the skiagrapher decides:

These skiagraphs are something like the stories he has left her. They are vulgar evidences of the loveliest things. They lie, and they tell the truth. They are interstitial. She cannot bear existing with only his stories. This negative of touch. (69)

Given that photography is "a way of trapping light reflected off objects on to another surface, creating an image of those objects," the analogy that Jones pursues between image and story-making is illustrative (Smee 14). But the story, or image, as a "negative of touch" has its own pathos as an inversion of what Barthes called "the guarantee of being" (*Camera Lucida* 113). There is a fine irony in Barthes's reflections in *Camera Lucida* in that the central focus of his discourse, a photograph of his mother as a child that he determines captures her "being," is not featured among the visual images included in his publication. It exists in the text as a name, "The Winter-garden Photograph," and is kept as a private icon (or story) beyond this public discourse. Just as the photograph may be an aide to memory, it may also fix the image to the detriment of actual, more diverse, remembering. In Jones's writing generally there is an interplay between presence and absence, truth and untruth, as stories reflect intricate expositions of being or the processes of becoming.

## HER-STORY: BECOMING PHOTOGRAPHER

The novel *Sixty Lights* is overtly informed by the history of photography and structured by the development of a photographer, Lucy Strange, before her untimely death at twenty-four. The title reflects the chapter sequence (a tri-partite structure with twenty chapters in each part), and pays its dues both to Virginia Woolf (Lucy sees that “[e]very person was a lighthouse, a signal of presence” [170]) and to Walter Benjamin’s wisdom that “[k]nowledge comes only in flashes” (epigraph to Part Two, *Sixty Lights* 79). Lucy and photography function, like Lucinda and glass in Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, as a refraction of feminist, modernist, pioneering innovation.

A child of the nineteenth century, Lucy is orphaned early and traumatised by her mother’s death in childbirth and her father’s subsequent suicide. The introspective child refuses to look at the world and instead uses her magnifying glass to compulsively burn holes in things (especially her carer’s clothes). She is sustained by inherited stories (*Jane Eyre* or her mother’s “ice-cave” story) and by memories of her mother:

It was not a photograph, but it might have been, since it swam into Lucy’s mind with the particular lucidity an image carries as it surfaces in its fluid, the lucidity of an entirely new vision, washed fresh into the world, wet with its image-birthing. (29)

As a child

[s]he becomes . . . one whose mission it is to un-conceal. This is the moment, aged eight, when Lucy becomes a photographer. And every photographic ambition will turn on summoning of a face and the retrieval of what is languishing just beyond vision. (46)

Lucy keeps a diary, an “irregular sequence of Special Things Seen,” in which she stores her “apprehension of images,” including descriptions of “photographs not taken” (86). While photography is, as Barthes indicates, an iconographic mode of signification, useful in confronting death and grief, it may also examine truths and reveal the ambiguity of what is seen. The individual nature of vision is further demonstrated as characters savour special moments of awareness or heightened remembrance that is rarely, if ever, shared (like Arthur’s lightning story of his father in *Sixty Lights* or Stephen’s father’s photograph atop the whale in *Dreams of Speaking*). These are akin to Beverley Farmer’s “hinges of time” that irrevocably change people (*The House in the Light* 79). Image making and story telling are

powerful mediums—"portals" as well as "encryptions" according to Jones (*Dreams of Speaking* 36).

In *Sixty Lights*, Lucy and her brother Thomas are fostered by their Uncle Neville and depart Australia "in biographical reversal and repetition" of their mother's prior journey (77).<sup>3</sup> But this care is diminished by instability and financial mismanagement, and Lucy then faces the realities of class difference, domestic violence and iniquitous working conditions in a factory making albumen paper for the photographic industry. Always the entrepreneur, Neville proposes her as a prospective wife for his old friend, Isaac Newton, a man to whom he is in debt. He shows Lucy a daguerreotype (a profile traced via an armature onto a copper plate) of a gentleman "who shone with unearthly light from his sealed brass compartment" and pragmatically Lucy accepts this vision of an escape route (107). Seduced on her journey to India by an opportunistic father of four, she meets a tolerant Newton who grants her his name and shelter despite her unexpected pregnancy. While she remains ignorant of his namesake's scientific fame, she senses this man's "emotional gravity," some quality beyond the face, which she thinks of as a "funnel to hidden selves" (134). He becomes a friend and valued mentor.

