A University of Sussex PhD thesis

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author.

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author.

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details.
AFTER SHAVE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FEMALE BODY HAIR REMOVAL IN
TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BRITAIN

LAURA CATHERINE COFIELD
PhD
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX
JUNE 2020
STATEMENT

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. However, the thesis incorporates, to the extent indicated below, material already submitted as part of required coursework for the degree of Masters of Contemporary History which was awarded by The University of Birmingham.

Parts of Chapter Four (pp.162-171) are based upon sections of my MA dissertation ‘How the Pubic became Public: The Transformation of Pubic Hair, Sexuality and the Body in the Late Twentieth Century’.

Signature: ………… Laura Catherine Cofield……………………..
This thesis examines how the ritual of hair removal has become inherently tied to the process of ‘becoming’ female in contemporary Britain. The association between hairlessness and female sexual and gender identity is explored using an interdisciplinary approach, calling upon medical history, feminist media and cultural studies, art history and social history to consider how the norm of hairlessness has taken shape in the everyday lives of women. In so doing, this thesis considers both the prescription and the practice of body hair removal, in that it is concerned with both the experience of hair removal and how this has transformed over the twentieth century, and how women have and continue to negotiate the multiple sources of ‘expertise’ that have shaped what it means to depilate. This has been facilitated by a mixed methodological approach, based around the combined use and re-use of oral history interviews and testimonies from the Mass Observation Project, alongside the analysis of ‘prescriptive’ discourses such as women’s lifestyle magazines, soft core pornography, medical journals, and feminist publications. Such an approach brings focus to the way cultural norms circulate through both networks and texts, but also assists in treating sympathetically the contradictions of feelings and attitudes to hair removal by privileging the voices of women themselves. As a case study, the seemingly mundane practice of female body hair removal exposes the deeply rooted assumptions around race, class, age and sex that continue to underpin ordinary aspects of female identity-production. This thesis offers one approach to the question of how we might historicise women’s complicated relationship with their bodies, asking how personal and individual processes of embodiment and resistance connect and relate to wider public structures of meaning-making.
## CONTENTS

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*  4  

**INTRODUCTION**  5  

1 **A METHODOLOGICAL UNTANGLING**  22  

2 **THE MEDICALISATION OF FEMALE BODY HAIR**  51  
   The Medicalisation of Female Facial Hair  55  
   Bearded Ladies and the Victorian Freak show  57  
   The Dangers of Depilation in the early Twentieth Century  61  
   The Discovery of Sex Hormones  70  
   Demedicalisation of Female Facial Hair  75  
   The Medicalisation of Pubic hair  80  
   Resistances to Pubic Hair Shaving  85  
   Conclusion  91  

3 ‘NICE GIRLS DON’T… HAVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR’: LEARNING HOW TO DO HAIR REMOVAL RIGHT  94  
   Expertise within Social Networks  101  
   The Expertise of Magazines  116  
   Conclusion  136  

4 **THE EROTICS OF HAIRLESSNESS: SEX AND PUBIC HAIR REMOVAL**  139  
   C.1974-2010  145  
   The Unveiling of Pubic Hair 1960s-1970s  145  
   *Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special*  155  
   Pubic Hairlessness in the 1990s and 2000s  165  
   *Fiesta: Shaven Havens and Ravers: Clean Shaven*  166  
   *Cosmopolitan*  175  
   Conclusion  189  

5 **THE BUSH IS BACK: BODY HAIR POLITICS AND FEMINISM’S GHOSTS**  191  
   Body Hair Politics and the Women’s Liberation Movement  199  
   Feminism and Body Hair in the 2010s  219  
   Conclusion: Living with Feminism’s Ghosts  238  

7 **CONCLUSION**  251  

8 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**  256
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It’s no understatement to say that this thesis would not have been completed without the help and support of many individuals. I cannot thank enough my two supervisors, Professor Lucy Robinson and Professor Claire Langhamer for their assistance and encouragement throughout my study at Sussex. Thank you for all your critical constructive work, for letting me explore some weird interdisciplinary avenues and reigning it back in when it needed it. It’s not just my historical work that is immeasurably richer by working with you. I take forward with me, in whatever endeavour I choose to do next, the importance of sisterhood and friendship, the value of feelings as part of the thought process, and the politics of kindness and generosity (particularly when it involves being kinder to yourself). My thanks also go to Professor Matt Worley, for great conference memories (Lemmy bars and giant pancakes) and for being a supporter of my ideas throughout. Thank you to Jessica Hammett, Sian Edwards, Daisy Payling, Natalie Thomlinson, Jill Kirby and Owen Emmerson with whom I have shared this PhD journey.

I would like to sincerely thank my oral history participants for giving up their time to be involved in this project and for sharing with me their stories and experiences. My thanks go also to the library and archivist staff at the University of Sussex Library, the Mass Observation Archive, the British Library, The Wellcome Library and The Wallgreen Boots Alliance company archive in Nottingham.

A thank you must go to my friends: the Malvern Wims and the House of Pie, who have had to listen to me talk about body hair since my MA in 2013. To my family; Trish, Mark, Harriet, Fran and my brother Alex. I love you all. To my dad for unending support. Thank you for bestowing me with a love of popular culture and politics in equal measure and seeing the importance of both - even if we don’t agree on what’s good.

And to my mum, the Lorelai to my Rory Gilmore. This, quite simply, would not have been completed without you. I am so grateful for your unrelenting love, patience, support and generosity. Thank you for continuing to believe in me, even in times I didn’t believe in myself.
INTRODUCTION

In November 2003, Daily Mail columnist Chrissy Iley described her disdain at having seen a set of newly published fashion editorial photographs of model Elizabeth Jagger with visible armpit hair.\(^1\) Jagger, who had exchanged her long blonde hair for a dark perm alongside the styling of her underarm hair, was accused by Iley of attention-grabbing by contriving a look that ‘made her look abused, tortured, [and] as if some tragedy had befallen her and she had been forced to let her beauty go’.\(^2\) The implication was that no woman would want to show off her body hair unless she was trying to cause a stir. Indeed, the notion that the presence of an unshaven armpit was indicative of statement-making and exhibitionism rather than simply a by-product of adult maturation, highlights the strangeness attributed to the public presence of women with body hair at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

So strange in fact, that national tabloid press in the late 1990s and early 2000s often felt it necessary to record the sightings of such nonconforming celebrity women.\(^3\) Jagger was identified as merely the latest name in a lineage of infamous public figures who had deviated from the hairlessness norm; a list that also included Julia Roberts, Helena Bonham Carter, Miranda Richardson, and Emma Thompson. The cataloguing of names implies a desire to monitor women’s rebellions against the norm of hairlessness. The reason being that the presence of body hair signified other, potentially more sinister transgressive behaviour than

---

\(^1\) C. Iley, ‘It’s the Pits!’ Daily Mail (6\(^{th}\) November 2003), p.63.
\(^2\) Ibid; It is significant to note that the photographs of Jagger were taken by Terry Richardson, the American fashion photographer known for controversial and highly sexualised images of women in late 1990s and 2000s. The association with Richardson again feeds into the idea that the exposure of body hair was to shock and provoke.
simply ‘letting one’s beauty go’ as in Jagger’s case. Iley exemplified this concern in her suggestion that Thompson’s underarm hair, in particular, gave her ‘a horrible “wimmin of Greenham Common” look’; denoting the strong historical association between hair rebellions and political radicalism. Iley’s reference to the appearance of women participating in the Women’s peace camp and anti-nuclear protest at Greenham in the 1980s, was a reading of Thompson’s age, her middle-classness and her liberal politics. It mirrored the way during the protest itself, that the press had trivialised the activism of the Greenham women by focusing on how they transgressed norms of femininity particularly through a perceived lack of hygiene and dishevelled appearance. Female body hair therefore was not only symbolic of political radicalism, but its visibility was also as a strategy of political disarmament.

The unfashionability of ‘the Greenham Common look’ in the early 2000s is perhaps not surprising considering the period has been identified as one in which feminist rhetoric became unpopular and a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ circulated in popular culture. In her examination of the representation of feminism in the British and North American national press, Kaitlynn Mendes has argued that even by the 1980s, ‘feminism has been turned into a ’dirty word’ – a euphemism for the old, unattractive, unfeminine and unkempt’. ‘Postfeminism’ or ‘Third wave’ feminism denoted, amongst other things, feminists’ re-engagement with beauty culture and celebrated femininity and consumer choice as forms of liberation. Media studies scholar Rosalind Gill has also argued a key aspect of the postfeminist media culture was the ‘obsessional preoccupation with the body’, facilitated by the rise of celebrity hyper-surveillance via magazines like *heat* and the growing popularity of reality television makeover

---

4 C. Iley, ‘It’s the Pits?’, p.63.
programmes such as What Not to Wear. The Daily Mail’s scrutiny over celebrities’ underarm hair would appear to exemplify Gill’s claim that the late 1990s precipitated a cultural fixation with feminine ideals and the policing of those who failed to adhere to them.

However, feelings of revulsion and fascination towards women with hairy bodies was not a phenomenon unique to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Historically, there are many instances in which female body hair has been viewed as a matter of public interest and has continually been used as a marker of women’s transgression and/or otherness. The second chapter of this thesis explores, for example, the exhibition of ‘bearded ladies’ in the late nineteenth century, conceptualised as forms of popular entertainment and as evidence of scientific discovery within the context of the freak show. Chapter Four documents the public controversy that surrounded the first unveiling of female pubic hair on film in British cinemas in 1968. Pubic hair thus became a point of debate regarding the impact of permissiveness in Britain, and for many was symbolic of a loss of a national sense of moral decency.

This thesis seeks to understand what makes the presence of female body hair so culturally strange in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; what gives it its capacity to signify political, social and sexual deviance or ‘otherness’? To answer these questions, I propose that we need to ‘make strange’ the habitual process of hair removal. Hair removal, via depilation or epilation, is a ritual taken for granted as routine for many women in twenty-first century Britain. I argue the mundanity attributed to it assists in making the visibility of body hair extraordinary. In his exploration of the everyday, Joe Moran argues that by ‘de-naturalizing’ what is ordinary, we ‘render it visible, disrupting the illusion of the timeless routine and connecting it again with historical processes’. He frames the everyday as a dialectical process – an interaction between

---

local and global, the habitual and fashionable, the individual and social, and present and past. This thesis asks how might we go about exposing the construction of female body hair removal as a similar set of processes or interactions? Crucially, I argue that by ‘denaturalising’ the ritual of body hair removal we might also render visible the ways in which the construction of sex and gender as binary categories has become integrated and embedded into everyday life. As a case study, body hair removal reveals the ongoing and repeated work that goes into the production of female identity. This builds on the theoretical work of Judith Butler who has argued that ‘becoming’ female should be understood as a never-ending social process; something that we ‘do’ rather than ‘are’, that ultimately comes to appear natural through discursive repetition. She uses the verb ‘congeal’ to describe the way in which the repetition of acts and language has consolidated gender as ‘a natural sort of being’. Butler calls for a ‘genealogy of gender ontologies…[to] deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender’. To investigate the effects of gender therefore, we must also reflect upon how gender itself is an effect.

The body has become a key site of construction and policing of sex and gender identity. In her article on power and the female body, first published in 1988, Sandra Lee Bartky utilised Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘disciplinary practices’ to examine why women modified their bodies in order to adhere to feminine ideals. Disciplinary power, she argued, is ‘dispersed’ and ‘anonymous’, resulting in women participating in their own surveillance and self-

---

10 Ibid, p.66.
12 Ibid, p.43.
13 Ibid, p.44.
monitoring. Female oppression is sustained through this self-regulation, as Lee Bartky explained,

The disciplinary techniques through which the “docile bodies” of women are constructed aim at a regulation which is perpetual and exhaustive – a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts.¹⁵

More recently however, Rose Weitz has called into question the assumption that women are entirely ‘docile’ in their relationship to power structures.¹⁶ Although she too recognised the body as a site of struggle, she emphasised women’s agency in and resistance to managing cultural expectations around gender.¹⁷ In interviewing women about their hairstyles and head hair grooming practices, Weitz recognised how women on a day-to-day basis used their hair as a strategy to gain power but also how they understood and negotiated the limits of this.

Echoing Weitz’s emphasis on agency, this thesis too recognises that body hair removal is not something that has been done to women as ‘docile bodies’, but seeks to investigate how women are active participants in the circulation of ideas and rituals around hairlessness and how the signification of hairlessness maps onto/into their everyday experiences. Body hair removal exemplifies how female self-fashioning and performativity is woven into women’s negotiation of cultural discourses, and influenced by their social relationships, the ageing process and the spaces in which they move around in.

Crucially as an historical study of body hair removal, a central focus of this thesis is how conceptualisations of body hair removal may have changed over time, if at all. This does not simply entail questions about how technology may have transformed practices, or pinpointing when it became fashionable to depilate certain sites of body hair, but asks how might the process of learning about hair removal have changed over the twentieth century? How might

¹⁵ Ibid, p.80.
the capacity to resist the hairless norm have shifted depending upon social and temporal context? To answer these questions this thesis spans the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, but particular attention is focused on the construction of hair removal from the 1960s to the 2010s. A period of transformation for women in terms of social, political and economic status, this thesis examines how these changes affected women’s relationships with their bodies, and how the process of ‘becoming’ a woman may have shifted as well.

This thesis explores how we might use body hair removal to think more specifically about how constructions of femininity and the embodiment of femaleness have fluctuated over the twentieth century. Body hair makes for a particularly good case study to explore this because historically hair has been perceived as ‘pivotal to the mechanisms of social and cultural differentiation’ but in ways that are often taken for granted as natural.\(^{18}\) An already existent, interdisciplinary scholarship has demonstrated the symbolic uses and political meaning of body hair across western culture. Sociologist Anthony Synnott identified his own 1987 study as one of the first to investigate hair symbolism (both head and body hair) in Britain.\(^{19}\) In part this focus had been influenced by his witnessing of the development of subcultural styles in the post war era, such as punk and skinheads. Synnott also considered hair in relation to distinctions of gender, stating simply,

> Men and women have opposite norms from each other, and opposite norms for the head and the body. In terms of equivalences, therefore, the male head and the female body are equivalent – relatively hairless, shaven or short; and the female head and the male body are equivalent – hairy.\(^{20}\)

Synnott’s study highlighted how hair enabled social distinctions to be made, and thus how body modification is both an individual, physical practice and holds social symbolism relating to group identity. Art historians also recognised the symbolic capacity of body hair to differentiate


\(^{20}\) Ibid, p.393.
sex in their examinations of the changing representations of nudity within the western art
tradition.\textsuperscript{21} John Berger, for example, noted how depictions of female nudity often omitted
body hair because of its symbolic association to sexual power and passion.\textsuperscript{22} The hairless
woman thus reinforced the feminine ideal of passivity in contrast to the male role of active
onlooker.

Feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s helped to further politicise body hair
removal by framing it as part of a wider critique of beauty and consumer culture. Sandra Lee
Bartky used hair removal as an example of the ‘disciplinary practices’ on women’s bodies
referred to previously, emphasising the costs of depilation for women in terms of pain and
expense.\textsuperscript{23} Wendy Chapkis’s\textit{Beauty Secrets} published in 1986, demonstrated how hair removal,
as a deeply personal ritual, was political because non-participation had negative consequences
on senses of social belonging, stating ‘most women shave their legs and underarms because it
is not only unfeminine, it is somehow unfemale to be hairy.’\textsuperscript{24} Germaine Greer argued that
depilation was the physical manifestation of the suppression of women’s ‘vigour and libido’,
typically thought of as masculine qualities.\textsuperscript{25}

Although feminist scholarship assisted in making visible the gendered inequalities
around cultural notions of hairlessness, a reading of hair removal as inherently oppressive for
women meant there was little room to consider the individual reasons for women’s
participation in the hairlessness norm. Several psychological studies of women’s hair removal
behaviour between the early 1990s and 2000s have sought to shed further light on why women
are incited to depilate. The aim of Susan Basow’s study published in 1991 was to explore

\textsuperscript{21} See for example, L. Nead, \textit{The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality} (Routledge: London and New
\textsuperscript{22} J. Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing}, p.49.
\textsuperscript{23} S. Lee Bartky, \textit{Femininity and Domination}, p.69.
p.125.
\textsuperscript{25} G. Greer, \textit{The Female Eunuch} (Flamingo: London, 1999), p.43.
through a qualitative survey of female participants the extent to which body hair removal had become normalised practice in western culture. Although the study indeed gave some evidence that body hair removal was a mainstream practice, discussion of the reasons why women were participating in the hairless ideal were less clear, Basow stating ambiguously that ‘white women shave primarily because it is socially normative to do so’.26 Tiggemann and Kenyon’s 1998 survey of high school and university students concluded that women removed hair simply for ‘femininity or attractiveness’.27

Subsequent psychological studies have however, added nuance to the examination of women’s hair removal habits, highlighting how age can affect which body sites participants most commonly depilated, and emphasising the specificity of socio-cultural meaning to each body region.28 A number of psychological studies have also investigated the relationship between visible body hair and disgust sensitivity. Basow and Braman concluded in their 1998 study of perceptions of female body hair amongst male and female college students that individuals with hairy bodies were considered less intelligent, less sociable and less sexually attractive than hairless counterparts.29 Tiggemann and Lewis concluded from their study that disgust towards women’s underarm hair had ‘become aligned with attitudes towards flyswatters and maggots in meat’.30

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein’s edited collection on women and body hair, published in 2006, picked up on this theme of disgust to explore how hair and monstrosity had coalesced within

various different visual and literary texts. Lesnik-Oberstein suggested that body hair held a taboo status in western culture in both the physical and discursive sense, maintained by its designation as a topic both too trivial and too repulsive to mention.\textsuperscript{31} The collection of essays builds on her question,

why does body hair appear at one and the same time meaningless: there is nothing to be said about it or show about it, and as too meaningful – too disgusting/horrible/private – to be permitted mention?\textsuperscript{32}

Each contributor explores this paradox through the critical engagement of a range of discourses, including the paintings of Frida Kahlo, novels such as Wilkie Collins’s \textit{The Woman in White}, the 1989 Hollywood film \textit{She-Devil}, and critical theorist Terry Eagleton’s academic text \textit{After Theory}.\textsuperscript{33} Such close textual analyses not only demonstrates the diversity of source material from which we might choose to examine the hairless ideal, but also illustrates the variety of conceptual frameworks we might use to consider the power structures that underpin cultural hostility to body hair. Alice Macdonald, for example, utilised Mary Douglas’s theory of pollution to explore how female body hair has been used as a negative signifier in film.\textsuperscript{34} Sue Walsh applied Freudian theories on fetishisation to explore the connection between body hair and fur in an advertorial campaign for PeTA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) in 1999.\textsuperscript{35}

With such close textual analyses however, there was little exploration of change over time in Lesnik-Oberstein’s edited collection. Since its publication a number of historians have made attempts to balance the exploration of representations of hair through cultural texts, with

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} A. Macdonald, ‘Hairs on the Lens’ in K. Lesnik Oberstein (ed.), \textit{The Last Taboo}, pp.66-82.
a more grounded examination of how this relates to changing social and temporal contexts. Galia Ofek’s *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, for example, examines the symbolic value of women’s hair in the mid-to-late Victorian period to understand the role formative images of femininity played in a critical period of women’s changing status and role in society. 36 Evans and Withey’s edited collection on the history of facial hair demonstrates how facial hair is a component in the construction of gender, ethnic and class identity which relates to particular environments and cultures. 37 Rebecca Herzig, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal* sustains a historical study of hair removal in the United States of America from the Civil War to the 2010s. 38 As a trade publication, *Plucked* focuses on narrative rather than exploring conceptual frameworks or in-depth critical engagement with sources. Each chapter traces the popularisation of various hair removal treatments and techniques and how this relates to changing social and political contexts; for instance, Herzig pinpoints how industrialisation in the eighteenth century shifted the production of depilatory creams from domestic home to mass manufacture; and how the construction of new homes and the privatisation of bathrooms in the 1930s helped to move men’s shaving practices from the public space of the barber to the private home. 39

Several key themes in Herzig’s history of hair removal in North America, I also pinpoint as significant in the British context. This thesis explores for example, the role played by medical scientists in assigning women’s body hair as a characteristic of women’s sexual and psychological disorder. It examines the association between pornography and the trend of extensive pubic hair removal in the late twentieth century, and concludes by interrogating the complex relationship between feminists and body hair resistance since the 1960s. I also adopt

Herzig’s approach to the study of body hair removal; to frame it not as an ethical concern, or make judgement about whether it is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing for women to participate in, but consider how hair removal is continuously negotiated by multiple actors engaging with both historic constructs of gender, race, class and their contemporary environments.\textsuperscript{40}

To accomplish this, this thesis utilises a mixed methodological approach with the aim of capturing both the way ideals of hairlessness have circulated across time and across different cultural texts, and to investigate how women themselves have negotiated these messages. The oral history research method, including re-use of the Sisterhood and After oral history project at the British Library, and the Mass Observation archive have been particularly useful in performing the latter of these two inquiries. The Mass Observation Project ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive from 1992 elucidates how general grooming and washing practices mapped onto participant’s conceptualisations of gender, national and class identity. Hair removal, however, was only fleetingly discussed by Mass Observers, reinforcing Lesnik-Oberstein’s claim that body hair is almost completely discursively invisible. Having women tell their own experiences of depilation through oral history interviews was intended to ‘fill in’ some of these gaps in the historical record, as participants explained how the ritual had both impacted and was impacted by social relationships, work and public life, feminism and shopping habits amongst other things. Oral history facilitated a means of co-producing these life histories centred around body hair and in many cases demonstrated the significance of the ritual for some women in their public and private lives, disrupting the idea that body hair is at all trivial or invisible work.

Alongside the investigation of women’s hair removal ‘practice’ is the exploration of how hair removal has been ‘prescribed’ through various different cultural texts. These include medical journals and textbooks; women’s lifestyle magazines Jackie and Cosmopolitan; soft core pornographic magazines which specialise in pubic hairlessness such as Sexpertise: Shaved

\textsuperscript{40} R. Herzig, Plucked, p.189.
Pubes Special, Fiesta: Shaven Haven and Ravers: Clean Shaven; and popular feminist publications and magazines such as Spare Rib. Chapters Two to Five in this thesis explore these ‘prescriptive’ discourses individually, thinking about how norms of hairlessness are presented in each and how these ideals vary across time. Although I consider these sources of prescription separately, themes such as the relationship between hair removal, hygiene and respectable femininity are recurrent. One of the key points of this thesis is to show how cultural texts engage with each other and recycle and re-present conceptualisations of hair removal similar to the way Butler describes the ‘congealing’ of gender ontologies. I also want to show how these texts are active mediators in relation to their audiences. Letters pages in magazines in particular have been useful in the exploration of readers’ engagement with texts and with each other. The letters pages in Spare Rib, Cosmopolitan, Jackie and the pornography magazines help us to think about how consumers can shape, challenge and take pleasure in the content of prescriptive discourses.

I have dedicated the first chapter of this thesis to the further discussion of sources, and to reflect upon the process of mapping a cultural history of female body hair removal. Hopefully, this will accomplish two things. First, it will allow space and time for a broader examination of the strengths and limitations of the individual types of sources I have utilised and detail the process of data collection, which in many cases goes beyond the remit of the chapters themselves. Secondly, the chapter goes into greater detail about ‘practice and prescription’ as a framework of methodology and reflects upon what this offers historians as a way of thinking about how expertise is negotiated through networks and texts.

As noted, the remaining chapters in this thesis explore prescriptive discourses individually. Chapter Two examines how the medical establishment has assisted in shaping the close association between the hairless body and female identity through an exploration of medical journal articles and textbooks. It focuses on the medicalisation of facial hair and pubic
hair as case studies to examine how frameworks of hair ‘norms’ and ‘disorders’ were negotiated by various medical professionals and hairy women, and how at times body hair became perceived as symptomatic of more significant dysfunction within the female body related to sexual and psychological ill-health and development. This chapter broadly covers the period between the late-nineteenth century to the 1980s, first, to demonstrate how the process of medicalisation of female body hair has fluctuated over time; secondly, to illustrate how conceptualisations of hairy women as dysfunctional and unclean have had sustained purchase over the course of the twentieth century.

Chapter Three focuses on the consumption of hair removal goods in the late twentieth century. Its aim is to examine not just how hair removal has been sold to women, but to think about how women have negotiated these messages. To do so this chapter considers the dynamics between different sources of expertise that inform choices about hair removal, principally the social networks and kinship relationships that ‘pass on’ knowledge and the textual sources, particularly women’s lifestyle magazines, that present ideals of hairless femininity. Using both the Mass Observation Project and Jackie magazine, I demonstrate how performing hair removal ‘correctly’ mapped onto perceptions of middle-class respectability through a discourse of hygiene and sanitisation. It offers an approach to the history of consumption that emphasises experience of consumers and considers their active negotiation of sources of expertise, which was reflected in how Jackie adapted its guidance on hair removal.

Chapter Four remains focused on magazines as prescriptive texts. Principally it is concerned with how pubic hair removal became a facet of female heterosexual identity construction in the late twentieth century within two types of sex discourse: soft core pornography and women’s lifestyle magazine Cosmopolitan. Both these texts demonstrate how the legacies of the medicalisation of pubic hair shaped ideals of female heterosexual identity in the late twentieth century, emphasising how good sex equated to a sanitised female body.
The examination of pubic hair removal in the closing decades of the twentieth century exposes how codes of heterosexuality and heteronormative sex are reproduced. The comparison between the representation of pubic hairlessness across pornography and women’s magazines also highlights the dynamic relationship these texts had with each other, situating pornography within (rather than outside of) the cultural circuit.

Although moments of resistance are discussed within each of these chapters, the final chapter of this thesis focuses specifically on the experience of resisting the hairless norm, looking at the complicated relationship between body hair and feminism from the late 1960s to the early 2010s. Re-using oral history testimonies from the *Sisterhood and After* oral history project and letters pages from *Spare Rib* magazine, the first half of this chapter examines how body hair mapped onto feminists’ identity-production in the Women’s Liberation Movement. The second half of this chapter shifts forward in time to consider body hair activism and resistance in the 2010s, but considers how the legacies of the second wave continued to shape the discussion and politics of resistance to body hair removal. My own oral history research explores how women negotiated their feminist identities and hair removal in their daily lives.

In a way this thesis brings together many of the themes that existing scholarship on the study of body hair have recognised. A historical lens lets us think about hair removal in relation to individual and group identity building; how power circulates through practices of body modification; allows for the ‘thick’ analyses of cultural texts, and traces changes and continuities in behaviour and attitudes over time. It is also important to note, however, the parameters of this research. This is a history of female body hair removal in Britain and thus makes no claims of being definitive. The self-selecting nature of my oral history participants, plus my own selection of texts such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Jackie* has facilitated a study of female hair removal which focuses specifically upon its synonymy with whiteness and heterosexuality and in turn, with ideal femininity. In so doing, this thesis builds upon the work
of those within the fields of critical race theory and queer theory, who have highlighted the need to examine the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality to historicize the cultural practices that go into making legible and coherent the hegemony and neutrality of white heteronormativity.\textsuperscript{41} The study of body hair removal is one way we might explore the performativity of the taken-for-granted naturalness of femininity; to investigate how ‘white beauty’ continues to be, as critical studies scholar Shirley Tate describes, ‘produced through racialized and racializing discourses on aesthetics and race-ing stylization practices’.\textsuperscript{42} Beginning in the nineteenth-century, this thesis explores the long-lasting impact of ideas such as Darwinian theories of evolution, imperialism and the sexualisation of racialised bodies on the conceptualisation of hairy women as ‘other’ in British culture, and how these ideas continue to be replicated through discourse and other systems of power.

The cultural histories and personal experiences of lesbian and Black women’s body hair removal in Britain is largely absent from this thesis. They are histories I plan to explore in future expansions of this project, building on scholarship that has already identified the importance of style, adornment and hair in political identity-making for some within these communities.\textsuperscript{43} Neither does this thesis explicitly discuss men’s hair removal although this has arguably become a more ‘mainstream’ practice in recent years.\textsuperscript{44} In attempting to expose the underpinnings of feminine gender construction through the study of hair, this thesis does,


\textsuperscript{42} S.A. Tate, \textit{Black Beauty, Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics} (Routledge: London and New York, 2009) p.1

\textsuperscript{43} For essays on hair and identity see G. Biddle-Perry and S. Cheang (eds.), \textit{Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion}; The political importance of head hair within black British and American cultures has been highlighted most recently in trade publications such as P. Robinson, \textit{You Can’t Touch my Hair: And Other Things I still have to Explain} (Plume: New York, 2016) and E. Dabiri, \textit{Don’t Touch My Hair} (Allen Lane, Penguin Random House UK: 2019). Studies of body hair in relation to male gay culture include A. Peterkin, \textit{One Thousand Beards: A Cultural History of Facial Hair} (Arsenal Pulp Press: Vancouver, 2001).

however, touch upon masculinity as the oppositional category; it explores how failing to embody femininity can be read as masculine.

Finally, the matter of geography. I have grappled with whether this could accurately be described as a study of British history. To clarify, the majority of the textual source material in this thesis was published in Britain and at the time of our interview, all my oral history participants lived in Britain. However, mainly due to financial constraints, the geographical range of these interviews was limited to England and therefore to English experiences of depilation. The Mass Observation Project has a similar anglicised bias in the makeup of its panel of volunteers. This study therefore, cannot comment upon how differences between the national and regional contexts of the Britain Isles shaped hair removal consumption and practice. However, in Chapters Two and Five participants do discuss the significance of space and depilation in regards to travel and moving between public, private and professional spheres. I hope with further expansion, future iterations of this project could include interviews with women living in Wales, Scotland, Norther Ireland, and rural as well as urban and suburban communities. At the moment, the ‘Britain’ in this title reflects an idea of Britain rather than the geographical location, spoken about by Mass Observers, the various magazine publications and the participants included in this project. What this thesis does show is how body hair removal and perceptions of cleanliness more generally were linked to personal feelings of national identity and what it meant to be British. In Chapters Two and Three in particular, Britishness was often defined through its comparison to ideas about traits in other national collective identities. Consequently, in addition to thinking about body hair removal in Britain, this thesis also examines how practices and prescriptions are inherently tied to Britain’s participation within a global beauty market and exchange of information and ideas. For example, the trade

of people within the Empire in 1800s, the popularisation of Brazilian waxing in the 2000s, and
the arguable revival of feminism in the 2010s via the global online community and the
development of social media platforms. Nevertheless, there is room for further comparative
histories to be done regarding British women’s body modification practices and the origins and
developments of conventions of female hairlessness in other national contexts. This would also
create opportunities to explore how specific Britain’s relationship with hair removal is tied to
its imperial history and its legal, social and institutional structures.
1. A METHODOLOGICAL UNTANGLING

The title of this chapter reflects the messiness of trying to unravel the multiplicity of sources and methods used within this study. Just like that knot of hair, the completion of this research has encompassed multiple different strands converging, in what sometimes felt like a chaotic and unmanageable way, and necessitates time and perspective to successfully unpick. Such a methodological untangling also speaks to Erin Manning’s methodological approach of ‘close reading’, operating through intuition and experimentation. She writes, ‘it is about balancing several books, or several passages, or several ideas, or several texts, at the edge of the desk, on the floor of the studio, and wondering how else they might come together, and what else, together, they might do’. ¹ I imagine this chapter as a laying out of the texts the way Manning has described, so we might see how they work individually as well as in combination to create one approach to the history of female body hair removal. Specifically, the source material I explored in this study included oral history methodology, women’s and girls’ lifestyle magazines, medical journals, British soft core pornographic titles, the Mass Observation Project, and feminist periodical and print culture. This chapter considers each of these sources in turn, documenting the parameters of examination and my processes of data collection.

This chapter is also an acknowledgement of the collaborative nature of writing history. It draws upon Lucy Robinson’s reflections on putting together ‘Observing the 80s’, an Open Educational Resource (OER) which also brought together different types of primary sources and materials across digital, archival and audio platforms.² She described various different types of collaboration the project had elicited, including ‘the process through which discrete texts, contexts or agents work together to transform the significance of each element in

² ‘Observing the 80s’, https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/ [accessed 18/05/20].
concert’. This chapter responds to Robinson’s call that ‘how you work together matters as much as the content that you produce’ and does so through a framework I call ‘practice and prescription’. Initially, the practice and prescription framework was a means of communicating my research questions – how has the practice of hair removal changed over the twentieth century? What are the ‘prescriptive’ discourses that have informed norms, habits and routines? This approach allowed for a flexibility between a ‘thick’ analyses of the relationship between ideas such as hygiene and hairlessness, and to think more broadly in longitudinal terms about continuity and change to attitude and behaviours over the course of the twentieth century.

The practices and prescriptions framework invites us to reflect upon the negotiations and interactions between people, between texts and between people and texts across historical contexts. In this chapter I extend the practice and prescriptions framework further to reflect upon my own practice of writing history, and consider the ‘prescriptive discourses’ - the existing historical expertise that have shaped my engagement with the past.

