See You Next Tuesday: A Walk and a Talk with Dorothy Trujillo Lusk

Danielle LaFrance

This walk and talk was recorded in multiple parts, over nearly eight hours, on September 15, 2015. It began on Danielle's patio in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood and soon marched towards False Creek, by the old Expo site, following the waterfront until Danielle and Dorothy reached the Sylvia Hotel in English Bay.

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Danielle LaFrance: So, you've got an extra vertebra?

Dorothy Trujillo Lusk: Yeah. There was this nuclear reactor that melted down before I was born, nine months to the day. I don't know. I was born with a horn in the middle of my forehead.

DL: You're a liar!

DTL: I'm not! And there was a boy born the same day who only had one ear. I later started to have back problems while running. The doctor had me x-rayed and said, "You're two inches taller than you're supposed to be. You've got an extra vertebra." At school I'd been learning about nuclear reactors and stuff like that, which is, as I say, where I come from.

DL: You came from a nuclear reactor?

DTL: Well, my dad worked on one, yeah. I thought, "Oh God, I'm such a mutant! I have a horn on my head! And I'm two inches taller than I'm supposed to be!" It gave me a focus for my misery. So I go see Michael, my shrink, and I'm telling him all this. Weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. I was really scared, shaking, a basket case. He starts nodding his hippie head and says, "You had a horn on your forehead when you were born?" And I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, some cartilage or a blood clot or something. They were going to operate but it went away on its own." "It went away on its own?" And I say, "Yes, Michael, it went away on its own." And he goes, "That's too bad." I just looked at him, like, "Michael, what do you mean that's too bad?" "It's too bad it went away, because otherwise you would have had a great future as a dildo."

DL: How old were you?

DTL: I was 22 or something like that. It was kinda radical, it sort of broke things for me.

DL: Did you laugh?

DTL: Yeah, I kinda did. Not kinda—I did laugh. I was grateful.

DL: So, I came across this email that Roger Farr sent me in July 2006—

[*DTL redirects course*]

Wait, why are we going this way? Why don't we walk around and not through this?

[*Gestures towards dirt path*]

DTL: But it's cool! It's dirt! Not just paved pieces of aggregate shit. There's probably a plastic mesh under it, but we don't get

dirt very often. What did Roger say in the email?

DL: He said, "Good chatting with you yesterday Danielle. Too bad I had to run for the ferry so suddenly. I wanted you to meet my friend Dorothy. She's a really great poet, longtime member of the KSW, lives in Kits. I have an essay on her work coming out this fall. She does a lot of stuff on single motherhood and class. I bet Betsy Warland knows her."

DTL: Oh right, because you had done that thing with Betsy Warland?

DL: Yeah, a course at SFU led by Betsy in 2006. Technically my first "serious" attempt at writing poetry and figuring out a way, that worked with me at the time, to discuss the poetry itself. I often go back into my email archive, almost relentlessly.

DTL: You do?

DL: I do, I do, obsessively so. I'd wanted to see the first time you would have been referenced in my archive, so I plugged your name in my search box and traced back in time to Roger's email. I was wondering how you and I would have introduced ourselves to one another in 2006.

DTL: At least I wasn't still breastfeeding then! Anna'd have been weaned, because otherwise I would have just blurted out, "I'M MOMMY!" I'm not kidding, that was always the best. How would I have introduced myself? "Hi, I'm Dorothy, it's good to meet you"? Honest to God. I was talking to my friend's much older-generation half-sister recently who asked, "So are you still doing any writing?" And I was like, "How do I get out of this?" I don't introduce myself as anything, especially not as a poet.

DL: I can't remember the first time I met you.

DTL: That's because we all go out in a clump.

DL: We metastasize over time.

DTL: It's true, right? I remember being quite hurt, when I was a younger woman, that I was cast as this undifferentiated younger female. I didn't have any fixed identity to the older writers, some of whom were not that much older, but nonetheless. You didn't have an identity unless you were somebody's grad student or had slept with them. Perhaps, even then, you wouldn't actually have an identity. That's maybe why I was always interested in the "decentered subject." Those pulp press guys especially would say "You have nothing to say" and "you can't write because you have nothing to say." And then another group would say "You haven't found your own voice yet" and they'd go on about that. Now, I just see these genial, lovely faces. Everybody is really smart and interesting. I think we were just clumped together. And people get used to me. It's the same with my younger friends, my female friends, people just get used to me.

DL: Like a venereal disease. Maybe because of that email I felt an affinity with you, long before I had even read your work.

DTL: Oh! That's how I totally felt about Maxine Gadd! I was, like, "Oh my god! I know Maxine Gadd! She doesn't know me, but I have talked with Maxine Gadd. I've waited at the ferry terminal with her!" It took a long time for her to know me and eventually she asked the same question—"When did I actually meet you?"

DL: You've mentioned to me in passing how challenging your writing process has become, not so much to produce but to arrange and compose on the page. What do you think has affected these changes and shifts in your process over time?

DTL: Things just don't bother me as much anymore, so the writing is suffering as a result.