Life in India furthers the realisation that "looking enchanted her, . . . that the delectable visibility of things was her aim and vocation" (122). Taken to a photographic studio for an obligatory portrait to legitimise her marriage, she sees that the photographer "sedated and mortified everything he sees" (141):

For Victor photography was pure fake—vain posturings, the stiff fictions of a happy marriage, placement in other, more remote and more comfortable worlds. For Lucy it was a shift in time itself, and a celebration of the lit-up gaze. The imposture of studio work did not really trouble her: she knew it was one mode among many of the concentrated image. There were still moments in time, moments arcane, seductive, trivial, breath-taking, that waited for the sidelong glance, the split second of notice, the opening up of an irrefutable and auratic presence. She had always known this. She had always believed this to be so. She had always been, after all, a photographer. (142)

Newton encourages her study of the art of "chemicals, glass and mechanical production"; however, it is not the science of perfection that she is drawn to but the transient, maculate, transforming processes of the craft (141). Her discussions with Newton about correspondences between light and shadow

and between sacredness and sexuality reflect physical and metaphysical controversies of the times. His namesake changed understandings of the world, invoking a new spectrum of possibilities with his view of “light as corpuscular—made of infinitely small particles,” but Lucy is differently transformed.<sup>4</sup> When her daughter is born, arriving as “irrefutable, glistening, a kind of absolute light,” the birth is heralded by the sixty lights of the *Dimali* festival (162). Feeling ready to face the world, Lucy returns to England only to be shocked by her acute feelings of cross-cultural dislocation. But her new appreciation of the beautiful complexity of difference sees her authoritatively reject the untruth of the nationalistic British view of India screened during her brother’s magic lantern shows.

Lucy finds solace in writing to Newton of mastering the art of “wet collodion technique” and of ongoing experiments with exposure times and different emulsions on metals (ferrotypes) (199). Having embraced her positive subjectivity, her gift for seeing (she is “a seer,” “someone leaning into time” as the novel’s cover suggests), she must then confront the negative reality of terminal consumption. She is a woman without a future who foresees a future for her art—a time of colour photography and image-making where the internal workings of bodies, developing babies, or glimpses of the mysteries of galaxies will be accessed by others. Her final acts of composition are to reclaim the friendship of her old carer, acknowledge the love of a fellow artist, Jacob, and to gift her child Ellen to her childless brother and his wife (183). This time she manages to evade the capture of the framed family photograph.

In the short story “Five Gifts told by Echo” in *Fetish Lives*, Jones offers her portrait of another photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, a woman who specialised in photographs combining real and unreal effects (Bajac 109) and who became obsessed with human faces (Sartre claimed that “the face is a natural fetish” [*Fetish Lives* 163]):

She loved the shadows where each soul would come artistically to rest. She loved differentiation, the un-echoing quality of each self. And though her hands were always blackened with the effects of her processing chemicals, and her skirts perpetually (and scandalously) collodian-stained, what she engaged in was less physical than it was metaphysical—the mysterious aspects of the capture of light. (173)

Fox Talbot’s early photographic experiments with prisms and the solar spectrum began a revelatory process causing both “wonder” and “disillusionment”: “the

photograph does not simply render more precise what . . . was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the object" (Kraus 220). Similarly, the photographer, Lucy Strange, walking at night in a familiar street is overtaken by the intensity of her response to a scene remade by "a quivery film of light" (*Sixty Lights* 186). In understanding the force of her revelation she acknowledges that she is "bound to this contradiction between the material and its ethereal incarnation in light" (186). This complex effect of perception, of exploration and illumination, of physical confirmation and metaphysical differentiation is manifest in the management of light throughout Gail Jones's narratives.