**Oral History**

Oral history methodology is considered by many social historians to contribute to the recovery of experiences of those groups often ‘hidden from history’. The documentation of women’s experiences, particularly with a focus on their life cycles, domestic roles and private lives through oral history, goes some way to try to offset the scarcity and neglect of these narratives in written and public documentary sources. Female body hair removal is a case in point: as a

---


ritual that women are nowadays expected to participate in, it has often been absent from public discourse due to its labelling as a mundane, trivial, personal practice, and additionally for some women deeply stigmatised. Kate Fisher has argued that unstructured and open-ended approaches to oral history can provide space and informality for topics deemed potentially sensitive in nature. There is also a political importance of having women speak about their own conditions on a subject that is inherently personal but often perceived as culturally taboo. For me at least, the use of oral history had political dimensions beyond ‘filling in the gaps’ in the historical record. Taking a ‘cultural’ approach to oral history by focusing on the composure of individual life narratives and their social context was a means of deconstructing the ‘taboo-ness’ of body hair itself. Building upon what Anna Green identifies as the ‘interpretive theory’ of oral history, I sought to understand the cultural, social and psychological matrix that went into the construction of memory and feeling around body hair removal: to paraphrase, which cultural discourses do people use to make sense of their lives and why? How do individuals draw upon, reject and reassemble popular myths to structure their narratives and what might this reveal about how ideologies of gender and sexuality circulate and take form?

One project that has exemplified how the recording of women’s voices can be a political act is the Sisterhood and After: The Women’s Liberation Oral History Project, an initiative undertaken jointly by the University of Sussex and the British Library between 2010 and 2013. Sisterhood and After comprises sixty life history interviews with women, selected for their feminist activism and political work since 1968. The interviews themselves do not merely

---

cover public activism and career-making, but emphasise the idea of ‘personal is political’ by asking women about their childhood, sex, family and relationships, hobbies, fashion and body image. The breadth of subjects covered and life experiences has generated a number of diverse historical uses for historians analysing various dynamics of social activism and the history of women’s lives. Zoe Strimpel, for example, has used the archive to examine perspectives on heterosexual love within the WLM.12 Lucy Delap combined re-use of the archive alongside print culture and memoirs to reflect on the centrality of books in fostering feminist networks and community-building.13

I was initially interested in exploring how body hair removal might be discussed by Sisterhood and After contributors as part of feminist praxis. The digital archive facilitated the means to search using key terms such as ‘hair’ and ‘body’ to locate the interviews with discussions around appearance. The majority of interviews included some form of questioning around how participants thought feminism had affected their relationship with their bodies. The broadness of the question allowing interviewees to interpret this in a diversity of ways personal to them, for instance: through sex and sexuality, race and ethnicity, body weight and food, ageing, and fashion and adornment. Some participants discussed body politics at greater length than others - indicative of the spectrum of experiences and approaches to politics within the WLM more generally. The challenge I found in re-using the interviews from the archive was one I expected; the inability to probe further or ask specific questions tailored to my research. Only a handful of the participants discussed body hair removal explicitly. Instead, the Sisterhood and After archive prompted me to further consider how ideas about the body circulated through networks and texts within the WLM and secondly, the politics of emotion

that accompanied discussions of embodiment. Chapter Five explores how this contributed to perceptions of belonging and otherness within the feminist movement.

Undertaking my own oral history project served two purposes: firstly, it allowed me to ‘be in the room’, to ask questions tailored to the study of depilation and to take note of gesture and expression as well as voice and language in the process of composure. Secondly, it gave me the capacity to explore women’s practices of body hair removal in relation to aspects of life such as growing up and social change, without prioritising feminist social activism. My aim was to interview women with a diversity of perspectives and experiences of hair removal, specifically selecting across a range of age categories. Six of the interviews I conducted between 2016 -2017 are drawn upon in this thesis.14 This includes ‘Carole’ who was sixty-five at the time of interview and lived in the North East of England; ‘Rita’ and ‘Sarah’ were from the South of England and both aged in their early fifties; ‘Lydia’ was fifty-three and resided in the East Midlands; ‘Emily’ was twenty-seven years old and lived in the West Midlands; ‘Megan’ was twenty-six years old and resided in the North of England.15 I selected a loosely unstructured approach to the interviews themselves, emulating the Sisterhood and After format of having several key topics of interest but open ended questions to maintain flexibility. I asked participants to firstly trace how their hair removal habits had changed over their lifetime and then prompted them to consider how their thoughts on hair removal related to themes such as shopping habits, feminism, socialising and romantic relationships, work, health and sex. Within this framework, participants discussed hair removal within the context of growing up and personal identity-formation, but could also express opinions and feelings about body hair within a wider social context and in relation to contemporary life. This was also a way for me

14 I also undertook three interviews with beauty therapists based at a salon in Brighton but upon reflection these recordings went beyond the remit of this particular study, focusing more on change and continuities to the business of hair removal, professional techniques and product development.
15 In line with the University of Sussex research ethics procedure participants have been given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.
to understand the ‘ingredients’ that had shaped their memory-making and their narratives of the self.\footnote{P. Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure’, p.67. Summerfield uses the phrase ‘cultural ingredients’ to explain how the construction of the self in oral history (also known as composure), is shaped and filtered through the passing of time and by factors within the cultural circuit. Silences and contradictions in oral history narratives, Summerfield argues, are political as well as historiographical and it is the historian’s challenge to unpick these.}

My process of recruitment initially involved approaching spaces and groups in which women spent time and formed networks, this included contacting beauty salons and local Women’s Institutes. Although there were murmurs of interest, potential trails went cold and exemplified the logistical and time-consuming challenge of conducting an oral history project. I also advertised on the online noticeboard on the University of Sussex’s internal website which, as a result, garnered the attention of Sarah, who also put me in touch with her friend Rita in a ‘snowball’ type process.\footnote{A. Tooth Murphy discusses how snowballing can help in oral history recruitment to help establish trust and rapport between narrator and researcher, see ”I Conformed: I Got Married. It Seemed like a Good Idea at the Time”: Domesticity in Postwar Lesbian Oral History’ in B. Lewis, (ed.), \textit{British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives} (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2013), pp.165-187, p.186.} Lydia, Carole, Megan and Emily got in contact as a result of hearing about the project via a BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour interview and a blogpost for the website Mumsnet on the subject of the stigmatisation of female facial hair.\footnote{BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour, \url{https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03k2s9p} (19th February 2016), [accessed 26/05/2020]; L. Cofield, ‘Guestpost: The “Burden” of Facial Hair’ Mumsnet \url{https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/guest_posts/2602462-Guest-post-The-burden-of-facial-hair} (29th March 2016), [accessed 26/05/2020].} Because these engagements were specifically focused around the theme of stigmatisation, it attracted participants who felt strongly about how their body hair had impacted their lives. The self-selecting nature of this process was, in a way, inevitable as it was always going to be highly unlikely that women apathetic about body hair would want to contribute to this project. David Geiringer has discussed a similar imbalance in his oral history work with Catholic women, speculating that his project appealed to ‘liberal’ Catholics who ‘would have been more naturally predisposed to speak about sexual matters, be that because of a comfort with the subject or the motivation to voice dissent’.\footnote{D. Geiringer, \textit{The Pope and the Pill}, p.29.}

Nevertheless, these interviews were not intended
to be representative survey of the ‘typical’ experience of British women and their body hair. A more general survey of hair removal would have to be significantly more diverse in terms of race, geographical location, class and sexual orientation. What the testimonies do offer are insights into the complexities of emotion that are tied to hair removal, and its role in the construction of female selfhood. Talking with those who felt that body hair had negatively impacted their lives added a new dimension to the research. Specifically, it prompted the question: how can the examination of extreme or marginal experiences tell us something about norms and how they function? Chapters Two and Five therefore, focus on what these narratives reveal about body hair and perceptions of social stigma, ways of coping with the feeling of being ‘other’ and the negotiation of public spaces.

An additional challenge I encountered whilst conducting my oral history project was in regard to my legitimacy as a researcher of hair removal. Part of what drew me to explore a history of body hair removal was because I had wrestled with my own feelings about hairlessness, having gone through various phases of monthly salon visits, militant non-shaving protests and lackadaisical growth spurts since my own adolescence. Lucy Robinson writes why personal interest in a topic is significant: ‘personal investment as a form of historical practice might not be the problem, it might be the point’. 20 It was not uncommon for participants and respondents to interrogate my personal investment in hair removal as a means of questioning my expertise. For example, in response to my guest-post on the stigma of female facial for the online forum Mumsnet, one member commented:

To me this article comes across as insincere. Does the writer leave her tache/chin/eye brows unplucked? Or is she merely calling for other people to become role models of hirsuteness? 21

The response indicated a suspicion around veracity, prompting the question whether one can write about a stigma if one has not experienced it first-hand. In this case, my expertise on the subject of body hair was inherently connected to personal involvement. This echoes Andy Medhurst’s observation in regards to punk subcultural histories, where legitimacy often manifested in the existence of a metaphorical “‘I was there” badge’.22

‘What do you do with your hair?’ was also asked by several of my interviewees. In part, I believe this was connected to the fact a number of them had never discussed their body hair explicitly prior to our interview, it having been a source of personal shame and embarrassment. Learning about my relationship with body hair was a means of judging whether it was safe for them to disclose private information in our exchange; of finding out whether I could mutually understand and empathise with their situations and be trusted not to judge. Potentially this was also connected to my identity as an academic researcher. My participants were aware that the interview was part of my PhD study and questions around my own depilation habits may have been an evaluation of whether the ‘academic gaze’ had bestowed upon me an objective eye or immunity to social pressures. Feelings of potential disconnect between academic figures and ‘ordinary’ subjects may also have been the motivation for the Mumsnet response regarding insincere role models.

I was hesitant to respond to interviewees’ interest in my own background having understood the effect the interviewer has in shaping narrative.23 Although I was an ‘insider’ in that I also shared the experience of feeling societal pressure to be hairless, my conversations with Lydia, Megan, Emily and Carole made me acutely aware of the privileges having light hair had afforded me. Even in those periods of time I stopped removing my body hair, it had not impacted upon the way I moved through public spaces or my engagements with other

---

23 K. Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain*, discusses how the relationship between interviewee and the interviewer should be seen as productive rather than distorting, p.18.
people. Unfamiliarity and distance however, can also be an advantage in the researcher-participant relationship. Geiringer writes that ‘shared knowledge of interviewees essential difference often created an atmosphere conducive to open and frank discussion where the interviewee felt a sense of control and ownership over the subject matter’.\(^24\) In the end I was honest when it came to my own life history with hair and how I had fluctuated between obsessiveness and indifference. The intention was that from the reciprocal exchange of information about each other, the flow of conversation would be enhanced and trust would be built by breaking down any potential reservations about academic imperviousness to social pressures.

**Mass Observation Project**

Akin to my use of oral history, my intention in exploring the Mass Observation Project (MOP), based at The Keep at the University of Sussex, was to investigate practices of and attitudes towards body hair removal across the last century. The Project, founded in 1981, comprises a panel of volunteer writers from across the United Kingdom. These ‘Observers’ are invited to answer open-ended questionnaires or ‘directives’ on various topics three times a year. With the aim of ‘recording everyday life in Britain’, the Project maintains many of the social commitments and anthropological motivations of the original Mass Observation initiative which ran between 1936 and the late 1950s.\(^25\) In writing for the Project, Observers document their personal experiences, opinions and beliefs on a diversity of subjects ranging from the overtly political: ‘climate change’ (Summer 2011), to the seemingly mundane and domestic

such as Gas and Electricity Bills (Summer 1982), and Housework and Maintenance (Autumn 1983). The willingness and candidness shown by Observers (facilitated in part by the protection and security of anonymity) to discuss sensitive or personal topics such as Sex (Autumn 2005), Menstruation (Spring 1996) and Death and Bereavement (Spring 1994) encouraged me to examine how the Project may have facilitated conversations around the intimate topic of hair removal, designated ‘the last taboo’ by Lesnik-Oberstein in her same-titled edited collection.

This study builds upon a model of using MOP which utilises responses from one or two directives to consider what that ‘case study’ might reveal about the construction of selfhood and identity-making in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This ‘telling’ case approach to MOP acknowledges that although the Observer panel might not be demographically representative of the British population, researchers can extrapolate out from single cases to explore social change, in the same way we engage with other forms of life history discourse. Louise Purbrick’s exploration of the ‘Giving and Receiving’ directive, for example, highlighted the gendered dimensions within the social ritual of gift-giving. Sociologist Mark Bhatti utilised the fact that there is an over-representation of older people within the panel of Observers as he examined ageing in relation to gardening and the home environment. Matt Cook’s use of MOP alongside the National Lesbian and Gay Survey demonstrated fragmented opinions and moral conflicts surrounding homosexuality in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s. David Geiringer and James Baker used the MOP to

26 See Mass Observation website for full list of previous and current directives, http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives [accessed 15/05/2020].
consider how the advent of the personal computer impacted upon processes of identity-making in late modernity, demonstrating how the Project can assist with untangling people’s relationships with material objects and technological change.\textsuperscript{32} The primary challenge I faced in using the MOP was that without a specific directive tailored to practices of hair removal, I relied upon locating responses from directives on similar topics which might have prompted Observers to also reflect upon depilation habits. A number of researchers have also reflected upon the complexities of re-using data from directives originally intended or designed for alternative studies.\textsuperscript{33} The ‘Hair and Hairdressing’ directive (2001) initially appeared promising, but the focus on head hair care and styling detracted from any mention of body hair grooming. The ‘Women and Men’ directive (1991) in which Observers were asked to consider the construction of gender and the meaning of the word ‘feminist’, provided useful context for Chapter Five’s exploration of historical tensions between feminism and femininity. Of most value to this study, however, was the ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive launched in Spring 1992, which asked Observers to respond to questions on cleanliness and washing by focussing answers around seven household products: soap, deodorant, shampoo, toilet paper, aftershave, toothpaste and handkerchiefs. As I note in Chapter Three, the ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive was designed for use in a BBC Radio 4 series entitled \textit{Keep It Clean}, which aired between August and September 1992.\textsuperscript{34} The omission of ‘razor’ from this list of products meant that, as a source for examining past practices of depilation, the directive was not vastly revealing. Instead, it encouraged me to think more broadly in terms of the relationship between hygienic consumption and identity-formation.

\textsuperscript{34} According to the BBC Genome Project, an online catalogue of BBC Radio Times listing information from 1923 to 2009, \textit{Keep It Clean} comprised of six programmes produced by K. Whitehead that first aired between 26th August and 30th September 1992, https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/65803d67adae44ef8c7ce7b94dfcc488 [accessed 21/05/2020].
What was noticeable was the array of authority figures and sources of guidance that Mass Observers referenced in their definitions of cleanliness and in responses to what products they used. In negotiating these different types of prescriptive discourses, Mass Observers themselves often claimed an expertise of their own. A number of scholars have discussed how Mass Observation causes us to rethink the category of ‘expert’. Matt Jones has discussed MOP as a source of ‘ordinary perspectives’, in which Observers often identify themselves in opposition to ‘official’ or ‘elite’ opinions, but as a form of knowledge that is no less valid or authoritative. Claire Langhamer has suggested in her exploration of ‘ordinariness’ in the immediate post-war period, that the categories of ‘ordinary’ and ‘expert’ were not necessarily oppositional, but Mass Observation demonstrates how ‘increasingly being an ordinary person was deemed to be a form of expertise in its own right’. Chapter Three builds upon these interventions, exploring knowledge-sharing and the negotiation of sources of guidance in relation to hygiene and hairlessness.

**Women’s and Girls’ Lifestyle Magazines**

In the 1980s the importance of women’s lifestyle magazines, both as business enterprises and as cultural texts, was brought into focus by scholars such as Marjorie Ferguson, Janice Winship and Angela McRobbie. Their work assisted in establishing why women’s commercial magazines were significant objects of sociological and political study; using a case study approach to demonstrate the contradictions in magazine content (between, for example work

---


and pleasure; feminism and femininity) to show how these were not investigatory obstacles but key points of interest.

Various aspects of women’s magazine print culture have now garnered scholars’ attention: from historical surveys of the business of magazine production, to a focus on changing organisational structures and the relationship between advertising and marketing industries. Many have highlighted magazines’ social and economic influence, their role as ‘agents of socialisation’, and the adaptation of their content to changing social and political climates, dispelling the notion that they are essentially homogenous creations. Joke Hermes’s analysis of reading practices attempted to address what she identified as a lack of focus in existing scholarship on readers’ agency as producers of meaning. Ellen McCracken’s *Decoding Women’s Magazines* offered an example of how magazine content can be read through semiotic analysis, demonstrating how this might assist in unpicking the power relationship between editors, readers and publishers. Social and cultural historians have also utilised lifestyle magazines to explore changing constructions of femininity and woman/girlhood in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century. Penny Tinkler’s examination of popular magazines between 1920-1950 traces not only the proliferation of publications ‘for girls’ in the interwar period, but how these texts were involved in ‘the production of ideals’ and acted as moral guides for adolescents. Alisa Webb investigated the

---


class-specific dimensions of advice-giving, arguing that a focus on health and beauty in girls’ magazines in the early twentieth century reflected the anxieties of medical professionals, educators and social commentators around the instability of pubescent female bodies.44

Women’s magazines have also been utilised by those interested in the intersections between social history and emotion. Hannah Charnock, for example, has investigated what the construction of infidelity within a selection of women’s magazines might reveal about the changing expectations of marriage and romantic love in the 1930s.45

My approach built on this understanding of magazines as sites of negotiated expertise. The aim of this investigation was to explore how the ritual of hair removal was presented in lifestyle magazines, and to reflect upon what this might reveal about conceptualisations of ideal femininity in the late twentieth century. I focused on two magazine titles: Jackie, a magazine with a readership aged between 10 to 14, which ran in the UK between 1964 and 1993 and Cosmopolitan, launched in the UK in 1972 and geared towards women in their late teens and twenties.46 Both publications emphasised a white, middle-class heteronormative ideal of femininity centred around consumption, body work and the pursuit of romantic relationships. My aim was to compare how hair removal guidance differed in the magazines due to the disparate age of their target markets. How might the language of instruction, promotion of depilation methods and motivations for hairlessness vary depending on whether a reader was ‘entering’ the hair removal market or assumed to be an already experienced consumer? In turn what did this suggest about the role magazine editorial teams saw themselves fulfilling for their audiences? I focused specifically on two periods of analysis: the publication of Jackie between 1964-80 and Cosmopolitan between 1987-2009. In a way this simulated the process of ageing

– as Jackie readers graduated into ‘Cosmo girls’, how would the ideal of hairlessness also be re-presented and re-configured? Two axes of time were therefore the objects of analysis in relation to hairlessness: biographical; how ideals of femininity correlated to the maturation of female bodies, and historical change over time – how the construction of female identity may or may not have transformed between 1964 and 2009.

My process within the archives remained the same for both magazines. To grasp a sense of change over time seasonally as well as over the time period, I chose to examine every issue from every other year. For instance, every weekly Jackie issue from 1964, 1966, 1968, and every monthly Cosmopolitan issue from 1987, 1989 and so on. Many consistencies emerged between Jackie and Cosmopolitan’s hair removal content, for example, a peak in advertising and beauty editorial features in the summer issues, and a sustained emphasis on the connection between hair removal and heteronormative attractiveness. The normativity of hairlessness was demonstrated both in the scarcity of visual images of women with hairy bodies and in the publication of letters from readers seeking help and advice for the body hair concerns. Problem pages and agony aunt columns, as Melanie Tebbutt discusses in her exploration of Mirabelle magazine, were (and still are) popular forums of personal experience and advice-giving which offered readers sources of information, titillation and humour.47 Bingham similarly suggests that although historians have traditionally overlooked problem pages as ‘feminised’ and thus non-political spaces of reader interaction, advice columns can act as ‘social barometers’ which offer a means of exploring how attitudes related to matters of morality, sexuality and gender change over time.48 Hair removal guidance and expertise manifested in various ways across

editorial content, advertisements and in problem pages and readers’ letters. I reflect upon how these different spaces facilitated different types of interaction and engagement between readers, magazine editors and hair removal brands.

Although my initial investigation set out to compare similarities and differences between Jackie and Cosmopolitan’s conceptualisations of hair removal, as progress on the project developed it became more evident that a comparison between lifestyle magazines as one form of expertise and other contemporaneous sources of guidance became a more interesting line of enquiry. As a result, Chapter Three focuses on Jackie magazine and the construction of female adolescence, exploring the magazine’s role alongside expertise generated by social networks, familial relationships and professional educators within the community. Chapter Four explores the ritual of hair removal as a preparation for sex and as an aspect of sexual foreplay, situating Cosmopolitan in comparison to two contemporary soft-core pornographic titles. This reflects Cosmo’s role as a lifestyle discourse and as a form of sexual representation. Exploring women's and girls’ lifestyle magazines in relation to other sources of hair removal guidance facilitates the examination of the dynamic relationship between magazines, consumers and the cultural circuit in which norms and ideals are repeatedly negotiated. In effect, it highlights the agency of consumers, by demonstrating how magazine content adapted and engaged with concurrent and often competing sources of expertise.

**Pornographic Magazines**

Part of my initial research outline was to ask how pornography, as a prescriptive discourse, may have shaped the practice of female body hair removal in the late-twentieth/twenty-first century. Early in the research phase, I recognised that the parameters of this investigation would be set by accessibility to materials on two interrelated levels. Firstly, it would be dictated
by the limitations set by both university and archive ethical research guidelines. Secondly, the availability and preservation of pornographic material in archives and collections as a whole. Of course this latter point is not a concern exclusively felt by historians of pornography - what is and is not valued as legitimate artefact for archival preservation and what is absent from official records are political questions that many scholars researching histories of marginalised, underrepresented and historically deviant groups are often faced with. Scholars working in the field of Porn Studies have, however, been particularly self-reflexive about the challenges of working with either incomplete, missing or sensitive source material.\(^{49}\) In part this self-consciousness reflects the relative ‘newness’ of the discipline in the UK and the desire to establish its reputation as a critically rigorous one. Often categorised as an ‘outlaw discourse’, pornography as a scholarly pursuit is, as Laura Helen Marks describes, ‘still regarded with some scepticism and a healthy degree of titillated interest that can sometimes feel like condescension’.\(^{50}\)

In a 2009 special issue of Sexualities journal which focused on the teaching and research of sexually explicit material in British institutions, editors Feona Attwood and I.Q. Hunter summarised,

…academics working the field face problems ranging from legal restraints and threats, out-of-date and restrictive framework of understanding, limited political perspectives and a new squeamishness about explicit imagery.\(^{51}\)

They argue that ‘bringing the sexually explicit’ into the university, has prompted discussions around:


\(^{50}\) L. H. Marks, “‘That Wasn’t Meant to Be Funny’: Mirth and the Porn Scholar’ Porn Studies (2018), 5 (1), pp.20-26; p.20.

boundaries, power, safety, respect, difference and tolerance; and about issues of value, the place of affective response in academia; the importance of viewing context in constructing meaning, and the way media images are regulated in public and education contexts.52

A number of scholars have reflected upon how their experience of teaching pornography within the university has been shaped by, for example, the contentious historical debates between anti/pro feminists, risk-averse and conservative political climates, and technological shifts which have precipitated, amongst other things, the advent of ‘trigger warnings’ and discussions around censorship.53 Hancock and Barker have discussed the ethical implications of showing pornography in the classroom.54 This echoed Attwood, Maina and Smith’s observation in 2018 that ‘imagery continues to be a source of tension for publishing, even while access to explicit material is dramatically easier everywhere else’.55

My own discussions with the University Research Governance Officer highlighted what mechanisms would need to be put in place to conduct any research, particularly if this involved ‘moving-image’ pornography accessed via online sharing sites or personal collections. The logistics of conducting secure research on campus was compromised by the fact that at the time I shared an office with other postgraduate students. Also, how could I ensure access only to professionally-made (i.e. not amateur) material? I was made aware I had to report any concerns I had about illegal or harmful material such as the involvement of minors to my supervisor, but what constituted ‘professional’ pornography was not always transparent, neither was the consent of participants. The question ‘when did pubic hair disappear from porn?’ seemed a

52 Ibid, p.549.
redundant one when provenance, date, location and authorship of the material were questionable at best. As Linda Williams describes of digital images,

> We may indeed currently have a surfeit of these inadvertent archives, but to what extent do these random ‘gotchas’ function as actual archives? Are they collected, organized, preserved and, despite their apparent ubiquity, do we really have long-term access to them?\(^{56}\)

Even though digital archives of pornography might be vast, they are ephemeral in nature. The potential hazards and ethical dilemmas this posed meant that I chose to move away from exploring online collections to focus specifically on material retained in traditional archival institutions—principally, the soft core pornographic magazines housed at the British Library (BL). Using the BL was a means of legitimising the investigation because it mitigated against some of the practical and security concerns. BL procedures are explicit in instructing researchers how to collect, examine and use pornographic source material in the Reading Rooms. There are desks in the Rare Books and Music dedicated to the use of explicit or sensitive reading material. Using the ‘naughty desks’ prompted a different research experience: notably one that bestowed a heightened self-consciousness, but also a sense of security—possibly because I find following rules and procedures oddly comforting. It is always nice at conferences to bump into other researchers who used the naughty desks and share experiences, because the demarcation of space in itself rouses titillation, mystery and curiosity.

I was given permission to photograph and scan pages of the magazines to aid my note-taking and writing-up. This permission did not extend to the use of these images in conference presentations or any published work, exemplifying Attwood, Maina and Smith’s reflection on the use of pornographic imagery from 2018. I have not included any images in this thesis of pornographic material for this reason, and for fairness have also chosen to omit images of any

---

other source material. This is not to say that having to describe visual imagery to readers does not come with its own challenges.\textsuperscript{57}

The BL collection contains numerous popular commercial British ‘top shelf’ men’s magazines from the late twentieth century and early twenty-first, including a selection of Paul Raymond publications such as \textit{Men Only}, \textit{Club International} and \textit{Escort}; \textit{Fiesta}, \textit{Ravers}, and \textit{Knave} from Galaxy Publications; and British versions of international titles such as \textit{Penthouse}, \textit{Playboy} and \textit{Hustler}. It also holds many independent titles and specialist publications specific to sexuality, kink and interest. This includes numerous iterations of ‘Shaving Specials’; publications centred around the ritual of shaving, or shaven women as a means of sexual arousal. I decided to focus my investigation upon the Shaving Specials. In particular, a magazine called \textit{Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special} which was published by Ben’s Books Ltd, a London-based erotic publication and distribution company in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{58} This series in particular drew my attention because the date of its publication appeared to disrupt the popular narrative that pubic hairlessness only arrived in pornography in the 1980s. The magazine raised questions regarding the fetishisation of pubic hair removal in relation to Britain’s ‘permissive moment’, and the historical association between pubic hairlessness, censorship and obscenity.

In addition, I also examined special editions of two mainstream top shelf magazines: \textit{Fiesta: Shaven Havens} and \textit{Ravers: Clean Shaven}.\textsuperscript{59} I selected these magazines principally because they had long issue runs, (the BL holds annual issues of \textit{Fiesta: Shaven Havens} from 1989 to 2007 and \textit{Ravers: Clean Shaven} from 1995 to 2004) and because the layout and format of their content held similarities to that of the women’s lifestyle magazines I had explored, helping to facilitate comparison. The Shaving Specials proved useful to the exploration of hair

\textsuperscript{57} F. Attwood, G. Maina and C. Smith also reflect upon instances in which having to describe pornography has generated concerns about ‘vulgar and unscholarly’ language-use or accusations of replicating pornography through descriptive accounts, ‘Conceptualizing, researching and writing about pornography’, p.3.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special} (Ben’s Books Ltd: London, 1974-5).

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Fiesta: Shaven Havens} (Galaxy Publications: Essex); \textit{Ravers: Clean Shaven} (Galaxy Publications: Essex).
removal and sexual identity because content was constructed around educating the reader as to why hairlessness was sexually alluring and desirable. Moving away from the question of how pornography might have shaped the practice of female body hair removal, I became more interested in how the practice of body hair removal had been incorporated into pornographic discourse at certain temporal moments; what this might reveal about fluctuations in the soft core industry, sexual tastes and consumption habits in late twentieth century Britain. Content analyses revealed how these texts had embraced and reproduced conceptualisations of hairlessness and frameworks of desire that were also located in, for example, medical journals and public health discourse, the history of art, and women’s magazines like *Cosmopolitan*.

Chapter Four therefore highlights how, although pornography may still be considered an outlaw discourse, as a cultural text it shapes and is shaped by cultural norms. It offers a potential means of exploring sexual expression and the circulation of ideas around sex. This thesis therefore, builds on the work of historians who have examined various types of representations of sex and ‘pornographies’ in the loosest sense of the term to think through the historically-specific nature of structures like sexual desire and identity-formation; scholars such as Lisa Z. Sigel, Harry Cocks, and Marcus Collins. Although we must be careful not to assume any direct correlation between the popularity of shaving in pornography and the popularisation of pubic hair shaving in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the subject of hair removal does lend itself as a case study to reconsider the relationship between pornography and sexual subjectivity in post-sexual revolution Britain.

---

Popular Feminist Publications

Much scholarship on the history of feminist print culture has emphasised its importance as a site of collective action and the transmission of feminist ideas.61 Bazin and Waters have argued that as historical objects, feminist periodicals contradict the idea of a singular, unified history of feminism, instead they highlight the continuing faultlines around activism and ideology.62 Lucy Delap has argued for the significance of women’s bookshops within the British Women’s Liberation Movement, as sites of inspiration, community and debate.63 The final chapter of this thesis builds upon these interventions, exploring the contestation of ideas around body hair removal and femininity identity-making within popular feminist texts. I use the term ‘popular’ to denote specifically trade publications and commercial press. The first of these is Spare Rib, a national magazine which ran from 1972 to 1993 in the UK and at its peak amassed a readership of 100,000 by offering what the editors perceived as a popular, ‘broadchurch’ feminist approach to content.64 The magazine’s aim, according to Selina Todd, was to be a counterpoint to traditional women’s lifestyle magazines, oppose the objectification of women by mass media and to explore alternatives to women’s conventional gendered role.65

There is a broad scholarship on Spare Rib, including accounts from past editors and contributors, which maps out the magazine’s ideological development, limitations and legacies.66 Its questionable faults, however, have not hindered its use as a historical source. On

---

66 See for example, S. Todd, ‘Models and Menstruation’; M. Rowe (ed.), Spare Rib Reader (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1982); A. Smith (ed.), Re-Reading Spare Rib (Palgrave Macmillan: 2017); C. Malpocher,
the contrary, many historians have utilised *Spare Rib* to investigate the complex and often contradictory aspects of feminist activism and thinking in the late twentieth century. For example, Joanne Hollows has explored *Spare Rib*’s fluctuating approach to consumption, Krista Cowman has traced how first wave feminist history was presented in the magazine, and a current Leverhulme Trust research project partnered with the University of Sussex aims to explore what *Spare Rib* may reveal about feminist commerce, business and trade networks across the country.67

The recent digitisation of the *Spare Rib* archive has facilitated even greater accessibility to study specific themes and subject areas the magazine covered.68 I was able to examine content related to the search term ‘body hair’ over the course of its publication, and effectively plot how the magazine’s approach to depilation shifted over time and in relation to readership response. Like Jackie and *Cosmopolitan*, readers’ letter pages in *Spare Rib* were a rich source of debate and interaction allowing readers to participate in a community of consciousness-raising and communicate with the editors their concerns and expectations of the magazine.69 Readers’ letters therefore helped to shape content, but also worked to point out many of the limitations of *Spare Rib*’s approach to feminism. In this research project, using *Spare Rib*’s readers’ letters alongside testimonies from the Sisterhood and After oral history project highlights the diversity of attitudes to body hair politics within the Women’s Liberation

---


68 For discussion of the politics and uses of the digitisation of *Spare Rib* see M. Moravec, ‘Feminist Research Practices and Digital Archives’ *Australian Feminist Studies* (2017), 32 (91-92), pp.186-201. It should also be noted the open accessibility of the digital archive has been compromised by recent developments regarding Brexit, for more detail see British Library blogpost: I. Cook ‘Spare Rib archive – possible suspension of access UPDPATE’, https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2019/10/spare-rib-update.html (26th January 2020), [accessed 21/05/20].

Movement between the 1960s and 1980s. It also demonstrates the affective dimensions of community building and how feelings of belonging and exclusion were inherently political, echoing Waters’s suggestion that ‘within the discourses of Spare Rib, feelings are a part of politics’.\textsuperscript{70}

As another type of popular feminist text, I also examine body hair politics within two semi-autobiographical, self-help publications: Caitlin Moran’s \textit{How to Be a Woman}, and Hadley Freeman’s \textit{Be Awesome: Modern Life for Modern Ladies}.\textsuperscript{71} Moran and Freeman were at the time both journalists for major British newspapers, so I use their works as ‘telling cases’ to explore feminist body politics in the 2010s and its relationship with second wave feminism. Chapter Five goes into greater detail about publishing trends of feminist trade publications in the 2010s and the so-called revival of feminism this supposedly indicates.

