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Book Review / Compte rendu

Cite this article: Smith L. (2023). Heather Dillaway and Laura Wershler, eds., *Musings on Perimenopause and Menopause: Identity, Experience, Transition*. Demeter Press: Bradford, Ontario, 2021. *Canadian Journal on Aging / La Revue canadienne du vieillissement* 42(1), 184–185.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980822000149>

In *Musings on Perimenopause and Menopause*, editors Dillaway and Wershler and a wide range of authors take time to pause, reflect, and share; in doing so, they bring to light the rich and varied voices of women as they “explore and expand on the experience and meaning of the menopausal transition” (p. 9). This timely and engaging collection brings together a tapestry of voices—including artists, researchers, and writers—to move beyond a strictly biological understanding of perimenopause and menopause. Through poetry, comics, first-person narrative, auto-ethnographies, and empirical research, contributors dispel myths and misconceptions, challenge biomedical discourses, and elaborate the myriad ways that biological processes intersect with and are shaped by social and cultural processes. The voices of women, on their own terms, are centred. The orientation and purpose of the text is thus an embodiment of academic method, and speaks to the rich tradition of critical feminist scholarship, particularly as it relates to health and the sexed and gendered body. Writing about and from lived experience allows for variation, difference, and complexity to rise to the surface.

Musings comes at a time when awareness of menstruation is heightened and visible as never before; yet, the full spectrum of the menstrual cycle, which includes perimenopause and menopause, remains underrepresented and is rarely studied. Further, the full range of experiences that encompass how women transition through perimenopause and menopause is not captured by existing biomedical accounts, which give no voice to variation, relationships, and emotions, or to liberation, contestation, and rejection of dominant cultural framings of menopause as end and loss. Within North American society, perimenopause and menopause are a key aspect of the menstrual cycle and are most often presented as a biological process that is to be made intelligible to women by the medical establishment and medical professionals. Critical scholarship has engaged sparsely with this important topic even within fields that centre the menstrual cycle. For example, the recently published *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, which has 72 chapters, has only 1 chapter on “Women’s Experiences of Menopause.”

The gap in scholarly literature is mirrored within society more generally. Perimenopause and menopause remain cloaked in mystery and secrecy and there are few spaces where women can share knowledge and talk or write about their experiences. Within popular culture, menopause is more often represented in a one-dimensional fashion and is a common comedic trope in relation to aging women. Recent years have seen some instances in which celebrities take up the discussion of menopause. For example, Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop endeavour markets products aimed at supporting women to master life and body at all stages, including perimenopause and menopause. However, such undertakings reflect the rise of lifestyle marketing and branding, as opposed to opportunities for deep transformation, representation, dialogue, and understanding. To this end, within existing scholarly literature in the field of aging studies and critical menstruation studies, as well as within cultural representations more generally, this book fills an important and vital gap.

In Chapter 1, Osnes’ comic rendition ‘The Anatomy of a Hot Flash’ are a humorous lead-in to Lupton’s ‘Gone Girl’, which reflects on *Menopause the Musical*. While themes of age 1 and aging, gender and gendered bodies, as well as sex and reproduction, are featured across the text, *Musings* equally pushes the boundaries of social and cultural assumptions about who menstruates and when. In Chapter 6, Sterling et al. consider the experiences of younger women who experience menopause. In Chapter 9, Davis and Khan bring to light intersex experiences through auto-ethnography. Kauffman’s ‘Shadow Story’ highlights the ongoing and complex experiences that creative endeavours bring to light. This collection is set to make an impact within a range of fields, including gerontology, gender and women’s studies, and medicine. Health advocates, grassroots activists, and community organizers may take notice of the extent to which health care providers are ill-equipped to support women in navigating perimenopause and menopause. They may also take note of the power of collective spaces, including this collection, and the digital means for support and knowledge sharing, such as those noted by Andersen in Chapter 11.

The text is intersectional without saying so. I would have liked to see the authors foreground an intersectional lens more explicitly when pulling together the collection in the conclusion to highlight the overlapping patterns of inequity that are reflected in the writings throughout the volume. In addition, a brief consideration of reproductive justice would not have been out of place and would have brought to the fore the range of structural injustices at work in accounts throughout the collection, as well as sites of resistance, both individual and collective.

As I read the collection, I found myself musing along with the authors, ultimately feeling empowered and hopeful about the possibilities in coming together as a collection of diverse voices. As a menstruator staring down the reality of perimenopause and menopause in what I

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assume will be the near future, I found myself engrossed in this collection and learning just how much I did not know. Who knew heart palpitations could be a symptom? Will I have hot flashes and have to keep nightgowns bunched under my pillows in the event that I sweat through the one I am wearing and need to change? Sharing the title of the collection with colleagues, students, and friends prompted impromptu conversations and sharing sessions.

In Chapter 12, Maccagno states, “this shit is real” (p. 157), referring to her experience of realizing what menopause was truly like for her. Acknowledging ‘the real’ truth about perimenopause and menopause requires bringing together a rich tapestry of voices

without subsuming them to the boundaries of abrupt and strict categories. As this collection demonstrates, perimenopause and menopause weave continuously through the lives of women, and this collection prompts a vital and much needed conversation.

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