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Menopausal Rage, Erotic Power and Gaga Feminist Possibilities

Introduction

Western discourses on menopause have changed throughout history. Historical research shows that prior to the ninetieth century, the end of menstruation was not considered an important event. It was only by the ninetieth century that it began to be seen as a 'physiological crisis' associated with disease (Bell, 1987: 536). Yet, in the twentieth century, this was taken one step further in that the end of menstruation itself became defined as pathological and abnormal. This was mainly due to developments in sex endocrinology research in the 1920s and 1930s. This field started to understand human sexuality and reproduction through the fluctuation of hormonal secretions, and of the secretions produced by the ovaries in particular (Leng, 1996). This biomedical view generated the definition of menopause as 'a condition of ovarian oestrogen "deficiency", an "illness" treatable with pharmaceutical products' (p. 33). What is more, the equation of menopause with a deficiency in so-called 'female' hormones has often been accompanied by the belief that 'the change' makes women lose their true womanhood. This "threat" can be averted by Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). The core of this thinking is based on reductionist and misogynist views that reduce women to their reproductive function (e.g. Wilson, 1966).

Since the 1960s, many alternative representations that criticise the medicalisation of menopause and the misogynist notions of ageing for women have been proposed. However, these have not been able to radically change the public imagery. 'The view of the unwholesome and deficient menopausal body', a body that is "out of control", "grotesque", or stressed and confused' (Ussher, 2008: 1785), continues to prevail. Menopause is still seen as 'the magic marker of decline' (Gullette, 1997: 177) that signals a

woman is on her way to being excluded from 'real' womanhood defined by patriarchal notions of sexual attractiveness and reproductive capacity. After the age of fertility, a woman is doomed to be desexualised and regarded as undeniably less than 'woman'.

A whole range of self-help books has arisen to help women cope with this difficult period, yet so far, relatively little academic attention has been paid to how this body of literature constraints or facilitates the development of alternative, more emancipatory discourses on menopause. This paper aims to fill this gap through a critical reading of a selection of nine recent self-help books on the topic in the context of Dutch-speaking Belgium and the Netherlands. The choice for self-help books was motivated by the relative absence of the topic in other mainstream media, even though in both countries women older than 50 represent a large proportion of the ageing population (StatBel, 2021; StatLine, 2021). Moreover, self-help books typically have emancipatory aims and offer advice on problem-solving and changing ways of living, making them an ideal place to look for alternative interpretations of menopause. However, the genre has been criticised for its normative edge (it tells people how to 'govern' themselves) favouring individual solutions over collective activist and feminist responses (Riley et al., 2019). We believe self-help books can provide us with insights into the prevailing moral frameworks, yet also into emerging strategies to establish counter-narratives. Considering that popular media are an important source of information on menopause (Clinkingbeard et al., 1999; Griffiths, 1999; Lyons, 2000), we want to explore this ambiguity between the potential of menopause self-help books as a site of resistance or reproduction of norms. Drawing on insights that understand discourse as 'not what is said', but 'that which constrains and enables what can be said' (Barad, 2003: 821), we investigate how the given advice may contribute to the further marginalisation of older women, or conversely, carry the seeds for new meanings and social transformation.

In what follows, we first give a brief overview of the feminist debates on the topic. After that, we move into our theoretical framework that builds on the legacy of the feminist debates of the 1990s and more recent feminist theorisations of material-discursive apparatuses of bodily possibility in which older women's potential for revolt is central. Then we provide information about our methodology and how we analysed the self-help books. Our analysis shows that while the books may contribute to more positive meanings of ageing, they fail to provide women with political interpretations that may enable transformation. We argue for the need for the development of a truly radical narrative of menopause and end the paper with several examples of older women's gaga feminist actions and representations, which could be explored in future research and help to strengthen this theoretical endeavour.

Feminist Debates on Menopause

Since the 1980s, feminist writers have argued against the medicalised interpretations of the end of menstruation by pleading for women-centred interpretations (e.g. Zita, 1993; Dickson, 1993; Bell, 1987; Greer, 2018/1993). They claimed that it was the professionalisation of medicine together with patriarchal conceptions of women that laid the foundations for 'viewing women in general as ill and menopausal women in particular as insane' (Formanek, 1990/2018: 10). They denounced definitions of the end of menstruation as an illness that needs treatment, as these are linked to views that tie the value of women to reproductive capacity and consider cyclicity as a 'natural' difference between men and women (Roberts, 2004). Another critique was that applying HRT to restore malfunctions enhanced the control of medicine and patriarchal rule over women's bodies (Greer, 2018/1993; Bell, 1987).

