

PATHWAYS, BRIDGES AND HAVENS: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S HEALTH

Joanne Gallivan and Suzanne Cooper, Eds.
Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2008

REVIEWED BY NANCI WHITE

A number of social and psychological determinants have altered the landscape of research into women's health issues over the last 50 years, particularly the foothold gained by non-western notions of the mind/body relationship, the rise of feminist centred social science scholarship, and the inroads of a more global data base informing North American welfare state policies and their advocates. While women are the benefactors of the many positive aspects of these changes, there are alarming cracks in the social welfare edifice, particularly in terms of women's caregiving programs. The result has been that there are more and more worrisome answers to the question: "where does it hurt?"

The mainly methodological articles in this collection showcase a diversity of studies, perspectives, and topics relating to the determinants of health in specific subgroups of women: sufferers of cervical cancer, chronic illness, addiction, fibromyalgia, depression, anxieties of long term caregivers, depression, and women struggling with career and family in the legal profession.

In addition, as a salient backdrop to these in depth researches, there are critical meta essays construing the macro determinants of women's poor health: the backsliding welfare state, a malnourished health care system budget and a non-inclusive mental health policy posing particular challenges for immigrant women.

These initiatives were first made

public at an institute in Halifax, Nova Scotia in June 2008, sponsored by the section on Women and Psychology (SWAP) of the Canadian Psychological Association. This book is a permanent record of the stimulating work and ideas presented there.

The most significant revelations of these papers was the surprisingly little amount of social support and encouragement necessary to give women the tools to fight the crucial battle against despair and self-blame in their daily lives. While it is certain that reducing public spending will increase social and economic inequalities and contribute to a lower quality of life for women in particular, and that the crumbling health care system is at the intersection of caregiving, health, stress and gender, it is also true that for most of these women studied their resilience was the best weapon in the war on women's decreased mental well-being.

Despite being enforced caregivers for all ages and all relations both here and abroad, women's ability to successfully meet the demands of multiple roles appears to lead to greater satisfaction, fulfillment, and an enhanced self esteem. Even the reality of aging, thought to be a stressor, in fact often empowers women and gives them confidence.

The complexities of even tenuously achieving a work/family/health/ life balance are readily apparent from these studies, but the most heartening conclusions come not from the revelations that music soothes chronic pain, or that worrying less about what others think of us makes us happier with ourselves, or even that new technologies offer hope and good advice for isolated caregivers needing coping strategies and mechanisms for sharing. But it is instead that the instinctual underpinnings determining women's psychic and physical resources (in the face of economic and social restraints) have given us effective tools to solve our dilemmas, in concert, by reaching out to one another, caring for one another, in person and on paper, and believing

that love and compassion will guide the way. We may not be 'the woman we used to be' or the woman we would like to be, but we are eager to get there.

Attitude is a powerful first step in her direction.

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FIRST DAY

Malca Litovitz
Toronto: Guernica Editions Inc.,
2008

SLOW DANCING: CREATIVITY AND ILLNESS: DUOLOGUE AND RENGAS

Malca Litovitz & Elana Wolff
Toronto: Guernica Editions Inc.,
2008

REVIEWED BY ANNA NATOLI

There was an article called "In Praise of Useless Things" but actually I think that the human soul needs poetry and that it will always be around and that it serves a real function in our psyche.

—Litovitz & Wolff

First Day (2008) and *Slow Dancing* (2008a) are two books of poetry, prose, rengas, and a duologue; although the thematic content is vast I want to speak to the significance of these two publications for a special issue on Women and Cancer. Each of these texts contains traces and echoes, and at times, vivid expression of a woman's journey of navigating living, healing, surviving, and witnessing the effects of cancer on her body, her movement, her mind, the poetry; but this is not overshadowed by the tracing and echoes of living, loving,

healing, and being present.

