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 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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WOMEN BETWEEN:
CONSTRUCTION OF SELF
IN THE WORK OF SHARON BUTALA, AGANETHA DYCK, MARY MEIGS AND MARY PRATT

Verna Reid
Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008

REVIEWS BY JANICE ANDREE

Verna Reid has many stories to tell of “women between,” especially a generation of Canadian women whose creative working lives extend well into the last-quarter century of their lifespan and into the new millennium. Her readers might expect a text heavily informed by theoretical analysis, for the artists and writers she examines – Mary Pratt, Aganetha Dyck, Mary Meigs, and Sharon Butala – have contributed much to the development of contemporary art and literature in this country. They are practically household names – certainly to academics and students, readers and viewers of Canadian art and literature. Or, her readers might expect a text structured within a tight feminist framework that leaves her reader wanting more about the actual visual and text work produced by each. What Reid delivers, however, is her own story of reading between disciplines and genres, between generations and life stories, of these artists and the work they produce.

Her story might not have been told, or known, before the advent of women’s studies courses and programmes in post-secondary education. Indeed, this text suggests the valuable contributions of feminist education and feminist analysis to the activities of “making” and interpretation. Like Reid, the lives of her four subjects operate within the confines of Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” and, as Carolyn Heilbrun suggests, the daily struggle between private domestic constraints and the public sphere of self-determination and agency.

Reid began teaching literature at the Alberta College of Art and Design in 1967, then women’s studies at ACAD and the University of Calgary where she received her Ph.D. in 2003 at the age of 75. Her intertextual and interdisciplinary doctoral work was inspired by the autobiographical content of her students’ work and the experiences they shared in her classroom but her interpretation and relational analysis were made possible by the critique and content of women’s studies courses and the body of feminist-informed knowledge she acquired through her studies. She cites the importance of Mary Kelley’s “On Sexual Politics and Art” in Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985 (1987) edited by Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, and Pollock’s own Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art (1988) and Differenting the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories (1999).

Reading between the disciplines, Reid employs feminist scholarship and feminist theory to rupture existing androcentric, hierarchical canons of literature and the visual arts, and the historical and interpretative practices they advance (See Julia Kristeva, New French Feminisms, 1981). Reid’s strategies of interpretation echo Susan Stanford Friedman’s in her groundbreaking essay “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” Heilbrun’s in Writing a Woman’s Life (1988) and Nancy Miller’s in Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (1988). Also evident is the influence of life-writing texts Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice (1992) and Autobiography and Questions of Gender (1991) edited, respectively, by Canadian academics Marlene Kadar and Shirley Neuman.

Reid’s own investigation relies heavily on the concept of unraveling representation(s) of the self-expressed