Resisting HRT and other forms of medicalisation was an important feminist response to derogatory accounts of women's midlife. It emphasised that the end of menstruation is not a disease that needs medical (thus 'cultural') intervention, but rather a 'natural' life transition and a time of re-evaluation, new freedom, wisdom and personal insight. In that wake, alternative 'naturopathic' treatments that advocate for a more 'natural' approach to menopause have blossomed (Loppie and Keddy, 2002). However, this response was criticised by other feminists for falling back on restrictive assumptions about women's 'natural' capacities (Leng, 1996; Dickson, 1993). It was seen as another side of the same biological essentialist coin. These critics, conversely, highlighted the importance of social context and identified psycho-social factors that affect how women construct meaning in relation to menopause. This included women's negotiations of negative socio-cultural constructions of older women's sexuality and femininity (e.g. Dillaway, 2005). The cultural construction of menopause was considered 'a clear case of women being aged by culture' rather than by the (non-)event of the end of menstruation' (Gullette, 1997: 177). Some of these analyses shed light on the dynamics of sex, race and class in discussions of menopause as un/natural (Roberts, 2004: 31). Furthermore, cross-cultural research disrupted universal and biologising notions by highlighting the diversity and cultural differences in women's experiences of menopause (e.g. Robinson, 1996). The most radical readings of menopause developed in the 1990s (Leng, 1996; Dickson, 1993; Campioni, 1997; Gullette, 1997; Zita, 1993; Greer, 2018/1993), and were inspired by feminist poststructuralist, critical psychoanalytic or new-materialist theories, pointed to menopause's embodied possibility for revolt. They identified 'the change' as a moment from which women might derive anger against sexist, ageist and other exclusions and turn it into politicised rage and resistance. This is often connected to erotic liberation and increased sexual agency of older women. Campioni (1997: 83) describes the menopausal woman's experience of her changing position in a patriarchal society as 'an opening of doors to perceptions,

which are mind-blowing, felt as uncannily astute, and the embodiment of a new female erotics of power'.

By the turn of the century, the abundance of feminist critique caused an emphasis shift towards the development of a preventive medical approach, also in the mainstream and medical perspectives on menopause. This new approach shied away from calling menopause a condition of deficiency and attached greater importance to women's informed decision-making (Murtagh and Hepworth, 2005). Even though feminist critiques informed this shift, it is also very much in line with neoliberal accounts that consider health as a moral duty. Within this discourse, the absence of menopausal symptoms is seen as the result of virtuous behaviour (Breheny and Stephens, 2003). The more radical feminist readings of menopause have not permeated mainstream accounts, a few exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Moran, 2020; Corinna, 2021). What is more, the conceptualisation of menopause as an opportunity for revolt seems to have largely disappeared from 21st-century feminist academic discussions. In the early 2000s, studies focused mostly on evaluating established discourses on menopause and prevailing constructions of ageing and sexuality (Hvas and Gannik, 2008a; Coupland and Williams, 2002; Lyons and Griffin, 2003), and on assessing how women's experience of menopause is tied to these constructions (Coupland and Williams, 2002; Hvas and Gannik, 2008b; Dillaway, 2005). More recent feminist studies on menopause have emphasised the need for a perspective that goes beyond the merely discursive by including the material (Ussher, 2008; Ussher et al., 2015). This material-discursive approach conceptualises the body as 'constitutive in the making and experience of subjectivity, and in the process of contesting and transforming discursively constructed beliefs' (Ussher, 2008: 1783). Ussher (2008) argues that women who manage to resist narratives of decay are more likely to see their ageing bodies as a site of new potential.

Theoretical framework

The literature review has pointed to anger and erotic power as main concepts put on the agenda in the 1990s by feminist academics in discussions on older women's potential to resist restrictive assumptions of menopause. With this paper, we aspire to resume the discussion that ceased in the late 1990s by complementing it with more recent insights from queer (e.g. Halberstam, 2012) and critical new-materialist theorisation (e.g. Willey, 2016) that can re-politicise women's experiences and challenge norms on age, gender and sexuality. We believe Willey's concept of bioposibility and Halberstam's notion of 'gaga feminism' are particularly valuable to explore further the interplay between anger and erotic power related to menopause. Both authors depart from a focus on the entanglement of the discursive/cultural and the biological, which allows for a view on both anger and the erotic as a driving forces that can move bodies and transform unequal processes.