**Medical Journals**

Chapter Two focuses on how medical scientists in the twentieth century have connected patterns of body hair growth to disease and dysfunction. It argues that scientific frameworks of knowledge were a product of and contributed to the assumption that female hairlessness equalled healthiness. To trace the development of these ideas over time and across various medical specialisms, I used two well-established and long running journals of general medicine, \textit{The British Medical Journal (BMJ)} and \textit{The Lancet}, founded in 1840 and 1823 respectively. These were supplemented partially by the use of general introductory textbooks on hair diseases and obstetrics from the Wellcome Library, including \textit{Obstetrics} by J. Whitridge

\textsuperscript{70} M. Waters, “‘Yours in struggle’”, p.461.

Williams, later re-titled *Williams Obstetrics*. The numerous re-editions of this textbook over the twentieth century facilitated the comparison of instruction regarding pubic hair ‘prepping’ whilst also sustaining some form of continuity.

The digitisation of the *BMJ* and the *Lancet* enabled an initial investigatory process using key word search tools. I focused my exploration around the terms ‘hirsutism’ and ‘hypertrichosis’, narrowing the field of analysis far more specifically than a search for ‘hair’ or ‘body hair’ would have permitted. Historian of medicine Vanessa Heggie has argued that one challenge facing historians using the medical press is the instability of scientific categories and definitions, which can have a multiplicity of meanings both over time and according to historical actor. It was not always clear how medical authors themselves were defining cases of hirsutism or hypertrichosis, or indeed the difference between these two labels suggesting at certain moments they were somewhat interchangeable. Similarly, I was cautious not to assign contemporary understandings of terminology to historical concepts. The word ‘bisexuality’, for instance, often cropped up in reports of excessive hairiness to signify persons of ambiguous gender or ‘intersexuality’, in contrast to the modern interpretation of bisexuality to denote sexual orientation.

The instability of concepts is not always a problem however, but rather the object of enquiry. A number of scholars have utilised medical periodicals to trace how language and perceptions of the aetiology of a disease have changed over time. For example, Julie Marie Strange has discussed the terminology around menstruation in *The Lancet*; Alison Mould has also explored *The Lancet* and its developing discussion around the suitability of female medical

---

practitioners in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{75} Heggie has investigated changing attitudes to the relationship between exercise and heart disease across a number of British medical science periodicals.\textsuperscript{76} Such studies draw attention to the multiplicity of voices and diversity of opinion within medical journals, positioning them as sites of debate, collaboration and disruption. I often came across this in my own research, particularly in correspondence columns in which practitioners across dermatology, endocrinology, general medicine and psychiatry would offer support or counter-narratives to recently published articles on the diagnoses and treatments of hair diseases. The demands and concerns of patients also manifested within these interactions (albeit mediated through the penmanship of the physician): in accounts of doctor-patient consultations; anxieties about emerging underground or black market depilatory services; and in letters written on behalf of patients seeking advice about treatments and side effects. The digitisation of medical journals has assisted in illuminating the dynamics and directness of these interactions – the retrieved search results often offer a visual display of the communication and correspondence between physicians. It enabled me to compile what I called ‘a timeline of discovery’, a chronological log of the articles and comments on hirsutism and hypertrichosis which highlighted the many challenges to expertise over the twentieth century. Alex Mold and Virginia Berridge have discussed the usefulness of digitisation in this respect, offering an efficient method to identify patterns of language usage and periods of extensive debate.\textsuperscript{77} This technique offers a springboard to then examine these fluctuations in more detail, taking into account developments within medical disciplines, technological innovations, and wider social and political change.

\textsuperscript{76} V. Heggie, ‘A Century of Cardiomythology’.
Locating medical journals as sites of contestation and interaction means I position them as cultural texts in the same way I have the other types of print culture in this project. It was an interesting contrast to attempt to critically engage with medical periodicals in the same way I had with women’s and girls’ lifestyle magazines and soft core pornography, however. There appears to be a dearth of historical research regarding the development of British medical publishing over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Existing work by medical and media historians has concentrated on reading medical journals within the broader context of Victorian print culture, as an example of the rapid expansion and professionalisation of journalism within the nineteenth century.78 Less has been said about the development of the British medical press in late modern Britain, particularly regarding reading cultures and practices, acts of editorship, business history, changes in format and content. This is in contrast to the historical examination of commercial periodicals or of ‘experimental’ archives such as Mass Observation, which often includes nuanced summaries of historical context pertaining to format, audience, circulation and intellectual or ideological development. Geiringer and Baker, for example, discuss how ‘social historians of late-modern Britain have sought to build sturdy methodological scaffolds to support their use of MOP’.79 This prompts me to ask whether there is a sustained divide between how we continue to approach academic or scholarly texts in contrast to sources which are of ‘low culture’ or unconventional. Or indeed how the use of academic source material is seen as justifiable in and of itself, whereas the validity of using girls’ magazines as a viable source material must always be made explicit.

---

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the different types of evidence I will be using to explore the practice and prescription of female body hair removal in twentieth and twenty-first century Britain. This thesis focuses on the dynamics between different types of source material and what these interactions and engagements might reveal about how hair removal norms have circulated and been negotiated by historical actors. Letters pages, the Mass Observation Project and oral history testimonies have been particularly useful in demonstrating the range of feelings surrounding hygiene and body hair removal and how these contribute to the female identity-construction.

In this chapter I have also used the ‘practice and prescription’ framework to discuss my research process and the existing scholarship that has contributed to how I have worked with my sources. This has highlighted a recurring theme around expertise, or particularly the role of the ‘expert’ and how authority is allocated and negotiated. Historicising expertise has been a topic of expanding importance in recent years within the field of modern British history, particularly in response to the contemporary political climate and questions around the public role of the expert.80 This study again raises questions around who is valued as expert at different historical junctures. How do we as historians legitimise and privilege certain narratives over others, and place parameters around objects of historical study? Part of this process for me has been reflecting upon why some sources of evidence are seen as more ‘expert’ in telling us about the past than others, how hierarchies of historical knowledge manifest or are reproduced through accessibility and preservation in archives, and in our discussions of reflexivity with some types of evidence but not others.

---

80 See J. Moran, ‘The Fall and Rise of the Expert’ The Critical Quarterly (2011), 53 (1), pp.6-22 for discussion of how the definition of expert has changed over time. C. Langhamer, “Who the Hell Are Ordinary People?” pp.175-195, discusses the intersections between ordinariness and expertise. Two conferences which explored the theme of expertise are ‘Seeking Legitimacy: Authority and Expertise in Modern Britain’, University of Birmingham, (June 2016) and ‘Sexpertise: Sexual Knowledge and the Public in the 19th and 20th Centuries’ University of Exeter, (July 2018).
The next chapter continues to focus upon expertise through the examination of female body hair removal and medical intervention in the twentieth century. Moving between medical journals and their correspondence, feminist print culture and oral history testimony I explore how certain regions of body hair were medicalised, and how medical expertise was negotiated and resisted.
2. THE MEDICALISATION OF FEMALE BODY HAIR

Introduction

The presence of hair on the female body has often been referred to as ‘unwanted’, ‘superfluous’, or ‘excessive’.¹ Such language is indicative of, and contributes to, a cultural understanding of hairlessness as the norm and the ‘othering’ of women with visible hair. This chapter explores how medical science has historically contributed to this process of normalisation and therefore to the construction of female body hair as problematic. It traces how scientific frameworks of measurement and observation have assisted in the categorisation of various sites of body hair as too much, unnecessary, abnormal and even sometimes harmful. In doing so, this chapter also highlights how the ‘natural’, or unmodified female body is continually represented as lacking or dysfunctional.

The chapter is informed by the work of social scientist Peter Conrad, who has examined the expansion of medical jurisdiction in the second half of the twentieth century and specifically what he identifies as ‘medicalisation’. He defines this as ‘a process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illness and disorders’.² Conrad builds on Foucault’s discussion of the ways medical science has categorised and classified bodies as a type of population control, and in so doing created norms which are internalised and complied with.³ Conrad suggests that his own concept of

¹ For example, hair removal brands often marketed their products using this language: the tagline for Lee Bikini Bare was ‘The Gentle Way To Remove Unwanted Hair’ Cosmopolitan (May 1989), p.186; Immac used a similar tagline, ‘The Feminine Way To Remove Unwanted Hair’ Jackie (1972-1980); Nair’s slogan was ‘For Girls Who’ve Just Discovered The Problem Of Unwanted Hair’ Jackie (1st June 1974), 543, p.22; Jackie magazine often referred to body hair as ‘superfluous’, for example, in ‘What Every Girl Should Know’ (5th August 1972), 448, p.5, advice read ‘Most girls prefer to remove under-arm hair, which is sensible and hygienic since this hair is superfluous’.


³ M. Foucault, The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1 (trans). R. Hurley (Penguin Books: London, 1998). Foucault discusses the role of medical science in labelling and categorizing sexual bodies in order to control populations (pp.43-45). Foucault uses the term ‘biopower’ to describe how populations within capitalism are controlled through the monitoring of biological process such as birth and mortality, and through
medicalisation moves beyond the discursive construction of medical categories to take into account the social processes involved in the promotion and application of (as well as resistances to) labelling medical problems. He argues that there are various means by which human concerns can become medicalised, for instance through the movement of ‘badness’ or deviant behaviour into ‘sickness’. He also identifies the movement of common life processes such as ageing into medical jurisdiction, highlighting how people’s tolerance of discomfort and concerns can also enact shifts in degrees of medical intervention. Conrad therefore asserts that there may be differing degrees of medicalisation and that these may fluctuate over time in a way that he calls ‘bidirectional’. Factors that may influence the medicalisation or demedicalisation of a condition include degrees of support from medical professionals; the discovery of new etiologies; the availability, profitability and cost of treatment; and pressure from ‘outsider’ interest groups and social movements. Key to Conrad’s conceptualisation of medicalisation then is the understanding that it is a form of collective action, rather than simply ‘medical imperialism’. Active collaboration in the medicalisation process means that the definitions and categories constituting illness compete, expand and contract over time.

In this chapter, I utilise Conrad’s conceptualisation of medicalisation as a collective and fluctuating process to help examine how and why female body hair has come to be popularly understood as ‘excessive’ and/or ‘superfluous’ and to reflect upon the dynamics of the relationship between medical professionals and women with body hair. I examine the medicalisation of two particular sites of body hair - facial hair and pubic hair. The consideration of these two sites highlights firstly, how different sites of body hair hold different socio-cultural

---

the optimization of bodies to be as highly functioning as possible (pp.139-141). It is this relationship of power between medical authorities, individuals and state actors which Conrad seeks to re-visit. 
5 Ibid, p.6. Conrad uses the examples of alcoholism, sexual and gender difference and mental disorders to illustrate this form of medicalisation.
6 Ibid, pp.6-7.
7 Ibid, p.7.
meaning which relate to the construction of ‘femaleness’. Secondly, pubic hair and facial hair present two cases of bidirectional medicalisation in that the medical establishment has, at certain moments during the twentieth century, defined them as medical problems and at other times as not. I argue that the fluctuating status of pubic hair and facial hair between medical issue and a non-medical, simply cosmetic concern has had significant repercussions on how the visibility of hair at these sites continues to be read culturally as a negation of female identity.

In the first section, I explore the association between female facial hair and diagnoses of women’s sexual and psychological dysfunction in the first half of the twentieth century. I consider the way facial hair has become a distinguishing factor in the classification of sex as a dualistic category, building on the work of those who have challenged the idea that sex is a stable biological and ahistorical concept, and who have looked at how the male/female dualism emerged and became the dominant paradigm in western culture. Reports and accounts from medical journals demonstrate how the scientific frameworks for understanding hair dysfunction fluctuated across medical specialisms including dermatology, endocrinology, general practice, gynaecology and radiography over the twentieth century. Discussion ensued amongst practitioners over the severity of female facial hair, its symptomatic connection to more sinister internal sexual and psychological disorders of the female body, and how it should be treated, if at all. These journal articles thus illustrate Conrad’s assertion that diagnoses and categories of illness are shaped and promoted through collective action.

The second part of the chapter considers the relationship between hygiene and hairlessness by examining the preparatory practice of pubic hair shaving as a component of childbirth in mid-to-late twentieth century Britain. The pathologisation of pubic hair as a

---


potentially harmful carrier of disease was part of the broader medicalised development of childbirth in the twentieth century, and prompts us to think about the relationship between hair removal and the sanitisation of female bodies.

Both sections also consider the social implications of medicalisation. Linked to these two case studies is the observation that women’s bodies are exposed to medicalisation more often than men’s. Although Conrad disputes the extent to which this disparity persists, Riessman’s analysis has demonstrated that women are more vulnerable to medical intervention because many of the physiological processes connected to the female body, such as childbirth, are highly visible and their function more open to social scrutiny.11 Peterson also argues that women’s bodies have continually been viewed as ‘other’ in comparison to the white, European, middle class heterosexual male body which has consistently been constructed as standard within medicine.12

Here I discuss how the medicalisation of female body hair has both shaped and been shaped by cultural notions of what it is to be female. The chapter builds on the work of feminist disability studies scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in that it challenges the ‘belief that femaleness is a natural form of physical and mental deficiency’ and similarly questions the assumption that ‘some bodies seem naturally deficient, or excessive and others seem superior’.13 Feminist disability studies examine how human difference is stigmatised and normalisation procedures occur. Feminist disability studies also encourages us to think about agency, and ‘the communities and identities that the bodies we consider disabled have produced’.14 Within this context terminology is dynamic. I have been cautious of assigning suffering or victim status to women seeking medical attention for their body hair whilst also being careful not to efface the experiences of those women who did actively seek, and benefit

from, medical intervention. Interpreting women’s own motivations and feelings through medical journals, feminist publications, and science articles is difficult. The second half of this chapter touches upon the joining together of resistance movements to pubic hair shaving procedures. My investigation of medical journals prompts questions about how we interpret women’s experiences through the eyes of practitioners, but also about how hairy women themselves collaborate in medicalisation processes. This chapter therefore also considers the affective dimensions of medical intervention and women’s active role in seeking solutions to their hair problems.

The Medicalisation of Female Facial Hair

In this section I explore how cultural ideas and medical frameworks of knowledge conjoined in the designation of women with facial hair as ‘other’. In so doing I trace the cultural history of the modern conceptualisation of ‘excessive hair’ as a symptom of deeper pathology internally within the female body – a disorder relating to dysfunction of sex identity, psychological imbalance, and reproductive ill-health. This reading of hairy female bodies stems from the nineteenth-century scientific pursuit of order and classification of social categories such as gender and race; resulting in the coalescing of cultural ideas around hair as an atavistic quality. The classification of excessive hair as a dysfunction of the female body, led to attempts to eliminate those that presented as hairy through various treatments methods.

And yet stories about bearded women have existed throughout history – Mary Fissell has discussed the hairy woman as a well-known figure of the Renaissance, for example.¹⁵ Both Rebecca Herzig in her history of female body hair removal in the United States and Kimberley

---

Hamlin’s historical exploration of bearded women pinpoint the mid-nineteenth century as the moment in which female facial hair transitioned (to use Conrad’s terminology) from ‘badness’ to ‘sickness’. Indeed, the first recorded use of ‘hirsute’ to describe the symptoms of a female patient in the *Lancet* in 1852 seems to add weight to this claim. Within the North American context, Hamlin also argues that ‘hypertrichosis’, defined at the time as ‘the disease of “superfluous hair”’ was first coined by dermatologist Dr. Louis Duhring in 1877.

But why did female facial hair become re-defined as a disease-entity at this particular historical juncture? Herzig argues one crucial explanation is the concurrent popularisation of Darwinian evolutionary theory, particularly its impact upon how gender differences were conceptualised and distinctions were made between primitive and civilised societal development. In Britain, a space in which these ideas could circulate was the Victorian freak show. The exhibition of ‘bearded ladies’ within this context signified an important turning point in the redefinition of hairy women from ‘wonder to error’. It was a space in which scientific and cultural ideas about female body hair coalesced in a public and popular way. Many of the ideas that shaped the exhibition of bearded ladies in the mid-to-late nineteenth century continued to inform the way hairy women were viewed as medical problems into the twentieth.

---

Bearded Ladies and the Victorian Freakshow

In his study of the freak show in North America, Robert Bogdan shows that the performers often described as ‘bearded ladies’ were presented to the public in two ways. Firstly, in the ‘exotic mode’ whereby showmen structured their exhibitions with an emphasis on ‘the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial’. This would often be exaggerated through elaborate origin stories, bolstered by imperialistic discourses of western superiority and the idea of the civilising mission into colonial subcontinents. The second mode of exhibiting ‘bearded ladies’ was through an ‘aggrandized’ presentation which elevated any prestigious talents or characteristics and emphasised hyper-femininity and elegance so that ‘except for the beards, these women represented the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood’.

Hamlin has added further nuance to this argument, suggesting that distinctions in the way bearded women were exhibited were made primarily along racial lines. She explains:

For white bearded ladies, circus performers and patients alike, public and medical discussion centred on the extent to which they conformed to otherwise feminine ideals of dress and behaviour and whether they could be considered “women”. Krao and other bearded ladies of colour, however, inspired public and scientific discussion of a different boundary: the fine line separating humans from animals.

Krao, the ‘bearded lady of colour’ who Hamlin refers to in this passage, is understood to have embodied and personified how discourses and ideas around Darwinism, imperialism and sexualisation of the primitive body coalesced in the late nineteenth century. Hamlin argues that the influence of Darwinian theories of evolution and sexual selection hinged on the idea that in the most developed societies, the sexes appeared as opposite and distinctive from each other as possible. Hair on women challenged the teleological concept of evolutionary development that

---

humans were the most advanced (and thus superior) beings. As Hamlin puts it, ‘superfluous hair on women was a visual reminder that, in a Darwinian world, species were not fixed, humans and apes shared a common ancestor, and humans had evolved from a single-celled hermaphrodite organism and still bore the evidence of this hermaphroditic past on their bodies’. Hairy women not only blurred the lines between civilised and primitive, male and female classification; Nadia Durbach’s reading of Krao focuses on how the eroticisation of her hairy body obscured boundaries between animal and human. She argues that the perception of bearded ladies of colour as excessively sexual was underpinned by the symbolic capacity of hair to signify animalistic and uncontained sexual drive.

The liminality of hairy women as individuals located somewhere between animal and human was also exemplified by Mexican-born Julia Pastrana’s exhibition in London in 1857. The series of advertisements in The Times newspaper that accompanied her performance made clear Pastrana’s scientifically endorsed uniqueness: ‘This young lady, the wonder of the world, supposed by eminent naturalists and physicians to be a hybrid, wherein the nature of woman predominates over the ourang-outang’s, is very singular’. Pastrana’s hybridity between animal and human was also evident in nicknames like ‘Baboon Lady’, ‘Ape Woman’ and ‘Bear Woman’. Garland-Thomson argues that Pastrana was an early prototype for ‘the missing-link’ in Darwinian evolutionary theory, a name later adopted by ‘Krao’ in the 1880s to describe evidence of Man’s evolution from primate into civilised being. Pastrana’s costuming and performance also emphasised the juxtaposition between animal and human; curated to emphasise her femininity, which was at odds with her bestial appearance, and to quell the

28 Ibid, p.42.
excessiveness of her sexuality. She was presented as an example of the civilising process in action and of how British influence could assist other nations: reported to speak two languages, dance the Highland Fling, and have excellent manners.²⁹

The fusion between science and showmanship that characterised the promotion and performance of bearded ladies assisted in the modernisation and increased respectability of the freak show in the nineteenth century.³⁰ There are multiple reasons why it became mutually beneficial for scientists and showmen to collaborate in the production and exhibition of anomalous bodies. Firstly, as a ‘source of raw material’, the freak show became a vehicle through which medical men could study deviant bodies and thus contribute to establishing ‘scientifically rigorous’ classificatory systems of corporeal norms.³¹ This endeavour was closely linked to the development of emerging (pseudo) science specialisms in the nineteenth century such as craniology (study of head size), teratology (the study of monstrous and abnormal bodies), and evolutionary theory within natural science.³² Taxonomies of physical characteristics such as height and head size became markers of the health and development and thus a means of comparison between one population and another, and humans and other species.

Many of these frameworks of measurement were underpinned by contemporary westernised cultural assumptions regarding hierarchies of race, sex and morality. Hair texture, distribution and colour were particularly important in establishing distinctions between male/female, civilised/primitive, human/animal and normal/pathological classifications. Excessive hair was seen as both an atavistic quality and a sign of masculinity; hairy women such as Pastrana thus presented to medical men as ‘a taxonomical enigma’.³³

---

²⁹ Ibid, p.44.
³⁰ R. Garland-Thomson identifies the nineteenth century as the freak show’s ‘golden age’ in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, p.11
³³ R. Garland-Thomson, ‘Julia Pastrana, the “Extraordinary Lady”’, p.44.
The development of such specialisms in the nineteenth century has been linked to concurrent non-scientific Victorian preoccupations with national citizenship, population degeneracy and British imperial endeavours. Jeffery Weeks argues that panic about domestic population degeneracy was closely linked to anxiety about national decay; intensified by the growth in urban living and poverty highlighted by sanitary reformers.\(^{34}\) It was also important for foreign policy. Robert Aguirre suggests that the exhibition of freaks from the colonies was key to the imperial project in the mid-nineteenth century – not only for economic benefit in the global trafficking and trade of bodies, but also in providing ‘evidence’ for theories of scientific racism, as ‘proofs of racial degeneracy’ of other cultures in comparison to British superiority.\(^{35}\) The ‘exotic’ mode of presentation of freaks such as Pastrana and Krao helped to justify the colonial process, showing not only the inferior development of other nationalities, but the positive influence of Britain. This links to the second benefit of the freak show for scientists; as ideological tools, they helped to popularise these new scientific theories about race and evolution to lay audiences. In turn, showmen deployed the authentication of medical men to promote their acts as educational and unique.\(^{36}\)

Medical historians and scholars of freakery who have examined Julia Pastrana’s life have highlighted how her exhibition indicates the historic specificity of the blending of folklore, cultural beliefs and science in Victorian culture; for instance, Alexander argues ‘the tragic saga of Julia Pastrana provides a glimpse into how Victorian Britons…came to understand a world they would never see’.\(^{37}\) Browne and Messenger claim that ‘she spanned the Darwinian moment’ and ‘deepens our awareness of just how different that society really was’.\(^{38}\) However,


I argue that these ideas continued to shape the way in which hairy women were conceptualised as ‘error’ in scientific discourse throughout the twentieth century, shaping how norms of hair distribution were set, how diagnosis of dysfunction was established, and what treatments were administered. The construction of the hairy woman as a medical problem persisted and impacted upon how women with hair consistently remained blurred within binaries of animal/human, male/female, normal/pathological.

**The Dangers of Depilation in the early Twentieth Century**

Medical professionals in the twentieth century have been interested in not only diagnosing hair dysfunction but also in finding ways to treat such problems effectively. The potential eradication of hairy women through the quest for a cure builds on Conrad’s suggestion that one of the social implications of the medicalisation process is the denial of certain aspects of human variation; the pathologisation of difference resulting in a decrease in societal tolerance for human diversity.39 Physicians’ experimentations with possible cures however, did not always come without further health risks for patients, precipitating debates within the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* about the degree to which the severity of hair diseases justified such extensive medical intervention.

The general list of hair removal techniques recommended by physicians in the 1900s differs very little from depilatory methods we might recognise as most commonly employed today. According to one 1908 introductory handbook *The Hair and Its Diseases* by David Walsh, a senior physician at the Western skin hospital in London, there were several ‘external’ treatments aimed at short term, localised abstraction of hair. These included: plucking or ‘epilation’ of hairs, described as a ‘rough-and-ready’ method which could cause regrowth ‘with

---

increased vigour’; shaving – particularly useful for facial hair removal; bleach consisting of ‘3 per cent solution of peroxide of hydrogen’, advised for fine hairs only; depilatory creams, although not highly recommended due to the risk of ‘disfiguring scars’; and electrolysis powered by ‘galvanic current’ in which a needle would be inserted into each individual hair follicle to destroy the root and allow the hair to be plucked out.\textsuperscript{40} Walsh maintained that electrolysis was ‘the best treatment for superfluous hair’, despite the time-consuming, painful and costly process it required. This was also despite the recent discovery of a new, seemingly un-invasive technology promising long-lasting and painless extraction of hair and currently being trialled across the country by a number of skin specialists. Epilation via X-ray, also known contemporaneously as the Roentgen ray, was heralded by various medical practitioners at the beginning of the twentieth century as a solution to the labour-intensity of traditional methods of hair removal. The subsequent and on-going debate in the \textit{British Medical Journal} and \textit{The Lancet} regarding the benefits and risks of X-ray epilation between the 1900s and 1930s is indicative of the enduring controversy that continued to accompany its application as a hair removal treatment.

Since the discovery of X-ray as a diagnostic tool by Wilhem Röntgen in 1896, the potential therapeutic function of light and radiation technology had been simultaneously explored by physicians.\textsuperscript{41} Dermatologists in particular, were interested in how X-ray therapy could potentially treat skin conditions such as hypertrichosis, ringworm and lupus vulgaris. According to Viennese dermatologist Eduard Schiff, the depilatory power of X-ray was discovered by himself and his colleague Leopald Freund in 1899 as a result of an experiment using Roentgen rays to treat a young child ‘whose back was covered with a thick-haired naevus

\textsuperscript{40} D. Walsh, \textit{The Hair and its Diseases: An Introductory Handbook}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Bailliere, Tindall and Cox: London, 1908), pp.29-31.

pigmentosus pilosus’. The procedure was considered a success when, after twelve days of two hour sessions of irradiation, ‘the hair, to our astonishment, fell out in thick tufts’. X-ray epilation thus appeared less painful and time-consuming than electrolysis, with longer-lasting hair loss than that of shaving, plucking and depilatory creams. Despite initial claims of achievement however, Schiff and Freund later reported the development of ‘extremely violent inflammation’ on the young girl’s skin, thought to be linked to the intense exposure to the radiation. G.H. Lancashire, an assistant physician at the Manchester and Salford Hospital for skin described in the *British Medical Journal* in 1902, the ‘chief bugbears of x-ray work’ citing amongst other effects: pigmentation of skin, erythema, inflammatory exudation, itching and burning. By 1910 the safety and dependability of X-ray as a ‘painless remedy’ was under serious revision, falling out of favour with dermatologists hoping to secure a permanent solution to excessive hair complaints. An article published in *The Lancet* entitled ‘The Failure of the X-rays in the Treatment of Hypertrichosis’ argued that not only was the permanency of X-ray removal rare, but that repeated exposure to rays had resulted in many cases in chronic inflammation, dermatitis, scarring, premature wrinkling and telangiectases (the appearance of dilated blood vessels near the surface of the skin).

Debate ensued amongst leading European dermatologists and radiologists regarding the safety of X-ray to treat skin conditions and what standard practice should be in place to make X-ray a safe and viable form of hair removal technology. Physicians experimented with different rates and intensities of light exposure, the size of tube, variations of distance from the

---

44 Ibid.
patient’s body, and modified the length of rest periods between treatments. Attempts to manage and harness the intensity of X-ray radiation however, were hindered by only a rudimentary understanding of how X-ray actually worked.\textsuperscript{48} Lancashire discussed the precautions he now took in administering therapy such as ensuring a distance of eight inches between skin and tube and periodic rests from treatment.\textsuperscript{49} Despite the risks he concluded that, ‘from what I have seen I would unhesitatingly recommend the judicious employment of this method of treatment for exaggerated forms of hirsuties of the class referred to above’.\textsuperscript{50}

For advocates of X-ray therapy, ‘unduly alarmist’ reports detailing unpleasant side effects had to be weighed up against the distressing experience of living with excess hair.\textsuperscript{51} Arthur Earnest Rayner, an honorary medical officer in the ‘Electrical department’ at Preston Royal Infirmary, argued in 1912 the main justification for using X-ray treatment was the potential psychological impact of leaving hair untreated:

\begin{quote}
I do not think that anything causes more distress – leading in many cases to a condition of neurasthenia, and in a few to what it is no exaggeration to term a monomania – than facial and cosmetic disfigurements, of which hypertrichosis in women is one of the most difficult to treat with complete safety and satisfaction.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Rayner proceeded to describe three cases in which he had treated hypertrichosis with X-ray with only ‘slight reactions’, ‘moderate erythema’ and ‘small telangiectasis’.\textsuperscript{53} He admitted he was rather ‘sanguine’ about the treatment’s results – a small price to pay to avoid the ‘monomania’ and ‘disfigurement’ caused by hypertrichosis.

Concern about psychological health re-emerged as a justification for X-ray therapy in a published exchange of correspondence in the \textit{British Medical Journal} in 1922 between Henry

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{48} Many early practitioners put forward hypotheses which varied from X-ray having ability to alter blood supply to hair follicles, to suggestions of its bactericidal properties See L. Freund et al., ‘A Discussion on Radiography’, pp.1318-9.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} A.E. Rayner, ‘The Treatment of Hypertrichosis with X Rays’ \textit{BMJ} (31\textsuperscript{st} August 1912), pp.480-481.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p.480.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p.480-481.
\end{footnotes}
C. Semon, a physician for Diseases of the Skin at the Royal Northern and Hampstead General Hospitals, North London and William Mitchell, a consultant radiologist at Bradford Royal Infirmary. Semon challenged the use of X-ray as treatment for ‘facial hirsuties’, arguing that radiation therapy was too powerful and destructive to be used effectively and without causing ‘severe disfigurement’ to the patient.\textsuperscript{54} Semon recalled treating a female patient who had, for the past eighteen months, been receiving X-ray treatment from another practitioner with unsuccessful results. Semon scolded,

\begin{quote}
The operator in this case presumably knows the risk he is running, and my protest is not so much directed to him as to the general medical practitioner, who may in the future be approached and persuaded by his patients to allow them to submit themselves to radiotherapy for hirsuties, because “their friend Mrs – was cured in a pleasant and painless fashion”.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Semon’s concern about the ethics of X-ray treatment (who was allowing it; who was being \textit{persuaded} to do it) suggests there were a number of women demanding treatment from practitioners in the interwar period for their hair problems. In her historical analysis of the emergence of hypertrichosis in North America, Herzig describes a similar trend in which female patients participated in ‘the stigmatization of body hair…often actively involved in the process of diagnosis and treatment of their own conditions’\textsuperscript{56} This again echoes Conrad’s assertion that medicalisation is often promoted through grassroots mobilisation, social movements and patients themselves.\textsuperscript{57}

In a rejoinder to Semon’s letter one week later, Mitchell insisted that X-ray therapy had come a long way in ten years and experimentation, although providing unfortunate consequences, had been key to its development. ‘It is by trial and error that we progress’, Mitchell remonstrated, noting that he had been treating hair concerns with X-ray treatment for

\textsuperscript{54}H. Semon, ‘X Rays on Hypertrichosis of the Face’ \textit{BMJ} (4\textsuperscript{th} November 1922), pp.891-892.
\textsuperscript{55}Ibid, p.891.
\textsuperscript{57}P. Conrad, \textit{The Medicalization of Society}, p.9.
sixteen years.\textsuperscript{58} Although he acknowledged that long-term side effects were uncertain: ‘…sufficient time has not yet elapsed to guarantee that no telangiectasis will follow’, he justified treatment on the basis of patient willingness, and the serious detrimental effects of hair diseases on many women’s quality of life, stating:

In each case I warned the patients of the risks, and they were willing to take them. Hypertrichosis in a young and pretty girl is a very serious condition as it tends to become a bar to marriage and has led sensitive natures to suicide. I think therefore we must make every effort to find a remedy.\textsuperscript{59}

Mitchell implied that patients’ willingness to undergo treatment stemmed from a fear of social ostracism and ultimately of spinsterhood. But the question remains as to whether patients themselves articulated these supposed consequences or these problems were being diagnosed by an increasingly interventionist medical establishment. Writing about the North American medical establishment in the early twentieth century, Hamlin argues that ‘it is quite possible that doctors enhanced descriptions of their hirsute patients’ suffering to legitimate the new specialty of dermatology and attract clients for costly electrolysis treatments’.\textsuperscript{60} However Herzig suggests that physicians’ reports indicate demand came from women themselves; that psychological effects were sometimes exaggerated not by doctors but by patients in order to gain access to treatment, and that this itself demonstrates their desperation to get rid of their hair.\textsuperscript{61} Herzig argues this sense of desperation was a product of these women’s understanding that hair made them not only unfeminine, but unfemale: ‘Men and women differed not in their susceptibility to hirsutism (for both men and women might sprout unwelcome body hair), but in women’s experience of this hairiness as an emotional malady’.\textsuperscript{62} She also argues, ‘Femaleness, in these accounts, resides somewhere in the psyche, in the persistent desire to

\textsuperscript{58} W. Mitchell, ‘X Rays in Hypertrichosis of the Face’ \textit{BMJ} (11\textsuperscript{th} November 1922), p.949.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} K.A. Hamlin, ‘The “Case of a Bearded Woman”’, p.968.
\textsuperscript{61} R. Herzig, ‘The Woman Beneath the Hair’, p.58.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
appear appropriately “feminine”. The sexes differ not in the possession of unwanted body hair, but in their responses to that hair.\textsuperscript{63} Mitchell’s emphasis on hypertrichosis as an issue specifically for ‘young and pretty’ girls feeds into this, the implication being that facial hair was psychologically distressing for women principally because their appearance threatened the fulfilment of their feminine roles as future wives and mothers.

