

Donato Mancini interviews **Dorothy Trujillo Lusk**

DM: The poetry in your most recent book, *Ogress Oblige* seems related to various vocal forms, literary and non-literary, from schoolyard doggerel, to song, to soap-box rants, to the kind of nonsensical vocalizations made in the throes of rage or pain. Is that why you evoked the noisy figure of the ogress to frame it with?

DTL: I initially saw the figure of the ogress as being mean women I didn't like, but then I decided to take it on again, as some people have taken on 'nigger' or as feminists in the sixties took on 'cunt'. Myself I'd like to take back 'cunt' as a term of pejorative rage, I want to make it bad again, to call people [growling] 'You fuckin' cunt!' But 'ogress' was originally applied to women I was pissed off at. So in *Ogress Oblige* I took on myself the expectation of the ogress, what ogresses must do etc. For me it's the scorned mother figure, the scorned female. In an earlier essay I called it 'the mother as a site of surplus values'. It's its own nexus for a lot of goofy shit. I don't swear that much in regular speech, and in my writing use profanities more as punctuation or to maintain a rhythm than vituperative emotive content. This said, I still do feel more power in the "c" word in its nasty aspect than in its reclaimed "positive" form.

DM: Is the ogress an anti-mother figure?

DTL: No, not really, it comes from having people cease to see you as sexually desirable. A former of mine, who had her child a bit before me, put on masses of weight when she became pregnant, as did I. Afterwards, she wore this giant t-shirt, this skateboarder's tie-dye swirl and really held her lane on the sidewalk. She didn't get out of peoples' ways just because she was no longer small and cute. She went into this sort of *fuck-you* raging thing. She's the ur-ogress in a way, for me. She bestowed that t-shirt upon me for my pregnancy.

DM: I also read *Ogress Oblige* in terms of wickedly tight knots of tensions - semantic, political, verbal, formal...

DTL: My earlier writing from the mid-80s, in *Redactive*, was a deliberate writing at cross-purposes to how people expect a poem to continue, in terms of received forms of poetry, or in terms of whatever's current in the theory-mill. What I really enjoy doing is taking a lot of the currently loaded terms and bugging around with them, mis-using them to confound that kind of easy accessibility. Ironically, most of my friends who are involved in art-criticism and high theory are actually quite keen on it. It was meant to confound them as much as everyone else, and to be deliberately not easily teachable. (Marjorie Perloff apparently taught my work in her classes. I wonder how she did that.)

There are lots of ways to teach things, but I don't want it to be expected that I'll be able to reiterate things in scholarly terms. That isn't part of my training, although it's part of my reading. I used to read just massive amounts of theory, but never knew if I was getting it the right way anyways because I didn't have the teacher to be the exegete. So I have my own mis-informed ways of reading things and turning out stuff that's a by-product of that. Before reading any of the so-called language poets, I'd just read what they were reading, and I quite deeply resented that certain people, particularly Canadian nationalist types,

would see this as a betrayal of my own naturally-given Canadian models. Even Ron Silliman mentioned that recently in a posting on the Buffalo Poetics list; the one thing that the NY School and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School have in common is that we all like Anselm Hollo.

DM: Who else did you read?

DTL: There are wonderful Canadian writers that I've always been interested in, some people who are actually friends now, like Maxine Gadd. Maxine Gadd and Anselm Hollo were the two biggest influences in terms of writing. And Ed Dorn, you know, who unfortunately went into disfavour due to some coke-addled remark he made about AIDS being retribution for homosexuality. There's not much of a way to recuperate after that, but his writing was fucking great! My oldest friend Kate Van Dusen, got a copy of *Gunslinger* and we used to read that out loud, as we read aloud *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco.

My favourite Canadian writer is Margaret Avison. She's somebody who's also very sincere and Christian mystic, which is the case with another writer I love, Fanny Howe. She's also someone who is very sincerely Christian, but the work isn't banal, it's very difficult. Those are very difficult paths to walk, to be up front about taking that stuff seriously, and not just using it as a trope or a conceit. Avison and Fanny Howe are never just falling back on it as a given ground, they're actually trying to work their way through the forest of possibility of this kind of cosmology, of the self in relation to something larger. It's always been difficult, but it's especially difficult now.

DM: Christian Bök raised an interesting point about influence, in an interview recently published in *Brick*; he was expressing a frustration that many bpNichol admirers 'reread him to the point of exhaustion, without finding a way to use such a predecessor as a springboard to something new in the same genre'.