Willey (2016: 556) developed the concept of 'biopossibility' 'as a conceptual alternative to biology' by building on Lorde and critical new materialist theory. In 'Uses of the Erotic', Lorde (1993) puts forward the erotic as the potentially 'replenishing and provocative' (p. 340) source of power that can provide energy for change and transformation, yet is often oppressed, corrupted or distorted. By interpreting Lorde's theory of the erotic as a theory of biopossibility, Willey aims to 'challenge the locus and authority of claims about the material body in the sciences and to mark an alternative conceptual terrain' (p. 560). She finds resources in Lorde's work to go beyond 'the idea that we are creatures motivated by an instinct that is sexual or reproductive or that we are motivated by social pressures to conform to such a script' (p. 562). Willey's reading of Lorde's erotic as 'an alternate field of resistance' (p. 563), opens room for the rethinking of a woman's life after menstruation and paves the way for starting the critical-creative work towards a queer feminist imagining of revolt.

Similar visions of alternative futures and new forms of revolt are articulated by Halberstam (2012) in their book 'Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sex and the End of Normal'. With the term 'gaga feminism', Halberstam pleads for a feminist politics, as exemplified by Lady Gaga's work, which subverts gender and sexual norms so that 'the normal' is being discarded altogether. Just like Willey, Halberstam emphasises the erotic power of women and stresses the need to go beyond binaries and ideologies based on biological determinism that keep women in subordinate positions. However, they go one step further by making an explicit connection between women's ageing and (sexual) resistance. Halberstam (2012) considers women over the age of forty-five as among the ones who best exemplify the spirit of 'going gaga'. Gaga is found in their expressions of rage against 'old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality' and their experimentation with 'new forms of relation, intimacy, embodiment and sexuality' (p.25). Their plea for a politics of 'unbecoming' woman, of undoing the category of 'woman' rather than rounding it out, corresponds well to the 1990s feminist writings that identified the menopausal experience as a possibility for heresy (Zita, 1993). It also incites ageing women to use their 'specifically menopausal "raised consciousness"' (Campioni, 1997: 82) to revolt and redefine womanhood. Yet, instead of expanding the house that culture has built for women to include room for older women, gaga feminism proposes to burn the house down (Halberstam, 2012: p. xiv). Gaga feminism, in Halberstam's view, is about reimagining 'the very meaning of house in form and function' (p. xiv). It is aimed at being liberated by the possibilities that the end of heterosexuality and the end of normal create. This anarchist project opens up new visions on women's erotic power, anger and revolt that have informed our methodology and approach to the empirical material.

Method

Self-help and expert guides are widely available and cover a broad range of topics that are assumed to be challenging for people and have been the focus of research for some time. Self-help literature, which has often been framed as central to the compliance industries required for neoliberal governmentality (see e.g. McGee, 2012), is a good place to study normative ideals. But their often emancipatory mission makes it also a site worth exploring for traces of revolt. However, while it lends itself well to both investigating deep-rooted and emergent beliefs about a particular topic and spotting openings for social transformation, little research has been done on recent, contemporary self-help literature or other texts addressed to menopausal women. This paper aims to fill this gap by discussing nine self-help books written in Dutch and (re)published between 2015 and 2020.

Five of the books considered are printed by Dutch-language publishers in Belgium (Depypere and Vanherpe, 2019; Prenen, 2017; Peeters, 2019; Steyaert, 2019/2011; Van Lierop, 2016) and four by publishers in the Netherlands (de Vries and Kerkhof, 2020; Oomen, 2017; Rozenbroeck and Teunis, 2016; Thooft, 2018/2015). All authors seem to belong to the Dutch-speaking white ethnic majority in the two countries, and all but one are women. Six of the authors are (para)medical experts (Depypere and Vanherpe, 2019; de Vries and Kerkhof, 2020; Rozenbroeck and Teunis, 2016; Peeters, 2019; Steyaert, 2019/2011; Thooft, 2018/2015); three are 'experts by experience', and more particularly women who have recently gone through the change yet are relatively well-known in the Dutch-speaking regions as writer (Oomen, 2017), musician (Van Lierop, 2016) or media figure (Prenen, 2017).