Discussions about the association between facial hair and patients’ mental stability emphasised the distress and psychological imbalance of female patients with hypertrichosis. However, it was not clear whether physicians thought psychological imbalance caused hair to grow (hair as a sign of insanity) or whether hair growing caused the psychological imbalance (hair growth causes insanity).\textsuperscript{64} For instance, C.T. Ewart, the senior assistant medical officer at London County Asylum in 1915, observed the high number of female patients with ‘an excessive overgrowth of hair on the face’ compared to the irregularity of seeing hairy women in ‘the everyday world’.\textsuperscript{65} This he correlated with unusual signs of ‘animal vigour’, suggesting hair was a sign of patients’ ‘mental and moral degeneracy’.\textsuperscript{66} Simultaneously, however, Ewart observed that ‘the type of insanity in each is that of depression’, which was treated in the asylum by allowing women to remove their hair by shaving or rubbing with a pumice-stone.\textsuperscript{67} This would indicate that depression was brought about by the growth of facial hair, not the other way round. Some thirty years later, surgeon L.R. Broster reported three case studies of hypertrichosis in the \textit{BMJ}, one of which was ‘post-menopausal hirsutism…a common observation among old women in asylums’.\textsuperscript{68} Broster thus reinforced the notion that the growth

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p.59.
\textsuperscript{64} For example, F. Hernaman-Johnson, ‘Treatment of Superfluous Facial Hair’ \textit{BMJ} (21\textsuperscript{st} January 1933), p.121, identified his patient as the ‘highly neurotic type of girl’, a condition which was exacerbated by her facial hair; In the introductory handbook by C.H. Danforth, \textit{Hair: With Special Reference to Hypertrichosis} (American Medical Association: Chicago, 1925) one of the causes of hypertrichosis was claimed to be a sign of degeneration and associated with insanity, supported by the studies of Hegar, Ewarts, Dupre and Duclos and O’Malley, pp.132-133.
\textsuperscript{65} C.T. Ewart, ‘Hypertrichosis in the Insane’ \textit{Lancet}, (29\textsuperscript{th} May 1915), pp.1133-4.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} L.R. Broster, ‘Hypertrichosis: A Report of Three Cases’ \textit{BMJ} (20\textsuperscript{th} May 1950), pp.1171-1174, p.1172.
of facial hair was a signifier of mental insanity, and specifically tied this to women’s ageing beyond their reproductive capacity.

It was not just hair growth in itself that signified psychological imbalance but women’s unwillingness to remove it that cemented this diagnosis. A healthy and well-adjusted woman, practitioners assumed, would desire the removal of facial hair as one article published in 1932 described,

There is no cosmetic defect about which women, especially young women, are more sensitive than the growth of hair to an abnormal degree upon the face. This is an instinctive reaction to an ill-balanced development which is to a large extent justified, for the presence of facial hair (other than negligible down) signifies incomplete femininity.69

Patients’ acknowledgement that facial hair negated their identity as female and their willingness to correct this were observed as signs of rationality. This mirrors Elaine Showalter’s argument in her historical study of female insanity, that the lucidity of women in Victorian asylums was often judged by their appearance and ‘compliance with middle-class standards of fashion’.70 Showalter suggests that ‘doctors imposed cultural stereotypes of femininity and female insanity on women who defied their gender roles’, including the expectation that women should care more about their appearance than men.71 The disregard of societal conventions of gender was therefore a reason in itself for hairy women to be presented before medical professionals. A 1956 case report published in the BMJ illustrates this further, reporting how a twenty-five-year-old women had been referred for psychiatric treatment because of a ‘profound change’ in the care of her appearance described as ‘unkempt and [with] a luxuriant growth of hair on the chin with acne and scurfy hair’.72 After an unsuccessful course of psychotherapy, the patient had her left adrenal gland removed in an operation known as an

71 Ibid, pp.84-86.
adrenalectomy. Signs of a cure lay in her renewed alignment with feminine ideals; not only was she able to resume domestic life and undertake ‘responsibility of a mild nature such as shopping’ but ‘after [the operation] she was able to depilate herself with satisfactory cosmetic effects’.

By and large, X-ray did not become a main method of hair removal. Herzig argues in the United States this was mainly because it was a costly treatment for what most doctors saw as a trivial cosmetic problem. However, there are indications that X-ray therapy did not disappear completely in Britain. Suggestions of the underground use of X-ray treatments are implied in physicians warnings against ‘quacks’ and ‘lay workers’ in the 1930s, indicating a harnessing of technology to fill a demand despite the risks. Indeed a further indication that women were looking beyond the medical establishment for treatment for their body and facial hair can be found in numerous reports of thallium poisoning arising in medical journals in the 1930s. Thallium, a toxic metal historically used in rodent killer, was routinely in use in small doses to treat ringworm in children in 1930s. Its ability to make hair fall out had been utilised by commercial companies in depilatory creams and pastes, but without careful monitoring of quantities and usage by consumers the poisonous properties of the metal had caused women to seek medical advice from their doctors.

X-Ray treatments also fell out of favour within medical science as a new etiological understanding of hair diseases took shape in the 1930s, shifting focus away from the skin’s surface to consider the internal biochemical processes facilitating hair growth. Endocrinology as a specialist medical field, although first recognised in the early 1900s, established itself as a

---

73 Ibid, p.479.
74 R. Herzig, Plucked, p.88.
reputable discipline in the 1930s. This had significant consequences on the way in which body hair and sex dimorphism became intertwined at physiological, psychological and now chemical levels.

The Discovery of Sex Hormones

There are a number of excellent historical studies which examine how the discovery of the ‘hormone’, a term first coined in 1905, impacted upon medical and cultural understandings of sex as a dualistic category in the twentieth century. Dreger pinpoints how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, sex distinction was primarily located in the gonads, meaning that the difference between men and women was thought to lie principally in their reproductive capabilities. Oudshoorn suggests, however, that this interpretation was challenged in the 1910s by sex endocrinologists who advocated that hormones were the ‘chemical messengers of masculinity and femininity’. This transformed understanding of where and how sex was ingrained into the body, as Fausto-Sterling notes, the discovery of hormones led to the belief that ‘chemicals infuse the body, from head to toe, with gender meanings’.

At this early stage, two hormones were thought to exist; a female hormone present in women’s bodies and an equivalent hormone present in men. This was consistent with the dualistic conceptualisation of sex as oppositional categories. By the 1930s it was more widely

---

80 A. Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodities and the Medical Invention of Sex*, p.29.
81 N. Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body*, p.22.
82 A. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, p.147. Important to note also that contemporary ideas about sex, sexuality and gender were intertwined and not necessarily differentiated between by medical scientists in the early twentieth century, see A. Dreger *Hermaphrodities*, p.10.
83 N. Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body*, p.22.
understood that hormones were ‘agents present in female as well as male bodies… the model suggested that, chemically speaking, all organisms [were] both male and female’. Specialised names for each hormone were introduced: oestrogen hormones were named in 1929-1930, progesterone in 1934 and similarly androgens became a collective term to denote what were considered to be ‘male’ sex hormones. Still, the suggestion that sex hormones were not sex specific confounded some scientists as no longer could men and women be assumed to be chemically opposite. There was debate about what this could mean - what the function of female sex hormones in the male body was and vice versa. It was argued that it was the quantity of secretions not the secretions themselves that would cause sex dysfunction. There was concern, for example, that too many female hormones in male bodies caused diseases or homosexuality. Sex endocrinologists introduced diagnostic tests to measure hormonal secretions and thus potentially capture the degree of femininity and masculinity in the human body. Oudshoorn argues that this led to ‘extensive changes in the sex labelling of physical features’ and psychic characteristics, and how these were divided was shaped by cultural notions of masculinity and femininity. Cases of ‘doubtful sex’, when patients were diagnosed with hermaphroditism or intersexuality were often assigned a ‘true’ sex by doctors dependent upon their observations of these ‘signs’ of gendered behaviour and appearance. Facial hair became classified as a secondary male characteristic, and thus the presentation of women with facial hair were often diagnosed as a case of ‘Virilism’ or female masculinity, symptomatic of disturbances to the female endocrine system.

---

84 Ibid, p.39.
85 Ibid, pp.33-34.
86 Ibid, p.32.
87 Ibid, p.60.
89 A. Domurat Dreger, Hermaphrodites, p.96.
As more became ‘known’ about the hormonal composition of hair growth, scientists became more interested in how cases of hirsutism could be treated internally by readdressing the hormonal imbalance. L.R. Broster, a surgeon at Charing Cross Hospital, outlined in his 1933 publication *The Adrenal Cortex* a dynamic, interdisciplinary approach to treating adrenal virilism, specifically through hormone control, psychological therapy and surgical extraction. He proposed that an ‘andrenalectomy’, the surgical removal of the adrenals sometimes also referred to as ‘the Broster Operation’, not only caused secondary male characteristics such as facial hair to fall out, but also returned ‘altered sex outlooks’ to ‘normal’. By this, Broster was referring to a hypothetical link he was pursuing between hormonal dysfunction and homosexuality. With his colleague Clifford Allen, a psychiatrist at Dreadnought hospital in London, Broster spent the late 1930s and early 1940s researching how ‘diminished heterosexuality’ was caused by both diseases of the glands and psychological imbalance. In an article in the *BMJ* in 1945, Broster and Allen summarised their findings and observations over the past decade; principally that women suffering from virilism ‘were often abnormal - undersexed or homosexual, sometimes psychotic.’ Writing retrospectively in 1956, Allen disclosed in the *British Medical Journal* that after twenty years of working on the connection between virilism and ‘mentally queer’ patients, the research had been brought prematurely to an end by the war.

The link between hair dysfunction and psychological disorder was thus further cemented by endocrinologists exploring endocrine imbalance. The endocrine feedback system was

---

95 C. Allen, ‘Virilism with Mental Symptoms’ *BMJ* (8th September 1956), p.604; C.R. Tebutt, ‘Popular and Medical Understandings of Sex Change in 1930s Britain’ (PhD Thesis) pp.55-56 suggests that Broster remained somewhat of a marginal figure in the field of sex-hormone research. She argues that his research might have ended because it did not offer much by way of commercial application, amongst other things.
gradually accepted as a theory to explain interrelation between female and male hormones, and as the centre which controlled secretion, the brain became accepted as the part which controlled sexual development. Women in particular, Oudshoorn argues, became ‘increasingly portrayed as a body completely controlled by hormones’, as the link between fluctuating hormone levels throughout the month and over the lifetime, appeared to confirm women’s perceived emotional instability compared to men.  

Of dispute amongst medical scientists in the interwar period was the question of whether virilism was inherently biological or environmental. Whereas some scientists argued that hormonal imbalance was a product of abnormal development during early foetal life, others speculated that recent social and political changes had made women more susceptible to masculinisation. Broster, for example, claimed in 1934 that,

We may be the innocent spectators in an evolutionary process drifting slowly and inevitably into the neuter state. The emancipation of women has been a big change; there is over-population in many parts of the world; there are many factors in our social lives leading to race deterioration, and they must react on the individual.

Such a statement highlights how theories of sex differentiation were shaped by the politics of the moment. Broster’s references to ‘over-population’ and ‘race deterioration’ are indicative of the popularisation of neo-Malthusian and eugenic ideologies in the early twentieth century. It reveals as well a sustained attachment to the Darwinian principle of human evolution corresponding to the development of increased distinction between the sexes. The emergence of a feminist movement advocating for women’s liberation in the early twentieth century appeared to cause conflict with the idea of the natural separation of roles for men and women.

---

96 N. Oudshoorn, Beyond the Natural Body, p.33.
97 Ibid, p.9.
98 A. Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, p.154.
in society. Fausto-Sterling has argued that ‘both female masculinity and male femininity threatened social stability’, and subsequently, this was a driving force for many sex endocrinologists to reinstate defined categories of male and female.101

Towards the late 1930s and early 1940s, cases of hypertrichosis became divided between those caused by ‘intersex’ conditions or disturbance to hormonal glands, and those cases considered to be hereditary or idiopathic in nature and which did not seem to be affected by hormone-based therapies.102 In fact, many patients diagnosed with idiopathic or ‘simple’ hirsutism were usually identified as such after it became clear treatments such as the use of steroids had little effect on hair distribution or quantity.103 Excessive hair caused by hormonal imbalance, or ‘masculine type hirsuties’ also became intrinsically linked to Stein and Leventhal syndrome, known more popularly since the 1960s as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), which tied together intrinsically excessive hair growth and female reproductive dysfunction.104 First identified in 1935 as the appearance of cysts on one or more ovary, Stein and Leventhal syndrome was identified by symptoms such as amenorrhoea (lack of periods), sterility and masculine-type hair growth.105 The diagnosis and aetiology of the condition remained obscure and disputed in the 1950s and 1960s, the treatment of ‘ovarian wedge resection’ (the removal of a proportion of ovary), although successful in amending some menstruation patterns, did not appear to significantly impact quantity or distribution of hair.106

101 A. Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, p.162.
By the 1960s, medical scientists and clinicians had begun to acknowledge that there was limited certainty about the causes and cure for hirsutism, both idiopathic and hormone-related. Student health officer Edith McKnight stated in the *Lancet* in 1964 that ‘each case [of hirsutism] presents a diagnostic problem and all too often becomes a disappointment in treatment’. Alongside this, the advent of the National Health Service established further need to measure and assess the severity of hair disorders to control access to medical care. A number of systems of measurement were trialled; one clinical research group at Middlesex hospital in 1964 reported a technique that involved letting the hair grow, cutting it off and then weighing it to assess it quantifiably. The Ferriman-Gallwey score, first established in 1961, became a much more popular method of classification, involving the visual scoring on a scale between 0 to 4 eleven different areas of body hair growth including lip and chin. One major hindrance of the scale was that it was based on subjective observation, as one general practitioner acknowledged in 1997 (when a modified version of the score was still in use), ‘although scoring systems have been developed… they are semi-quantitative at best and subject to large variability between observers’.

### Demedicalisation of Female Facial Hair

The disappointing results of steroid treatments to treat hirsutism between the 1950s and 1970s led again to questions about its aetiology and that of syndromes like Stein-Leventhal with

---

which it had become associated. Continued difficulties with systematic measuring of excessive hair also led many practitioners to conclude that female hair growth was a wide spectrum which often presented overlapping characteristics with that of men’s and which certain ethnic groups were particularly sensitive to. Observations such as this contributed to the re-assessment of excessive hair as simply a variation of ‘normal’ female development, perhaps symptomatic of elevated androgen levels, but generally not harmful. For example, in 1980, Ginsburg and White argued that hirsutism ‘is a symptom but not a disease entity’. Similarly, dermatologist Nick Simpson argued in the *BMJ* in 1986 that patients seeking medical advice should be reassured about the ‘normality of hair’. In 1988 dermatologist D. Kemmett suggested that hirsutism in fact necessitated ‘generally no endocrine investigation’. By 2009, the discussion of hirsutism had shifted from a language of ‘treatment’ to that of ‘management’, emphasising control over excessive hair as opposed to something to be cured. Management techniques also predominantly focused on how hirsutism affected psychological well-being of patients because of social stigma, rather than pinpointing any more sinister internal dysfunction it might indicate. This would suggest at least a partial demedicalisation of hirsutism and hypertrichosis, according to Conrad’s definition: ‘demedicalization occurs when a problem is no longer defined as medical, and medical treatments are no longer deemed appropriate’. This process was facilitated by a re-conceptualisation of what signified an ‘abnormal’ quantity

---

of androgen production in the female body, as well as the ongoing ineffective results and unpredictability of long term treatments for excessive hair.

The medical declassification of female facial hair as a disease-entity did not necessarily translate into the de-stigmatisation of it in the wider public sphere, however. My oral history interviewee Carole demonstrates how the process of demedicalisation can perpetuate the feeling of social rejection and otherness. Her account therefore highlights the liminal positioning of hairy women in contemporary culture, as outsiders both within a society and within contemporary medical practice and health care.

Carole was 65 years old when I interviewed her at her home in the North East of England in 2016. She identified as having struggled with a hair ‘problem’ on her face since her early twenties, and had experimented with multiple methods of hair removal over the last forty years with varying levels of satisfaction. Carole recalled that there had been no hesitation in her decision to remove her facial hair once it had started to become visible. She described it as ‘like being disfigured. Only it’s not the flesh itself… because you’re not the way you are supposed to be. You are not what society expects, sort of thing’.\textsuperscript{120} As a result, Carole remained hyper-vigilant of her own body and its proximity to others. She explained,

\begin{quote}
If I was in a restaurant, right? And I go in, right? And the sun was shining and it’s during the day, where do you wanna sit? I want to sit where there’s no lights - where the light’s not shining on you, or the sun won’t be streaming in on you, and where you can see from one side and what have you. And you hate sitting next to somebody. I used to hate it… Not so much on a bus, because on a bus people tend not to look at you. But if you are… I don’t know… in a situation where you’re just sitting next to somebody, you’ll be thinking, “she’s noticed it” and this type of thing, you know?\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

This had also affected many decisions in her life. She had enjoyed a career as a midwifery nurse, but admitted that for the ten years before retirement she had only ever worked night

\textsuperscript{120} Present author, Interview with Carole, 2016.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
shifts, ‘not because I liked it. It was because I felt I could cope with it better - I was out the way’. For the same reason, she had never put herself forward for promotion, although she knew she had had the capacity. And it had contributed to her decision not to develop any romantic relationships with men, ‘because obviously it’s a put off for them, isn’t it?’.

Working within a hospital environment meant that Carole held a great respect for medical practitioners, but she remained ambivalent about how medical experts treated the issue of female facial hair and she compared the lack of treatment options, advice, and support available as similar to abandonment:

It’s a bit like forty years in the wilderness in a way... I must have spent from the age of twenty to sixty thinking...one day they’re going to discover something – whether it be a cream, a wax, or whatever it is that’s gonna cure this. But it might not be in my life time – that’s what you start thinking – it’s not going to be in my lifetime.

A feeling of otherness and neglect was compounded by her perception that access to medical care for hair problems was now limited because of financial constraint. She described the difficulty that she and women like her faced in attempting to get laser therapy, or ‘laser ray’ removal as she called it, through G.P. referral as part of the National Health Service:

But now that everything is rationed it’s only if the G.P. thinks it’s excessive that you will be allowed to, that you will put forward to the… What do you call them? These groups of doctors who make decisions about how the money’s going to be spent? […] The majority, I know from my G.P., are being sent back - are being refused because they don’t think it is excessive enough. And so consequently you can pay yourself and the G.P. doesn’t even have to know about it. ‘Cause that’s what I wanted really, I thought, I don’t want them to know.

Carole highlighted what she perceived to be the subjective and unpredictable decision-making process that has led to only a limited number of women receiving hair removal treatment from

---

122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
the NHS. Her account also emphasised how the quest for a solution was balanced alongside
the desire to retain privacy, and how this informed her decision whether or not to approach
medical experts. Her choice to pursue commercially available services instead of going through
medical channels was in part to do with minimising scrutiny over her body and avoiding having
to disclose her personal situation for the judgement of others.

Carole’s preoccupation with concealment also trickled into her advocacy for a support
group for women with facial hair. She described how such a group would have to recognise
women’s desire to remain discreet about their hair problems, at the same time opening up space
to allow the safe sharing of experiences:

It can’t be cured or something but I know people who share this problem with me…I
mean you could say “can I set up a support group for mastectomy or psoriasis” there’s
thousands of them! So why can’t there be one for this? You see it would have to be
under a name, where only certain people, you know, walking past probably most people
wouldn’t even have heard of it, you know. It couldn’t be “come and join our support
group if you’ve got facial hair, body hair” do you know what I mean?126

Carole’s testimony highlights the complexities of collective action in trying to make something
medical; the difficulties in bringing together, protecting and making visible the issues for a
stigmatised group of people. The negotiation of finding visibility with a desire to retain
invisibility remained a consistent conflict for Carole as she looked for ways to deal with the
physical and psychological consequences of being a hairy woman.

The Medicalisation of Pubic Hair

So far this chapter has demonstrated how a hairy female face undermined the carefully
constructed distinctions in medical science between human and animal, male and female, sane

126 Ibid.
and insane. In this next section I focus on how the trend for pubic hair shaving as a preparation of hospital-based childbirth in the mid-twentieth century illustrates the consignment of female body hair as unhygienic and a source of contamination by medical practitioners. This conceptualisation of female pubic hair as a potentially harmful carrier of disease underpins what subsequent chapters will show is a sustained belief in the unsanitary qualities of female body hair.

The social context of birth has been well-established within both medical history and feminist scholarship. Such work has demonstrated that over the course of the twentieth century the physiological process of pregnancy and childbirth transitioned from a predominantly private and individual experience to a medical event, governed by expanding professional guidance and intervention. As the century began, concern about the conditions of childbirth were brought about by increased anxiety from medical and state authorities. Not only did maternal mortality rates remain consistently high but the Boer War had exposed the low standard of health amongst the population, despite the introduction of numerous public health reforms in the late nineteenth century. Improving antenatal, intranatal and postnatal care became of national importance and responsibility again after the loss of life experienced during the First World War: ‘Parturition differs from all other physiological functions’ stated Professor Johnstone of midwifery in 1928, ‘in that it is performed in the interests of the race, while all others are performed in the interests of the individual only’. The rediscovery of maternal mortality in 1919, a year in which the number of recorded childbirth deaths was

---

greater than the previous ten, forced practitioners to reflect on the insufficiency of existing preventative measures of puerperal infection.\textsuperscript{130}

Although the importance of asepsis and antiseptic procedures had long been established, debate ensued within the British medical establishment during the interwar period concerning whether or not these measures were being adhered to, and who or what was to blame for the persistently high number of deaths of women from puerperal sepsis. Speculative opinions and medical research were recorded and discussed in the \textit{British Medical Journal}, with two schools of thought emerging. The first considered the causes of maternal infection as exogenous (the result of external origin from factors such as poor housing and sanitary conditions).\textsuperscript{131} The second school subscribed to the notion of autogenetic or self-generated causes which the natural disposition of the female reproductive system produced.\textsuperscript{132} This led to speculation about, as one obstetrician put it in 1921, the ‘uterine inefficiency’ which rendered the female body so liable to infection.\textsuperscript{133}

Both of these schools of thought contributed to a new ‘modern doctrine’ based upon preventative and reparative obstetrics. ‘Natural’ childbirth was reframed not just as inefficient but as hazardous: ‘nature has made the mistake of placing the birth area almost in the middle of this danger zone’, physician Victor Bonney was quoted as saying in 1921.\textsuperscript{134} The implication was that nature had failed in creating the optimal conditions for childbirth, and that relying on nature was an outdated and inefficient course of action for practitioners to take.\textsuperscript{135} As a result, physicians in the \textit{British Medical Journal} called for a new ‘frame of mind’ towards labour, and that it be treated with the same care and precaution as if it were a surgical

\textsuperscript{130} ‘Puerperal Morality in 1919’ \textit{BMJ} (5\textsuperscript{th} March 1921), pp.354-5.
\textsuperscript{131} E.J. Maclean, ‘Puerperal Infection Mortality in Wales’ \textit{BMJ} (18\textsuperscript{th} November 1922), pp.976-7; ‘The Sources of Puerperal Infection’ \textit{BMJ} (4\textsuperscript{th} January 1936), p.18.
\textsuperscript{132} A main proponent of this school of thought was A. Campbell Stark. See for example, A. Campbell Stark and J.M. Lovett, ‘Puerperal Sepsis’ \textit{BMJ} (11\textsuperscript{th} September 1920), p.420; A. Campbell Stark, F.L. Cary, A.H. Turner, ‘Puerperal Morbidity and Mortality’ \textit{BMJ} (16\textsuperscript{th} January 1926), pp.119-120.
\textsuperscript{133} J. Fairbairn, ‘Physiological Principles in Midwifery Practice’ \textit{BMJ} (19\textsuperscript{th} March 1921), p.413.
\textsuperscript{134} Cited in ‘Puerperal Morbidity in 1919’ \textit{BMJ} (5\textsuperscript{th} March 1921), p.354.
\textsuperscript{135} N. Beattie, ‘The prevention of Puerperal Infection’ \textit{BMJ} (11\textsuperscript{th} June 1921), p.874.
procedure.\textsuperscript{136} This entailed preparing and treating the area of the vulva as if it were a site of potential infection. Practitioners’ tools and clothing were to be sterilized accordingly, and although examination and general supervision were to be increased, any contact with the exposed areas was to be minimal in order to maintain sterility.\textsuperscript{137} Medical historian Edward Shorter also suggests that the 1930s heralded a greater emphasis on ‘perinatology’ the care and delivery of the infant which in many cases superseded the health and wellbeing of the mother and changed how labour was managed.\textsuperscript{138}

This new surgical approach to childbirth initiated a change not just in behaviour but in the use of language in reference to the external genitalia. For some physicians the vulva was not so much in danger of infection as constituting the danger itself. For example, Blair Bell recognised the threat of the location of hair around the pubis as an inherent threat to asepsis:

\begin{quote}
A piece of unpurified vulval skin and hair placed in the uterus would probably be far more deadly than a spoonful of faeces. Moreover, faeces look infective, whereas the vulva does not, and the latter, therefore, constitutes a danger too often unsuspected.\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

The severity of such contamination was articulated through an almost militaristic attitude to intervention, illustrated in Munro Kerr’s assertion that: ‘The field of operation in the case of the parturient… receives but perfunctory attention, and yet it is a most septic area. The hair of the pubis and folds of the vulva teem with pyogenic organisms, constantly added to from the bowel, which is in the immediate vicinity’.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{137} ‘The Prevention of Puerperal Infection’ \textit{BMJ} (14\textsuperscript{th} May 1921), pp.709-10 gives overview of prevention methods which includes: use of sterilised gloves and instruments, preparation of parturient woman ‘as if for an operation’ by emptying rectum, bathing patient in antiseptic solution and shaving the vulva, p.710.
\textsuperscript{138} E. Shorter, \textit{A History of Women’s Bodies}, p.139, pp.165-166.
\textsuperscript{139} W. Blair Bell, ‘An Address on the Prevention and Treatment of Puerperal Infections” \textit{BMJ} (14\textsuperscript{th} May 1921), p.693.
\textsuperscript{140} J. Munro Kerr, ‘A Lecture on Preventative Medicine as Applied to Obstetrics’ \textit{BMJ} (12\textsuperscript{th} June 1926), pp.977-81; p.978.
One could argue that the anxiety demonstrated by physicians regarding disease is indicative of the problematic status of the pregnant body within society. In her sociological exploration of the pregnant body in contemporary culture, Imogen Tyler explains how ‘on the one hand pregnancy has been constructed as sacred, on the other… indelibly marked by sex’.\textsuperscript{141} The medical journals demonstrate however, a much longer history of pregnant women disrupting traditional constructions of ideal femininity as virtuous by embodying the consequences of sexual activity. This almost combative language of ‘danger zone’ and ‘field of operation’ is suggestive of an underlying desire to reclaim control and police the boundaries of female sexual identity.

The \textit{Williams Obstetrics} textbook series illustrates how the practice of pubic hair shaving became integrated into the management of perinatal asepsis. As early as 1903, Williams made reference to shaving as part of the preparation for vaginal examination during the first stage of labour. Instructions stipulated that:

The vulva and the inner surfaces of the thighs are then thoroughly washed with soap and hot water, particular attention being paid to the regions about the anus and clitoris. If the pubic hairs are very long they should be cut short with scissors or shaved.\textsuperscript{142}

The use of ‘if’ in this context implies that rituals of removal were based upon practitioner subjectivity and personal preference, suggesting that variation amongst hospitals was probably common in the early twentieth century. This was further maintained in the third edition published in 1912 which again relied on personal judgement of the obstetrical nurse as the

\begin{footnotesize}

\end{footnotesize}
determining factor, stating, ‘to prepare the patient for vaginal examination place her upon a douche pan, and cut the pubic hairs, if necessary’.  

Further editions maintained this instructive narrative until the seventh edition was published in 1936. The change in tone is discernible not only in the more explicit guidance on hygienic practice in antenatal care in both hospital and home, but also in the clearer listed designation of tasks between obstetrical nurse or midwife, and doctor. There are nine listed instructions for midwives to complete at the time of labour: after notifying the doctor, preparing the room and giving the patient a warm sponge bath and soap-suds enema, the guidance reads: 

(h) To prepare for vaginal examination place the patient upon a douche pan and shave the external genital and pubic region. Then wash the genitalia thoroughly from above downwards (toward the anus) with soap and warm water, taking care that the soap suds and rinse-ings do not come into contact with the vaginal opening. The doctor shall take care of the rest of the cleansing.  

This call for greater precision and meticulous practice is suggestive of the integration of a greater interventionist approach to childbirth. Williams Obstetrics went on to define the ‘three principles’ of infection prevention, combining the exogenous/autogenous schools of thought on germ transference:

(1) Prevention of potential infecting organisms from exogenous sources being deposited on the external genitals or adjacent area.
(2) Sterilization of the perineal field in order to prevent migration, transportation or growth of organisms from this field into the vagina,
(3) Prevention of the existing bacterial flora in the vagina from being carried into the uterus.  

This shift in tone in *Williams Obstetrics* from the 1936 edition onwards implies that shaving became somewhat of a common policy within the medical establishment in the mid-twentieth century. Subsequent editions of *Williams Obstetrics* continued to advocate pubic hair shaving for the next five decades. However, by the release of the 1980 edition, instruction had taken a more relaxed tone, stating simply ‘in many hospitals… shaving or clipping is the practice’.

Even by 1956, in the eleventh edition of *Williams Obstetrics*, pubic hair shaving, known as the ‘perineal clean-up’ was recognised as possibly in opposition to women’s emotional health. Author N.J. Eastman, in addressing the admissions procedure to hospital, wrote that ‘it will be much easier for her if she has been told about the necessary preliminary procedures, such as the vulvar (sic) and the perineal clean-up…after labour progresses these activities are more difficult to carry out and much more distressing to the patient’. This increased focus on the mother’s wellbeing was also reflected in Eastman’s reference to British obstetrician Grantly Dick Read, and his reflection that hospital birthing procedures were increasingly putting more emphasis on the “emotional labor” which is as definite and important as its physical counterpart.

**Resistances to Pubic Hair Shaving**

There are a number of factors which may have contributed to a relaxation around the policy of shaving by the 1980s. For example, obstetricians had begun to question the value of the practice of shaving, illustrated by the publication in *Obstetrics and Gynaecology Journal* of two articles: Burchell’s ‘Predelivery Removal of Pubic Hair’ in 1964 and Kantor, Rember, Tabio and

---


Burchell’s posing of the question ‘is it necessary?’ indicates a growing scepticism of the interventionist approach to the preparation of birth imposed by obstetricians from the 1920s.\footnote{S. Selwyn ‘Aseptic Rituals Unmasked’ BMJ (15th December 1984), pp. 1642-3; p.1642.}

In an article emphasising the need to reassess the necessity of accepted surgical measures on all types of hospital procedure, Sydney Selwyn argued in 1984 that:

> The recent advances in our knowledge of microbiology of the skin…have stimulated reappraisal of the measure designed to protect the patient from infection. Traditionally these have included the surgical scrub, as well as shaving, disinfecting, draping, and subsequently dressing the operation site, and also preparing the bowel before surgery on the gut.\footnote{M. L. Romney, ‘Predelivery Shaving: An Unjustified Assault?’ Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (1980), 1, 33–35.}\footnote{Ibid.}

Such a statement would suggest that the decline in pubic hair shaving was prompted by medical practitioners themselves and the development of knowledge regarding infection and asepsis.