DTL: When I was living in Toronto Barrie Nichol was still alive – and this applies to others in his circle, like Chris Dewdney and Steve McCaffery – it seemed to me that the audience saw them as being so *up there* that they wouldn't bother trying check out what these guys had been reading, what they were referring to. When we got Chris Dewdney's work we'd go check out the references. But there's this cultishness where for the audience-guy it's just [in a male voice] 'I don't know what it means, but *wow!*' instead of trying to work closely as a responsible reader. You just make it more interesting for yourself by trying various ways of reading, and reading other material. I could hope everybody who reads Charles Olson will read Carl Sauer. Part of the Olsonian project as a reader is to read his library, so why not with these guys? Why not give them the attention?

When I was 11 we did a whole bunch of Coleridge in school, and I was totally undone by the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I kind of used that form, the way the language moved, as a vehicle for my own sort of notions of heaven and hell and judgement from on high and stuff like that. 'A sinner from a burning well'. When I handed in my poem to my teacher I got it back, and she gave me a good mark, but then she put at the bottom, she said [condescending] 'I detect a note of plagiarism here, shades of the Ancient Mariner hhhhhhhhh?' And I looked up 'plagiarism' and said 'What's wrong with that?' I didn't realise it was a bad thing, cos writing is based on our reading, on how we read.

At that time CBC was re-broadcasting a BBC film that Peter Watkins had made on the Battle of Culloden. Having seen all the gory Vietnam footage on the nightly news, and living through my viewer's horror, I went upstairs to my room to get away from this broadcast. But we lived in a small house and I could hear *all* of it. I was 11 or 12, and Watkins' film detailed all the child-soldiers' deaths, and the manner of their deaths, and the sounds of their dying. And I wrote through it then, through my sense of the actuality of people dying. And that's what I think I still do, but not always as first-person testimonial. One doesn't necessarily write from one's own personal position of horror, but somehow we write through it.

DM: With the way you chew up bits of Pound etc it seems sometimes that you're going back and attacking the writers of the past.

DTL: I'm not really attacking them, I'm more replicating my own idiosyncratic reading of them, the things I pick up on. Mostly I'm writing around people who have been mean to me. I'm trying to show how maybe I tend to misunderstand things or misconstrue things or tend to foreground certain things.

Kate Van Dusen was the first person I knew who was a smart girl who was writing and who was up front about being a writer. You didn't have to have this phony anti-intellectualism, you didn't have to play stupid. You could ask questions, you could be interested in things instead just being dismissive. There was kind of a vogue for being against putting any effort into anything, or knowing anything.

DM: I think that's still in vogue.

DTL: O fuck yeah! It's turned into a post-punk slacker ethos.

DM: The work ethic is perhaps now directed more towards making it no work for the reader; writers work very, very hard to make it easy as possible the reader.

DTL: Well I'm willing to do that in essays, as mine tend to be anecdotal and yappy, they're not the most difficult things in the world to read. I think that's only fair, cos I'm not trying to prove myself smart at the reader's expense. But with poetry it's different. I don't know if it comes out of protestant work-ethic or what it is but I still get pissed off if it seems to me like someone hasn't put enough effort into their writing. Also true with the ear; the musicality you mentioned. It pisses me off when things *thunk* when I don't think the writer's aware of it, cos they're not listening to it, cos they're just *looking* at the words, and going by syntactic or semantic things. A lot of so-called Language writing sounds like shit. Sound allows writing another dimension.

I really like tossing in a lot of etymological jokes. I don't privilege etymology, cos that would be a very reactionary position, but it's a blast to find these things that feed back and forth to each other. And fucking around with these completely asinine, baroque, Latinate figurations, like putting parking-lots of little anglo-saxon things and other derivations into it and seeing what percolates out of that. A friend of mine was teasing me about my work, saying 'I don't know Dorothy, you're gonna have to start being a lot more dense than this.'

There's a line in one of the poems 'composing transits of ineffable fluff, which Susan Clark liked, cos it has like five Fs in a row. But it's alluding to the smugness of writers who really think that they're smarter than their readership, writing accusatively in the second person 'this is stuff you don't know...', and they'll annotate their work. Come on, let the reader figure it out themselves. I don't know how well this is going to sit with a lot of people writing who, as you were saying, work so hard to make it easy for the reader, but I like to be more fun for the reader. I think it's more fun if they have to sort of gnaw away at bits of it. Or not. They can just jump into the middle of something.

Derksen years ago said he liked how you could see different ideologies bumping up against each other in my writing, with the kind of grating that would occur. I thought that was very perceptive. He also said that he thought I was splicing things together, but I rejected that model entirely because I felt that was necessarily linear, because with splicing in the filmic sense you're then putting it into the sprockets and then it plays forward, though you can reverse the direction.