We systematically coded the texts for recurrent themes, such as taboo, symptoms/phenomena, fading of beauty, changes in sexuality, etc. Yet, we also coded for discursive strategies and implicit meanings, such as (resisting) medicalisation, ageism or sexism, body-shaming, the production of class, etc. One striking subtheme that emerged was anger, which in the books was generally discussed as an important phenomenon in menopause albeit sometimes implicitly (e.g. subsumed under mood swings). We coded for the causes that anger was associated with, such as the dissatisfaction of ageing women with their life situation, psycho-medical problems, etc. and for whether the proposed remedies required remedial action in women themselves or external change. Ageing women's erotic power was another important theme and emerged in discussions of sexuality. Here, we coded for the issues associated with it, how they were being explained, and what was presented as a way out. Patterns in the data across the themes allowed us to identify three prominent repertoires, notably medical, psycho-therapeutic and spiritual. In each of the books, one of these repertoires appeared to be dominant, but that does not exclude that in the same book, sometimes other repertoires are used as

well. In what follows, we discuss the way anger and erotic power have been presented in the selected books, and evaluate their gaga potential.

Before we jump into the analysis, we briefly note that in the material considered, the terms 'menopause' (*menopauze*) and 'the change' (*de overgang*) were used inconsistently. Both were used to refer to either a woman's last menstruation or to the period of transition from the reproductive to the non-reproductive stage of life. Menopause was also used in the meaning of 'post-menopause' or the non-reproductive stage of a woman's life after the last menstruation, and some of the books also used the term 'perimenopause' every now and then, to refer to the transitional time before the last menstruation. Also, in the academic literature, there is no agreement on the definition of the terms. In this article, we have chosen to use the terms as they were used by the authors, yet regard them as social constructions, not as givens.

Menopausal Rage in Medical, Psycho-Therapeutic and Spiritual Repertoires

In this section, we discuss which meaning the books attribute to ageing women's feelings of anger and distress, dependent on the discursive repertoire the authors draw upon, and evaluate what kind of emancipation is advocated for. Of the nine books considered, three books, (co)authored by (para)medical professionals, (Depypere and Vanherpe, 2019; Rozenbroeck and Teunis, 2016; de Vries and Kerkhof, 2020) tend to support a predominantly medicalised view on menopause. Within this repertoire, we distinguished two sub-repertoires. De Pypere and Vanherpe (2019) tend to depict menopause as a dysfunctional state and go so far as to claim that from an evolutionary viewpoint, menopause is an 'unnatural situation' (p. 36), which, however, can be remedied via medical intervention. De Vries and Kerkhof (2020: 10), conversely, emphasise menopause is a 'natural, biological process', yet one that can 'cause sickening complaints'.

Regardless of the subrepertoire, however, these books advocate the use of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) to alleviate menopausal symptoms, including anger and mood swings. Anger is discussed less often than in the other books, but when it is addressed, it is invariably framed as a symptom. Rozenbroeck and Teunis (2016: 48), for instance, cite a woman named Karin who recounted that in the year she had turned fifty, she had been nothing but angry, but regained her peace of mind after starting to take hormones. They explain that the sudden loss of 'cuddle or care hormones' (*knuffel- of zorghormonen*) associated with the change hampers women's ability to continue to take care of others, and can make them angry with their situation. This claim testifies to the underlying belief that taking responsibility in caregiving is predominantly hormone-induced (and thus something young women do naturally). It also implies that women's anger with the gendered divisions of work is an issue that can be medically treated. Here, the emancipation that is sought is an emancipation from

ignorance. Once women learn from experts what is wrong with them, the anger can be relieved. De Pypere and Vanherpe (2019) make this even more explicit when they portray sex hormone preparations as an important facilitator of women's emancipation that can save them from the lack of control over their reproductive and hormonal functions. Moreover, their claim that it is the second important catalyst for emancipation, after the invention of oral contraceptives, conceptualises women's subordination as merely a matter of being at a biological disadvantage relative to men. While this view ignores the complex social, economic and political factors that deprived women of control over their bodies (and which, e.g. prevented the condom from becoming a tool for women's empowerment), it also fails to address the role of the pharmaceutical industry in the history of medicalisation of women's reproductive health and the 'co-opting' of women's bodies for profit (see e.g. Gullette, 1997; Greer, 2018/1993).