The question around the psychological impact of perineal shaving on mothers referred to briefly in Williams Obstetrics in 1956, also garnered greater research interest by the 1980s. The publication of M. Romney’s 1980 study entitled ‘Predelivery Shaving: An Unjustified Assault?’ was influential in that it demonstrated through the investigation of 693 patients that ‘shaving did not affect the incidence of infection’.\footnote{M. L. Romney, ‘Predelivery Shaving: An Unjustified Assault?’ Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (1980), 1, 33–35.} In addition, it surveyed the opinions of women, concluding that 98 per cent of them ‘were disappointed that they were shaved’ due to the resulting discomfort it produced.\footnote{Ibid.} The conclusion read, ‘We find no evidence to support the current and widespread practice of perineal shaving. It increases patient discomfort without
reducing infection or improving healing. We believe that perineal shaving is an unjustified assault and should be abandoned.\textsuperscript{154}

The significance of this investigation was identified by Judith Schott, an antenatal teacher and a member of the National Childbirth Trust. In 1982 she wrote to Romney about the study, asking for more information in order for antenatal teachers to share it with expectant parents.\textsuperscript{155} This demonstrates a turning point in the relationship between mothers and midwives, evidenced further in the inaugural speech of Sue Sadler, President of the Bristol Royal College of Midwives in 1988. She stated ‘I can see a development in the Trust from the “telling them how to do it” style, to the “enabling them to have the knowledge and confidence to find their own way of doing it” style.’\textsuperscript{156} She proceeded to suggest how the role of the expert should be to ‘empower’ the parent, and bestow a ‘sense of control over their own lives’.\textsuperscript{157}

This illustrates the alteration in consciousness of both medical practitioners and patients by the 1980s. Characterised by Oakley as a ‘consumers’ revolt’, it is argued that the role of the patient transformed from ‘passive recipient’ to ‘consumer-activist’, encouraged by new cultures of citizenship, and as a result of better education.\textsuperscript{158} Oakley’s work itself, first published in 1984 and detailing how the medical profession had ‘captured the womb’, was part of this dialogue acknowledging the sense of powerlessness the medicalisation of childbirth had caused women.\textsuperscript{159} Angela Davis’s history of modern motherhood describes a general development in ‘wider feminist, anti-doctor critique of obstetric care’ beginning in the 1970s, as a reaction to the routinisation of procedures once considered emergency (such as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, p.35. \\
\textsuperscript{155} J. Schott correspondence with M. Romney located in Hanna Corbishley’s papers and correspondence: Enemas and shaving 1980-1989, National Childbirth Trust Collection, SA/NCT/A/7/5, Box 10, Wellcome Library. \\
\textsuperscript{156} S. Sadler, Inaugural Speech Jan 1988 in Hanna Corbishley’s Papers and Correspondence: Enemas and Shaving, National Childbirth Trust Collection, SA/NCT/A/7/5, Box 10, Wellcome Library, p.2. \\
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid, p.8. \\
\textsuperscript{158} A. Oakley, \textit{The Captured Womb}, p.236. \\
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
episiotomies and inductions), and as technologies of testing and monitoring became more invasive.\footnote{160}

The linear structuring of this chapter implies resistance to pre-delivery shaving began only to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century; it has been much harder to find voices of resistance before this in the historical record.\footnote{161} Nevertheless, articles in the \textit{British Medical Journal} do infer that there was opposition to the procedure when it was first established. For example, Dr Munro Kerr, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Glasgow University, speculated in 1926 that ‘It has been urged that women would object to such preparations… I am perfectly certain that if it were impressed on all parturient women that this detail is necessary, few would object’.\footnote{162} Shorter suggests that a mellowing of resistance to shaving occurred from the 1930s onwards, as mothers became more accepting of, and compliant with, the authority of medical experts, persuaded that the health of the infant took precedence and ‘would best come from a nonseptic birth canal’.\footnote{163} Another reason for the waning of objection from patients was also arguably the technological improvements made to the safety razor which made it increasingly convenient to use.\footnote{164} Having said this, I am inclined to support Ann Oakley’s claim that ‘consumer dissatisfaction with antenatal care has always existed… but the health care and wider political climate of the 1960s and 1970s has allowed the dissatisfaction an organizational voice of its own’.\footnote{165}

Although visibility of resistance from patients was increasing in the 1970s, Romney’s 1980 investigation highlighted the continued support of shaving from midwives who took part in the study, 90 percent of whom supported perineal shaving.\footnote{166} This was expounded in my

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{160} A. Davies, \textit{Modern Motherhood}, p.85.
\item \footnote{161} One exception which shows how women’s demands in the early twentieth century changed medical practice is J. Bourke, ‘Childbirth in the UK: Suffering and Citizenship Before the 1950s’ \textit{Lancet} (2014), 383 (9925), pp.1288-1289.
\item \footnote{162} J.M. Munro Kerr, ‘Preventive Medicine as Applied to Obstetrics’ \textit{BMJ} (12 June 1926), p.978.
\item \footnote{163} E. Shorter, \textit{A History of Women’s Bodies}, p.168.
\item \footnote{164} M. Romney, ‘Predelivery Shaving: An Unjustified Assault?’, p.34.
\item \footnote{165} A. Oakley, \textit{Captured Womb}, p.236.
\item \footnote{166} M. Romney, ‘Predelivery Shaving’, p.33.
\end{itemize}
oral history interview with Carole, who, as a retired midwife who trained in the north of England in the early 1970s, spoke very positively about the prepping process. She remarked that at the time:

…they [the mothers] used to come and say “oh it feels cleaner. I feel much cleaner” sort of thing… and didn’t seem to object to it at all. And I was really good at shaving I can tell you…. and I used to say to them “don’t worry about this because I’m very good at it”, you know, in case they thought I was gonna cut… … I would say yes I would rather be shaved, I’ll be honest. I would now you know.\(^ {167}\)

Although Carole maintained the advantages of prepping, she also noted how the decline of the practice of shaving was connected to changes in the profession more generally, echoing the sentiment of the NCT in recognising the needs of mothers as well as infants:

Nobody wants to be put up in a lithotomy you know with the legs up. Nobody wants that. They’ve got much nicer ones now… But I think the staff are more nice to people now so I think it makes it easier, you know [not] like “come in here and do what you’re told” and this sort of thing, I think it’s all changed now for the better, you know where… You’re just giving her a service and er… hopefully she’ll come back again if she wants to! You know if she wants to.\(^ {168}\)

The undesirable experience of the lithotomy which Carole recalls is more fully detailed by journalist and broadcaster Jenni Murray, in her testimony for the *Sisterhood and After* oral history project based at the British Library. In her reflections on the challenging relationship she had with her mother, Murray pointed to her birth as one of the pivotal moments which established an on-going tension between them:

I was a dreadful disappointment…She would have actually been much better off if she’d stayed at home and had the local midwife come in, much better off. But you know, we – the NHS, the hospital, this was the right place to go, and they lay her on – they shaved her, they gave her an enema, they lay her on her back in a bed with her legs in the air and left her on her own and she was in labour for twenty-four hours and came

---

\(^ {167}\) Present Author, interview with Carole.

\(^ {168}\) Ibid.
very close to dying apparently, I have been told this story so many times I can’t tell you.\textsuperscript{169}

In this account, the act of shaving - situated alongside the other routine NHS practices such as the use of an enema, the prohibition of visitors including the father, and the immobilisation of the mother on her back - is depicted as a state of vulnerability and exposure. Murray rationalised that at the time it was considered ‘the right place to go’ which demonstrates not only the success of the medical establishment in garnering medical jurisdiction over childbirth by the mid-century, but also its success in convincing patients that such measures were necessary and ethical. Only after the event was that expertise questioned, and trauma realised.

Romney’s research and Murray’s personal account illustrate two reasons behind a growing resistance to pubic shaving: firstly, the painful itching and discomfort that shaving caused, and secondly the emotional trauma that accompanied this. The political significance of these feelings were championed and explicated by women’s health activists within the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The feminist magazine \textit{Spare Rib} popularised these experiences further, as the issues surrounding childbirth and medical intervention took prominence in the publication between 1978 and 1989. Perineal shaving took on an almost symbolic status, representing all that was wrong in the medical model of antenatal care: the unnecessary and deceptive measures of childbirth management; the disregard for women’s psychological well-being; and the lack of autonomy over their own bodies. Articles such as ‘Birth: Home or Hospital’ and ‘No Such Thing as Pain’ focused upon the personal experiences of mothers in hospitals to illustrate this. Testimonies recalled for example:

\begin{quote}
Despite your protests, you are shaved and given an enema, during which your companion is made to leave the room which upsets you.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{169}M. Jolly, Interview with Jenni Murray, \textit{Sisterhood and After} (2012), Track 1.
\textsuperscript{170}R. Klein, “Birth: Home or Hospital” \textit{Spare Rib} (1980), 98, pp.22-5.
Stripped, shaven and duly humiliated, I had a prophetic glimpse of the horrors which awaited me.\textsuperscript{171} I expected the pain… what I wasn’t prepared for was the indignity of the experience.\textsuperscript{172}

The trauma experienced by women in the process of giving birth formed part of a greater politicisation of control over women’s bodies initiated by feminism’s second wave. The publication of \textit{Our Bodies Ourselves}, an instructive text aimed at helping women gain more control over their own bodies and reproductive choices through self-education, offered women alternatives to the medical model of childbirth.\textsuperscript{173} On the subject of hospital policy regarding the ‘prepping’ of pubic hair, the second edition of \textit{Our Bodies} stated:

This is totally unnecessary. It is just one part of the male medical ritual of depolluting, purifying women. Prepping desexes us, makes us look like little girls again. Doctors believe that pubic hair contains germs and prepping decreases the risk of infection. In fact, prepping \textit{increases} the risk of infection, when surface skin cells are scraped off and sometimes razors nick skin… Since the last edition of this book many hospitals have dropped the procedure but it is still routine in some hospitals.\textsuperscript{174}

In the rejection of the presumed link between hygiene and hairlessness, \textit{Our Bodies} exposed the gendered underpinnings of shaving. Pubic hair was a symbol of mature fertile womanhood, it was no coincidence, they argued, that medicine had also demarcated its pathological risk.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The medicalisation of female facial hair and pubic hair in the twentieth century exemplifies Conrad’s conceptualisation of the process as ‘bidirectional’.\textsuperscript{175} Female body hair at one time

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{171} ‘No Such Thing as Pain: Having your Baby in Hospital is Supposed to be Safe and Restful… Ruth Wheeler Knows Otherwise!’ \textit{Spare Rib} (1982), 114, pp.49-50.
\item \textsuperscript{172} M. Stewart, ‘Parenting: Birth Rights’ \textit{Spare Rib} (1989), 208, p.89.
\item \textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p.390.
\item \textsuperscript{175} P. Conrad, \textit{The Medicalization of Society}, p.7.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
or another, became a medical problem associated with racial degeneracy, ambiguous sex, psychological imbalance, reproductive dysfunction, and contamination and infection. To have ‘excessive’ hair therefore, constituted not only personal illness but societal risk to healthy population development. The de-medicalisation of female body hair in the second half of the twentieth century from disease-entity or symptom of dysfunction to simply a variation of normal female growth, demonstrates the instability of medical classifications, definitions and measurements of terms such as ‘excessive’ and ‘superfluous’ in regards to hair, on which the hairlessness norm for women is contingent.

This chapter has also demonstrated how the process of medicalisation is a social dialogue between medical practitioners (both within and between specialisms), patients, and other collective groups of stakeholders. Female patients perpetuated and sought medicalisation in order to get access to treatment for their hair conditions (although notably evidence of this desire was mediated through the medical practitioners themselves writing for medical journals). However, patients also contributed to the de-medicalisation process of pubic hair shaving in the 1970s and 1980s, as part of a wider political action to reclaim the female body from the medical establishment. Carole’s testimony illustrates the liminal position of hairy women as a result of the fluctuating status of excessive hair as a medical problem. The sustained association between hair and abnormality meant that she perceived her facial hair to be a stigma and likened it to a deformity. Her isolation was perpetuated by her sense of the ineffectual treatments and support offered by medical practitioners, demonstrating how processes of de-medicalisation via changes to medical terminology and treatment options do not necessarily translate to the de-stigmatisation of those social groups in wider society. Although the medical understanding of female body hair as pathological may have been overturned in the late twentieth century, the subsequent chapters of this thesis explore the ripples of medicalisation; the sustained presence
and circulation of ideas which link hairiness to being a dysfunctional woman, and hairlessness with hygiene, respectability and femininity.
3. ‘NICE GIRLS DON’T… HAVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR’: LEARNING HOW TO DO HAIR REMOVAL RIGHT

Introduction

There are various ways in which a history of hair removal consumption might be approached. In 1982, Christine Hope traced the gradual expansion of body parts incorporated into hair removal advertising in North American women’s lifestyle magazines between the 1910s to the 1940s. More recently Rebecca Herzig’s history of hair removal (also in a North American context), focused on technological development such as the introduction of the safety razor to account for changing grooming habits in the first half the twentieth century. The history of hair removal consumption in this chapter changes tack once more, demonstrating the multiplicity of ways ‘consumption’ as a category of historical analysis can be understood as a dynamic between and beyond manufacturers, retailers, advertisers, government bodies and consumers. This chapter focuses on the latter of those groups. Primarily, it explores the negotiations performed by female consumers – the processes of thought and the social/temporal contexts which have shaped the purchase, use and performance of hair removal over the twentieth century.

In the previous chapter, we explored how female hair removal became embedded into medicalised narratives of disease prevention and sanitisation, and a remedy or treatment for perceived sexual, psychological dysfunction. Hair removal was thus implicit in both the signification of physical and psychological health, and also in ‘producing’ female gender identity. This chapter traces how these conceptualisations have transmuted into the ‘everyday’, routinised practices and prescriptions of hair removal; into the choices about how to depilate,

---

2 R. Herzig, Plucked, pp.199-121.
where, and how often. In so doing, I conceptualise consumption of hair removal not only as
the transaction of material goods but also as a symbolic transaction, which conveys information
about the self, and can be understood as a form of communication to others. Championed by
theorists such as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood in *The World of Goods*, this ‘cultural
theory of consumption’ emphasises not only the social meanings and uses that material
possessions carry, but also the importance of these in making and maintaining social
relationships.³

Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is a particularly useful framework to help us think
through hair removal consumption as a form of communication, allowing us to account for
both the symbolic value of hairlessness and its significance in processes of identity-formation,
and acknowledge that hair removal rituals are also a custom underpinned by the cultural
circulation of ideas, principles and people. The first of these delineations draws upon
Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the uneven distribution of power and resources in society
through what he identifies as various forms of capital. In contrast to Marx’s understanding of
capital in singularly economic or material terms, Bourdieu theorises that capital can also be
distributed through cultural, social and symbolic formations. Social capital denotes the social
connections that can generate power. Cultural capital can exist in various shapes – as cultural
goods, educational qualifications, and (importantly for this study) through embodiment and
body work.⁴ Symbolic capital refers to the legitimation of cultural capital – the process by
which cultural capital is converted into power. Bourdieu argues that the legitimation necessary
for gaining symbolic capital rests on arbitrary judgements of taste, validated by the dominant
classes within that specific temporal and spatial context.⁵ This in turn sustains and reproduces
relations of class inequality through the marking of distinction. Bourdieu’s theory of class

⁵ Ibid, p.292.
distinction and inequality relies upon the assumption that individuals are firstly, motivated to invest in gaining capital, and secondly, that they recognise and can distinguish what is ‘tasteful’ and what is not. In effect, this requires an understanding of how to decode distinctions and relate it to one’s own identity – to recognise one’s social positioning in the hierarchy. Bourdieu argues that this dynamic is mediated through ‘the habitus’, an intrinsic knowledge and sense of embodiment that works upon the internalization of customs.\(^6\) It denotes a generative, ‘embodied history’, rather than a fixed set of external social norms one carries alongside them: ‘An ensemble of schemata of perception, thinking, feeling, evaluating, speaking, and acting that structures all the expressive, verbal and practical manifestations and utterances of a person’.\(^7\) The habitus encompasses the expertise necessary in recognising distinctions of class, and understanding how one might generate or accrue capital within this field of relations.

One criticism aimed at Bourdieu’s conceptual framework is the lack of historical and cultural specificity he warrants the organisation of society.\(^8\) Not only does this imply a transhistorical notion of capital, LiPuma argues that ‘at issue is the scope or generality of the central concepts of field, capital and habitus. The issue is whether these categories themselves are culturally specific’.\(^9\) Two particular sociological studies have utilised elements of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction whilst thinking specifically about its applicability to women’s class in Britain in the mid-1990s and 2000s. Beverley Skeggs’s *Formations of Class and Gender* and Paula Black’s *The Beauty Industry* have been invaluable to this study, in helping think through women’s work on the body as a form of cultural capital acquisition.\(^10\) The central

---

\(^6\) Ibid, p.165.
theme of Skeggs’s investigation was working class women’s recognition and navigation of classificatory systems; how they deployed different forms of capital strategically to allow access and movement through the social sphere in a day-to-day context. She argued that the primary mechanism through which class is distinguished is the assessment of respectability; a judgement applicable to the organization of women’s homes, caring practices, sexuality, conduct and appearance. Skeggs discussed the historical roots of respectability as an aspirational value and as a marker of class, noting ‘many attempts – often through religion – were made to “rescue” White working-class women from the clutches of non-respectability. To not be respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy… the use of “Welfare Mothers” and “Crack Babies” in the US shows how easily historical constructs can be recycled’.  

Investing in physical appearance to conform to ideals of femininity was one way in which respectability was codified. Historically as a property of the middle-classes, ideal femininity and ‘tasteful’ appearances have seen to be at odds with the representation of White female working class body as ‘out of control, in excess…vulgar, pathological, tasteless and sexual.’

Working class women’s investments in femininity can be a means of generating some value, or at least ‘halt losses’. Although the feminine ideal is, Skeggs suggested, ‘uninhabitable as a complete and coherent category’, women learn to ‘pass’ as feminine or ‘put on’ femininity as needed. In order to make investments then, women must gain expertise to recognise how to display and embody femininity in the right way and Skeggs described this attainment of consumer knowledge as so:

The women had to know what to buy, where from, how to wear it, what to wear it with and on what occasions to wear it. The legacies of knowing one’s place through clothing informed their ‘choice’. The women had learnt the distinctions between style and fashion, between looking good and looking tarty, between looking feminine and looking sexy. The women’s knowledge of femininity was not just absorbed directly

---

11 B. Skeggs. Formations of Class and Gender, p.3.
12 Ibid, p.100.
14 Ibid, pp.102-106.
from the traditional textual sources of femininity (such as magazines, advertising, etc.), rather it was an amalgam of this and local knowledge…. Looking good involved a substantial amount of labour but also collective discussion.¹⁵

The performance and display of femininity according to Skeggs operated through a spatially and temporally-specific habitus, intimately linked to local, relational bonds that acted as devices of validation, belonging and surveillance. Unlike Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of distinction, Skeggs also recognised women’s resistance to the adherence to ideals of ‘respectable’ femininity, highlighting the affective dimensions – the pleasures and the pains in the experience of distinction making.¹⁶ Whilst working class women may want to ‘take up, try on’ femininity, they might also discard it.¹⁷ Skeggs argued that adherence to the ideals of middle class femininity (and the passivity this evokes) can also be disavowed by working class women through investments in glamour – the ‘performance of femininity with [the] strength’ of sexuality.¹⁸ An awareness of class distinctions may not necessarily translate to adherence, thus making women’s relationship to obtaining respectability ultimately ambivalent.¹⁹

Paula Black’s study of the beauty salon picked up on Skeggs’s themes. Black framed the salon as a space in which ideals of femininity are mediated and investments can be made. Black’s research goes into greater detail about the processes of decision-making through which women negotiate looking good and ‘getting it right’.²⁰ She suggested that the habitus is a reconciliation between a ‘self-view’ – an interrogation of ‘what type of person I am’; a ‘world-view’ – the situation of the self within a broader moral and social framework; and a knowledge of ‘appropriateness’.²¹ Like Skeggs’s notion of respectability, Black’s conceptualisation of

¹⁵ Ibid, p.103.
¹⁶ Ibid, p.10.
¹⁷ Ibid, p.98.
¹⁸ Ibid, pp.110-111.
²⁰ Ibid, p.43.
²¹ Ibid, pp.43-51.
appropriateness referred to standards of looking and being which related to an awareness of social positioning. Black argued that appropriateness expanded beyond the class-based conceptualisation of respectability however, by also considering how judgements of acceptable appearance are drawn along boundaries of gender, age and race.\textsuperscript{22} She used the example of female facial hair to illustrate how some aspects of inappropriate or ‘unfeminine’ appearance can cut across class identity and allow for tensions and differences within classes as well as between.\textsuperscript{23} In order to deploy appropriateness correctly, Black argued:

Women require knowledge of what is appropriate, they require skill in order to achieve their goals and they must also be able to engage in a performance which displays the achievement of appropriateness if they are to avoid sanction and ridicule.\textsuperscript{24}

Knowledge, skill and performance are honed and adapted as women transition through the life cycle and through work and social spaces. Like Skeggs, Black also acknowledges the mutuality of knowledge-production, stating that ‘knowledge then is not simply cognitive, it is the internalized result of social relationships and social position’.\textsuperscript{25}

This chapter builds on Black’s understanding of how women ‘get it right’ through the application of knowledge, skills and performance. It also historicises the process by investigating how women learnt to get hair removal ‘right’ across the twentieth century. It considers both the social networks and the mediated texts through which good hair removal practice has been disseminated, thinking also about the dynamic between networks and texts and how female consumers gain expertise in ‘bricolaging’ these sources of advice. Together, Skeggs and Black showed how femininity performs respectability and communicates a knowledge of appropriateness that can impact women’s social positioning. Adding an historical dimension helps us to trace the historical notions of class, racial and gendered differences

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, pp.72-74.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, pp.73-74.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p.75.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p.79.
which underpinned the category of respectability within discourses on personal hygiene and cleanliness. The study of female body hair removal lends itself particularly well to this exploration, in that the ritual straddles the divide between beauty culture and personal hygiene practice. The utilisation of the Mass Observation Project’s ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive from 1992 in combination with the beauty and grooming guidance explicated by teenage magazine *Jackie* in this chapter, exemplifies this cross-over, and thus the way in which body hair removal has blurred the divide between work and pleasure.\(^2\) This combination of sources also provides a means to interrogate how Skeggs’s assertion that women learn to pass as feminine through an amalgamation of textual sources and collective, local discussion manifests within the context of depilation.\(^2\)

The first section of this chapter discusses the ritual of body hair removal within the wider remit of personal hygiene consumption. Using the Mass Observation Project’s ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive from 1992, we explore how hair removal became part of what society warrants as clean and asks what this might tell us about the way cleanliness has been commodified in the twentieth century. How has personal hygiene consumption maintained an attachment to identity-formation and what it means to be respectable? The Mass Observation directive also allows us to reflect upon the diverse sources of advice that have shaped individuals’ personal hygiene consumption both throughout the life cycle and over the twentieth century. It prompts us to reflect upon how ‘expertise’ is assigned, valued, critiqued and in some cases resisted, producing complex social relationships and circuits of knowledge-exchange that emphasise the mutuality of consumptive practices more generally.

The second section of this chapter examines the teenage lifestyle magazines as a source of expertise. Namely, it analyses *Jackie* magazine from 1964-1980 to demonstrate the role of

\(^2\) Mass Observation Project, Spring 1992 (1) ‘Personal Hygiene’, University of Sussex, SxMOA2/1/36/1/1.

\(^2\) B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, p.103.
magazines in teaching girls how to ‘get it right’. Jackie often utilised social networks in order to ‘sell’ hair removal as the key to social popularity, desirability and respectability. The Dear Doctor Column, the portrayal of the friend in Immac advertisements and ‘older sisters’ Cathy and Claire helped to simulate intimacy and authenticity.

Jackie’s hair removal guidance in its beauty features and advertisements also highlights how the magazine framed hair removal as consumption around the passage of time in terms of both seasonal change and the life cycle. There were seasons in which hair removal became more important: summer and special occasions, as well as a demand to regularly self-monitor for ‘embarrassing’ hair problems. This type of demarcation of time through consumption has been noted by Douglas and Isherwood. They explain that, ‘consumption goods are used for notching off these intervals: their range in quality arises from the need to differentiate through the calendar year and the life cycle’. This section of the chapter will therefore conclude by reflecting on how hair removal consumption, and women’s body work more generally, is tied to multiple temporalities: ageing and life cycle, seasonality, the calendar year, and habitual domestic routines.

**Expertise within Social Networks**

The Mass Observation Project’s ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive illuminates different types of social networks - formal and informal, professional and familial. Mass Observers gained knowledge and expertise about cleanliness from these networks enabling them to assemble habits and routines. This section traces who these figures of authority were and why Observers thought being clean mattered. It then considers how respondents observed the dynamic between

---

‘word of mouth’ sources of advice and commercial sources like advertising, reflecting on how hair removal consumption complicates and somewhat blurs the distinction between ‘being’ clean and ‘appearing’ clean. I consider how ‘good’ hygienic practice, including that of female body hair removal, persisted as a measure of respectability and a consistent factor in structuring Observers’ perceptions of classed, gendered, racial and national identities.

The Mass Observation Project’s ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive was designed for use in a BBC Radio 4 series entitled Keep It Clean, which aired between August and September 1992. Observers were asked to consider seven individual hygiene products: soap; deodorant; shampoo; toilet paper; aftershave; toothpaste and handkerchiefs, tailoring their responses around questions such as ‘how vital is this product in your life?’ and ‘who buys this product for your household?’. In so doing, the responses to the directive offer a snapshot into early 1990s household consumptive habits. Not only were popular brands of the moment identified, (‘that lovely dog’ from the Andrex toilet roll commercial, for example) but these choices were often discussed within a framework of broader social and political consciousness; ‘the greenhouse effect’ and environmental concerns were consistently cited as reasons for swapping to an ecological toilet roll brand or replacing CFC-propellant aerosol deodorants for roll-on, for instance.

The ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive is insightful however, because it also prompted respondents to reflect on how the definition and practice of personal hygiene had transformed over the twentieth century. Questions set by the directive such as ‘what influences your choice?’ and ‘do you feel society is placing more emphasis on cleanliness now than in the past?’ encouraged observers to reflect upon continuity and change over their lifetimes, and consider the various sources of advice that had featured in their habit-making and product consumption.

---

The demographic makeup of the panel of volunteers, most of whom were middle-aged or older at the time of writing in 1992, produced responses which spanned the 1920s to the early 1990s. Within these narratives were commentaries on how transformations to housing, technology, employment and public health programming, had affected rituals of cleanliness over the century. For example, greater accessibility to private washing facilities, increased choice in the shopping aisles, rising affluence in the post-war period and less ‘dirty’ manual occupations led many observers to believe that British society was cleaner in 1992 than it had ever previously been. But a number of observers were sceptical about teleological progress, citing an emerging distinction between truly ‘being’ clean and simply ‘appearing’ clean. This perception encapsulated concerns specific to the historical moment around the pervasiveness of consumerism and advertising, the susceptibility of younger generations to these commercial influences, and ultimately the displacement of traditional (and seemingly more authentic) sources of advice and identity-production such as kinship networks by profiteering business corporations. Such anxieties reflect what social theorists such as Giddens have identified as the individualizing trends of late twentieth century capitalist culture. The impact of which is said to have had:

an epochal change in the nature of the self. The modern individual, socially mobile and dis-embedded as never before from roles laid down by traditional structures of kinship, community, class, and gender, had unprecedented freedom to shape his or her own identity.

---

31 J. Hinton, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016) discusses how the panel of MOP volunteers is heavily weighted towards older people. He argues ‘people writing later in their lives and thus able to reflect on the experience of many decades provide the richest material for historical analysis… because the people dealt with here engaged with the defining transformations of the late twentieth century as adults’, pp.3-4.

32 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, A1292 argues society is cleaner now than in the 1940s and 50s because ‘detergents do a far better job…it is becoming improper to smoke…there were lots of dirty jobs around eg docker…affluence and higher expectations…health education in schools’; See also P1500 who mentions the impact of being given grants to put water systems into homes post-war; B1654 remembered the first appearance of deodorants in the department store he worked in in the late 1940s, early 1950s; S1089 noted houses used to be perpetually dirty because of coal fires and was content to be living in 1992, ‘with the chemist’s shop and Supermarket in the local High Street ready to supply me with all manner of goods for my personal freshness’.

33 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, G2524; C2177; J2520; M1201; S2271; S1570.


Historians such as James Hinton and Jon Lawrence have overturned this argument, Lawrence suggesting that ‘community hasn’t died, but it has changed’.\(^{36}\) Hinton argues that the Mass Observation Project demonstrates the sustained importance of social bonds in identity-production in the late twentieth century.\(^{37}\) Indeed, the formal and informal relationships that Mass Observers identified as significant in the formation of their attitudes to cleanliness in the Personal Hygiene directive, supports Hinton’s claim.

For a number of Mass Observers, trustworthy and dependable advice about personal hygiene often originated from formal interactions with independent professionals. One female respondent, for example, recalled a hairdresser giving her advice about the removal of hair from her upper lip.\(^{38}\) Another recounted how in 1958, an American beauty counsellor named ‘Mr de Navarre’ had visited her workplace to educate the staff about deodorant use.\(^{39}\) Health workers such as doctors were also cited as authorities when personal hygiene went awry: lost tampons, excessive douching, irritation from deodorants and soaps and suspected incursions of lice were circumstances in which Observers had called for medical expertise.\(^{40}\) One respondent also cited government and local authority health campaigns as characteristic of her childhood personal hygiene education, recalling the wartime slogan: ‘Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases’ and the introduction of ‘Now Wash Your Hands’ notices in her local public toilets sometime in the 1950s.\(^{41}\) Such a wide scope of authorities on hygiene is suggestive of what Nikolas Rose has identified as the ‘proliferation of “expert” discourse’ in the second half of

---

40 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, A1530 was reassured by her doctor she had not ‘lost her Lillet’ after forgetting to remove it; B58 was told by G.P in 1958 to throw her douche away; P428 had a reaction to perfumed soaps; S2607 consulted doctor after deodorant stung a cut from underarm shaving; C602 remembered visits from the school doctor in 1920s and 1930s for lice inspections.
the twentieth century, characterised by the way in which expertise has ‘been built in to the very fabric of existence’.  

Hilton et al.’s exploration of the professionalisation of non-governmental organisations in modern Britain, however, is a reminder that professional expertise is not experienced passively, but a point of negotiation between citizens and ‘experts’. Mass Observers reflected this by demonstrating how informal relationships were also referenced as sources of advice and guidance on good hygienic practice. Friends, in particular, were remembered as reliably introducing observers to particular brands and products. One fifty-three-year-old Observer from Lichfield, for example, recounted how it had been her ‘closest school friend’ that had introduced her to her first deodorant, ‘Bodymist’. The intimacy of friendship afforded some Observers reassurance that their washing routines worked. However, anecdotes about having to take aside, or being taken aside by a colleague or friend to have a word about body odour were recalled sometimes with great candour:

For many years I took the view that deodorants were a modern marketing gimmick, and that good honest soap and water were all that was needed to keep a man clean and fresh. Then, about twelve years ago, I shared a small office with an attractive woman. This degree of intimacy may have over-stimulated my secondary sex glands; anyway it was not long before a friendly colleague took me on one side in a paternal sort of way, just like in an advertisement, and warned me about body odour.

In other instances, hints from colleagues were apparently not so well-received:

I have worked in factories where pervading smells obliterated body odours of fellow workers and usually they don’t bother me. I did work for one person who was pretty high. I don’t think he had a bath more than once a season. In one of the workshops we had an extract fan which was operated by a rotary switch with four positions: off – low

---

45 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, S2577 wrote ‘I have never needed a deodorant as I do not perspire very much, in fact very little. My friends have assured me that I do not have B.O!’.
– medium – high. Someone added a fifth position “Fred”. Fred didn’t appreciate the joke and his washing habits remained as before.47

‘Fred’s’ resistance to his colleagues prompting in this particular account reminds us of Skeggs’s claim that awareness and knowledge of what is deemed respectable do not always translate into adherence.48

The Mass Observation directive illustrates, perhaps most prominently, the consolidation of women’s roles as experts in matters of personal hygiene. Training started from childhood: female respondents recalled learning about the importance of good hygienic habits as part of school education and extra-curricular activities – such as within the setting of Domestic Science classes or in the Girl Guides.49 This knowledge was carried through into respondents’ adult roles in their capacities as care-givers and home-makers. Wives were often reported to have been pivotal agents in influencing the hygiene habits of male respondents. One sixty-five-year-old male respondent from Tunbridge Wells wrote, for example, ‘I think it was my wife who persuaded me to use an aftershave, a few years before she persuaded me to use a deodorant’.50

The purchase and gifting of personal hygiene items by female family members can also be viewed as part of a framework of caring and love, drawing on Daniel Miller’s conceptualisation of shopping as an exchange of love.51 Although this sometimes went unappreciated: ‘my wife once bought me an electric razor as a Christmas gift, and I tried hard to take to it, but I never felt really well shaved, and I always suspected that my face showed a dark stubble’.52

---

48 B. Skeggs, Formations of Class and Gender, p.98.
Victoria Kelley has discussed the historical roots which locate women’s cultural capital in their ability to be experts in cleanliness. Although Kelley recognises the second wave feminist argument that oppression is/was generated by women’s relegation to the home and the unpaid work of the domestic labour, she also acknowledges that it has been a ‘power base for much of the influence that women have been able to wield’.\textsuperscript{53} Expertise in personal hygiene has also allowed some women to move between public and private spheres, having both applicability to professional and domestic settings. One respondent, for example, demonstrated how she had capitalised on her authority as a hygiene expert in a very literal sense – applying her knowledge to running a household but also transferring this into her career as a lecturer on personal hygiene at a further education institution in Stockport.\textsuperscript{54} Skeggs emphasises the class dimension to the professionalisation of caring work. She discusses the institutionalisation of courses on ‘caring’ such as domestic science courses as part of a historical legacy reaffirming women’s responsibility as carers, as well as recognising how these courses can also have a productive power, particularly for working class women, for acquiring respectability and cultural capital.\textsuperscript{55}

Generational knowledge sharing between mothers and children maintained a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness principally because of its historical lineage. This was encapsulated in the line, ‘good clean youngsters as taught by their mother as taught by her mother’, as one respondent put it.\textsuperscript{56} Maternal figures were recognised by Mass Observers as vital in bestowing to younger generations the symbolic importance of cleanliness and its capacity to impact social status. As one respondent explained:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, R860.
\item \textsuperscript{55} B. Skeggs, Formations of Class and Gender, p.54.
\item \textsuperscript{56} M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, B1440.
\end{itemize}
My grandmother placed a high value on it because she associated dirt with being poor and common. For her, cleanliness was high class, so she strove for it to show she was a cut above.\(^{57}\)

Tom Crooks’s historical examination of personal hygiene in England demonstrates how rituals have formed around cultural notions of the historical progress of civilisation and is useful here in thinking about the long-lasting association between class distinction and cleanliness. Crook argues that the performance of personal cleanliness as a distinguishing characteristic of upper-classness was reinforced during the Victorian era, in which wealth and status became expressed not just through the regularity of bathing rituals but by the movement of bathing from public baths into the private sphere.\(^{58}\) Whilst experiences of washing practices were stratified along class lines at the start of the twentieth century, at the same time bathing was reconceptualised as a matter of national public health and therefore a responsibility for everyone, not just a luxury afforded by the top echelons of society.\(^{59}\) The maintenance of personal hygiene became intrinsically intertwined with religious, social and personal duties of citizenship: a means of demonstrating admirable qualities such as self-discipline, respect for others, honour and diligence as a functioning member of society.\(^{60}\) In this context, Crook asserts that ‘general norms of personal hygiene perhaps operated quietly and subtly, indeed habitually, to the extent that they became part of an unreflective – if still class-inflected – performance of body, mind and morals’.\(^{61}\) Lucy Delap has similarly traced a reframing of domestic chores as the duty of modern middle class housewifery in the interwar period. Housewives were encouraged to think of themselves as ‘leisured guardians of civilized culture, as a bulwark against national decline and population loss, or as making a civic, professional, or intellectual contribution to British


\(^{59}\) Ibid, p.256.