DL: Is that in part because of medication? You've mentioned how the effects have changed how you go about editing. This is not, of course, to denigrate its benefits, but we can't deny how being medicated changes our relationship to the production of poetry, to writing.

DTL: Oh, I think so. I mean I'm not on medication anymore, but it had a permanent effect on me. For me depression is absolutely clinical. I was diagnosed at seven and hospitalized by the time I was thirteen. So depression for me is a whole other order of magnitude.

DL: I think "coping" comes out of the discourse of being diagnosed. The diagnosed subject is overcome with solutions like "coping strategies" or "managing your depression." How is writing connected with anguish for you?

DTL: Anguish is a hell of a lot different from anger. I don't think they are at all similar. Depression, it seems, or a common way to understand it, is anger that has not been able to vent, that has been flattened out. Yet it was in a state of anguish that I could write. The ogress was always a figure of the anguished mother, desexualized and ostracized, relegated to a reproductive role of surplus labour, who has to fight for their kid, for territory on the street, to maintain their place on the street, because we don't get to be flâneurs.

DL: There seems to be a resurgence of confessionalism lately, this confessional "I," even though most writers would maybe not use that identifier because of the religious or authoritarian connotations, like, who am I confessing to? I've been trying to consider how to propose a form of critique that doesn't dismiss it as mere narcissism. In your own work you're always rubbing against this overly produced "I," a hyperrepresentation of yourself. Have you found yourself distrusting most inherited modes of confessionalism?

DTL: I don't know if I've distrusted confessionalism, because that places it into an emotional category that was never a pull for me at all. I think I just didn't get it. Why isolate those banalities and insist on framing them in this particular way? Why are people swooning?

DL: Is the new poetry you're producing difficult to discuss? And did you at any time feel apprehensive talking about your earlier books *Redactive* and *Ogress Oblige*?

DTL: No—I mean, they were so, so long ago. I really am quite far away from that stuff. One wouldn't use the same vocabulary to talk about it; one has gone through other experiences. The ideas are similar, but they've been transmuted. Still, with very few exceptions, I feel okay with the stuff that made it into publishing. I don't know how to talk about the newer stuff because I don't even know how to work with the newer stuff. I don't know if it's because of the brain injury or antidepressants. I mean, Kevin Davies said, "You know the head

injury didn't seem to make any difference, it was pretty much the same…"

DL: Editorially it's tough? I mean, a lot's been produced.

DTL: But does it seem edited?

DL: No, it does not.

[*Takes DTL's work-in-progress,* Garadene Swine, *out of her bag and starts to flip through its stapled pages; DTL asks a couple what breed their dog is*]

DTL: This is the problem with the type of concentration I've needed and don't seem to have anymore. For some people, their so-called "state of being able to create" is hypomania, but for me it's hypoparanoia, which may be nobody's term but mine. I need to be in a state of almost-paranoia, almost tipped over into this little pile. Paranoia in the sense of intuiting the interconnectedness of everything, of being able to draw all of these things in. They might not be real connections, but you do see them. It used to be that I'd have a whole bunch of stuff I'd written and could easily notice what worked well with other stuff, what I could pull in from elsewhere. When I typed something up, I'd have a number of different versions of it and spread them all over the place. I was able to remember everything I'd written all at once and turn it into a number of different pieces. But now I go from stanza to stanza. I don't remember one bit to the next, and I don't have that sense of hypoparanoia. It's for me the ideal editing state.

[*DL stops under the Burrard Street Bridge to less distractedly look through DTL's manuscript for a moment*]

DL: A lot of the jokes in your work people don't seem to get, myself included. Or they think it's a joke when it's not.

DTL: I think it has to do with excess. Or right now it does, following Weird Al Yankovic's "Dare to be Stupid."

DL: Weird Al is obviously where your and Aaron Vidaver's true affinity lies.

DTL: Most of them are not jokes, as such. So what am I writing? Stand-up comedy? The stuff is so anguished. Sometimes I make it both—Peter Culley got that. There was a line in *Redactive* about a field mouse: "As the field mouse regrets her last hole—what will we not hurtle upon our father's plain?" He was like, "there's so much pathos in this." And I was playing with it, but it's also incredibly real. It's not a joke, but it does humorously convey some anguish and sorrow, some historical memory.

DL: It's not so specific in a larger context, not specific to current events, though it does have a sense of those things. It's not a white chalk-line telling you how to feel, which is my least favorite poetry.

DTL: Or that directs you.

DL: Or that goes about intellectualizing your emotional life to the point where you do all your feeling by way of "affect theory" and its varying iterations in the academy.

DTL: Even using the term "iterations"! Like "reification" was in an earlier generation, so is "iteration." Overprocessed.

DL: We've talked about that before, how we're getting to the point where a number of us have learned this previously, ostensibly important skill set—how to intellectualize

everything, psychologize everything, give everything a term. But we've become quite distant from how we're actually feeling. Not to say it hasn't saved my life!

DTL: I never got there, ever. I was always processing through all these different things, but not strictly through theory. I drove people nuts, especially folks who were going through MA programs, because I would read it all through my own experience and whatever shit was in play or had been in play. I was never able to distance anything.