Two books (Van Lierop, 2016; Oomen, 2017) explicitly oppose the medicalisation of menopause and the use of hormones as a remedy for complaints, mainly drawing on psycho-therapeutic language and concepts. According to this repertoire, anger stems from traumas and ghosts from the past. In this repertoire, remedies must be sought in various types of psychotherapy. Van Lierop (2016), for instance, who in the 1980s and 1990s, was a singer, well-known in the Belgian New Beat scene, and she later became a writer, paints a picture of the change as a quite horrendous experience, shrouded in taboo, of which women lack the necessary knowledge and which is not being taken seriously enough. She portrays menopause as a phase in life in which women stop being polite and no longer tolerate arrogance or self-important behaviour, by claiming that 'since menopause [she] can no longer tolerate the smell of ego' (Van Lierop, 2016: 48-49)[1]. She describes the change as a period in which women can no longer deny the anger and feelings of unfairness accumulated throughout life nor prevent the emotions come out as an uncontrollable and heated rage (in the shape of hot flashes). She recounts that she herself stopped experiencing hot flashes after having a treatment with Kambo frog poison, which causes severe vomiting and allowed her to let out the anger that had gathered in her body as a result of the abuse she had suffered as a child. Although she clearly points to the dissatisfaction of aging women with their position in life, she refrains from connecting their anger to patriarchal norms and relationships.

Oomen's graphic novel (2017) equally draws on psycho-therapeutic metaphors. The Dutch children's book writer and illustrator portrays the change as a difficult phase of transformation, similar to that from cocoon to butterfly, and assumes that hot flashes are meant to enable women to dump 'old shit'. Using the (ageist) metaphors of '*Tang*' (Bitch) and '*Centje*' (an abbreviation of Francientje, the

[1] We have translated quotes from the books from Dutch to English.

diminutive of her name) she describes how she found a way out of the anger, distress and turmoil that menopause caused in her. Drawn as an evil old woman, 'an awful bitch' who is 'critical, demanding and tough' (p. 48), Tang stands for the 'old shit' (p. 188), 'all the anger' that 'you felt towards your parents as a child' and 'you were not able to express' and is now locked up in a kind of anger saving pot' (p. 192). Centje, on the other hand, is depicted as a young child and represents Oomen's creativity that had been locked up by Tang for years. Oomen explains that in order to be able to get rid of Tang, she needed to understand, but also 'feel' the fear, pain, guilt, sadness and loneliness that had made Tang appear in her mind. She explains that she needed therapy to do so, and she had to create '*Kloek*' (Hen), drawn as a chicken, representing her 'inner mother' who takes care of her. While both Van Lierop (2016) and Oomen (2017) characterise menopause as a period of angry revolt, they situate the problem and solution in psychological coping with experiences of violence or injustice. Women's anger is ascribed to poorly processed individual trauma rather than to structural political causes, and it is the women who are prompted to change.

Four of the books in this study (Prenen, 2017; Steyaert, 2019/2011; Peeters, 2019; Thooft, 2018/2015) mainly draw on spiritual repertoires. They tend to depict the change as a *natural* life transition, not to a worse but a better state of being, yet that nevertheless constitutes 'a crisis situation' that is 'dramatic', 'revolutionary', and a phase in life that requires '(self-)healing'. Naturopath Steyaert (2019/2011) explicitly speaks out against treating menopause as a syndrome and stresses that she prefers to use the term '*verschijnselen*' (phenomena) over '*symptomen*' (symptoms) to talk about the 'biological, physical changes that occur in a woman's body at a given time' (p. 13). The book written by Martine Prenen (2017), a television presenter on Belgian and Dutch TV channels who became a health coach, describes the change as 'one of the most exciting, beautiful and special periods' (p. 9) of a woman's life. The book is glossy and full of colourful pictures that portray the author wearing comfortable but classy clothes, doing yoga, meditation and exercises, having a nap, or, the eyes closed, enjoying the sun, enjoying life. It repeatedly addresses the readership with '*lieve sisters*' (dear sisters) and refers to older women as '*wijze tijgers*' (wise tigers) and '*godinnen*' (goddesses), and explicitly refers to ideas and practices of sisterhood and feminine power associated with Neopagan women's circles (for a more in-depth discussion of women's circles, see, e.g. Longman 2018). Prenen (2017) states that the anger of ageing women is a powerful signal of their inner wisdom. She argues:

> For me, it started with gentle elbow punches, yet it gradually turned into rebellion, anger. I became angry with injustice and inequality. That ranged from 'Why do I always have to cook?' to irritation about things I saw around me and on the news. I wanted to change things. What is more, I wanted to make a whole circle of women enthusiastic about the following of your

> dreams. (...) That's not self-evident, because our culture still expects women to suppress their own aspirations for as long as possible, and preferably forever (p. 14).