\(^{60}\) Ibid, p.266.

\(^{61}\) Ibid, pp.267-8.
national life’, although Delap argues this did not completely dislodge some middle class women’s sense of entitlement to domestic servants.62

Many Observers still echoed this understanding of good hygienic practice as symbolic of moral and ethical righteousness, repeating the English cleric John Wesley’s assertion that ‘cleanliness is next to Godliness’.63 The attachment of personal worth and distinctions of class to a clean appearance and smell were also evident in responses like:

And a great store was put upon washing necks as well as faces, “grubby round the neck” was a very derogatory remark and carried social stigma.64

A honking armpit is a bit like an uncultured voice to me.65

I take the view that personal hygiene is an important part of a person’s outlook on civilized life. It shows a level of self-esteem and consideration for good relationships… To have attended to personal hygiene and dress is a compliment paid to others.66

That a washed and groomed appearance could signify respectability, echoes Skeggs’s assertion that femininity was the ‘property of middle-class women who could prove themselves to be respectable through their appearance and conduct’.67

A number of respondents, however, also rejected the idea that upward social mobility was necessarily consistent with improved hygiene practices:

I think class plays a real part in this personal cleanliness business, and I think the lower middle classes are the cleanest. They are anxious to conform, to be respectable, that they are clean and honest to a degree. Just an idea… the upper middle and higher classes are not so bothered about the niceties, because they do not feel they have to prove or justify their status.68

---

67 B. Skeggs, Formations of Class and Gender, p.99.
References to the “great unwashed” meaning working class people was patronising and not necessarily true, but what was forgotten by better-off people was that it cost money to keep clean.69

This last response highlights the difficulties imposed on the reconciliation of hygiene consumption and financial constraint. According to Mass Observers, mothers’ and wives’ expertise in personal cleanliness involved not only maintaining high standards of personal hygiene within the household and passing this knowledge on, but also negotiating this alongside management of the household budget. This echoes Judy Giles’s assertion that shopping blurred the lines between work and leisure, as ‘modern housewives’ expertise in consumerism lay in being ‘skilled in budgeting but…equally adept at domestic creativity’.70 Resourcefulness, thrifting and frugality were valued particularly by those Observers who had grown up before and during the Second World War:

Cleanliness was damn hard work. Cleanliness was therefore a sign of more even than self respect, it was a proof of sheer energy. How did a woman with a troop of children and only a cold tap manage to send them to school with scrubbed hands and polished shoes?71

As the war progressed, soap became harder and harder to find in the shops, so Mother used to save all the slithers and press them together for re-use. Not a thing was wasted during the War and imaginative techniques were used to conserve the available resources.72

My mother, were she alive today would be 100; she was a country woman. One of a very large family (12 to be quite exact) and her father was a shepherd. As you can imagine money was scarce so, although they were not short on hygiene, only the most basic materials were used. This ethos was passed on by my mother to me.73

70 J. Giles, The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity (Berg: Oxford, 2004), pp.107-111 argues that the cultural valuing of women’s ability to be financially frugal is connected to the idea that financial extravagance is linked to unrestrained female sexuality.
Pride and respect manifested in keeping clean despite adversity, and doing it on next to nothing. The expertise of mothers, however, was not always unassailable. For a number of respondents, the inheritance of older generations’ grooming rituals was a mark of outmodedness and being able to participate in new styles of washing and bathing was a sign of modern teenage independence. This echoes Skeggs’s observation that ‘appearance, and more importantly, the autonomy to construct one’s appearance is a site of contestation between the projections of mother and daughter over who they think “she” is’. As one 71-year-old Observer from Scotland explained,

Like most teenage girls I was influenced in such things by the magazines I read – anything my mother had to say being old-fashioned!... I remember there used to be a slogan “are you a daily dipper?” I think it was put out by Lux. That was the first time it began to dawn on my sister and me that one should do such things. Most of our information came from magazines and from friends at the all girls school we attended.

Generational differences were emphasised by technological developments over the twentieth century. For example, Observers noted how the emergence of the tampon and of underarm deodorants had distinguished their experiences of personal hygiene consumption from their mothers. Mass marketing, commercial print culture and the rising popularity of television was also perceived to be at odds with traditional motherly advice. The notion that a mother’s expertise had been somewhat usurped by commercial sources in the later twentieth century was a concern shared by several respondents:

Today, of course, it is all thought out for them by advertising and T.V., but I still think it is mothers who are the best people to advise their children – particularly daughters. You then find the daughters influence their families.

---

74 B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, p.103.
76 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, P1743 discussed the tampon as ‘the great discovery of the century’; H260 discussed how deodorants did not exist for her generation; P1282 and P1500 used deodorants but could not remember their mothers using it; R1026 recalled the use of ‘dress shields’ before the availability of deodorant and R1321 suggested that few elderly women used deodorant even in 1992.
Since the teaching of habits to children in the family home seem to have been largely replaced by behaviour depicted on TV, it is not surprising that certain standards are slipping rather than rising.\(^{78}\)

It may be useful to reflect upon why, firstly, commercial sources of advice were framed as antithetical to advice shared through traditional kinship networks, and secondly what in particular was alarming to respondents about commercial sources of expertise more broadly. The proliferation of commercial marketing of hygiene products prompted many Mass Observers to suggest there had been a shift in attitudes to and definitions of cleanliness during the late twentieth century. In particular, advertising was thought to promote an artificial interpretation of cleanliness which put emphasis on appearance and smell, detaching the significance of cleanliness away from the sanitisation and purification of the body for reasons of health. This was reflected in testimonies such as:

Our society pays more attention these days to smelling clean and secondly being clean.\(^{79}\)

I have come across many people who appear to be clean outwardly but live in filth. They spend hours covering themselves in hairspray and perfume but will never clean the toilet or the grill pan! This reflects modern Western society where appearances are given more importance at the expense of quality of substance.\(^{80}\)

Commercially based advertising is basing the emphasis on toilet goods rather than people themselves becoming cleaner. The whole thing is one great big con!\(^{81}\)

At my age, I remember Personal Hygiene as being a matter of essential health-and-wholesomeness discipline, taught by one’s parents and absorbed into one’s routine of living. Today, though this element undoubtedly still exists, the principles of Personal Hygiene and the products available for its practice are increasingly governed by perceptions of social acceptability. Personal Hygiene has become yet another marketing battlefield… but maybe it’s our brains as well as our bodies that are being wash[ed], and I am sure for many of us, particularly the suggestible young, are using far too much of too many products on your lists in their fevered aspiration to become Socially Acceptable Through Sanitisation.\(^{82}\)

The first two of these responses demonstrate how smell and in particular the artificiality of perfume signified a distinction between ‘appearing’ clean and truly ‘being’ clean. Advertising was thought to endorse ‘products which cover up smells… in preference those which eliminate the causes’.\(^{83}\) The futility of aftershave was claimed by one observer purely to be ‘a vehicle for the makers of “stinkifiers” to rake in yet more money’.\(^{84}\) The masking of filth with smell was concerning to Mass Observers for two reasons: firstly, it denoted the profiteering of companies from products that had limited purpose. There was particular unease about the vulnerability of young generations to marketing messages in phrases like ‘the suggestible young’ in this last response.\(^{85}\) Whilst many respondents considered themselves impervious to advertising, children and young people were thought to be easily duped by false needs – as one respondent put it, advertisements were ‘drumming up young girls’ fears of being left on the shelf, advertisers will sell you anything it seems’.

Historically, feelings of anxiety around the vulnerability of young people has perpetually re-emerged alongside the development of technology and media. In the introduction to the third edition of his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen identified ‘a long history of moral panics about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms – comics and cartoons, popular theatre, cinema, rock music, video nasties, computer games, internet porn’.\(^{87}\) The responses suggest that commercial advertising could also be added to this list.

A number of respondents also identified health risks attached to the masking of the absence of cleanliness with artificial smell. The argument that society in 1992 was no cleaner than it had been in the past was thought to be evidenced by the recent proliferation of diseases

\(^{85}\) M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, J2520. See also S2271 who wrote ‘it is a great shame that generations of young people are being brain-washed into thinking there is something almost indecent about them’.
\(^{86}\) M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, A1473; R1452 suggested skills of critical analysis came with age: ‘I am not influenced by advertising. I used to be, but I have more sense in my old age’; B58, identified themselves as ‘highly resistant’ to advertising, as did B786.
\(^{87}\) S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The creation of the mods and rockers* 3rd Ed. (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2011), XIX.
and health concerns spread through poor hygiene practices. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, Legionella and a recent news story about a man who had caught polio from changing a baby’s nappy were all cited by Observers as evidence that although there may be increased awareness about how bacteria spread and greater accessibility to washing facilities, the general cleanliness of the population had not improved.  

Hair removal, however, blurred this distinction between being and appearing clean. Although hair removal was discussed mainly as having an aesthetic function, many observers associated a lack of hair removal with the absence of cleanliness. This echoed the conflation between hairlessness and hygiene by medical professionals explored in the previous chapter. For instance, as one observer put it:

No I do not think society is placing more emphasis on cleanliness… People have ears full of hair, nostrils full of hair, today battery operated hand machines can be bought to clear hair from ears and nostrils.

Proximity to women with hair also incited feelings of revulsion and disgust, explicated in responses like, ‘…have been known to share although unlike spray deodorant, stick kind means contact with other people’s skin so I suppose I could be put off by other people’s underarm hair’ and ‘ladies take great care to ensure that their armpits are clear of hair, which makes them nicer to stand near’. Thus despite the directive’s lack of explicit prompting to consider female hair removal, a number of Mass Observers did highlight the importance of it to their cleansing routines in response to the question ‘Which other products (not mentioned here) do you have

---

88 M-O Directive, ‘Personal Hygiene’, A1292 kept her toothbrush in her room when she had visitors as she was concerned about how AIDS spread; S1399 also identified AIDS as a concern; C108 discussed how Legionella virus was caused by ‘not clean enough showers’; The polio news story was mentioned by P1282 and A2212 who wrote, ‘people like to look clean, but there may be ignorance of what should really be done to promote healthy cleanliness’.


strong feeling about?’. The correlation between feeling clean and maintaining hairlessness was suggested in responses such as:

The only other item I couldn’t do without would be a razor (electric or wet) with which to shave under my arms and to shave my legs once a week. I wouldn’t feel at all clean with hairy underarms and legs.  

The only product I can think about that you haven’t mentioned that I feel strongly about is razors, I buy BIC disposable and would loathe to be without. I just can’t feel clean with hairy armpits and stubble on my legs.

As a marker of social distinction, parameters of national identity were also drawn around hair removal customs. This supports Elizabeth Shove’s assertion in her sociological work on cleanliness and comfort that ‘cleaning is the stuff of division and demarcation’. This was evidenced in the responses from a 43-year-old from Leamington Spa and a 63-year-old from Middlesex respectively:

I have a Spanish friend and one day last summer when she was wearing a sleeveless dress I noticed her hairy armpits! I do not think it is attractive, and I don’t know if she uses deodorant.

I think British people care more about hygiene and personal cleanliness. Partly through contact with Americans. Europeans do not have any greater emphasis than we do… I work for a German company and in Germany it is not thought necessary to shave ones armpits – which is I suppose something they were brought up to.

Britishness in this context, was defined in the viewing of foreign ‘other’. The notion that as a population, British people (and particularly ‘Englishness’ according to Skeggs) were more fastidious about cleanliness than other countries suggests a recycling of popular myth that Anne

McClintock argues has circulated as part of British imperialist discourse. McClintock argues that during the Victorian era, ‘cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain’s evolutionary superiority’, in turn, the cult of domesticity became indispensable to the consolidation of British national identity. Female body hair as a sign of foreignness and political radicalism was identified by one thirty-seven-year-old observer from Carlisle:

I always remember when I went to France when I was 14 and being absolutely incredulous when an attractive waitress serving our family a meal stretched her arm across the table to reach something and I saw a great thatch of under arm hair and a smell of sweat. I had never realised until then that often women in continental Europe did not shave under their arms. I met that resistance to deodorants and under arm shaving when I was at university amongst feminists who felt that to shave under their arms and to use deodorants was part of a male conspiracy to get women to conform to men’s images of clean cut airbrushed women.

The enduring symbolic power of body hair within representations of feminism will be explored in the final chapter. For now, the ‘Personal Hygiene’ directive shows how ‘being clean’ formed part of identity making, pertaining to respectable Britishness, dutifulness and ideal femininity. It also demonstrates how various forms of expertise in cleanliness were also divided and demarcated. Professional experts, friends, colleagues, maternal figures and commercial sources of advice were all important in structuring Observers’ understanding of what constituted ‘being clean’, although the reliability of these sources was often contested.

The Expertise of Magazines

The Personal Hygiene directive exemplified Skeggs’s and Black’s argument that social relationships and collective discussion formed the basis of many women’s understanding of

---

97 Ibid, p.207.
how to ‘pass’ as feminine. However, Mass Observers’ general scepticism of commercial sources of advice negates both Skeggs’s and Black’s recognition of the function of magazines in generating and disseminating knowledge about respectability and appropriateness.  

It would be useful therefore to explore the shared boundaries between social networks and magazines as spaces which set out to girls how body hair removal helped to perform and communicate ‘getting it right’ and respectability. Women’s and girls’ lifestyle magazines have been utilised by historians as a means of exploring how ideals of feminine performance have changed and/or remained consistent over time. Alisa Webb in her analysis of Girls’ Best Friend paper between 1898-99 argues that ‘girls’ magazines, whether past or current, are agents of socialisation, introducing or cementing dominant gender and class ideologies’. Similarly, Penny Tinkler frames magazines as ‘a prism through which to explore ideas about the teenage self and lifestyle’ at particular historical junctures. This section reflects on the different types of expertise on ‘getting it right’ that girls’ magazines offered its readers: in advertisements, letters pages and editorial content, to show how the importance of social relationships were woven into these spaces.

For this historical study of hair removal, I focus on one publication, Jackie, a commercial teen-girl lifestyle magazine which ran between 1964 and 1993. In its first ten years, Jackie became Britain’s biggest-selling teen magazine, attracting an audience with an average age between 10-14 years old. The youthfulness of its readership had significant impact upon the nature of its grooming advice. In contrast to publications like Cosmopolitan which targeted an elder teen demographic and took for granted readers’ basic grooming knowledge, Jackie saw

---

itself as a platform to introduce many concepts and codes of femininity. Angela McRobbie in her seminal analysis of Jackie, first published as a paper within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1978, highlighted how seriously the magazine took its role as an expert, adopting an approachable ‘older sister’ tone to its advice-giving.\textsuperscript{103} McRobbie argued that ‘Jackie introduce[d] the girl to adolescence, outlining its landmarks and characteristics’, and structuring its ideology around four main interlinking codes: the code of romance; the code of personal/domestic life; the code of fashion and beauty; the code of pop music.\textsuperscript{104} Beauty culture in Jackie was couched in terms of fun but also as a gateway to success; body maintenance and beautification rituals were key parts of this pursuit. Jackie offered a blueprint for what ‘getting it right’ looked like for girls growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, cultivation of the body was encouraged as a legitimate and valuable activity for all girls.

The examination of hair removal advice in Jackie shows two things. Firstly, the sustained importance of social networks in guiding consumption choices – evidenced by Jackie’s use of medical professionals, friends and beauty experts as vehicles to disseminate knowledge about methods and uses of hair removal. Secondly, Jackie also emphasised the role of hair removal in the construction of identity, and how investment in hair removal could afford readers cultural capital to allow them access to and participation in social activities. Jackie also spelled out the repercussions, social isolation and abjection, for not participating or getting it wrong. The magazine was explicit in its instructions when, why and where to depilate, outlining the occasions for which body hair management was most essential. In particular, these denoted any spaces with potential for romantic encounter. The remainder of this section identifies the occasions in which Jackie deemed hair removal appropriate: summer, special occasions and regular removal. The identification of times when hair removal was more appropriate fits with

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, p.83.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, p.93.
Skeggs’s suggestion that there is a ‘temporality to the sign of femininity’ as it cannot be constantly occupied.\textsuperscript{105} The segmentation of time in this manner was a useful marketing strategy – expanding selling opportunities through the promotion of products specific to bodily location, time of year, occasion or event. Consumption of hair removal thus became intricately tied to the passage of time, in terms of weekly routine, seasonality and changes of the life cycle. We might think about how women’s bodies are measurements of time more broadly, or, how time is demarcated through the body as a woman. In her study of women’s use of the beauty salon, Black similarly identifies that time is experienced in different ways by women, affecting their engagement with beauty culture. These include the ageing process (or the passage of lifetime), biographical ruptures or turning points like special occasions, designated time to the self and relaxation (seen as a luxury), and generational and cultural change.\textsuperscript{106}

Similarly, hair removal was represented to Jackie readers through a conceptualisation of time which resonated on a number of levels, denoting not only a physical transformation from hair to hairlessness, but symbolising the transition of growing up and moving into independent womanhood. Hair removal advertisements in Jackie also incorporated hair removal rituals into the idea of cultural and generational change for teen girls growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. This historical juncture has been characterised as a period of tumultuous disruption in regard to gender relations; in which traditional ideals of feminine fulfilment such as love, marriage and domesticity where arguably displaced by a new dynamic ideal of young womanhood predicated upon discourses of empowerment and independence. New opportunities were brought about by (amongst other things) the sexual revolution, educational reform, the provision of state welfare and the ongoing expansion of opportunity to enter into public spaces of work and leisure. However, the historical work of Tinkler, Langhamer, Dyhouse, Todd and

\textsuperscript{105} B. Skeggs, \textit{Formations of Class and Gender}, p.106.
\textsuperscript{106} P. Black, \textit{The Beauty Industry}, pp.52-65.
Young has encouraged us to re-evaluate the extent to which this experience was often mixed: the 1960s might have established a new age of independence for some teenage girls; for instance, an increased number left home to live independently, it became less exceptional to travel abroad alone, and the number of girls continuing with education into university also increased. But the age of marriage was still falling, especially amongst working class girls, and Todd and Young have argued that the majority of women ‘still tended to seek fulfilment within the family structure’.

*Jackie* demonstrates how parallel ideals of adolescent femininity in this period were mapped into the advice and guidance on female body hair removal and the body became a space on which these tensions played out. *Jackie*’s advice on body management presented a means for girls to navigate a sense of selfhood which oscillated between an expanding sense of freedom and independence on the one hand and the sustained importance given to conformity to traditional gender roles on the other. Immac’s advertisements within *Jackie* illustrated to girls how to navigate the new, dynamic ideal of young womanhood, and carve out an identity that balanced new aspirations of modern living alongside traditional values of feminine fulfilment.

**Summer Time**

According to McRobbie, the development of seasonal consumer spending in teenage girls’ magazines signified ‘a handy euphemism both for change and for the necessity of continually restocking the toilet bag’. *Jackie* magazine ran at least two articles every year between the

---


109 A. McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, p.120.
months of May and August encouraging hair removal as part of summertime body maintenance. Article titles such as ‘Be a Summer Stunner - Summer Count Down’ and ‘It’s time to Show a Leg!’, reminded readers to start preparing their body for imminent public exposure: ‘Now that summer’s nearly here, and you’ll soon be revealing all on the beach, you’ve got to be a really smooth operator!’\(^{110}\) Hair removal in these articles focused on two key areas: leg hair for ‘smoothness’ and underarm hair for ‘freshness’. These were often discussed separately and therefore called for individual attention, expanding the opportunity to sell products specific to each bodily site.

Underarm hair removal during summertime was particularly encouraged for reasons of hygiene – a paradigm which echoes the construction of cleanliness recognised by Mass Observers. ‘Cleanliness spells coolness’ explained a 1964 article entitled, ‘Cool Girls are Hot News!’\(^{111}\) Accompanying the advice that readers should take a bath and change their underwear daily, it was recommended that girls should ‘defuzz underarms as often as necessary to keep absolutely free of hair’.\(^{112}\) Underarm ‘de-fuzzing’ was framed as particularly crucial in the battle against body odour, also known as ‘the fight for freshness’, precipitated by hot weather.\(^{113}\) Whilst deodorants and anti-perspirants were the first line of defence, successful application of these products relied on precise preparation of the skin via hair removal. In ‘Cool Customers’, a Beauty Box article introducing readers to various brands of anti-perspirant, feminine and foot deodorants, Jackie instructed:

> But the secret of making any anti-perspirant or deodorant work properly is to apply it to a clean, dry skin, free of fuzz… Unless you use a product properly, you can’t expect it to do its job.\(^{114}\)


\(^{111}\) ‘Cool Girls are Hot News!’ *Jackie* (11th July 1964), 27, p.6.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.


\(^{114}\) ‘Cool Customers’ (20th May 1972), 437, p.31.
When one reader sent a letter to Jackie’s ‘Dear Beauty Editor’ problem page describing her problems using deodorant, the editor’s response was to remind her to ‘make sure underarms are kept fuzz-free’ in order for the deodorant to work. Not following these rules ran the risk of creating a reputation for carelessness, as the article ‘Here’s How to Hold off a Heatwave’ explained:

Let’s face it, if he’s not mad about you on sight, one embarrassing thing can put him right off before your romance has a chance of getting going! And one of the fastest putter-offers is the girl who looks good – til she’s within sniffing range...So, first de-fuzz, at night, so that your skin rests before you apply the deodorant, whether you cream or razor away your fuzz.

Leg hair removal was similarly discussed within the context of potential romance. Articles such as ‘Look After Your Legs – and He Will Too!’ and ‘Do Your Legs Rate a Wolf Whistle?’ encouraged leg hair depilation for ‘the girl who wants to dive in at the deep end and come out looking good enough to land the best bit of male talent’. Whilst hairy legs risked being labelled as masculine: ‘O.K for footballers, but not for her! ’; hairless legs were thought to accentuate a ‘long, lean’ look as well as assist with tanning. The embodiment of ‘smoothness’ in this context signified both the attainment of the feminine ideal and opened up opportunities for potential flirtations with boys as girls become ‘smooth operators’. To ‘be a smoothie’ or a ‘smooth operator’ in this context denoted being smooth-bodied, flipping the conventional understanding of ‘smoothie’ to mean ‘smooth-talker’, often applied in descriptions of men’s

---

115 ‘Dear Beauty Editor’ Jackie (19th June 1965), 76, p.18.
116 ‘Here’s How to Hold Off a Heatwave’ Jackie (20th July 1968), 237, p. 6.
117 ‘Look After Your Legs – and He Will Too!’ Jackie (5th June 1965), 74, p.8; ‘Do Your Legs Rate a Wolf Whistle?’ Jackie (24th July 1965), 81 p.6; ‘Sun Time Fun Time’ Jackie (1st June 1968), 230, p.6.
118 ‘Look After Your Legs – and He Will Too!’ Jackie (5th June 1965), 74, p.8; ‘Do Your Legs Rate a Wolf Whistle?’ Jackie (24th July 1965), 81, p.6; ‘Shake a Leg for Summer’ Jackie (15th June 1968), 232, p.8, emphasises how leg hair comes ‘between you and a gorgeous tan’.
119 ‘No Fuss – No Fuzz!’ Jackie (13th May 1972), 436, p.15, instructed ‘now that summer’s nearly here, and you’ll soon be revealing all on the beach, you’ve got to be a really smooth operator!’.
flirtatious chatter. The parallel meanings of ‘smoothness’ demonstrates how whilst male desirability is often located in their skill as orators, female desirability lay in their bodies.\textsuperscript{120}

Very little mention was given to hair removal around the pubic region in Jackie’s summer issues. When it was referred to this was in vague terms like ‘the above-the-knee’ area.\textsuperscript{121} Certainly, Jackie did not promote extensive pubic hair removal. As one ‘Dear Doctor’ reply explained in 1978 when one reader enquired ‘why it is thought strange to remove pubic hair’: ‘I think mainly because pubic hair is as natural as the hair on our heads and there’s really no reason to shave it’.\textsuperscript{122} The perceived ‘naturalness’ of pubic hair as opposed to leg or underarm hair which did necessitate removal, highlights the signification of pubic hair as sexual in contrast to other sites of female body hair. The dismissal of pubic hair removal as an appropriate grooming ritual for Jackie readers, sits comfortably within what McRobbie identifies as the magazine’s conservative and often evasive approach to sex and sexuality.\textsuperscript{123}

Although romance was framed as serious and important, sexual problems were deemed unacceptable for the age-group of Jackie’s readership, in turn, the magazine persistently advised ‘pubic hair should be left alone’.\textsuperscript{124}

Instructions for summer underarm and leg hair removal remained largely consistent in Jackie between 1964 – 1979. In 1980 however, the magazine re-evaluated its stance on hair removal creating a distinctive shift in tone in a May edition of Beauty Box: ‘Is Your Body Beautiful: Countdown to Summer!’ The article explained:

A few years ago, there was no question about it – surplus hair was considered unattractive and offensive and was always removed. However, on the Continent, for instance, body hair such as underarm hair has always been looked upon as natural and even attractive, and often is not removed at all. This is very much a personal thing and

\textsuperscript{120} See also, ‘Beauty Box: Be a Smoothie’ Jackie (12th June 1976), 649, p.5; ‘Beauty Box: Are you a Smoothie?’ Jackie (17th June 1978), 754, p.13.
\textsuperscript{121} ‘Don’t Be a Comic When You Strip!’ Jackie (18th July 1970), 341, p.6.
\textsuperscript{122} ‘Dear Doctor’ Jackie (11th March 1978), 740, p.28.
\textsuperscript{123} A. McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, p.110.
\textsuperscript{124} ‘What Every Girl Should Know…’ Jackie (5th August 1972), 448, p.5.
there’s no reason why you should remove underarm, leg or surplus facial hair, unless, of course, you feel more confident that way.\textsuperscript{125}

This emphasis on personal choice was similarly echoed in a ‘Cathy and Claire’ special, featuring Jackie’s resident agony aunts. Instead of their usual column answering readers’ questions, a feature entitled ‘Things Your Mother Never Told You!’ sought to myth-bust certain popularly held opinions about feminine ideals.\textsuperscript{126} Both the title and the inclusion of Cathy and Claire as respected and intimate confidents, is suggestive of Jackie’s desire to undermine the expertise associated with generational knowledge-sharing which might potentially promote ‘old-fashioned’ views on young womanhood. Alongside the revelation that ‘marriage can be miserable’, it stated ‘hairy girls are nice’:

Don’t get the idea that body hair isn’t quite nice. It’s natural. You may decide, in summer maybe, that you want to remove hair from your legs or under your arms, but if you don’t feel you want to, don’t worry about it. There are lots of different ways of being beautiful and attractive, and natural bodily hair can be very beautiful if you feel you like it.\textsuperscript{127}

The broadening out of Jackie’s typically-rigid grooming advice is curious. The change in tone is suggestive of a rupture with the hairless feminine ideal occurring in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Pharmaceutical trade journals similarly observed a fluctuation in the popularity of hair removal goods some years prior to Jackie’s attitude reversal. Retail Chemist reported in September 1976 that the depilatory market in Britain had for the last four years been static, ‘if not slightly declining’, only for the record hot summer of 1976 to spark a thirty-nine percent increase in the sales of Immac depilatory cream.\textsuperscript{128} Chemist and Druggist speculated in 1977 that the drop in sales of depilatory products over the last couple of years

\textsuperscript{125} ‘Countdown to Summer’ Jackie (24\textsuperscript{th} May 1980), 855, p.13.
\textsuperscript{126} ‘Things Your Mother Never Told You’ Jackie (3\textsuperscript{rd} May 1980), 852, pp.10-11.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, p.11.
\textsuperscript{128} ‘Depilatories: A Growth’ Retail Chemist (23\textsuperscript{rd} September 1976), Wallgreen Boots Alliance Archive (WBA), Nottingham.
had been prompted by two social transformations: firstly, the expansion of affordable travel overseas and the discovery that ‘continental ladies’ did not shave (echoing the surprise of some of the Mass Observers). Secondly, the influence of feminist politics described as ‘a time of rampant bra burning, [which] caused many ladies to go natural and leave hair to grow as it would’.¹²⁹ There are parallels here with Mass Observers’ association of women’s body hair with political and national identity-production. Any potential ‘continental’ or ‘feminist’ influence on Jackie’s stance on hair removal were however, short lived. By September 1980 – four months after the magazine’s calls for readers to be more open-minded about their body hair – Jackie’s Beauty Box reverted back to a stance of immutable smoothness:

Ok, so lots of liberated ladies have been letting their hair down recently, but if you’ve been removing hair from legs and underarms all summer, don’t stop now just because you’re about to go undercover for winter. Keep softly smooth whatever the weather.¹³⁰

Not only was the summer time requirement for hairlessness reinstated then, but readers were further urged to extend their depilation practices beyond seasonal grooming. For a very brief moment expectations of female hairlessness were brought into question. But the incongruity of this with Jackie’s emphasis on consumption and the stakehold that hair removal brands like Immac, Jolen, Nair, Buto and Dhaussy had by buying advertising space, helped to quickly re-establish traditional ideals of hairlessness. Fundamentally, Jackie’s temporary relaxation around hair removal in 1980 suggests the magazine grappled with the cultural changes of the decade, particularly around femininity and beauty ideals. It does seem to imply second wave feminism, or ‘liberated ladies’ to use Jackie’s rhetoric, had long-reaching impact upon attitudes to and participation in hair removal towards the late 1970s. An examination of Jackie’s next circumstance that precipitated hair removal - special occasions – further demonstrates the magazine’s attempt to negotiate new parameters of liberation and independence for young

¹²⁹ ‘Hair Apparent or Not?’ Chemist and Druggist (11th June 1977), WBA Archive, Nottingham.
women, whilst it simultaneously maintained traditional, heteronormative ideals of domesticity and femininity.

**Special Occasions**

Although summer time occasioned the most consistent prompt to readers to depilate, any circumstance in which the body would be ‘on show’ called for increased body maintenance. Going out, dating and parties, specifically at Christmas, New Year’s Eve and Valentine’s Day were prominent dates in the hair removal calendar. This echoes Skeggs’s suggestion that ‘the putting on of femininity’ is often done as part of an occasion, a signification of heterosexuality, as well as the sense of collectivity from belonging to and using of social space.\(^{131}\) Jackie’s beauty features promoted fore-thought and careful planning in preparation for these events. For instance, articles would instruct readers to:

- Start a special beauty routine before that Feb 14 party or dance, and show the boys just how pretty you can be…\(^{132}\)
- Keep legs sleek ‘n’ smoothie by defuzzing once a week…do all this now and you’ll be ready to really step it out and swing this Christmas.\(^{133}\)
- The prettiest girls at Christmas parties know it’s the couple of hours beforehand that guarantee success or failure… you ought to have removed superfluous underarm hair the day before of course, so that you can safely use an anti-perspirant without it stinging.\(^{134}\)

The intertwining of body maintenance with the prospect of romance in these articles demonstrate what McRobbie argues is Jackie’s ideology of girlhood.\(^{135}\) It also highlights how social events were conceptualised in Jackie as sites both of leisure and work. Specifically,

---

\(^{132}\) ‘Take Heart’ *Jackie* (12 February 1972), 423, p.6.
\(^{133}\) ‘Do your Leg Work Now!’ *Jackie* (31\(^{st}\) October 1964), 43, p.6.
\(^{134}\) ‘Jackie Beauty Box: Christmas Countdown’ *Jackie* (23\(^{rd}\) December 1972), 468, p.6.
\(^{135}\) A. McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, p.95.
going out required body work like hair removal preceding the event, and also required a performative labour at the event itself to ‘show the boys just how pretty you can be’. This supports the idea that, for girls, ‘leisure in their “single” years is especially important because it is here that their future is secured. It is in this sphere that they go about finding a husband and thereby sealing their fate’.

