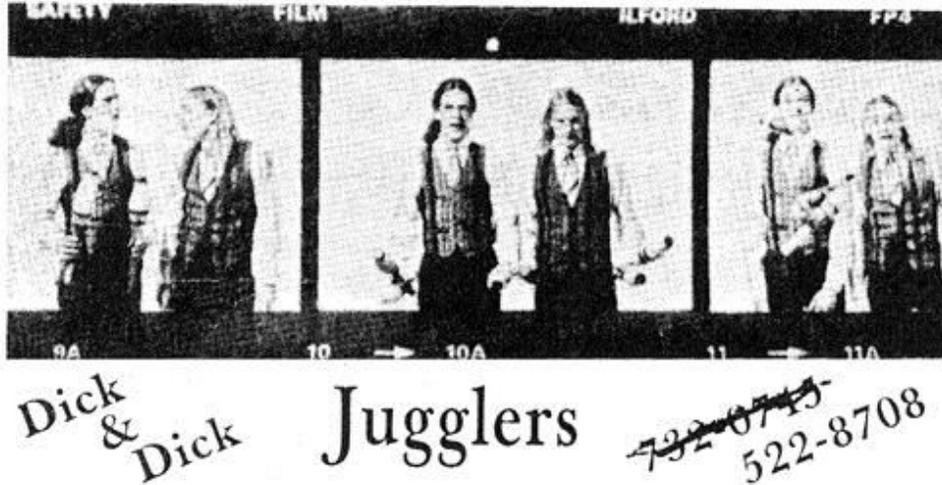


Hustling At The New Poetics Colloquium

Paulette Jiles



I went to the New Poetics Colloquium last August 23 and 25 because I had to be in Vancouver anyway to read for the Pat Lowther Award Benefit and also because most of the writers I knew were going to be at the Colloquium. People die and leave their diaries behind; that's why I'm afraid of flying. Diaries. I'm afraid I'll die in a plane crash and everybody will read my diaries, things like

worked in a yard. Not too many phone calls. Thinking abt. Andrew and wondering why he's not showing up. Caroline and I went to caber tossing, she taped pipe band.

When I get off planes I feel as if I've been held at gunpoint for several hours and then let go, an escape, it's always miraculous. The New Poetics Colloquium was being held at the Emily Carr School of Art on Granville Island and there, behind Granville Market, out on the dock, having lunch and talking theory, were all the women from the conference. They were mostly Americans and I listened and tried to understand some of the theory. I couldn't keep up with it; I'll never write anything like this again. I don't know why I promised *Brick* an article about this. I was sitting beside Pauline Butling and she said she couldn't keep up with the theory either, and she's an academic. One woman from the States said something about "the nature of my experience." I thought, I should write down what the nature of her experience is but that's all I remember. I really wanted to get to know them, but they were all talking vitally and intensely to each other.

"There's a lot of Americans at this conference," said Pauline. After sixteen years in Canada, I wondered if they would recognize me as an American. Maybe I don't exude that combination of power and guilt anymore. Did I ever?

"Are they saying content is important or not important?" I asked Pauline.

"Well, I don't know really," she said. I knew then, suddenly, that this article was going to start out *very slowly*. I love Granville Island. There are so many city people out having outrageous fun in the outdoors it makes you want to weep. It's a strange little exciting sort of

Disneyland for Yuppies. I wish I could live there and drink young beer forever. Or at least a week.

A woman from San Francisco was breastfeeding a baby at the same time she was discussing theory in the most amazingly abstract terms. I don't know why the women all ended up together. How does this happen? Will somebody do a study? Street buskers were playing and singing all over the market area. There were two jugglers named Dick and Dick who had drawn a huge crown and were yelling things like "And NOW we will start throwing these RAZO-SHARP JUGGLING CLUBS!!"

So I went back when the talks started up again. It appeared that the women were pissed off at the men. The men talked about deconstruction and poetics and said things about lineation. I shouldn't be reporting on this. I think the men were actually doing something called "talking deconstructionist talk." It's hard to do. It takes skill. I just can't keep my mind on it for very long. And so at three-thirty the women went for coffee together again and spoke about pagination and lineation and discourse and absorption. Dick and Dick were back again, hustling the crowd, passing a paper bag for the money. It was an exceptional day, big ripped-looking clouds were getting torn off eastwards and the sailboats were banding themselves in the masthead with those giant marine snapshackles. What a great day to sit out on the dick and drink white wine, with Dick and Dick yelling "Don't applaud now folks, SAVE THAT APPLAUSE!!" and then "Now! Now!" The men I think were all somewhere else together, both American and Canadian deconstructionists, continuing to say theoretical things to each other and Dick and Dick screamed "We will soon be appearing in Calgary by special request of the VANCOUVER CHIEF OF POLICE!!!" It was exhausting, really.