DM: So are the poems composed slowly?

DTL: I used to compose really fast, cos I used to work a lot, but you know I've had a kid for the last 12 years. I don't really have the necessary time for the condition of reverie, that kind of spacing-out into foreground / middleground, that necessary precondition to any creative act. And I'm too fucking exhausted from all the fucking harangue that goes on in my household. I'm not blaming my kid, but she's very high-strung. She's the product of myself and her father and we both come from a very shallow gene pool in the Ottawa valley of Scots-Irish Protestants. It's no wonder that all of our family are stunted with depression and weird hard-wiring. So it's not a blame thing, it's just how it plays out. I don't work slowly cos I want to, I have no choice. And I don't think my recent work's as complex or as interesting as I would have wanted it to be, cos I haven't really had the depth of attention, that really close, kind of hypno-paranoiac, state of attention.

DM: Is it important to you that your work be contextualised as 'radical' vs other currents in writing?

DTL: I don't give a shit. If there's some way that a reader can enjoy it, whatever it is, whether it's reading it aloud and saying 'Boy, this stuff's stupid!' or 'What the hell's that supposed to mean?' That's one way of enjoying it, although no one wants to be dismissed out of hand.

DM: There are some ways of being dismissed that are desirable.

DTL: [laughs] Yeah, there are certain ways that are more ok than others. But I'd be quite stricken if the type of work I do became so mannered that it became just a mainstream tendency. It worried me a few years ago when I felt the kind of work I was doing really was it's *own* mainstream. I talked to Deanna Ferguson about this, how we'd be in the middle of writing something and we'd come up with something and just say [loud] 'O fuck!! That's just the fucking kind of thing I *would* write!' You start feeling dead.

DM: A painter friend of mine who loves your work, loves it much to his surprise because it doesn't give him what he calls 'poetry blisters'.

DTL: [laughs] Another term I've used is 'first person soporific' O, that 'you are a house of bone' stuff is sort of banal and creepy at the same time, which isn't a great combination. Other poetry that I guess gives me poetry blisters is the stuff the 'I'm so sensitive in a better way than you are and I'm going to show that off' which is an eternal trait of the snobbish lyriciser.

Kevin Davies gave me and Gerry Creede the best advice as writers. He kept saying 'Make it weirder.' You know, you go to writing workshops and people say [in a niggling voice] 'Maybe you should work on this.... Maybe knock this bit off here....' But Kevin said 'make it *weirder*', rich and strange: make it weirder, rather than filing off all the unwieldy or wonky bits and valorizing the smooth, easily digested and homogenous.

DM: Are you writing primarily as a political act, or out of a politics?

DTL: Yes, definitely *of* a politics, but it's primarily an act of pleasure. For quite a while within leftist political streams there was a real proscription against anything that was of pleasure, in and of itself. This went into conceptual visual art as well. Just the act of painting wasn't good enough; you had to come up with a whole apparatus in order to justify it. I think of the much-dismissed Sunday-painter: good for them. That goes for writing bogus poetry as well, it just depends on what you want to do with it. That there can be writing as act of pleasure, and writing as an act of testimony. Kevin said in the mid-eighties, when we were at our most hard-headed, that that kind of writing is never going to be eradicated, nor should it be. I mean, we cannot merely theorize into our field of apprehension the testimony of people who are writing through political horror and rage, regardless of whether or not they're aware of the language as it's used.

So many people I know who are involved in the visual arts as scholars always come up that quote from Adorno about the obscenity of writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz. But they usually forget to put 'lyric' in there, cos the different categories or senses of poetry are beyond their ken. It's as though one person by that pronouncement could render everything that people were doing redundant. There's such a proscriptive smugness there, and such a reference and reverence to the authority of Adorno. Whether it's writing from a position of pleasure or whether it's like Paul Celan, who in this sense made it possible for all of us to write poetry at all, following that dismissal. I see his poetry as a necessary corrective to that smug Adornoan pronouncement.

DM: I hope this isn't a bizarre question in an interview of a poet, but why poetry? More so than *Redactive*, the poems in *Ogress Oblige* seem to show a hostility to their own medium.