In order to become desirable to the opposite sex, Jackie reinforced the idea that girls needed to become ‘nice’. ‘Niceness’ in this context, echoes Skeggs’s paradigm of respectability as a marker of social value and legitimacy. Becoming ‘nice’ signified the conformity to ideals of femininity both in terms of appearance and demeanour. In the 1972 Beauty Box article ‘Nice Girls Do… Nice Girls Don’t…’ for example, Jackie explicitly set out the hidden labour required to attain ‘niceness’. It explained,

Everyone thinks they’re a nice girl, but do you really make the grade? Nice to know, nice to kiss, nice to be seen around with? The girls who look their best spend ages on the things that don’t always show, but they know it’s not a waste of time – people don’t need to look twice to recognise the nice girls.

Things ‘nice girls’ did revolved around embodiment, including ‘smell pretty all the time’ and ‘keep their figures slim and trim’. ‘Nice girls don’t…’ it clarified, ‘look scruffy or untidy’ or ‘have superfluous hair’, thus proceeding to outline the different methods available to readers to achieve the hairless ideal. Jackie’s distinction-making between nice, desirable girls and undesirable girls through aspects of their appearance, exemplifies what Skeggs has identified as the conflation between respectable, middle-class femininity and bodily containment. This is significant considering Jackie’s emphasis on what McRobbie calls ‘a class-less, race-less

---

136 *Take Heart* Jackie (12 February 1972), 423, p.6.
137 A. McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, p.89.
138 B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, pp.100-103.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, p.100.
sameness’. Despite Jackie’s commitment to a sense of prevailing classlessness amongst its readership, the distinction making in its grooming advice demonstrates how boundaries of respectability were implicated through its calls for body modification.

Part of the discourse of ‘niceness’ encompassed Jackie’s recommendation of depilatory creams over other removal methods. Creaming was presented as a ‘much nicer, more feminine method and the re-growth isn’t so stubbly’. One article suggested that the only legitimate use of a razor would be in a social emergency: ‘if the phone rings, and you’ve invited out unexpectedly in ten minutes’ occasioning the need to ‘borrow dad’s razor for once’.

Consequently, bleach and depilatory creams were almost exclusively the only method of hair removal which held advertising space in Jackie between 1964-1980. A specific marketing strategy for depilatory brands as, according to the trade journal Retail Chemist, the greatest usage of depilatory creams occurred in the 16-18 age category in 1976. Hair removal creams were often marketed as better suited to younger consumers due to being gentler, kinder and causing less damaging consequences to skin compared to other removal methods. Brands such as Nair, Bu-to and Veeto maintained the sense of a seasonal requirement of hairlessness with explicit advertising only present within the summer issues of the magazine. Immac however, the leading brand of depilatory cream, kept a sustained advertising presence throughout the year in Jackie, often tailoring its adverts to tally with activities and special occasions around the annual social calendar.

I want to spend a moment exploring the depiction of hair removal in these series of Immac advertisements. Specifically, I consider the ways in which Immac presented the

---

143 A. McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, p.83.
146 See for example, ‘Beauty Editor’ Jackie (12th September 1964), 36, p.7, which explains ‘Next time you defuzz, why not try a removing cream like Immac or Bu-to? They are very easy to use and the hairs don’t grow in so quickly as they are removed from underneath the skin’; ‘Shake a Leg for Summer!’ Jackie (15th June 1968), 232, p.8 states ‘But – put down that razor, please! What with scratches and scrapes and bits off here and there I’m sure you could find less painful ways to slim your legs!’.
visibility of superfluous hair as a signifier of social undesirability; how it could not only hasten social isolation but impact upon feelings of value and self-worth. The ritual of hair removal was thus framed as ‘producing’ girls’ identity in multiple ways. Firstly, it was a portrayal of the ‘putting on’ of respectable femininity to paraphrase Skeggs. Secondly, it also denoted the transition from girl into womanhood both in the physical sense of maturation and by conceptualising the choice to consume Immac as a signifier of increased autonomy and expression of independence. Thirdly, the transitionary process of hair removal also reflected Immac’s own conceptualisation of social change in the 1970s. Immac intertwined hair removal with the lifestyle and opportunities of the ‘modern seventies teen’: the girl who shopped, who dated, who worked, who socialised used Immac. The advertisements in effect show the negotiation of social transformations of the period alongside attachment to traditional norms of heterosexual romantic fulfilment and middle-class femininity.

Each Immac advert depicted a story arc loosely based around a teenage girl, embarrassed by her body hair, who discovers Immac thus transforming her body, confidence and social status. In effect, the adverts replicated for Jackie’s readership the process of getting the embodiment of hairlessness ‘right’. The format of the Immac advertisements mirrored the comic book style illustrations that accompanied the romance stories regularly published in Jackie between 1964 and 1980. The scenarios portrayed in the adverts reflected the aspirational, recreational activities of any Jackie reader: for instance, clothes shopping, a holiday, a disco, cheerleading practice, going to work, to the sports club, or a date. The coverture of their presentation assisted in blurring the divides between fantasy, instructive guidance and promotional advertising. Immac’s tagline, ‘the feminine way to remove unwanted hair’ stressed the notion that getting it right involved not just the outcome: the hairless ideal; but undertaking the process using the right and most ‘feminine’ methods. The recurrent underlying theme of

---

each storyline was the threat of missing out or risking social isolation by doing hair removal ‘wrong’ or not doing it at all. This threat of exclusion was made clear with titles such as, ‘I Never Wore A Short Dress’, ‘Jenny Never Joins In The Fun’, ‘No I Can’t Come To The Party’ and ‘They All Have Fun Except Me’.

Feelings of shame and shyness around being different were often made explicit in the protagonists’ confessions to their friends about their body hair. In ‘Lindy Square Eyes’, for instance, ‘Lindy’ resisted her friend’s encouragement to go out claiming, ‘But I’m so shy – It’s because of my legs, they’re all rough and hairy’.

Similarly, in ‘It’s Only Rock’n Roll’, when the protagonist is asked by her friend what she will be wearing to the ‘Rock’n Roll party’, she admits, ‘I suppose it’ll have to be jeans again… I’m too ashamed of my legs they’re all rough and hairy’. Sara Ahmed’s examination of the lived experience of shame highlights how the feeling is often expressed as and through a turning away from others in the way that these adverts depicted. Ahmed’s assertion that ‘shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence’ also applies here, as we witness the two protagonists acknowledgement of their failure to live within the conventions of ideal femininity.

Modern girlhood was conceptualised by participation in social life which extended beyond parties and into the workplace. In ‘They All have Fun Except Me’, two young female colleagues discussed the firm’s sports amenities. In response to an invitation to the sports club, ‘Mary’ the central character replied, ‘I’d love to come. But I’m so embarrassed by my underarm hair’. In this example, Immac sold not just hair removal cream but modernity – it set up an aspirational future for Jackie readers in which the modern girl was the working girl, emulating

---

151 ‘It’s Only Rock’n Roll’ Jackie (7th January 1978), 731, p.10.
154 ‘They All Have Fun Except Me’, p.10.
Dyhouse’s assertion that ‘for this new generation, work seemed to offer space for personal development and independence’.\textsuperscript{155}

The attachment of modernity to Immac usage was made even more explicit in the advert entitled ‘Old Fashioned Girl’.\textsuperscript{156} The advert conveyed the ideal image of contemporary girlhood – two friends at the shopping centre signalled disposable income, and the expansion of shopping as a leisure pursuit. When one fears she cannot participate in the latest fashion trends because of her hairy legs, the implication is that without Immac, her identity will become ‘old-fashioned’ both in her clothing style and in the sense that she will be unable to transition into this new era of independence and autonomy. The enduring importance of the friend in these scenarios as the confident and source of advice is pivotal here to Immac’s portrayal of authenticity. Most frequently, it was through the central character’s confession to a trusted friend of her problem, and the friend’s suggestion of ‘don’t shave – use Immac’ that initiated transformation. For example, ‘The Going was Rough at First’ chronicled the story of Jane, who ‘wants to leave home to live with her best friend Alice in London’.\textsuperscript{157} The scenario demonstrates Immac’s engagement with the normalisation of female independent living as an important aspect of growing up for some young women in the 1970s. Tinkler suggests that this type of engagement was in part prompted by reports from the late 1950s onwards, ‘of a rising number of young single women leaving home to work, and, to a lesser degree, acknowledgement of women leaving home to study’, although many studies suggest this trend was class-specific.\textsuperscript{158} In the advert, Jane’s parents were upset – anxious she might be too young and inexperienced to live away from home. Jane decided to prove them wrong by seeking the help of her glamorous friend Alice, who showed her the advantages of using Immac. Jane returned to her parents with news that she had a new job now that she ‘looked just the sort they

\textsuperscript{155} C. Dyhouse, \textit{Girl Trouble}, p.160.
\textsuperscript{156} ‘Old Fashioned Girl’ \textit{Jackie} (10th January 1976), 627, p.20.
\textsuperscript{157} ‘The Going was Rough at First’ \textit{Jackie} (1st April 1978), 743, p.10.
\textsuperscript{158} P. Tinkler, ‘Are you Really Living?’, p.605.
wanted’. Her parents were delighted – she demonstrated, with help from Immac, that she was a ‘grown girl’. Hair removal in this context was intertwined with becoming independent and growing up respectfully. The use of the friendly advice-giver also demonstrated Immac’s recognition of consumers’ scepticism around advertising as a source of dependable knowledge and expertise. Instead, it keyed into the importance put upon friendship with Jackie’s branding more broadly. Girlhood friendships in this instance were conceptualised as a space for intimacy but also as vital in helping to structure definitions of the self. This resonates with Alison Winch’s conceptualisation of girlfriendship and interpersonal relationships more generally as policers of the boundaries of acceptability and appropriateness.

Despite Immac’s investment in narratives of modern living, it also sustained conventional codes of heterosexual romance. This shows a grappling with old and new, highlighting the sustained importance of traditional conceptualisations of girlhood aspirations in tandem with the modern. Notable because of their frequency, are the number of scenarios that conclude with the main female character – newly transformed and hairless – being the subject of the male gaze. The takeaway message is that liberation, freedom and confidence are all worthwhile outcomes, but romance is of course what everyone is after. The adverts reinforce Jackie’s definition of adolescence as a time to ‘catch a man’ in preparation for marriage and the interpretation is that the Immac user gets the man of Jackie readers’ dreams. For Jackie’s girls, ‘getting it right’ meant acquiring the expertise, skills and knowledge to negotiate aspirations for independent living and empowerment, at the same time girlhood identity remained underpinned by conventional ideals of heterosexual romance and conventional ideals of feminine appearance.

159 ‘The Going was Rough at First’ Jackie (1st April 1978), 743, p.10.
Regular Removal

Jackie’s insistence on the removal of hair for summer and special occasions constructed the requirement to depilate around the public exposure of skin and basic hygiene practice. However, for a number of sites of ‘embarrassing’ body hair, the magazine prompted regular routine removal throughout the year, whether the hair was concealed or not. Facial hair, nipple hair, hair on the stomach and upper thigh chiefly became defined as ‘problems’. This was ultimately emphasised by their relegation to the magazine’s problem pages and advice columns: ‘Dear Beauty Editor’ and ‘Dear Doctor’. The fact that letters about body hair concerns were featured regularly in both the ‘Dear Doctor’ and the ‘Dear Beauty Editor’ columns denotes the positioning of body hair as both a cosmetic flaw and a medical worry. It reflects what was identified at the beginning of this chapter as the mutability of body hair removal as both a beauty practice and an aspect of personal hygiene.

The ‘Dear Doctor’ column, launched in 1972, was a dedicated space in the magazine ‘where all your most personal health problems are answered sympathetically by a doctor who understands young girls’ worries’.161 Winship delineates how problem pages have served as both enjoyment and reassurance for readers, ‘observing problems which are blessedly not yours… [or] that you are not alone with your problems, that really you’re alright’.162 In the ‘Dear Doctor’ column, issues with body hair were constructed earnestly around dealing with feelings of abnormality. Readers would often recount situations in which body hair had made them the target of social isolation. For example, one reader explained, ‘The boy I was dating until last week was always teasing me about having a “moustache” and needing a “shave”.

162 J. Winship, Inside Women’s Magazines, p.77.
am terribly hurt and worried as a result’. Letters to the ‘Beauty Ed’ often highlighted the embarrassment of having dark body hair, in questions like:

I have very hairy arms and this embarrasses me when I wear short-sleeved dresses… what can I do to prevent it?164

My arms are covered with dark hairs and I also have a bit of a “moustache”. This is very embarrassing and I wondered if I should shave them off?165

I have the really embarrassing problem of having thick dark hairs that are extremely noticeable all over my arms.166

The core response from Jackie’s experts was to persuade readers of the normalcy of body hair:

There is nothing abnormal about having hairs around your nipples. In fact, most women have these, it is all part of growing up.167

…but be careful, though, and remember, you are not unusual, but a very normal female.168

First of all, it’s perfectly natural to have a fine “down” all over your body, including the face and top lip.169

I know you’re not going to like this – but the only answer is to learn to accept yourself – hair and all. I know you are very self-conscious about this and think you’re the only girl in the world with so much unwanted hair. Take comfort from the fact that we all have hair – all over – this is just natural and it is more obvious when hair is dark.170

The advice to simply ‘accept yourself’ seems incongruous to Jackie’s persistent call for girls to work on their bodies in the beauty features and advertisements that the rest of this section has focused on. The overriding assumption that with time, anxieties about one’s body hair would dissipate, suggested that bodily acceptance correlated to ageing and maturity. The problem with body hair was, in this instance, framed in terms of a problem with individual

165 ‘Dear Beauty Editor’ Jackie (18 September 1965), 89, p.9.
168 ‘Dear Doctor’ Jackie (18th September 1976), 663, p.25.
mindset rather than a societal pressure around body ideals. This call for readers to work on their sense of self, however, was often juxtaposed by a rundown of the various methods readers could use to remove the hair that embarrassed them.\footnote{For example, in answer to the reader’s letter about being teased about her moustache, the ‘doctor’ replied, ‘I feel if your boy-friend packs you up because of hairs on your upper lip…he wasn’t worth having anyway. However I know you must now be very sensitive about the problem. There are various cream and wax depilatories which can be used to remove these unwanted hairs…’ Jackie (5th February 1972), 422, p.26.} This conflict between conformity and resistance to body hair removal, and the feelings of guilt and shame it can manifest will be explored in further depth in Chapter Five.

Finally, straddling the divide between special occasion and routine hair removal was the allocation of time for pampering. The bathroom and the beauty salon were identified in Jackie as spaces in which time to the self was connected to the idea of escapism, self-love and indulgence. The divide between work and leisure became further blurred in this context, as pampering was discussed as part of one’s personal betterment rather than labour in the pursuit to ‘catch a man’, (although these objectives of course were somewhat blurred). Whereas McRobbie suggested this shift toward a ‘focus on the self’ took place within girls’ magazines in the 1980s, hair removal guidance in Jackie demonstrates such an emphasis was present in 1960s and 1970s beauty and grooming advice.\footnote{A. McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, p.183.} For instance, articles such as ‘Bath Time Can Bring a Beauty Bonus’, ‘Twenty Ways to Beat A Rainy Evening’ and ‘Spare a While for the Personal File’ reframed regular bathing and body maintenance in terms of ‘special’ treatment, combining cleansing with relaxation.\footnote{‘Bath Time can Bring a Beauty Bonus’ Jackie (16th January 1965), 54, p.10; ‘Twenty Ways to Beat a Rainy Evening’ Jackie (13th January 1968), 210, p.22; ‘Spare a While for the Personal File’ Jackie (20th January 1968), 211, p.7.}

In August 1976, the article ‘Splash Out!’ encouraged readers to take time out of their week to pamper themselves by taking a bath. This was at a time when having a bathroom might be a relatively new phenomenon for some. It explained,

> There’s nothing better than a bath to make you feel really great. Especially after a long hot day. Linger in a deliciously scented tub and pamper yourself with perfumed oils...
and lotions to make your skin feel really good. Bath time can leave you feeling really beautiful if you take the time to enjoy it!\textsuperscript{174}

Pampering as a pursuit became accessible to girls in this way, regardless of income or inability to visit a salon. It also intersected feeling good with the process of cleansing, promoting the idea of fulfilment through sanitisation of the body. What distinguished a pampered bath from a typical bath, the article suggested, was allowing for extra time - ‘lingering’ or ‘taking’ the time to enjoy it. In addition, it was made more luxurious because it involved the consumption of more products; the article advised a selection of creams, oils, bath salts and sponges. A luxury ‘pamper’ therefore, although framed in terms of respite actually required extra work encompassing more products and grooming practices:

This is the time you can take a good look at yourself and do all sorts of things like manicuring your hands and giving your feet a good pedicure, removing superfluous hair from underarms and legs and treating any rough patches of skin.\textsuperscript{175}

Despite emphasising the contrast between a routine bath and a pampered bath time, the hair removal process described in ‘Splash Out!’ was remarkably similar in its mundanity to the depilation process described on any other occasion.

**Conclusion**

As a ritual that spanned across both beauty culture and personal hygiene practice, female body hair removal was embedded within cultural frameworks of ideal femininity and respectability. Skeggs’s and Black’s work has demonstrated how the ‘putting on’ of femininity gains cultural capital and status for women – the containment and refinement of the body (such as the removal

\textsuperscript{174} 'Splash Out!' *Jackie* (7\textsuperscript{th} August 1976), 657, p.5.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
of body hair) is a sign of class identity and taste. The Mass Observers in this chapter have demonstrated how a sense of ‘good’ personal hygiene was intimately connected to perceptions of racial, national, gendered and classed identities, and showed how the presence of female body hair was implicated within frameworks of radicalism and foreignness. Jackie magazine further illustrated through its beauty advice and guidance how hairlessness related to desirability through its references to ‘niceness’. It was not simply the end result of hairlessness that signified respectability, but how and when the ritual of hair removal was performed, for which it gave detailed instruction.

This chapter has also explored the way in which sources of advice are mediated through texts and networks to help structure the consumption of hair removal products in the twentieth century. The Mass Observation responses illustrate the sustained importance of social relationships at work, home and in the community that shaped their knowledge of what it meant to be clean. Women in particular, were regarded as ‘experts’ in this field, with a number of Observers criticising the inauthenticity of commercial sources of advice in comparison to mothers and wives. The importance of social relationships as advice-giving networks was also understood by Jackie, demonstrating a dialogic relationship between networks and texts. The magazine disseminated many of its marketing messages about hair removal through people: the friendly advice-giving within Immac adverts, The Dear Doctor column and agony aunts Cathy and Claire.

Finally, the examination of hair removal advice in Jackie between 1964 and 1980 shows a grappling with change to conceptualisations of modern girlhood. The magazine’s recognition of new freedoms and aspirations of its young readers was often juxtaposed with the reinforcement of traditional codes of femininity and adherence to cultural beauty norms. In the following chapter, we pick up the theme of turbulence between old and new in the 1970s, to
explore what changing attitudes to pubic hair might reveal about sex after the sexual revolution in Britain.
4. THE EROTICS OF HAIRLESSNESS: SEX AND PUBIC HAIR REMOVAL C. 1974-2010

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore how pubic hair removal became integrated within sexual discourses and female heterosexual identity-production in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. In the previous chapter, I explored how female body hair removal has become a critical part of the embodiment of middle-class femininity. The removal of pubic hair however, somewhat complicates this framework in its capacity to both signify gender and sexual identity, as my oral history participant, Lydia, described:

I don’t feel the same about pubic hair because um… and we’re all in a massive moral panic about paedophilia aren’t we and all of that stuff, it brings all that back. You know, so… I would never do it. I mean I’ll shave it so that it doesn’t show off you know if I’m wearing a swimming costume you know but that’s it, I wouldn’t do anymore.¹

Lydia drew a distinction between bikini line depilation for reasons of public modesty and extensive pubic hair removal which she associated with the sexualisation of pre-pubescent bodies. Pubic hair’s proximity to the genital area, to the ‘private’ and intimate body, results in extensive labour being read not as conformity to ideals of beauty but as sexual and intimate labour imbued with moral significance that other sites of depilation are not.² Pubic hair’s capacity to (at different times and in different contexts) shock and disgust, arouse, or produce laughter captures its liminal positioning in the social imagination. It prompts us to question

¹ Present Author, Interview with Lydia, (2016).
how sexual behaviour and identity of women are still regulated through the organisation of categories of respectability and transgression.

With a focus on sex after the ‘sexual revolution’ in Britain, this chapter spans the period identified by various sociologists and cultural philosophers as a period of transformation of intimacy in Britain caused by a contested list of factors such as: the loosening of ties between sex and reproduction; the ‘democratisation’ or ‘pluralisation’ of family life to incorporate sexual diversity; a rise in individualisation, a re-framing of risk and the commercialisation of the erotic.³ Many histories of moral and sexual change in twentieth century Britain have been assembled via official records, survey-data and the accounts of disputes taking place in court rooms, the tabloid press and lobbying factions.⁴ Frank Mort’s work has prompted historians to move beyond ‘over-generalized accounts of permissiveness’, specifically by taking seriously the paradoxes that circulated within ‘particularities of power, institutions, people and settings’.⁵ David Geiringer’s study of the Catholic Church for instance has built on this premise, arguing that internal communications within the Church records show a reconciliation of and engagement with ideas of sexual liberation, thus complicating our understanding of the role of the Church as a reactionary force within communities.⁶ Ben Mechen’s exploration of Alex Comfort’s sex manual *The Joy of Sex* similarly addresses the contradictions between visions of sexual liberalisation and more normative conceptualisations of pleasure within one text.⁷

---

I use pubic hair removal as a case study to explore the changing significance of the body in the discussion and experience of sexual interaction and erotic pleasure in the late twentieth century. The study of pubic hairlessness brings together a number of these lines of enquiry dedicated to exploring the transformation of sex in ‘late modernity’. Most notably however, the recent trend of extensive pubic hair removal amongst young women in Britain has been discussed in reference to (and as evidence of) the damaging impact of what has been termed the ‘sexualisation of culture’. Feminist media scholar Feona Attwood describes in more detail what this umbrella term indicates about changes to ‘mainstream’ popular culture:

A contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex.

This shift to greater openness around sex has simultaneously also been conflated with ‘pornographication’ of culture, or the mainstreaming of pornographic discourse. There was a common recognition amongst my oral history participants that complete removal of pubic hair was evidence of this phenomenon, as a standard convention of contemporary heterosexual pornographic imagery that had since become a normalised part of sexual behaviour of young people. Emily, for example, articulated:

And I get like...I don’t know, like people say, ‘oh it’s from pornography... like in pornography’. The women are all... they haven’t got any hair and things. But then that had to come from...like, where did that come from? Because that’s not always been the case.

---

12 Present author, Interview with Emily, (2016).
Pubic hair removal and its associations with pornography has meant that consistently the practice has been framed in public and scholarly debate through anti/pro rhetoric, building on the polarised feminist ‘sex wars’ discussions of the 1980s. Recently however, scholars of sexual culture have called for and worked towards moving beyond this ‘stagnation’, to explore how sexualisation operates rather than whether it is inherently good or bad. Questions now being asked include how women actively engage, participate or resist aspects of sexual culture instead of something which is ‘done to’ women. This has led to further investigation of specific sites of ‘sexualised’ culture; for instance, Holland and Attwood’s study of pole dancing as exercise and Wood’s analysis of women’s lingerie shopping, for a more nuanced understanding of the complex structures of feeling involved in women’s negotiation of sexual consumption. I follow in this vein focusing specifically on pubic hair removal, but I do so in an effort to contribute an historical dimension to the discussion of contemporary sexual culture; to demonstrate that aspects of sexualisation are predicated upon historically rooted conceptualisations of gender, heterosexuality, obscenity, and hierarchies of class.

This chapter focuses on the representation of pubic hair removal across two genres of sexual discourse: British soft core pornography and the sex advice found in commercial women’s magazines. In doing so it supports and exemplifies Attwood’s assertion that the media is a key resource for identity work, but also highlights how textually mediated ideals of feminine heterosexuality have both endured and transformed across time and place. Evans and

---


Riley’s utilisation of the concept of ‘technologies of sexiness’ is useful here to portray how discourses (identified as technologies of subjectivity) ‘form a “bricolage” that “invites and incites’” individuals to act upon themselves to embody sexual subjectivities (technologies of the self). It is the aim of this chapter to unpick the bricolage which has incited women to embody pubic hairlessness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in a comparison of the content of shaving special magazines and Cosmopolitan.

Despite pornography’s designation as an ‘outlaw discourse’, and the variation in the readership and target market of soft core pornography and women’s commercial lifestyle magazines, similarities in Cosmo and the content and format of the shaving specials have facilitated critical engagement as different, but comparable forms of popular sexual expertise in the late twentieth century. As commercial enterprises both had standardised magazine formats which changed very little over the twenty years. Both contained features such as readers’ letter pages, agony aunt columns, fictional stories, and were heavily saturated with visual imagery and advertising suffused with fantasy elements and engaged in the construction of ideals – ideal sex, ideal bodies and ideal relationships, which were carefully monitored by the financial motivations of publishers. This fantasy idea was overwhelmingly constituted in both publications as white and heteronormative, which also reflected their intended readership.

This chapter is divided into two sections, exploring the relationship between pubic hairlessness and female sexual identity production in two temporal locations. In the first section I focus on pubic hair and pornography in the early 1970s. In particular, I investigate how pubic hair became embedded within definitions and categorisations of obscene material in mid-twentieth century Britain, and how these debates developed into matters of national interest within tabloid and broadsheet press coverage when the unveiling of pubic hair on screen and in print was assumed to signal the impact of the permissive society. The 1960s has been

---

characterised as a period in which sex in Britain became easier to find. Addison has discussed the saturation of erotic imagery within popular culture; including the top shelves of newsagents and the plots of soap operas.\textsuperscript{17} Collins argues that the significant expansion of sales of ‘adult’ titles between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s is in itself indicative of permissive society burgeoning.\textsuperscript{18} Less has been said about how pornographers themselves reckoned with the apparent ‘sexualisation’ of society and shifting parameters of explicitness during this time, leaving unquestioned the assumption that pornographers were to an extent both the drivers and beneficiaries of sexual liberation.\textsuperscript{19} I argue that an analysis of pornographic magazine content reveals a much more complicated negotiation of the ‘sexual revolution’ by pornographers than the straightforward missionising relationship porn is understood to have had with its readers. Such a study emphasises how representations of pubic hair have fluctuated between the licit and illicit; the grotesque and the respectable throughout the twentieth century. This section traces how the history of pubic hair removal is inherently tied to the history of the mutable regulation of ‘obscenity’ and the censoring of the erotic in Britain. This in turn has had significant impact on the production quality and styling of explicit material in Britain including, as we shall see, the content of soft-core pornographic magazines.

In the second section, I transition in time to the 1990s and 2000s, in which pubic hairlessness is thought to have shifted from niche pornographic convention to mainstream practice. I compare the representation of pubic hair removal across two mediums of sexual discourse: soft-core pornographic special edition magazines known as ‘shaving specials’ and the women’s lifestyle magazine \textit{Cosmopolitan}. I examine how pubic hairlessness was


\textsuperscript{19} M. Collins is an exception, see ‘The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men’s Sexuality and Women’s Emancipation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain’ \textit{History Workshop Journal} (Spring 1999), 47, pp.99-120. He argues that ‘new pornographers’ framed themselves as ‘beneficiaries, mirrors and sponsors of the permissive society…interpreting the implications of permissiveness and attempting to shape society and people according to their desires’, p.105.
presented to sexual consumers in the 1990s and 2000s; as integral to the preparation for and performance of sex. A comparison shows how both texts emphasised the benefits of hairlessness as a form of sanitisation of the female sexual body, and as key to women and men’s sexual fulfilment. I explore how pubic hair removal became incorporated into discourses of sexual pleasure and self-care and ask what this might reveal about the way female heterosexuality was constructed within these prescriptive discourses as a negotiation between responsibility and sexual autonomy. Even though the trend for extensive pubic hair removal may have been recognised as new, this chapter demonstrates how its significance is still predicated upon conceptualisations of female sexuality addressed in Chapter Two, as in need of containment, sanitisation and labour.

The Unveiling of Pubic Hair 1960s-1970s

In May 1973, customs officer Reginald Sorrell attended Middlesex Crown Court in London, alleged to have been ‘knowingly concerned in the fraudulent evasion of the prohibition on the importation of indecent or obscene articles – catalogues, magazines and seven films’.

As part of his defence, Sorrell described the uncertainty he now faced in attempting to judge the difference between permissible and indecent material:

I remember the time when, if any pubic hair was to be seen, that was pornography without any shadow of doubt, but now the situation is that to some extent each officer, I think, has his own idea.

Sorrell’s plight was indicative of the equivocal nature of obscenity regulation in England and Wales during a time of substantial cultural, moral and legal reform. In particular, it highlights...

---

21 Ibid
how one of the major hindrances of the regulation was that prosecutions for obscenity were ‘essentially selective and based on the complaints of individual citizens’. The Obscene Publications Act enacted in 1959 and modified in 1964 had been intended to strengthen the powers to suppress pornography, and make the law clearer and more exacting for the defence of work with literary or artistic merit. Consequently, the regulation has been described by Tim Newburn as having ‘dual tendencies’ or ‘a double taxonomy’: ‘on the one hand liberalising controls over literature, whilst at the same time extending the powers to control the pornography trade’. It appended a number of legislative measures established to police the circulation of indecent material with the capacity to ‘deprave and corrupt’. These included the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, the 1876 Customs Consolidation Act prohibiting importation and the 1953 Post Office Act which made it a criminal offence to send indecent work through the post. As Sorrell’s case illuminated however, what constituted such material was very much up for debate - the definition of obscenity was not only subjective but constantly shifting. This first section examines how the absence or presence of pubic hair became embroiled in such judgement-making processes.

The location of material and who could access it was taken seriously in the policing of obscenity. Cocks has argued this reinforced an arbitrary division between high and low culture, healthy and unhealthy sex and good and bad citizenship:

While nudity or sexual imagery were confined to high art, or restricted to those assumed to practice moral self-possession, it was not necessarily considered problematic. However, if mass print culture made such material accessible to a wide audience, including vulnerable groups like women or the young, then it could be judged obscene.

---

24 T. Newburn, Permission and Regulation, pp.79-80.  
Content as well as context were taken into consideration in defining obscene material. One means of distinction was to judge content within the terms of the naked/nude dichotomy which has evolved within western art traditions as a means of differentiating between artistic ideal and explicit crudeness. Art historian Kenneth Clark for example, initially differentiated between nakedness and nudity through a structure of feeling – ‘to be naked’ he described, ‘implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone’. Nudity in this instance, denoted a managed or ‘conventionalised’ translation of nakedness into a more refined and cultivated image. John Berger similarly discusses ‘nudity [a]s a form of dress’ in *Ways of Seeing*, veiling the ‘raw’ and ‘lived’ body, which evidences the natural processes of ageing on the skin, into an artistic ideal. The airbrushing away of pubic hair is noted by art historian Anne Hollander to be one historic convention through which nakedness has been typically translated into nudity, encapsulated in her statement that: ‘[the] absence of pubic hair meant Art and Beauty and its presence meant Gross Sex’. Berger further clarified this association between the depiction of hair and sexual connotation: ‘hair is associated with sexual power, with passion. The woman’s sexual passion needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion’. The airbrushing or removal of pubic hair within female nude portraiture and sculpture thus has a gendered dimension to it and can be read as part of the containment of female sexuality and passive status of women in culture, compounding his claim that ‘men act, women appear’.

That this artistic convention of ‘airbrushing’ pubic hair out was formally adopted as a tool for distinguishing art from obscenity by the police in the interwar period, was maintained

---

31 Ibid, p.47.
by art historian Francis Watson in a short commentary on the regulation of nudity in art for *The Guardian* in 1963. Watson explained how ‘The Muskett Test’ (so called after the police spokesperson who urged censors to utilise the depiction of pubic hair as ‘a line of guidance’ to discern ‘filthy production’) was employed at the controversial public display of D.H. Lawrence’s nude paintings at the Warren Gallery in London in 1929. Watson however noted that the efficacy of such a tool was fleeting:

> The Muskett test had only to be established to be ignored. With distinguished help from some of the surrealists who burst upon London in 1939, this class of filthy production was soon flourishing everywhere. [Pubic hair] invaded the London Group. It invaded the Royal Academy.  