#### PHOTO-GRAPHS

Jones's fictions draw on a wealth of critical knowledge of linguistics, semiotics, film, optics, the phenomenology of perception and postmodern theory—knowledge not fore-grounded in this reading of the diverse ways that photography and mirroring feature in the fiction. There is, however, ample evidence, in the content and form of these texts, of postmodern re-assessment of modernist achievements:

Photography . . . is a specially revealing instance of the struggle between a modernist restricted field, with its stress on individuality, purity and essence, and the postmodernist expanded field, with its embrace of the contingent conditions which attend photography as a social practice. (Connor 107)

These fictions are playful, speculative, at times enigmatic investigations of the unpredictable nature of lived performance. The writers who inhabit the texts are not solely concerned with self-development, but rather people engaged in expressions of passion, conscience, ethics, public reflection, discovery and interrogation. In an echo of that "transport of angels" in "Modernity" in the *House of Breathing*,<sup>3</sup> Jones consistently celebrates the individual's potential to employ word and image to cut through the dark. Just as Lucy rejects self-representation and uses the camera's lens to see differently rather than reproduce the obvious, preferring the "maculate" and changing image, so Jones deftly manages her "light-writing" in its various forms to illuminate a spectrum of truths (*Sixty Lights* 175). The integrations of form and content and variation of optical effects in these inscriptions perform a repertoire of ways of seeing and being in the world, effectively paying tribute to both life and art while exploring essential dream-spaces between them.

In her essay on photography, “The Heart Beating Across the Room,” and in *Sixty Lights*, Jones speaks of photography as a “physical” almost “devotional” activity, as a “kind of kiss” (*Sixty Lights* 200). In the former she considers modernist assumptions that “the image has automatic priority over the word ‘seeing is believing’” but prefers

the primacy of photography as a social practice and one, which is both, conditioned by and constructed through existing (and traceable) social relations. The rhetoric of autotelic modernism is seductive because it seems to include some accounting for the melancholy dissociation from the referent that *all* photographs enact—and this must be more pronounced in historical photographs we seek to retroactivate. (I’m reminded, too, of Baudrillard on cinema: “the real as a referential in perdition.”)

So we negotiate the perdurable image with *temps perdu*, the affectivity of the kiss with the automism of a shutter: postmodernity is ever-vexing in its forms of paradox. (39)

Like Mr Sakamoto, who has a mature and generously inclusive view of the world, Jones is not afraid to “historicise,” in Fredric Jameson’s terms—that is, to avoid postmodernism’s “fading sense of history” (Connor 44). Like Mr Sakamoto, Jones confirms the inestimable value of both word and image—necessary lights in a dangerously ill-lit world. These narratives, like photo-*graphs*, plot complex fields of reference and demonstrate the need for remembering. They are articulate and illustrative depictions of intricate human associations from which we may draw and interrogate meaning:

The river was a field of light. It might have grown there. Wind pushed at the brassy water making furrows, rills. A kind of sigh uprose. Great and lovely possibilities seemed inherent here, and people on the shore, children especially, sensed enticing otherworldliness and festive propositions. Strange, thought Alice, how nature succumbs to abstraction. She looked from the bank to the far distance and saw ferries, sailboats, jet-skis, windsurfers, and beyond them, a ridge of cumulus efflorescing. To watch this river was to enter into the openness of things, the space of giving in to lucid and elemental sensations. (*Dreams of Speaking* 204)

In a final tribute to Mr Sakamoto, Alice watches the films he has recommended, seeing them from her perspective, a view which has changed by knowing or perhaps “dreaming” him.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 An analogy between word and illumination was implied in the first book to commercially use photographic illustrations, *The Pencil of Nature* by Henry Fox Talbot (1844), scientist, botanist, linguist, mathematician and one of the inventors of photography who experimented with silver salts and light sensitivity. Gail Jones refers to his work in "The Heart Beating across the Room" (40).
- 2 The photographer's lover, the artist Victoria Morrell, recalls him as a shadow, but also as "bright outlined very sharply and with unusual definition," reminiscent of "a photographic technique called solarisation" (272).
- 3 Her sunlit revelation is echoed as her children are "transfixed" by "a photo-sensitive departure" when lovers shine mirrors from shore to ship (77).
- 4 Beginning from Newton's view of light as "corpuscular," those with interests in Swedenborg's teachings thought that "it was possible to think of light as a spectrum that begins in the world of the senses and shades off into the world of spirits . . . how propositions from the natural sphere are transformed into their correspondence in the spiritual one" (Krauss 126). Newton's concepts added to the Cartesian notion that matter consists of particles that are indefinitely divisible.

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