DTL: Poetry wasn't my chosen medium, really. I went to art school, and I was really more interested in art restoration. I wanted to go into art restoration cos I saw this movie when I was a kid called *Don't Look Now*, really a kind of stupid film. What was interesting was that this Donald Sutherland character was helping restore palaces in Venice. I found that really fascinating. There was one place in Canada to get that education, Sir Sanford Fleming in Peterborough, but when I was a teenager I'd dropped out of high school and

married, but my husband didn't want to go to Peterborough. He wanted to come to Vancouver to study genetics with David Suzuki, but he ended up going to Victoria to study astrophysics and creative writing with Robin Skelton! [laughs] He didn't stay, he quit. And he told me I was too much of a bumblefuck to go to University, so he said 'Why don't you go to art school, any damn fool can get into art school.' And so I did, first at Camosun, then Emily Carr. At Camosun they were mostly mentally-ill or incompetent. One guy was going through a marriage break up, the other guy had just got laid for the first time in his life, and the photography guy, while quite competent, which was a blessing, couldn't teach us anything aesthetically. He'd just say 'Well, do what you want, just make sure it's creative.' [laughs]

At Emily Carr, the teachers were all these conceptual artists who were really, really fucking snotty. [English accent] 'What do you want to learn to *draw* for, it's just making *marks*.' Oh god, it was a horrible, horrible place, just ghastly and they didn't want to teach you how to do anything. So I was rendered incapable of making any art at all, because you had to be able to justify anything you made with a whole conceptual apparatus. I didn't really know all the terms, and I didn't want to be stupid, I didn't want to be incapable of couching my work in the current lingo, so I fell into the depression of not being able to do anything. But I always did write in my sketchbooks, and never considered it writing as such that other people would be interested in, so I was never afraid of how other people would read it. My writing didn't change as much as some people might think. I was writing po-mo doggerel at the age of 12, in a way. I was pleased with just sort of going along with how it sounded, and if it made some sort of bogus surreal sense, well, ok, fine.

I came out more as a writer much later on. I had this boyfriend, Keith, who I thought was this great boyfriend, and he abandoned me and went to Switzerland, cos he got this art-gig there, through one of those hands-across-the-water, art-Mafia programs. When Keith came back like three years later to visit, I wanted to prove to him that I hadn't been sitting around doing nothing (which I *was*). I really hadn't done anything except paint some kind of zig-zaggy cats, or stuff like little upside down sharks with the word 'bereft' underneath; stupid shit. I guess I was mostly influenced by Japanese comics and my misreadings of Maurice Blanchot. So I read some of my writing to him. And he hated it, he fucking hated it! And I don't blame him cos in the way I read I was trying not to express 'the writer's voice'. All the writers of my generation had this thing crammed down our throats that we had 'our own voice', and I was really resentful of that, cos I didn't believe there was a unified subject in that way. And that didn't come only from readings of po-mo theory, but also Tibetan Buddhism, and all kinds of things.

The writing I was doing was like finding the paranoid tendencies in tv-guide blurbs. I'd pull them out and they'd all seem to be about kidnapped kids, and junior-goes-wild type stuff. I was pulling things from diverse public sources, as well as writing scrambly syntactical what-not. So I read this out loud to him and I was trying to make each word sound discreetly and not put any expression into it, kind of like that robot who used to phone you from the library. Keith just went [screeching] 'O my god!!! That's fucking horrible!! Aaaaaaaahhh!!!' It was kind of like trying to do the writing equivalent of Frank Stella you know [gruff and robotic] "No brush strokes.... No brush strokes!" I realised it was a bad mistake.

But my friend Kevin Davies, who came to live with me while I was having various nervous breakdowns, was the first person I let read writing I'd done, and he really liked my writing. I thought it could have been just that he liked me, but he insisted. I was amazed, cos I knew what a great writer Kevin was. He was my only reader for a few years. Later I imagined an audience of people whose writing I'd read who I thought might like what I was doing. It gave me a sense of a wider community. I was living in Toronto at the time, and there was no possible readership there, there wasn't the social milieu with a lot of convergent social interaction, like Vancouver. Writers didn't hang out with people in other places like they do here. That gave me freedom to write whatever the hell I wanted, and cackle away with my goofy jokes.

DM: So you didn't write with a vision of it 'going somewhere'.

DTL: No, I didn't. I felt that it could go somewhere if it played out that way, but I didn't expect it ever would. Kevin wanted me to submit stuff to magazines, and I thought: no fucking way! But I have the most ridiculous luck as a writer. People solicit my work, and always have done since Lary Timewell Bremner put together a chapbook for me. He sent it all over the place, distributed it wonderfully. Since then people have always asked me for books, or for contributions to magazines.

DM: You stumbled into the role.

DTL: I did. But it was because of wonderful friends like Lary Bremner, and Kevin Davies. Really, I do think that people need the support of other writers. I can't imagine the horror of sending things off to magazines over and over and over again. You read interviews with writers and they say it's just something you gotta get used to. I'd just about die, wouldn't you?

