

*Pauline Butling's response to Paulette Jiles' article "Hustling At The New Poetics Colloquium", published in Brick 27.*

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## Letters And Opinions

Dear Brick:

Since I am one of the main sources of information (or misinformation in some instances) in Paulette Jiles's "Hustling at the New Poetics Colloquium" [*Brick* 27], I'd like to add a few observations and comments of my own. I too was struck by the aggressiveness of the participants, to the point of feeling assaulted at times. But to characterize the event in terms of males as aggressors and—sexual and otherwise ("Dick and Dick"), females as passive observers (potential Pat Lowthers) is too simple.

For one thing, it was by no means an all-male atmosphere: Nicole Brossard's presentation and Susan Howe's reading were highlights of the conference for me, as for many others. Both were clear, strong—luminous best describes them. Nor were the women all huddled together on the edges of the action, although they did all have lunch together one day, the day that Jiles came. It's true that most of the American women aligned themselves with the American males, more conscious of their common ground than their differences (as is usually the case when there is a "cause": e.g. wartime, the sixties, etc.). Most of the Canadian women, on the other hand, stood their ground, resisting, challenging, defying, insisting that their concerns be addressed: Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott, Janice Williamson and others created some of the liveliest moments at the conference.

As for the males: yes, there was a lot of male posturing and arrogance and assertiveness as there is at any such event where egos are on the line, perhaps fuelled by the characteristic Canadian politeness and humility in the presence of confident, assertive Americans. But there was more to it than that: these people were constantly on edge—fists up, guns poised, ready to attack and defend so to speak. When Ron Silliman said over lunch one day: "How would you feel if your country went around threatening to blow up the world?" I realized their violence and aggressiveness derives mainly from their resistance to that military power structure of the U.S.A. The strength and power of that structure demands and equally strong resistance. The aggressive, ready-for-action frontal-attack mode is the inevitable result. It is all-pervasive: the assault on language, structure, thought, is part of the process of disassociating themselves from that centre and of deconstructing that centre. But the result is not simply a "dead cat." At the very least, it disrupts and disturbs the centre, with any luck it also redirects, reconstructs, revitalizes. Certainly one could argue with the methods (violence breeds violence, etc.), but let's not mistake the methods for the event.

We Canadians should know all about this: it's a garrison mentality (complete with the "herd mind," etc.) in full bloom—but we only have to resist the weight of an unknown continent; they have to resist the weight of one of the most awesome military imperialistic structures ever invented.

I see these writers as a continuation of the Ginsberg-Burroughs line in American writing, the writing of people who, moved by a mixture of anger, anguish and despair, work at the extreme edge, resisting, challenging, fracturing, and fragmenting in order to expose and

reconstruct a more meaningful centre. It's not my favourite tradition in American writing, because of all the anger, anguish and despair, work at the extreme edge, resisting, challenging, fracturing, and fragmenting in order to expose and reconstruct a more meaningful centre. It's not my favourite tradition in American writing, because of all the anger, but it hardly seems fair to dismiss it on those grounds.

At the beginning of her article, Jiles characterizes Americans generally as a curious mixture of "power and guilt," but then fails to note this characteristic in the participants. Again at the end of the article, she seems to recognize the situation when she shifts from the tongue-in-cheek humorous tone which she uses to attack aggressive male intellectualism, to a serious discussion of the problem of being marginalized, but she refers only to the experience of women being on the edges and feeling excluded by the "Dick and Dick" atmosphere. Ironically, she misses the point that these so-called Dick-and-Dicks are equally marginalized, and they are fighting back with all the intellectual and emotional force they can muster. She mistakes both the even and object of the attack.

Dare I quote Julia Kristeva talking about a similar situation at the turn of the century? She talks about the "problem...of finding practices...capable of confronting the machine, colonial expansion, banks, science, Parliament—those positions of mastery that conceal their violence and pretend to be mere neutral legality." Then she describes the solution, which is to deconstruct and reexamine everything so that "violence, surging up through the phonetic, syntactic, and logical orders, could reach the symbolic order and the technocratic ideologies that had been built over this violence to ignore or repress it. To penetrate the era, poetry had to disturb the logic that dominated the social order and do so through that logic itself, by assuming and unraveling its position, its syntheses, and hence the ideologies it controls." (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, page 83.)

Language structures and social and political structures are part of the same fabric. Of course disrupting these structures will produce confusion, among other things. Indeed, to a casual observer, confusion may seem to be the only result. Had Jiles been able to attend more of the colloquium I'm sure she would have felt the full intellectual/emotional force of it all and thus also perceived the politics and aesthetics of it in a different light.

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