DL: I think in university when you do that you're fucked. You feel stupid and crazy. But theory can really be a bad form of protection, like "nuance." Nuance is similarly becoming too defensive. And I love theory, but when it seeps into poetry—

DTL: —it doesn't just seep. It's an overlay on everything. Theory as protection in this sense of a carapace. I'm thinking back to years of reading psychoanalytic theory, where a subject's character is a carapace built up of trauma and pain and sorrow. It forms how you present yourself.

DL: Have you found writing, regardless of the context or type of publication, a form of protection in your life?

DTL: It's only afforded me a kind of identity. I mean I barely existed. I could've been around people for several years, but it took poetry to tell me I existed. And all the theory I was reading was telling me I didn't exist.

[*Looks out at the inlet, the sunset*]

It's beautiful. Look at that reflection.

DL: I used to meet up with friends at the Inukshuk over there and smoke up. You know what I hate?

DTL: What?

DL: Paddleboarding.

DTL: Why?!

DL: Because it's not an activity. Or a sport.

DTL: It's not as scary or interesting as surfing, true. But if you can't get to Tofino, you go out paddleboarding. They look like those Egyptian drawings.

[*DL starts singing "Walk Like an Egyptian"*]

DTL: You know, I didn't like that song. I thought it was racist. But then I listened to it again, and it's more about walking like a waitress, because you've got a tray. It's talking specifically about labour.

DL: Consider my mind blown. You know I don't like most poetry.

DTL: I didn't like poetry either. I wasn't really into it, but it's like punk, you don't get a social life unless you go where your friends are. So I just forced myself to believe everybody and how we're supposed to receive poets and recognize them as the archons of the universe.

DL: I think I missed that pill.

DTL: Oh, what did you get instead? I remember when you first met Jamie Reid, you said it was so touching because he was actually interested in your perspective. He was a finite creature.

DL: It wasn't just that he was generous with his acknowledgement of my presence, he also wasn't being condescending in

that generosity. He wasn't going out of his way—it was just "Hey, you're here too." Sometimes you get poets who will turn their heads and be so surprised that there's another generation, gender, race present. I was quite fortunate to come into the feminist discourse I did and to work with certain poets, like Betsy and Erín Moure.

DTL: Did you get into Nicole Brossard?

DL: Her work shaped a lot of my own, especially for *Species Branding*.

DTL: For me her earlier stuff was really important, like *French Kiss*. When I still wasn't totally "out" as a writer, I was the project manager for the Women and Words Society and there was a workshop as a part of the 1987, or maybe 1988, conference. *Les Femmes et Les Mots* was the book byproduct of the conference. The conference then lasted as a series of workshops, one of which was the first workshop that Betsy taught. She would come back from the pool on the UBC campus appearing like a beautiful adolescent.

DL: Your work was initially one of the subjects of Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* before the relevant sections were cut. How do you tend to feel about how critics perceive your work? I'm particularly interested in how you align yourself with "disgust" as an affective category, following Ngai's rubric.

DTL: I'm always interested in what people have to say about my work, especially Sianne. But she had this line about a cockroach crawling on a turd, and I felt like *that* disgust was kinda naturalized and universalized. Like, of course we're supposed to have this reaction of disgust!

DL: Sometimes you live where there are cockroaches, and that's your home.

DTL: Maybe I'm not that squeamish. But I don't have that kind of visceral reaction.

[*DL ushers DTL into the side doors of the Sylvia Hotel; they seat themselves in the bistro, away from the uptempo jazz music playing in the bar area, and mutter over ordering a half litre or full bottle of whatever is the cheapest*]

DL: Could you talk a bit about how collectives, maybe the KSW in particular, have shaped or unshaped your writing, your sense of identity?

DTL: I wasn't a part of the heyday of the feminist writing of KSW; I actually felt excluded from it. I didn't feel like I was entirely welcome. But at that time I was fragile and was probably just being paranoid. When Nancy Shaw died she was writing about my work. It's my own problem, really, that stems from insecurities. The collectives that I felt were important and anchored me were Vultures (aka Vancouver Women's Research Group) and About a Bicycle. Also Red Queen, early on, when I wasn't yet identifying as a writer but worked on posters for readings 'n' shit.

DL: With whom and what do you consider yourself in dialogue while you write? I'm asking specifically of the material and bodies you circuitously approach but nevertheless meet head-on in your poetry. Maybe it's because you've referred to the subject in your work as a "moving target" that I'm thinking of tactical maneuvers in poems.

DTL: Mostly I'm in dialogue with memory, possibility, and the thwarted

possibility of conventional communication or "dialogue." But memory doesn't go away to be recovered. It's just there, is impetus. It's not a repressed history—not even close. My first book was called *Redactive*, right, and it involved the activity of knowing that some things are veiled and concealed in various ways. But even though it's never going to be a straight-on communicative approach in my writing, I'm not actually trying to conceal anything. It's material and I am working with it.

[*A server asks DTL and DL if they'd like anything more to drink or to eat; the two contemplate silently, decline*] ‡