We sometimes do this magazine, *W*, and others disagree, but I'd really like to have the editorial role taken seriously. To be able to say: 'Why don't you try this with it?', though not in a bullying way. I have friends who help me with my work, and I really want them to. I really want that reader, and I help my friends with their work, but then other people huff up, 'I would never presume to tell another person how to write!' And I think, well you're a university professor but as a writer you won't take the editorial position. I say: let's take the editorial position seriously and offer concrete suggestions. I got Aaron Vidaver, Reg Johanson and Roger Farr and had them all read different versions of what went into *Ogress Oblige*, and had them offer suggestions. Roger and Aaron and I all had a conference call and came up with a version, and I really appreciated that; that's what I wanted.

DM: You were happier with the final version as it turned out?

DTL: It didn't actually go into the published book. I'm so fucking disorganised I sent out the wrong disc with an earlier version on it, and that's what got published. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I thought [horrified] 'I think I sent the wrong version off to Dan Farrell at Krupskaya!' I saw Dan the next day and said 'Dan, Dan, I think I sent you the wrong version!' He said 'No, no, no, you sent the right version, don't worry' and Aaron said, 'Yeah, you sent the right version.' But Aaron read it later and said 'You were right.'

DM: You said you wanted to talk about your friend D.M. Fraser?

DTL: The thing about Don Fraser is that he was a very fragile person, you know, alcoholic, and whatever diseases of birth he had. I think it was cerebral palsy, but we really didn't know. He was a wonderful, wonderful guy. He was in the Ph.D. program at UBC. He was one of the few people in Canada who was allowed to bypass the Master's program and go directly into the Doctorate program, which is quite common in the U.S.. But he dropped out because he fell in love with the quasi working-class guys at Pulp Press. I addressed him directly in the poem *Oral Tragedy*. [The line: 'Then last week he relegated his wit's end to a grubby 5th in the cellar. Not interesting & missing Don to get it'] cos Don would always get my stupid jokes, even though it was beneath the other guys' radar. *To D.M. Fraser*, the first poem in *Ogress Oblige*, has the subtitle 'Rich in Russia, and owed wot an Etruscan earned' You see Don wrote this book, *Class Warfare*, and he said to me [excited whisper] 'Don't tell anyone Dorothy, but I'm rich in Russia!' Somebody translated *Class Warfare* into Russian, and it was a huge best-seller in Russia. And he said: 'The only problem is, I'm rich in Russia and you can't take the currency out, so I'd have to go to Russia. It's all in roubles.' I just thought that was so fucking great. He's dead now, so I can tell that story.

DM: So it was a happy irony after he quit the Ph.D. that his work became so successful in Russia and in Canada.

DTL: Yeah, but he was too fragile to actually go to Russia. He should have been able to get there, but he didn't. Our bearded, Stalinist book-seller Bill Hoffer managed to get to Russia. He at least got to go to Russia, and got married and stuff, although he's dead as well. Anyway – and this is what the Etruscan line refers to – our last public appearance in Canada before going over to Italy was to go to Don's funeral. Where Kevin and I lived in Italy was one of the main Etruscan areas, Umbria, which is a landlocked, central area of Italy. We lived was about 22km from Assisi. What I really liked over there were all the Etruscan things that survived, and I also really liked that their language wasn't translatable. There's something still really mysterious about the Etruscan civilization and language. So I was fiddling around with a lot of Latinate goofiness and this poem, although it was only published a few years ago, it was started when Don died, which was in '85, when we went to Italy. I hope that when this film gets made [a film on one of Fraser's short stories is being made by the film-maker Flick Harrison] people read his books again, cos his books were once in every leftist bathroom in all of British Columbia.

He was really, really a drinker, and as his illnesses progressed, you couldn't understand him very well. My first encounter with the Kootenay School of Writing, was when Kevin Davies and Don Fraser and I were downtown together at Robson Square, as a big demonstration was going on. The David Thompson University Centre in Nelson had been shut down by the Social Credit government. All these young students from those programs, people who became friends of ours later, were demonstrating against the closure of their school. They had this teletype machine or some damn thing, and were saying 'Everybody should write a poem, everybody should write a poem and type it in!' This woman recognised Don Fraser as a well-known writer and she kept saying, 'You're a poet, you're a poet! I know you! Write a poem! You're a poet! Write a poem!' And Don, because you couldn't understand him very well with his disability kept saying [in a fuzzy

frozen-mouthed drawl] 'I'm a prose writer, I'm a prose writer' and this woman insisted he was a poet and he must write a poem. That's the first time I encountered what would become the KSW later on; write a poem! [laughs]