The conference was sponsored by the Kootenay School of Writing, and they had worked for months to get the funding and get it all set up and everything was going smoothly. Most of the poetry confirmed and illustrated the theory of deconstructing language. I wonder if you write deconstructionist poetry very strictly according to theory would without either brains or talent appear to have both? Maybe so: deconstructionist poetry is very democratic. Probably the same criticism could be made of "work" or "performance" or "dub" poetry. How do you tell the good from the bad if the poem is strictly and obediently following a theory? Fall back on value judgements [sic]? Say "it took the top of my head off"? Anyway, high-school year books are definitely *out*.



And the theory was *fantastic*.

And this was only the first day!

The major speaker was Charles Berstein [sic], an American, who is what you might call your main deconstructionist man and he can talk deconstructionist talk for hours. Berstein [sic] said really really complex things. I couldn't understand it at all. I mean honestly I could not understand two sentences one after the other. But it was a beautiful day to be on Granville Island

what with Dick and Dick, and white wine, and I was pissed off that Andrew hadn't shown up. He said he was stuck up in Frobisher Bay on a shoot. Oh if only he could see me among all these deconstructionists, I thought. I'm so cute when I'm confused. However, breakthroughs in literature can only grow out of a fertile field of audacious failures. And funding. I could see that most of the speakers at this conference lived on Planet of the Grants. They lived on Fundingworld. The upstairs lecture hall at Emily Carr was mostly full of men; men lecturing and men in the audience. I went down and watched Dick and Dick for an hour. They were a perfect team. "And now as a protest against traffic lights we will...SET OUR CLUBS ON FIRE!!" They do all this stuff in double-voicing and they really did set their clubs on fire, flaming torches orbited their heads in figure eights. There was also inviting exotic music coming from the big covered market. It sounded as if you could take your false self out to dinner in there and buy it anything it wanted. Back at Emily Carr, Nicole Brossard got up and said that women had to develop their own feminist theory of writing, and ignore the men. Ignore the men, she said, and do your own thing. Or something like that. I don't know, I had to ask Pauline again because of my extremely short attention span.

"What'd she say about content?" I asked Angela Hryniuk. "Did she talk about whether content is important or not?"

"Well, I'm not sure," said Angela. "But she's really good. She's inspiring." Angela used to be a student at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson; there were a lot of former DTUC students at the Colloquium, most of whom had last been seen on the road out of Nelson with mattresses and bicycles, refugees from the Sacred bombings, heading towards Vancouver, in search of an education.

I am extremely short on poetic theory, and often I don't think I'll every [sic] write poetry again; sometimes literature is surrounded by a large dense cloud of gentility in which people take everything so seriously that they seize up and lock. If I get funny, I thought, I'll end up here laughing by myself. It's the practice of extinguishing a response by non-acknowledgement. If you run into something funny just don't laugh. Glare.

At the break I went and asked Colin Browne if I could crash at his place but he was full up and pointed me out to another guy named George who had a room and an extra foamie. George had a girlfriend, Alanna, who was an exotic dancer and whom I knew from the year before at the Women and Words Conference where she did a belly dance during performance night and a lot of the women were offended. Joan Webb was also in town. She's a writer who lives in the top half of the house I live in, in Nelson. She's not a belly dancer. As far as I know. She may have a secret life. And don't we all?

After the lectures and poetry readings and talks were over on Saturday evening, Joan and I walked around looking for one of Vancouver's famed second-hand clothing stores so I could buy something to wear to the benefit reading the next day.

"So what are the women deconstructionists saying?" I asked Joan. I was actually afraid to ask them myself, mainly because I couldn't talk deconstructionist talk, and I knew they'd get impatient.

"Hell, I don't know. There was this one woman who had some poem about desire for the 'object'. I think she meant a penis. One of the others gave her a hard time about it afterwards and she said, 'I'm not molesting you, am I?' I mean, she used the word 'molest' for 'bother'. It was weird."

"Maybe she's a theory groupie."

"Ick."



