Reviewed by Melanie Brannagan Frederiksen

Winner of the Gabrielle Roy Prize for best scholarly monograph in Canadian letters, *Wider Boundaries of Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women’s Writing* addresses a long-standing omission in the history of Canadian writing. The modernist movement in Canadian poetry has historically been traced through a masculine, central Canadian tradition. This genealogy, which posits “F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith as originary fathers of the movement, and E.J. Pratt and Leo Kennedy as their sons and inheritors” (Brandt 4), favours the juvenilia of two male poets over more accomplished and more enduring female poets, such as Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, and Phyllis Webb, among others (6). *Wider Boundaries of Daring*, writes Di Brandt in the introduction to the volume,

> hopes to offer a corrective to the current telling of Canadian literary history by highlighting the achievement and legacy of our best modernist women poets, not “alone” but “together,” not as solitary and marginal receivers of modernist influence but as important makers of it, consciously engaging in a collective, revisionary, “new” cultural project. (8)

The collection makes two key arguments: First, the history of Canadian modernism is neither masculinist nor centrist; rather than forefathers, the movement has foremothers, and its tradition is grounded in Dorothy Livesay’s poetry as well as in the small literary magazines, whose contributors were marginalized in such canon-building anthologies as *New Canadian Provinces* (1936) and *The Book of Canadian Poetry*. Dorothy Livesay was, for example, omitted from the *New Canadian Provinces* anthology because A.J.M. Smith, the editor, “disliked her socialist verse” (Djwa 76). The essays in the first section, “The Making of Canadian Literary Modernism,” establish this new genealogy of modernism, beginning with Livesay and her mother, F.R. Livesay. Ann Martin argues, in “The Writing Livesays,” that the prism of the Livesays’ mother-daughter relationship illuminates emerging modernism in Canada: “[M]odernism,” Martin writes, “is not necessarily a sudden paradigm shift based on an untroubled rejection of earlier writers, literary forms, images and themes” (45):
Rather, the similarities between these two poets and the two generations they represent suggest a common bond amongst different writers of the early twentieth century, linked as they are by their responses to a rapidly changing social and physical landscape. (45)

This theme, that Canadian modernism is composed of bonds between writers of different generations, with different allegiances, as opposed to generational conflict and homogeneous allegiances, arches over this first section of essays, which comprises essays about Livesay, P.K. Page, Elizabeth Brewster, Anne Wilkinson, Anne Marriott, as well as an essay on regional modernism, and it culminates in Lianne Moyes’s essay, “Discontinuity, Intertextuality, and Literary History: Gail Scott’s Reading of Gertrude Stein”: “Scott’s return to Stein reminds us of the role of international connections in the history of Canadian Modernism,” she writes:

Scott’s return makes legible not only the assumptions and oversights of Stein’s expatriate American “I,” but also what is at stake for a woman writer in the contradiction between losing her self in the process of writing and presenting herself as “someone,” a “female-sexed” “someone.” (181-82)

In this essay, Moyes highlights the institutional practices by which generational and national identifications are formed, and the shortfalls of such externally imposed identifications on women writers who find themselves outside them and between them:

Many women locate themselves between national literatures, however, and find interpretive communities for their work among international groups of writers and artists. Insofar as national institutions and narratives have a tendency to short-circuit women’s literary culture and to forget women’s roles in literary history, women writers often have reason to position themselves otherwise: to affiliate locally or regionally, to affiliate with a diasporic community, and/or to affiliate according to sexual orientation, political identification, or aesthetic project. (165)

The second key argument in Wider Boundaries of Daring is that, far from being isolated from social concerns and non-literary cultural production, Canadian modernism as practised by Livesay, P.K. Page, Phyllis Webb, Miriam Waddington, Miriam Nichols, and Margaret Avison is inseparable from those concerns. In addition to the traditional matrixes of modernism – “the
interrogation of subjectivity in the domestic and public arenas, new definitions of sociality and the implications of new media on the local, national, and transnational level[s]; and experimental, mythopoetic, surreal, ‘decadent,’ imagist, and what we would now call feminist and ecopoetic approaches to language and creative expression” (Brandt 7) – modernism, as the contributors in the section “Literary Modernism as a Cultural Act” construct it, is inextricable from political practice and non-literary cultural production. Of particular note are the essays on Dorothy Livesay’s and Phyllis Webb’s work for the CBC. Of Phyllis Webb, Pauline Butling writes that her relationship with the CBC was, in spite of its apparent idiosyncrasies, mutually beneficial. She argues that Webb’s profile, that she was a poet with a degree in English and philosophy, that she was in contact with domestic and international avant-garde artists, furthered the CBC’s “reputation for ‘modern,’ cutting-edge programming” (244). Furthermore, producing Ideas provided Webb with an alternative way to address her intellectual concerns:

Webb’s personal imperatives were also intertwined with the twin engines of nationalism and modernism, albeit with a gendered twist. Her despair comes from her inability to escape male dominance; but experimenting with new forms, sending the fathers to Lethe, challenging authority, and developing a social critique are all modernist impulses. Simultaneously, she shared the nationalist project of developing a distinctive Canadian culture, as seen in her research and writing in the 1950s on the state of Canadian literary publishing. Finally, the CBC provided a public forum for Webb to explore ideas and issues that were crucial to her work in poetry.

Although Livesay’s professional affiliation with the CBC was more prolonged than was Webb’s, it was, in Peggy Lynn Kelly’s account, less felicitous. Kelly attributes this, in large part, to gender discrimination, but she also examines the way Livesay’s work blended high (largely based on aesthetic concerns) and low (that is, based on more populist, political and social concerns) modernism, suggesting that this, too, accounts for the lukewarm response Livesay’s radio plays received. Herein lies perhaps the strongest aspect of Wider Boundaries of Daring: that, given the amended genealogy of Canadian modernist poetry, the notions of high and low modernism, the separation of aesthetic, political, and spiritual lose their canonical authority.

The editors of Wider Boundaries of Daring have collected essays by some of the finest scholars of Canadian literature on the subject of critically marginalized poets and modernist poetry, and in so doing they have produced an important collection, one that revises not only the
erroneous and discriminatory genealogy of Canadian modernism but also re-imagines the very nature of modernism.

Melanie Brannagan Frederiksen is a poet and a doctoral candidate in the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba. Her dissertation is tentatively titled “The Memory of Things: Walter Benjamin and Modernity,” and her interests include theories of memory and subjectivity, and twentieth-century literature.