By way of separating the two collections, *First Day* is a collection of poetry and prose with a sole titled author, Malca Litovitz. *Slow Dancing* is a collection of collaborative writing: the first half of the collection is a duologue between the two titled authors, Malca Litovitz and Elena Wolff, and the second half is a collection of rengas, “a form of collaborative, linked poetry, similar in structure to haiku, with origins in medieval Japan.” In the spirit of navigating this new collaboration they agreed to set aside the “formal renga rules” and “write line-by-alternating-line, and took turns at going first.” There was no discussion of subject matter and there was no condition about “syllabic count or line length. [Their] aim was simply to continue working together creatively” over the course of eight months prior to Malca Litovitz’s death.

Slow Dancing begins with a thematically expansive duologue in which Malca Litovitz speaks about the relationship to “her literary life.” In it there is a discussion about the themes in her poetry but much more significant is her reflection about the connection between writing poetry and life, living, healing, loving, being present. As a reflection about the significance and importance of the representation of beauty in her poetry, she states, “I want to experience beauty. I don’t want to ask why it’s beautiful,” grounding her relationship to poetry in the experiential and the present.

In this review I will speak more visibly about *Slow Dancing*, largely to bear witness to the spiritually healing quality of this collaborative writing found in this collection. Elena Wolff reflects in the Forward on writing the rengas for the collection: “We experienced the delight of surprise, the excitement of discovery, the comfort of shared thought, and the closeness of slow dancing – preserved in words.” *Slow Dancing* makes significant the nearness of poetry to dance, the slow dance, the partnered dance, and the

soft rhythmical movements of slow sensuality. The title calls the reader to the physical presence of bodies and flesh in the experience of, the taste of, the intimacy and nakedness of slow dancing; it is life-affirming, as is poetry. Malca Litovitz’s work is “prayerful,” states Elena Wolff. I read this to suggest not only is her poetry connected to God and the presence of God but that it is full of breath, fully in breath, present in breathing, an echo of Malca Litovitz’s connection with meditation and writing poetry as a practice. The proximity of the body, the nearness of the body is both in the act of writing and the word as flesh, “jazz riff in the morning – /silk stockings in your voice mail, /our cries in the garden.”

This life-affirming quality of the writing does not overshadow the visibility of illness in the writing: “my bladder, fused to my uterus, ripped a little –.” Illness is debilitating and it affects her proximity to writing, to living and to being present, “Illness is a form of paralysis.” Illness also invites collaboration and subsequently leads to the collaborative writing of the rengas; illness does not defeat her capacity to write: “Don’t let me be mad, let me pick up my paint instead.”

There is no competition for the presence of life with that of illness in *First Day* or *Slow Dancing*. These collections are conversations about the complexity of poetry as healing; of poetry as life-affirming; of poetry as vulnerability; of poetry as voice; of poetry as embodied; of poetry as confessional; of poetry as love; of poetry as flesh, slow dancing, affirming, present, living, healing, loving, nakedness.

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SINGING ME HOME

Carol Lipszyc
Toronto: Inanna Publications,
2010

REVIEWED BY MIRIAM N.
KOTZIN

Singing Me Home, Carol Lipszyc’s compelling debut collection of poetry, is far more than a simple melody. The poems are filled with arresting images, metaphors, and turns of language, as, for example, in the last lines of the opening poem, “Preserving Childhood,” girls with a purple hoola-hoop “press / time down, heart-shaped / and iridescent like leaves / before they scatter / in the lapses of wind.” The opening series of poems offer the complexities of growing up as child of survivors of the Holocaust. For example, a stanza describing the baking of Sabbath bread “to see how wide God’s honey-laced / blessings can spread” is followed by an answer to that question as the teacher first “locks the classroom door” and then tells the children “how she once lived/ in a bone yard / where ovens baked not bread/ but people, / where chimneys spewed ashes – / and what did we think of that, / boys and girls?”

The second two sections of *Singing Me Home* shift attention to the world of an adult—and these poems,