I wondered about women who wanted to write like Erma Bombeck. I read Erma Bombeck. She isn't stupid. You can't be funny and stupid at the same time. In fact, I don't think you can be intelligent and dull at the same time. Anyway, there are so many different things going on in the States. All at the same time. There Americans at the conference were confident, the centre of their own world.

We found a second-hand store and went in to play in the rags.

"Actually, I'm interested in it all," said Joan. "I'm getting off on all this theory. The men can keep it up for hours. Maybe in the end I'll have a mental orgasm."

There was an orange silk skirt and a big top to go with it. I don't look good in orange.

"Oh yes you do," said the saleswoman. "It's your colour."

"But I'm a winter," I said. The skirt looked kind of like a sarong and the top was gigantic and hung all over me.

"Winters can have oranges," she said, strangely. "It has to be the right kind of orange. And hey, that's *your* orange."

So I gave in. Who wouldn't? She wouldn't give me a receipt. She said she didn't have anything to write it on, so that left me without being able to take it off my income tax.

Joan found a pair of earrings that were tiny pistols in holsters.

"Twelve bucks! Hey, can you take a little off for us? These are going to be used in a play. They'll be on stage. They're going to be famous."

"Are you guys actresses?"

"No, we're writers. We write all the lines that the actresses say."

"I'm going to do a reading," I said. "Read poetry."

She looked at me weird. They always look at you weird when you say that.

"Oh yeah, right. Well, no, I can't take anything off. I'm not the owner. The owner's not here right now."

At that time I was planning to do a play about a barrel racer, because I had met all these cowgirls at the Women and Words conference the fall before, but that has since imploded. Theory, theory, theory. The owner's not here right now.

That afternoon they told me there was another good speech; the American woman with the baby had spoken and some other people. By the time the talks were over it was dark and everybody was full of energy from sitting around all day. Angela Hryniuk, Steve Fearing, Sandy Duncan, Joan Webb, Kathy Armstrong and I were trying to find Steve's car so we could all go to the party and get drunk or something. We were walking through the Granville Island parking lots when Joan saw a parked 1957 Chevrolet convertible with the top down. She had a bouquet of flowers somebody must have stolen from in front of an Italian restaurant, and so she jumped into the convertible and sat up on the back seat and started slowly waving to imaginary crowds. It was astonishing, my upstairs neighbour suddenly turned into a Prom Queen.

“Just what I always wanted to do!” Joan yelled, as we dragged her from the convertible before the owner arrived. We went off to find Steve and Angela’s terminal, rust-and-green, falling-apart thing. Then we went driving around Vancouver arguing about where to buy beer for the party.

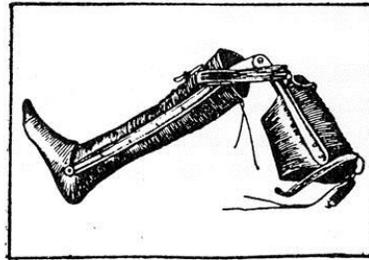
“Well, what were some of the funny things people said?” I persisted, thinking about this article for *Brick*.

“It was all titters,” said Joan. “People weren’t laughing with their bodies.”

“Yeah, like he’d mention the word shit or fuck or piss and all these men would go snigger snigger.”

I began to understand that there’s something about deconstructionist poetry that makes people very angry.

And it seems impossible to express passion or anger or mystery or suspense or devotion or terror in deconstructionist poetry. Maybe they’re closet Buddhists. When you deconstruct language, what you end up with is deconstructed language. It’s like deconstructing a cat: what you end up with is a dead cat.



Only lately have I ever gong to literary parties; you have to be very careful. If I don’t have anybody to hide behind then I try to eat a lot. Because you should never go hustling men at literary parties and poetry conferences. When I was in Cambridge last June there was this huge six-foot-five *warm* man from California who wasn’t a poet and kept taking me out to lunch and everything. I just love being Taken Care Of as long as it doesn’t go too far, and he was a real taker-care-of type. I fell down the bank of the Cam River and he casually lifted me back up and brushed me off and kept on walking and talking about his consulting firm, it was just wonderful. I was thinking of checking out of Trinity Hall and making more convenient arrangements. But after conversation in a swank, seamy, honest-to-God Olde English Inn of some kind, and asking him about himself with my matchless reporter’s instincts, he had admitted he’d spent three years in the Illinois State Asylum for the Completely Bonkers and it appeared he’d spent most of his first marriage enthusiastically beating his wife. I was suddenly seized by an overwhelming desire to go somewhere *alone* and buy a pair of shoes. I leapt up from the lunch table and left the Olde English Inn and the quiche and him all in one burst of speed. The getaway scene. Other people go to poetry conferences and meet perfectly normal people, but I end up attracting a giant demented Californian.