Lisette Thooft (2018/2015), a writer and coach from the Netherlands, writes:

> That's what it's all about: own wisdom [*eigen wijsheid*], and if you want to join the two words together, that's even better [in Dutch *eigenwijsheid* means 'headstrongness']. The process has started because you are losing your fertility and thus your 'market value', and that's just difficult to digest, or even painful. But once you are through it, when you have come out the other side, it feels like a liberation. (p. 20)

All three authors hint at feminist critiques that denounce the valuation of women in terms of their fertility and suggest that ageing women's experience of being devalued is a cause of their distress and anger. They present an alternative reading that points to older women's increased wisdom and maturity, and to their freedom from the expectations that patriarchal society demands from young women. However, the authors do not recommend ageing women to go gaga and dismantle the powers of subordination, but advise women to claim an elevated status within the patriarchal system, as wise women or goddesses. Moreover, their argumentation tends to be underpinned by the belief that the successful transition to (post)menopause is a matter of personal responsibility. It is argued that successful ageing and managing one's life in a healthy and fulfilling way is a matter of discipline and hard work, including the psychological processing of trauma, diet and body work. A similar self-responsibilising discourse can be found in the book written by the Dutch herbalist Anntje Peeters (2019) that discusses natural remedies and herbs that can be used against menopausal complaints. What is also striking is the classed notions the books draw upon that tend to equate healthiness with the consumption of (expensive) 'natural', 'unprocessed' and 'organic' products, and healthy bodies with slim, fit and able-bodied bodies.

Erotic Power in Spiritual Repertoires

Sexuality, and changes in sexuality, in particular, is a prominent theme in all the books in this study. The books that draw on medical or psycho-therapeutic repertoires mainly focus on negative changes, such as changes in libido and vaginal dryness. The book's that use a spiritual language, conversely, emphasise the positive effects of ageing on women's sexuality, and attribute to ageing women the possibility to transform into wise women or goddesses and to acquire increased erotic power. Prenen (2017), Steyaert (2019/2011) and Thooft (2018/2015) point to the growing assertiveness of ageing women, and argue that menopausal women tend to be no longer prepared to please their husbands; on the contrary, they start to articulate what they want or even become angry about the subservient

role they are assumed to play. Steyaert makes reference to the archetype of the Wise Old Woman or Witch, who has liberated herself of what society demands from her. Prenen (2017) draws on elements from 'goddess feminism' (she refers to the self-help book written by Savage, 1999), to advocate for a radical change in thinking about older women. She draws a picture of women growing stronger with age, and who should be worshipped by men for their powerful femininity. She points to their sexual power, which is not only about sexual arousal but is also a source of energy in women's bodies that fuels the vitality in and around them. Thooft (2018/2015) uses the metaphor of the dragon. She argues that the change is the process in which the primal feminine force of female sexuality dissolves and is elevated to a higher, spiritual part of ourselves.

While the authors praise older women's increased erotic power, they tend to use biological arguments to explain the unequal distribution of power between genders. Prenen (2017), for instance, claims that:

> 'A psycho-therapeutic study showed that women are much easier to dominate during their fertile years - intellectually, psychologically and socially. There is not much you can do about that yourself, blame it on the biological processes in your body.' (p. 13)

She uses this argumentation framework to explain why once fertility declines, women no longer tolerate domination. Social and cultural factors are rarely mentioned in the books, and even then, often without further discussion or framed as facts with which women have to come to terms. Moreover, the books draw on heteronormative understandings of relationships and sex, and resort to binary gender beliefs. Men and women are portrayed as being fundamentally different, and this is mainly attributed to major biological dissimilarity. Youthful standards and other societal ideals of sexual attractiveness that affect older women's relational and sexual options are brought up by some of the authors, however often only sideways. Peeters (2019), for instance, states:

> 'Perhaps it's no wonder that because of this constant unconscious brainwashing, many women fear the day that their ovaries will keep their heads down and they will make the transition from being a fertile to being a wise woman.' (p. 9)

Moreover, when structural inequalities are mentioned, it is mainly as an explanation for older women's negative self-image, fears or lack of self-confidence, not as something they should revolt against.