So at this party I’m going to sit out on the deck and look at the city and try to act normal. Nicole Brossard is there and I say hello and attempt conversation, but she is tired and talked out so the conversation falters. Except for me, of course, motor-mouth, attempting to say something of interest and nattering on about my Louisiana French ancestor. I felt like either Dick or Dick. And then everything was normal for a while until Joan came out onto the deck red in the face. She’d barged in on Charles Berstein [sic] in the washroom. “I said, ‘Oh Jesus! I’m sorry! Excuse

me! I didn't know anybody was in here!" she said. This is the kind of talk that goes on. Nobody says, "I ran into Joe Schmoe in the toilet." It has to be Charles Bernstein.

At the place where I was crashing, I saw George's girlfriend who, as you will no doubt remember much better than anything I've said about deconstructionist poetry, was named Alanna and was an exotic dancer. As I mentioned, she had come to performance night at the Women and Words Conference in Creston the year before and did her belly dancing, which I missed. But she and I went out drinking together along with Luanne Armstrong and some cowgirls including the incomparable Margie Jameson from Tata Creek. It was a heady and splendid mix of writing and riding and dancing. Margie Jameson is a roper, and also a freelance writer, and she and her husband work together. He's a photographer and has been on one of the Everest expeditions. Just think about the social gulfs that separate all these people! Think how nice it would be if Margie Jameson could meet the deconstructionists and hear them talk deconstructionist talk! Imagine how thrilled the male academics would be if they could see Margie rope or Alanna dance! You may think I'm being sarcastic but I'm not; every one of the above-named skills are useless except as play. Ah, but the conceptual gulfs that separate them.



The woman with the baby spoke at the final day of the conference again, and then Bernstein [sic] spoke. He was surrounded by admirers, and they asked questions in deconstructionist language, and he answered in same. Smoking wasn't allowed inside the lecture hall so a group of women ended up standing at the door, smoking and listening. The men were, I think, actually having contests to see who could go on the longest without once having referred to anything concrete. It's a sort of high-wire act. Which is why this article is intentionally the other way. I bet I haven't once introduced a thought without having preceded it with a story. Like Gerry in Malcolm Lowry's *Lunar Caustic*:

Do you know, it's a funny thing, it's like a miracle, but wherever I am, if I'm up in the air, or under the sea, or in the mountains, anywhere—I can tell a story. No matter where you put me, even in prison. I can be sitting, not sitting. Eating, not eating. I can put the whole thing into that story, that's what makes it a story.

"What'd they say about content?" I asked Sandy Duncan. She shrugged. There was Gail Scott, and the woman with the baby, and Angela, and Sandy Duncan, and Pauline Butling, and me, all listening and smoking. Except Pauline who quit smoking ten years ago and now has completely pink lungs. I eventually quit too. I imagine men must find that very sexy, a woman with completely pink lungs!

"But that's a completely false analogy!" said the woman with the baby, looking around at the rest of us incredulously. I didn't even understand what the analogy was. Gail Scott seemed to

know what she meant, though, and nodded. I finally realized that all this reminded me of the old days on the New Left, the women hanging around the periphery, the men figure-skating on icy ponds of jargon, talking in long abstract sentences without every coming down to concrete examples, the women crying out, “We need a feminist analysis!” and “That’s a completely false analogy!”

I wandered outside again. Joan came along. “You know when that woman went up to speak and handed the baby to her husband?” she said.

“Yes?”

“And everybody thought it was so evolved, like to the two of them sharing child care?”

“Right.”

“Well, he came up to me and said, ‘Hey, would you look after the baby for a while? Teenage babysitters are so hard to get.’ He actually said that to me.”

“Had you met him before?”

“No! I didn’t even know the guy. You’d think he found it under a rock or something.”

People were getting tired of me asking about content and somebody finally said: “Listen, forget writing an article about this, just do one of your humour pieces. You write really funny stuff.” And I said yeah, but where in Canada do you go to be funny?

Pauline Butling left the lecture hall. She was fuming. “Somebody just asked Berstein [sic] a question in objection to something he’d said and he replied: ‘I don’t have to deal with that.’ And refused to answer. Isn’t that convenient?”