When ageing women are nevertheless encouraged to revolt and to use their erotic power, this revolt is simultaneously being depoliticised and rendered a matter of personal spiritual growth. In Steyaert's (2019/2011) words, menopause is a process of a woman's transformation to who she really is. Thooft (2018/2015) explains that during and after the change, women lose the 'libidinal suction power' (p.

96), which tries to catch men's seed for their eggs waiting to be fertilised and which makes their vagina 'receptive' and wet (p. 100). She argues that from then on, a woman cannot 'open her lap but for a loving and fearless suitor' (p. 99), which, she claims, points to the need for spiritualising one's love life in this stage of life. This requires, she says, to confront 'all old pain, psychological blockages and dormant trauma's' (p. 100). Thooft even explicitly discourages ageing women to stand against the system, but rather to use their primal feminine force that is no longer needed for procreation for a 'higher' purpose, i.e. the development of inner freedom. She calls this energy 'the psychic shadow side of the libido' (p. 59) or a 'woman's inner dragon' (p. 59). She writes:

> 'A dragon is strong and powerful, fierce and passionate. Even if, as a fertile woman, you were passive and submissive, your inner dragon usually comes out during the change. The inner dragon scares and frightens others, but can also do a lot of good with her strength' (p. 59).

Thooft (2018/2015: 63) interprets hot flashes as the heath of the dragon that stops hiding in the 'primal cave' of a woman's femininity and comes out in all its glory. She advises women not to use the dragon power for anger or dominance—which would turn them into '*een draak van een vrouw*' (a dragon lady)—but use it to transform themselves into milder, wiser, and more beautiful people. Thooft refrains from any social-political analysis of gendered power relations yet reverts to a language of spirituality that urges women to stop expressing dissatisfaction. She misogynisticly advises women to realise that the problem resides in themselves and tells them they should discipline themselves by defeating the 'dragon shadow' that manifests itself in their purported tendency to be bossy and dominant (Thooft, 2018/2015: 116), to 'play the victim' (p. 119) or just to 'keep babbling' (p. 147).

Envisioning a potential future for women as wise women or goddesses as a strategy to resist derogatory accounts of older women that exclude them from true womanhood seems, at first sight, to be promising. However, bio-essentialist understandings of womanhood considerably limit its potential to be truly disruptive and to break away from the belittling medicalised understandings.

Emancipatory potentials and personalized responsibilities

Through an analysis of the books' discussions of anger and erotic power, the previous sections aimed to evaluate the emancipatory potential of the self-help literature. Although in the discussions of both themes, ageing women's experiences may be linked to unequal gendered societal roles, and/or older women may be advised to claim a position of respect, we argue that the books' potential to be a cheerful and jubilant template for going gaga and transform the world is severely constrained due to the following reasons.

First, the dominant narratives conveyed in the self-help books tend to contribute to neoliberal subject formation. The self-help books draw on a depoliticised and individualistic narrative, in which dealing with feelings of rage is portrayed as a merely individual struggle for women. Moreover, women are urged to pacify their rebellious tendencies, to know their duties and place, and to retreat in the background. Women are incited to work on themselves by subjecting themselves to self-evaluative labour, self-improvement and consumption, and in Campioni (1997: 80) words, 'are offered to "freely" choose their own subjugation (once again)'. The women's anger and erotic power, which could constitute fruitful grounds for gaga anarchy and provide a spirit of 'experimentation, cooperation, change, motility, combustibility, and urgency' (Halberstam, 2012: 140) are neutralised through these discourses of individual healing and work on the self. Doing so, they fail to include the collaborative aspect that Halberstam (2012) identifies as a necessary prerequisite for gaga feminist revolt. Even in the books that reject pathologisation, the path to resolution is commonly expressed by reference to merely spiritual repertoires, which Campioni (1997), almost twenty-five years ago, denounced for their often striking lack of political criticism of the established order and their failure to offer an alternative that is truly empowering for women. Similarly, Halberstam (2012) encourages gaga feminists to stay away from a depoliticised spirituality and practice creative nonbelieving. They also warn us about the spirituality culture's underlying business model, which we have traced in the self-help books' clear focus on the relatively affluent group of middle to higher class women and the advertising of classy clothes, wellness, herbal teas and other consumer goods as a way to deal with menopausal phenomena.