And there you are, there’s the answer. Nobody has to deal with Berstein [sic] or this kind of writing, either, but most people feel they do. They feel, rightly or wrongly, that these are high-powered academics, that they’re important, that the writing that’s going on here feels itself to be avant-garde and superior. And that you have to argue with it. In deconstructionist talk. But you don’t. Like Berstein [sic], you can just say: “I don’t have to deal with that.”

At the end of the conference, as people were drifting off, Sandy Duncan and Joan and I and some other women were standing around talking about our sci-fi and fabulist writings, comparing notes. We all agreed to meet in my kitchen in Nelson in a month and read our stuff to each other. This actually happened!

Then George and Alanna and Joan and I went to a restaurant to eat something before I had to go and do the reading at the Pat Lowther Award Benefit. It was at a Vietnamese restaurant and Joan kept trying to find some kind of food or soup that would be good for a hangover.

“God, Joan, you only had four beers, how can you have a hangover?”

“I’m a cheap drunk. I’m just a cheap drunk. Jesus, did you see me? Running all over the place and talking to Nicole Brossard about my cat? I mean, did I really think Nicole Brossard was going to be interested in my goddamned cat? I’m going on, ‘She’s in heat, she’s bringing in all her boyfriends, the slut.’ I mean, really.”

“Yeah, me too. I was carrying on about my French grandmother, like that was interesting or something. I bet she wishes she had a dollar for every anglo that apologized for not speaking French.”

“You got it.”

“So did you run into anybody interesting?”

“Nope. I sort of went sidling into the kitchen—this was after, in my incarnation as Superklutz, I walking in on Berstein [sic] in the washroom—and the men were all off by

themselves at the kitchen table. Talking about guess what? They were talking about the letter 'L.'"

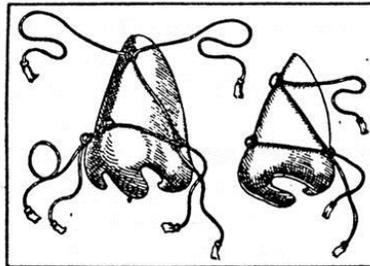
"That's fairly safe. Nobody's taking any emotional risks with that one."

"Can't get AIDS from 'L.'"

"What the 'L,' eh?"

We left the Vietnamese restaurant and went walking through downtown Vancouver to the reading. Joan had tried to talk the manager into selling her the huge plastic lobster in the front window of the restaurant but he wouldn't.

"So this is fashion," she said, staring around at all the downtown Vancouver people. Many strange things



people were dressed in. In our little town in the mountains we sometimes forget that fashion is occurring every day. In fact fashion never stops happening! I was sliding around inside the enormous jacket-shirt thing like an orange in a winter boxcar. I was feeling a bit isolated and shipwrecked. I was short on content these days. I was mad at Andrew for not coming down, why did he have to take that shoot up in Frobisher Bay? I hoped his camera exploded. I hoped a dead frozen caribou fell on him. I felt like a penny with a hole in it and I had to go do a reading like this.

At the benefit I ran into another friend, Monica Parker, who had been at the Friday night reading at the Colloquium.

"So did they say anything about content?" One last try.

"I don't know. I hated it so much Blake and I got up and walked out. I was just so angry. They think that's poetry?"

"It's their conference," said Joan. "They can call it anything they want."

"That's right. It's a conference for that kind of poetry."

The benefit reading went off very well and I heard Pat Lowther's poetry read aloud for the first time. She was a first-rate poet. Oddly enough, even though most of the poems are not more than sixteen years old, the style and diction seemed stilted, archaic. The same with Plath's poetry. They read like John Donne; you say to yourself, 'Oh, yes. That's how they wrote back then,' which doesn't lessen your appreciation for this very fine poetry. But it's odd how old it sounds, how quickly poetic fashions have changed.

By the time I got up to read half the audience had left. I don't blame them. It was a long reading, and I had even longer poems. Afterwards some people were standing around and Phyllis Webb said: "Of course the question is, why didn't she leave him?" Meaning Pat Lowther.

Maybe she felt she had to around and argue with him. Maybe she felt she had to prove what he was saying was a completely false analogy. And so you end up pleading, demanding, insisting, convincing, coercing, arguing, but somebody else is always the centre and you're on the margin. What you're really doing is asking for permission or approval, and of course there's

no end to an addiction to approval. It's inventing over and over again every day the *derakous*, the hostile and derisive observer from the centre. And a person can hang around doing that just a little bit too long.

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