Second, the books fail to provide a new understanding of nature (Leng, 1997), and thus the 'rearrangement of flesh and meaning' (Zita, 1993: 76) that feminist critics in the 1990s advocated for. Attempts to offer ageing women a (proud) place within womanhood by depicting them as goddesses, and thus more-than-woman, fails to fundamentally 'undo' the category of 'woman' (as a biological fact) and its subordinate place within social hierarchies. Both medical and spiritual narratives start from the assumption that human beings, and women, in particular, are determined by their procreative role and unable to escape their reproductive drives. This biological essentialist lens is used to paint a picture of young/fertile women as naturally submissive and sexually accommodating to men, and thus to justify the social, political and economic histories of gendered oppression. Willey's (2016) concept of 'biopossibility', alongside other critical new-materialist theorisation, can offer a conceptual alternative to 'biology' and 'the metaphysical misogyny which defines "woman" by her reproductive capacity' (Zita, 1993: 75). Approaching forms of menopausal embodiment as biopossibilities offers opportunities to capture the ways in which these embodiments 'emerge through "entangled" processes of biopolitical becoming' (Willey, 2016: 555), and are thus shaped by interconnections

between 'the intelligibility of a biopossibility and our capacity to actually embody it' (p. 555). Understanding women as 'erotic, rather than (self-evidently, or universally) sexual', as Willey (p. 562) proposes, seems to be an important first step towards disrupting the normative discourses of women's natural reproductive functions that underlie the prevailing medical and spirituality narratives. Instead of being silenced as a 'symptom' or 'phenomenon' the menopausal women's 'coming to her senses', her anger, and her embodied refusal to be pushed to the wayside (Zita, 1993: 74) can then be seen as 'erotic power' that opens space for engaging with gaga-feminist narratives of overthrowing oppressive models of gender, sexuality and desire.

From Goddess to Gaga

The self-help books in this study seem to represent a dead-end for women's resistance, as they 'clog the machinery that manufactures the new by simply repackaging the old' (Halberstam, 2012: 220). Halberstam rejects the 'repair work' of the neoliberal and self-responsibilising discourse of self-healing and spirituality. Instead, they propose an outspokenly anti-neoliberal political project that aims at dismantling unequal structures and envisions a future that can be 'rescripted, reshot, reimagined' (p. 29). While the dominant discourse, as expressed in the self-help books, might not lead us to the *gagapocalypse* that Halberstam imagines, we believe that, in the margins, gaga feminisms are nevertheless taking place and should be the focus of future in-depth research. The documentary 'Rebel Menopause' by Adele Tulli (2014), which sketches a portrait of the then eighty-five years old Thérèse Clerc, the French activist and founder of the activist-feminist, self-governing co-housing collective Babayaga in Montreuil, is an example in case. For Clerc, who died two years after the documentary was released, older women's sexual experimentation and search for alternative ways of cohabitation should inextricably be linked to the political practice of fighting oppression. She believed that older women can play the role of the enlightened rebel avant-garde in the struggle against patriarchal oppression. The activist community she initiated is an example of what Campioni (1997: 82) describes as 'the active creation of a life and meaning outside male-defined parameters of femininity and sexuality' resulting from the enhanced critical awareness caused by the experience of menopause. Another example of older women's gaga feminist practice can be found in the punk DIY ethics of zines, which older women use to critique the neoliberal and commercial interpretations of DIY in self-help books and women's magazines. A gaga aesthetics is also used in some of the comics made by older women. The art form that usually does not take itself too seriously, enables women to go gaga through the production of often humorous, child-like, outlandish doodles, sketches and drawings. More empirical work on older women's gaga feminist actions and representations is needed, alongside the further development of the theoretical underpinnings of a gaga-feminist narrative of gender, ageing and sexuality that can be embraced more widely. We urgently need a narrative that can provide ageing

women with possibilities to turn their embodied anger and erotic energy into resistant discourses that can intervene to disrupt the divisions and oppressions that structure late-capitalist living.

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