As pubic hair ‘invaded’ art galleries, pornographers, hoping to evade censorship regulation worked around the so-called ‘Muskett test’ by omitting pubic hair from their publications. This mechanism of sanitisation in porn has been described as the ‘artistic alibi’ by Marcus Collins, drawing on historian Thomas Waugh’s conceptualisation of ‘alibis’ to describe how eroticism was ‘hidden’ behind stylistic self-censorship. Harry Cocks has similarly discussed how pornography prior to the 1960s presented itself through the guise of art study, naturism, or medical illustration in order to incite sexual feeling without being viewed as explicit or perverse. The absence of pubic hair within representations of sex in the early twentieth century, created a kind of ‘plastic conception’ of the female nude according to Hollander - smooth, flawless and hairless, suggestive of sex but not altogether transgressive. Lisa Sigel in her examination of the emergence of sexual postcards in the Victorian and Edwardian periods in Britain, identified how the covering or absence of women’s pubic hair, genitals and

---

33 Ibid.
nipples demarcated ‘legal’ postcards which could be sent through the post from the illegal
variety that had to be more covertly distributed. Film historian David McGillivray describes
how this model of sanitised sexuality was also utilised in nudist films of the 1950s. In the
release of the first British ‘nudie’ film *Nudist Paradise* in 1958, for instance, breasts and
buttocks were bared, but respectability was maintained through ‘the provisos… that pubic hair
and genitals must not be visible, and that settings must be recognisable as nudist camps’.\(^{38}\)

By the late 1960s the symbolic capacity of pubic hair to denote obscenity was, however,
waning suggesting that attitudes to the depiction of full frontal nudity were beginning to relax.
Controversy was caused when the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) cut a scene from the
Swedish film *Hugs and Kisses* when it opened at the Paris Pullman cinema in March 1968, on
account of the twenty-second exposure of pubic hair.\(^{39}\) Discrepancy was highlighted by the
press when it was noted that the BBFC had previously passed two films with exposed shots of
pubic hair: Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966) and Ingmar Bergman’s *Hour of the Wolf
(1968)*. The regulatory body’s decision was further undermined when local authorities in
London, Newcastle and Glasgow permitted cinema screenings of the uncut version of the
film.\(^{40}\) *Hugs and Kisses* was eventually screened in its uncut version at the Paris Pullman, but
the controversy had publicly highlighted the subjective and inconsistent nature of censorship
regulation. John Trevelyan, secretary of the BBFC from 1958 to 1971, reflected on the sense
of ambiguity the incident had precipitated in *The Guardian*:

> In a way we deliberately made an issue of that to see what the public, or some of the
public thought. It transpired that many thought pubic hair perfectly innocent and said
so. Such a controversy would have been unthinkable a few years ago. We would never

---

37 L. Z. Sigel, ‘Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and
38 D. McGillivray, *Doing Rude Things: This History of the British Sex Film 1957-1981* (Sun Tavern Fields:
have got away with leaving in such a scene. All the time we’re only guessing, seeing what the public will take. So now we feel justified in moving on.  

Pubic hair was also gaining cultural capital within the fashionable elite and countercultural circuits. In the same year that *Hugs and Kisses* was released in the UK, the abolition of the Theatres Act permitted the first exposure of nudity on stage. James Rado and Gerome Ragni’s musical *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* set the scene for the first unveiling of pubic hair at Shaftesbury Theatre in London in September 1968. A year later, fashion icon Mary Quant discussed in a feature for the *Daily Mirror* her prediction for the centrality of pubic hair within future fashion trends:

> We shall move towards exposure of body cosmetics, and certainly pubic hair – which we can now view in the cinema and on stage – will become a fashion emphasis, although not necessarily blatant. I think it is a very pretty part of the female anatomy, my husband once cut mine into a beautiful heart shape.

This public unveiling however, also attracted criticism and disapproval. The press council received a number of complaints of ‘lewdeness’ in reference to Quant’s endorsement of pubic hair grooming, although these were ultimately rejected. Notable bastions of the literary and performing arts maintained that pubic hair signified the declining standards of artistic and moral culture in Britain. The novelist and playwright J.B. Priestley, for example, quipped to *Daily Mail* reporter Peter Lewis in 1970 that ‘pubic hair is not an adequate substitute for wit’ as he bemoaned the theatre’s perceived decline into a spectacle of exhibitionism. Actress Doris Day similarly condemned pubic hair exposure on screen:

> I am really appalled by some of the public exhibitions on the screen by good actors and actresses who certainly have the talent to convey the impact of what they are doing

---

41 ‘Mr Trevelyan Explains Cut in Film’ *Guardian* (26th March 1968), p.6.
43 F. Green, ‘Has Mary Quant Gone Too Far this Time?’ *Daily Mirror* (16th October 1969), pp.16-17.
without showing us to the last detail of pubic hair and rosy nipple how they are doing it.  

Despite pubic hair’s unveiling, to many it symbolised declining standards as a result of permissive society, antithetical to artistic integrity and moral decency. American film producer, Howard G. Minsky echoed this sentiment in an interview with The Guardian for his 1971 film Love Story in which he justified the absence of pubic hair in a love-making scene on moral grounds: ‘I am Jewish and I have a high set of values and ethics upon which I try to live: I and my family’. The exposure of pubic hair thus remained in a space between respectable and obscene in the early 1970s. Although no longer criminally offensive, for a number of cultural critics the presence of pubic hair still symbolised the vulgarity, crudeness and degeneracy associated with ‘low culture’.

The liminal positioning of pubic hair in the early 1970s - somewhere between liberated and taboo, had consequences for the British pornography market. The ‘Pubic Wars’ as it has since become known, identified a period of intensifying pressure at the beginning of the 1970s for commercial soft core pornographic magazines to demonstrate their embrace of now-licit full frontal nudity. Two high-profile magazines in particular were embroiled in this competition to full exposure: Hugh Hefner’s Playboy and Bob Guccione’s Penthouse, founded in the UK in 1965. Since its inception in 1953, Playboy had resisted the inclusion of pubic hair in its nude photosets, perceiving it as antithetical to its aspirational and respectable middle-class marketing strategy. In September 1970, after Penthouse published the first fully visible

---

46 D. Day, ‘Suddenly I found I hadn’t a Cent and was Half a Million in Debt’ Daily Mail (23rd October 1975), pp.20-21.
pubic hairs, *Playboy*’s clean-cut sexuality began to look conservative and old-fashioned compared to its rival.\(^{51}\) In two successive issues; December 1970 and January 1971, *Playboy* published a double page spread and its first centrefold featuring the exposure of models’ pubic hair. Agony aunt and columnist Marjorie Proops reported on Hefner’s ‘historical decision’ for the *Daily Mirror* speculating that:

Perhaps he saw that, in an age when full frontal nudity on the stage and explicit sex on the screens (parlour and cinema size) indicated a relaxation of puritan standards, his touch-me-not, go-so-far-and-no-further girls had become an anachronism.\(^{52}\)

She further ventured, ‘A bit late, I suspect. Most of the readers, must, by now, have seen it all before’.\(^{53}\) Proops’s comment implies a latency within pornography to keep up with changing public attitudes to nudity; trailing behind rather than trailblazing its way to maximum explicitness. Even Hefner’s justification that ‘we moved into the area of pubic hair at the time when society was ready to accept it’ was mocked by *Guardian* journalist Barry Norman for its comical obsolescence: ‘it reads like some laconic entry in an explorer’s logbook’, he scoffed.\(^{54}\)

As British soft-core porn titles embraced pubic hair (*Mayfair* shortly followed suit in August 1971), the pornography market itself experienced a popular mainstream embrace in the early 1970s.\(^{55}\) The legitimisation of soft core consumption amongst the middle classes was claimed by *Guardian* journalist Geoffrey Sheridan, who noted in 1972 that forty-five per cent of *Mayfair*’s quarter of a million monthly sales were to a readership ‘ABC-1 file’, whilst sixty-two per cent of *Penthouse* readers were ‘suit-buyers… no mention of macs’.\(^{56}\) By 1980, these magazines were reported to be situated ‘at the “respectable” end of the market – which means, roughly, pubic hair but no perversions’.\(^{57}\)


\(^{52}\) M. Proops, ‘At Last, Mr Playboy Reveals All’ *Daily Mirror* (4\(^{th}\) January 1971), pp.6-7.

\(^{53}\) Ibid

\(^{54}\) B. Norman, ‘Carry on Nurse’ *Guardian* (2\(^{nd}\) October 1972), p.11.


tastes was also propelled by the emergence of ‘downmarket’ titles such as *Hustler* and *Fiesta* entering circulation. As top-shelf publishing and full frontal nudity became increasingly commonplace however, a number of contemporary social commentators claimed that the process of respectable-isation affected porn’s capacity to represent the erotic. As one newspaper critic noted:

> By this process public acceptance is brought about – respectability is achieved... Only now of course, we are no longer very interested: because in the end the process of making something respectable has the effect of desexualising it... As full frontal nudity becomes commonplace so the naked body becomes less and less erotic.

Linda Williams has described the transition of sex into the public sphere as ‘on/scenity’: ‘the gesture by which a culture brings on its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene’. Such an observation prompts us to consider more closely how erotic desire works around processes of exposure and concealment— or veiling and unveiling, both within individual texts and as a mechanism within the broader structuring of the pornography market. The term ‘unveiling’ within the context of pubic hair thus refers its transition into the public sphere in the late 1960s and 1970s; but also highlights how the ‘veil’ as a protector of modesty or purity in itself can elicit or cause lasciviousness. Sigel’s exploration of early twentieth century erotic postcards demonstrates, for example, how the stylised use of clothing and draping by photographers to cover models’ bodies actually helped ‘to make the women appear more naked, rather than less’. According to Williams, the process of unveiling, for instance in the act of the striptease, gains its eroticism from the theatrical performance of public and private spheres permeating.

Jack Sargeant’s reading of pubic hair removal in Anaïs Nin’s erotic story *Basque and the Bijou* emulates this, illustrating how the act of gradual genital exposure was intertwined with ‘seduction, foreplay, and, for some, a ritual of submission’ as a means of titillation.63

A number of scholars have explored how the transition into the public sphere has affected the capacity of pornography to arouse particularly when, as Walter Kendrick claimed in *The Secret Museum*, modern pornography is identifiable and obtains its significance primarily through its positioning as illicit and transgressive.64 The outlaw status of pornographic discourse thus is thought to add to its allure; D.H. Lawrence is similarly said to have noted that ‘censorship eroticized secrecy, and thereby distorted the sexual impulse’ in the early twentieth century.65

The increasing respectability of soft-core pornography and the openness with which it was more generally discussed in the public sphere in the early 1970s signified a need for pornographers to reconfigure what the boundaries of illicitness were, and how to balance the devices of veiling/unveiling within a new sexual climate. Almost concurrent to the unveiling of pubic hair in pornography in the early 1970s, the erotics of removal manifested both in text and on screen.66 The subsequent publication of specialist pornographic magazines dedicated to pubic hair removal demonstrates how the unveiling of pubic hair in pornography almost immediately opened up a market which sought to appeal to consumers wanting to return to the ‘artistic alibi’ of pubic hairlessness. Such evidence disrupts the popular cultural narrative of pubic hair removal as only beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, demonstrating that the

fetishisation of pubic hairlessness has a longer history as a niche specialism within commercial soft core pornography in Britain, intimately connected to the history of censorship and obscenity regulation. Instead, the evolution of ‘shaven’ models as a niche pornographic interest in the 1970s shows a fetishisation of pubic hairlessness occurring as a by-product of the unveiling of pubic hair.

**Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special**

For the remainder of this first section, I want to focus on exploring the content and format of one early 1970s shaving special, *Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special*. The magazine was one of a number of sex publications produced and distributed by Ben’s Books Limited, a publisher and postal ordering service based in Acton, West London. I examine how *Sexpertise* re-conceptualised hairlessness as a pioneering sexual invention specifically for the permissive age. The magazine shows a turbulent grappling with old and new, echoing Weeks’s description of permissiveness as a moment ‘where past and present jostled uncomfortably together’, by celebrating both progressive aspects of liberalisation and seeking relief in the traditional structures of gender hierarchy through the male gaze.

This balancing between liberalisation of gender roles and the reinstitution of male dominance often played out in *Sexpertise’s* advice-giving. *Sexpertise* presented the erotics of shaving in both pornographic terms (i.e. aimed at the reader’s sexual gratification) and instructive, offering guidance to readers about the advantages of hairlessness and how to incorporate it into their own lives. This echoes Cocks’s observation about the melding of genres in pornographic texts in the mid-twentieth century; the utilisation of tropes conventionally

---

67 This was a narrative which interviewee Emily recited, she cited the Martin Scorsese film *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) which is set in the early 1990s as evidence for this. Present author, Interview with Emily.


69 J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p.322.
found in self-help, scientific and sex reform publications permitting pornographers to evade prohibition under obscenity regulation. The title itself - ‘Sexpertise’ demonstrates this adoption and the magazine’s dual intentions (even if only superficially) to educate as well as titillate. But the benefits of female pubic hairlessness were often disseminated less overtly; namely, threaded through readers’ letters, fictional stories and editorial content. Sexpertise was a space in which established fans of shaving porn could find pleasure, but newcomers could also learn the distinctions between hair and hairlessness, and why this should matter to their sexual fulfilment.

In issue 1 for example, Sexpertise intertwined arousal and instruction by offering a black and white photoset depicting the various stages of depilation, accompanied by a written account in which a female narrator recalled the first time her boyfriend shaved her. This graphic retelling as well as the gradual visual reveal of genitalia were both intended for arousal. The feature concluded with guidance for removal methods, imploring readers: ‘If you want to try to add this new dimension to your sex life, I’d consider the matter seriously’. The pros and cons of each method were considered: electrolysis for example, was ‘painless’ but also expensive; hair removal cream required ‘a great deal of care’ in application. The narrator urged instead: ‘stick the good-old fashioned razor… I recommend it highly as an enormous erotic stimulant’.

In ‘Razor’s Hedge’ a fictional story in issue 1 of Sexpertise, this conceptualisation of shaving as a form of male domination was further made explicit. The plot revolved around the first-person account of Clay Gentry, an attorney from San Francisco who refused to have sex with unshaved women. The story culminated in a forbidden sexual encounter, when Gentry

72 Ibid, p.44.
73 Ibid.
shaved and had sex with the wife of his former senior partner from the law firm. The story also functioned however as an instructive text, using Gentry as a vehicle to delineate why shaving was so important to rituals around sex. He argued for example, ‘the shaving of a woman is also a pleasurable manifestation of personal power. A woman isn’t really naked until she’s stripped of that last vestige of natural modesty’. Shaving thus performed a type of double undressing in which women were first stripped of their garments and then their pubic hair to achieve a true state of sexual readiness.

This sense of shaving as an act of dominance over women is similarly reflected in Gentry’s claim: ‘I have relationships with women, not animals. In a very concrete sense you might say that I flatter the former by reminding them that they aren’t animals’. There is a framework of desire/disgust at play here, as well as one of domination and subordination, that denies the unshaven women not only her identity as a woman, but as human at all. The conflation between woman and animal has a longer history in the representations of sex in Britain. Lisa Sigel, for instance, discusses the combination of women and animals as a common theme in early twentieth century comic sexual postcards, as a means of relishing in the grotesque, and inciting Rabelaisian humour. The significance of hair in the civilising transformation from animal to human was further reinforced by Gentry’s historical justification that ‘in most sophisticated civilizations of the past a shaved female was de rigor (sic).... In most primitive societies a human body denuded of facial and pubic hair is thought to distinguish man from other animals’. Such a conceit demonstrates the enduring importance of hair in the categorisation of binary distinctions such as men/women, human/animal, civilised/uncivilised that we explored in Chapter Two.

---

75 Ibid, p.28.
76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
There were also additional pragmatic benefits that *Sexpertise* attached to hairlessness. Primarily, the claim that one could literally *see more* in photographic reproductions when pubic hair was missing. This argument was often conveyed through the medium of the letters page, ‘Public Square’, in which readers would discuss the importance of visualising as much as possible. For instance, C.S., from Brighton declared, ‘I love the pictures of clean shaven girls, with nothing left to the imagination. The best pictures of all, in my opinion are the ones which have everything on show even when they have their legs together’. Readers appeared heavily invested in ensuring the quality of the photographic shots used in the magazine had enough clarity. In reference to a previous issue one reader complained, ‘I was disappointed in the picture on page 21, as a shadow was cast on the vital point of the shot’. This reference to the inconvenience of shadows echoes that of Reginald Sorrell’s predicament featured at the beginning of this chapter; for whom pubic hair loomed as ‘a shadow of doubt’ as he attempted to make legal judgements about obscene material. We might speculate therefore, that shaving in pornography served as a practical device as well as an ideological one, to appease readers and balance out the inconsistent quality of photographic content when the expense of obtaining good quality photographic reproduction for small publishers was still high.

‘Public Square’ was also a forum for *Sexpertise* to introduce women’s perspectives on shaving. Ultimately, female readers’ letters were there to titillate, recounting personal experiences of shaving or being shaved which often masqueraded as word-of-mouth advice: ‘I thought you would like to hear about our experience as it might help other readers’. This was a way of legitimising shaving, not just as a ‘kink’ or pornographic convention, but so readers could imagine how to introduce it into their own sex lives. The inclusion of letters supposedly sent in by single women, as well as wives and girlfriends of readers, implied not only the

---

80 R.B. Ibid.
magazines universal enjoyment but assisted in promoting the act of shaving as beneficial for women’s sexual pleasure as well as men’s. Mrs. H.R., from Manchester, for instance, wrote to *Sexpertise* to tell them how the magazine had changed her life:

My sex life had become very routine… I read one of the stories about shaving pubes, and decided to try it… The upshot of it was, I found the tickling sensation of the razor made me feel randy, and I couldn’t wait until my husband was ready, and we had an absolutely fantastic time.

The conceptualisation of shaving as a kind of aphrodisiac for women highlights *Sexpertise*’s recognition of active female sexuality, reflecting Collins’s observation that ‘new pornographers’ of the late 1960s and early 1970s understood that ‘women wanted sex as much as men’ and promoted women’s sexual emancipation. However, this narrative of female sexual awakening runs somewhat incongruently to the male domination/female subordination paradigm of shaving explicated in stories like ‘Razor’s Hedge’. Moreover, it should also be pointed out how the emphasis on the mutuality of sexual pleasure in *Sexpertise* was ultimately underpinned by the continued assumption around women’s labour. This echoes what Mechen has described as the continued ‘burden of pleasure’ which fell to women within popular instructive texts of the 1970s such as *The Joy of Sex*. That *Sexpertise* seemed to advocate female sexual liberation and simultaneously reinforced traditional hierarchical relationships of power between men and women is in itself quite telling but not surprising; in many ways it echoes the limits and contradictions of the sexual revolution more generally. Jeffrey Weeks for example, has discussed a combination of factors which led to what he identifies as a transformation in sexual and intimate life in the late twentieth century, not least the separation

---

82 There is debate amongst historians whether or not correspondence was from ‘real’ readers or written by editorial teams. L. Sigel argues, citing V. Steele and D. Kunzle, that whether authentic or not letters pages still create a ‘fantasy space’ that revealed ‘the existence of sexual subcultures’, in ‘Fashioning Fetishism from the Pages of London Life’ *Journal of British Studies* (2012), 51, pp.664-684, p.669.
83 H.R. *Sexpertise*. (1975), 1 (6), p.3.
of sex and reproduction and sex and marriage via legislative reform. And yet he also acknowledges the precarity of these gains, notably the persistence of ‘traditional assumptions about the social meanings of masculinity and femininity [which] remain deeply embedded in everyday practices and in the psychic and emotional relationships between men and women’.87

Pubic hairlessness therefore had a greater function in *Sexpertise* than just erotic stimulation. It was also part of a social commentary on the changing conditions of sexual culture in 1970s Britain and an attempt to recalculate the role of soft core pornography within the so-called permissive society. Pubic hair shaving was a means of demonstrating to readers that pornography was still relevant and sexually innovative. An article in issue 1 of *Sexpertise* entitled ‘The Great Shaved Pubis Debate. Depilation: Sane or Zany?’ made clear the magazine’s desire to put itself forward as progressive. Written as a sort of political think-piece, the article considered the spectrum of public opinion regarding pubic hair shaving, arguing that ‘the liberation of the sexes has made it possible to approach this issue with a great deal more candour than has been given to it in the past’.88 It functioned as satirical parody - *Sexpertise*’s version of the cultural battleground of the permissive society occupied by moral conservative crusaders versus liberal advocates.89 It used political terminology to describe the different factions: ‘Conservatives’ who argued against shaving; the ‘liberal contingent’ who advocated trimming; the ‘fringe element’ who experimented with dyeing their pubic hair; and the ‘independents’ who, ‘will never come within a hair’s-breadth of winning this debate’. *Sexpertise* positioned itself, of course, as ‘the radicals…proud to be included among the ranks of the enlightened avant-garde segment of our society which declaims: “Shave and be

86 J. Weeks, *The World We Have Won*, pp.70-71.
87 Ibid, p.142.
89 H. Cocks, ‘Reading Obscene Texts’, p.277. The historical relationship between pornography and satire is one which Cocks argues has evolved from the early modern period, in which pornography, erotic fiction, anti-clerical tracts and other varieties of ‘philosophical books’ were all in a sense viewed as ‘bad books’.
damned!”. Such a declaration reveals the magazine’s desire to be identified as both progressive and illicit; the support of shaving conceived of as a condemnable but worthwhile action.

Readers’ letters were also a vehicle to express this progressive sentiment – many letter writers congratulated the editorial team for endorsing the ‘new idea of shaved pubes’ and their ‘enlightening content’. The editor of the magazine also praised readers for being ‘broadminded’ when they spoke about integrating shaving into their own sex lives, bestowing a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ between shavers and non-shavers. Sexpertise also invested heavily in the notion that it was at the precipice of distastefulness and indecency. Letters which stated it was ‘revolting to see pictures of the nude female body sans hair’ and that readers were ‘somewhat embarrassed’ about their shaving preferences were purposefully published to maintain the magazine’s reputation as extreme. Sexpertise’s radicalism was deemed so significant by one reader, she confessed to living as a clandestine shaver, at risk of the sack if her non-conformist behaviour were ever to be revealed to her employer. She argued that the magazine’s ‘lofty sexually liberated heights’ had not yet reached the north where she resided, a possible comment upon the geographical limitations of permissiveness which historians such as Collins have also discussed.

But Sexpertise was also critical of change and the expansion of sexual exhibitionism that permissiveness had seemingly brought about. Whilst the visual depiction of the shaving ritual was conceptualised as pushing the boundaries of taste by fully exposing the female body, Sexpertise also emphasised how pubic hairlessness evoked fond memories of British pornography’s past. This reveals the dual taxonomy of pubic hairlessness: its ability to both

---

90 Ibid.
93 C.B. and K.H, Ibid.
further reveal the female body by stripping it, and yet also conceal bare flesh by ‘cooking’ the raw into something more palatable. The magazine’s desire to return to the comforts and familiarity of the inhibited hairless nudity associated with pornography of the 1940s and 1950s, suggests a mixed reaction to the liberalisation of obscenity regulation by British pornographers. Nostalgia in this instance functioned as a political tool and social commentary on the changes to the industry and how this affected pornographers’ capacity to generate erotic pleasure through their texts.

Two features in particular, ‘Sexpertise Nostalgia’ in issue 8 and ‘The Way We Were Razed: The Shaved Nude of Yesterday’ in issue 1 examined and celebrated Britain’s pornographic past, situating hairlessness in a broader historical context that became integrally tied to national and generational identity. On a practical level, there was a good financial incentive for Sexpertise to include vintage photographs, removing the need to spend money producing or buying new material. But these articles also demonstrate how pornographers utilised, circulated and appropriated popular myths of sexual past. Moreover, this prompts us to reflect upon what the uses of history and nostalgia are within pornographic discourses more generally, particularly when we keep in mind how pornographic collections and ephemera have often been devalued within mainstream archival spaces.95

In ‘Sexpertise Nostalgia’, Sexpertise reflected upon how ‘the sizzling seventies’ had transformed the way in which nudity was configured in pornographic discourse.96 The magazine supported the notion that the unveiling of pubic hair had diminished the fantasy element (and thereby undermined the sense of idealised femininity) that the hairless conception of nudity had cultivated in the 1940s and 1950s. The magazine claimed, ‘these girls belong to a more fanciful and romantic era than the present day, when girls still held an aura of mystery

96 ‘Sexpertise Nostalgia’ Sexpertise (1975), 1 (8), p.47.
and aloofness, completely different from the more real, natural poses of our time’. The article wistfully fantasised about where the clean-shaven models of the past were now:

Maybe some of them still adorn the inside doors of lockers of war-time ships, or army trucks and old, disused camps. Once they may have cheered the dreary lives of servicemen, far away from home, reminding them of one of the things they were fighting for! Perhaps some of the pictures are still blowing about in the lonely, empty Sahara Desert, lost by some soldiers of the Eighth Army during their historic advance across North Africa in pursuit of Rommel’s men.

Such a romanticised framing of hairless nudity and the association of it with pin-up culture of the Second World War supports Adrian Bingham’s observation of the emerging acceptance, fondness and even patriotic feeling towards pin-up girls in mid-century Britain. Despite Sexpertise’s previous claims of the innovative concept of pubic hairlessness, the magazine recognised its function in saving and re-telling the historical lineage of hairlessness and how it was tied to national identity, romance, adventure, and exoticism.

Similarly, in ‘The Way We Were Razed’, writer Roy Cramer spoke of the allure of shaven models of ‘yesteryear’. The article situates itself as a criticism of ‘new pornography’ of the 1970s, in particular the conflation between erotic desire and greater exhibitionism. For example, Cramer criticised how his pornographic contemporaries gave models personalities, preferring them to have ‘no weird and wonderful hobbies or ambitions’ but the ‘mute eloquence of a bygone age’. This appears to be a direct response to the fabrication of personality profiles for models that first became customary in men’s magazines in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a means of highlighting their actively sexual and ‘ultra-permissive’ sense of self. Cramer on the other hand, saw eroticism located not in the greater exposure of sexual frankness

---

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
but in the way models reflected men’s own desires and sexual identity formation. Speaking on the subject of men’s preference for hairless models, he argued, ‘to some of us they will seem more erotic than any ultra-contemporary looking starlet type to be found in the pages of the men’s glossies that proliferate today. Why? Because we associated them with our own youth’. Hairless nudity according to Cramer, embodied ‘the mirror of our own budding sexuality as young men to whom sexual relations with the opposite sex was something not quite proper’. The erotic pull of hairlessness was, in this instance, located in the shared memory of the reader’s first discoveries of sexuality, and nostalgic feelings surrounding the illicit experience of first encountering pornography as adolescents. Erotic potential was produced not through greater sexual explicitness, but through reminiscence. Hairlessness therefore tapped into both individual sexual identity formation, and a collective sense of commonality found in the often clandestine, first-time acquisition and consumption of pornography.

Pornographers use of, and interest in, commodifying pubic hairlessness in the 1970s demonstrates both an embrace of expanding openness around sex-post-sexual revolution and simultaneously the culmination of anxieties about cultural sexual change. In the next section, we explore how pubic hair removal was re-presented to sexual consumers in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the styling of language and photography was adapted, the conceptualisation of the benefits of pubic hairlessness in this period remained centred around the dichotomous frameworks of veiling and unveiling, disgust and desire and subordination and empowerment that underpinned Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special.

---

103 Ibid.
Pubic hairlessness in the 1990s and 2000s

If historians have pointed to the widening openness of sexual culture in the late 1960s and 1970s, porn and media scholars have identified a continued ‘mainstreaming’ of sex in the decades that followed. In Striptease Culture, sociologist Brian McNair identified a postmodern shift in the 1980s and 1990s in which more ‘frank and direct sexual discussion’ entered the public sphere, and codes and conventions traditionally associated with pornographic iconography became assimilated into ‘mainstream’ popular culture.104 ‘Porno-chic’ he argued, ‘replaced the traditional demonization of porn with, if not always approval or celebration, a spirit of excited inquiry into its nature, appeal and meaning’.105 Susan Paasonen et al. have investigated the intertwining development of technology and the cultural visibility of sexual culture.106 Clarissa Smith’s analysis of the decline of ‘top shelf’ magazine market in the 1990s, has demonstrated how this was facilitated by the growing accessibility of pornography through video, satellite television and the internet as well as the proliferation of ‘porno-lite’ men’s magazines such as Loaded, Nuts and Zoo.107 Feona Attwood has discussed female agency and engagement with the sexualisation of culture, particularly in relation to commerce.108

In this section I explore the ongoing embrace of female pubic hair shaving as a mechanism for arousal by pornographic shaving specials Fiesta: Shaven Havens and Ravers: Clean Shaven. These publications indicate an ongoing desire to see hairless vulvas attached to witnessing the process of transformation and revelation. I also explore how women were ‘hailed’ toward extensive pubic hair removal for the purpose of sex by women’s magazine

104 B. McNair, Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire (Routledge: London and New York, 2002), p.64. He gives examples such as popstar Madonna, the incorporation of ‘fetish garments’ in early 1990s fashion design.
Cosmopolitan. This is not to suggest that women were not also consumers of the ‘top shelf’ pornography considered in the previous section; on the contrary I demonstrate how pornography became increasingly integrated into ideals of female sexual consumption in the late twentieth century. Rather, I hope to extend the analysis from the previous section, to consider how (if at all) pubic hairlessness was re-presented and re-drawn within commercial women’s magazine literature and sex guidance. I investigate how women were called to negotiate the fault lines between embodying both purity and sex appeal, disgust and desire, and how this manifested in guidance on pubic hair removal within commercial sex advice.

**Fiesta: Shaven Havens and Ravers: Clean Shaven**

Galaxy Publications began to publish annual shaving special editions of its publications, *Fiesta* in 1989 and *Ravers* in 1995. They were by no means the only shaving specials: a sister Galaxy publication called *Knave Close Shave* produced five annual issues from 2000-2005 and Gold Star Publications Ltd published *Park Lane: Shaving Special.* The publication of individual specialist titles with a focus on specific niche interests such as these was a means for pornographers to diversify in the heavily regulated soft core market by particularising content to tastes. The popularity of Galaxy’s shaving specials was evident to the editorial commentary of both *Ravers* and *Fiesta:* David Spenser editor of *Ravers: Clean Shaven* claimed it had become their biggest selling issue of the year by 2001. In its fourth year of publication, *Fiesta: Shaven Havens*’ editors confessed, ‘when we published our first shaven haven’s special,

---

109 I utilise A. Evans and S. Riley’s notion of ‘hailing’ which builds on Althusser’s theory of interpellation to explain how ‘technologies of sexiness’ are recognised and responded to in a psychological and personal way, *Technologies of Sexiness,* pp.47-48.
110 *Knave Close Shave* (Galaxy Publications Ltd: Essex, 2000); *Park Lane: Shaving Special* (Gold star Publications, London). These are publications which I have identified through the British Library archives although this is not to say there weren’t more shaving specials by other publishers.
111 D. Spenser, *Ravers: Clean Shaven* (2001), 7, p.3 (hereafter *Ravers*).
we had no idea that the idea would prove so popular and that it would have become an annual event.’\textsuperscript{112} By 2002 the editor stated that he intended ‘to include a great many more shaving photosets in regular issues of Fiesta. The readers love it!’\textsuperscript{113} This would certainly imply a transition of pubic hairlessness from niche specialist interest to an anticipated part of British ‘mainstream’ soft core pornography by the 2000s.

Unlike \textit{Sexpertise}, neither \textit{Fiesta: Shaven Haven} nor \textit{Ravers: Clean Shaven} marketed themselves explicitly as manuals for sexual guidance, their self-identified function was to stimulate guilt-free sexual pleasure, ‘guaranteed to give you real hard-ons and followed by real ejaculations’.\textsuperscript{114} However, an instructive tone was present in their annual shaving special issues. This was partly a recognition by the editorial team that they would need to engage with the shaving fanatic without alienating the regular \textit{Fiesta} or \textit{Ravers} reader for whom shaven women might not have been a particular interest.

A large proportion of magazine content was dedicated to explaining why shaving was arousing as well as providing tips and guidance on how readers could incorporate it into their own sex lives. For example, it included features with shaving ‘experts’ from within the porn industry such as ‘Bush Barber’ John Mason and the ‘Dear Delilah’ agony aunt column in \textit{Ravers: Clean Shaven} and via Belinda Sterne’s advice in ‘12 Good Reasons to Trim your Quim’ and ‘Trimmed Thrills’ in \textit{Fiesta}.\textsuperscript{115} Toward the late 1990s both magazines intermittently offered guidance on how to navigate the internet for more ‘shaven haven’ pornography.\textsuperscript{116} Secondly, and by a more covert means, shaving was validated through the language and rhetoric used in fictional stories, readers’ letters, and the editorial comments which

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Fiesta: Shaven Havens} (1992), 4, p.94 (hereafter \textit{Fiesta}).
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Fiesta} (2002), 14, p.84.
\textsuperscript{114} ‘Intro’ \textit{Fiesta} (1991), 3, p.5.
\end{flushleft}
accompanied the photosets akin to *Sexpertise*. Through these means, the practice of erotic shaving was woven into Galaxy’s particular conceptualisation of everyday working-class masculine sexuality, in which pleasure was constructed primarily out of football, women and smutty puns, as this example from 1998 demonstrates: ‘we kick off with Colleen, who is much more effective in the box than England’s number nine and probably scores a damn sight more often. Here, though, we catch her shaving the post’. 117

Two main benefits of pubic hair removal were conveyed by *Fiesta* and *Ravers*: improved functionalism of sexual intercourse and greater aesthetic enhancement of genitalia. Pubic hairlessness, it was argued, not only created a more stimulated sexual experience for men and women, but particularly improved the giving and receiving of oral sex. 118 This is described extensively in an article entitled ‘The Razors Edge’ in issue four of *Fiesta*:

As well as heightened kink factor for men, several women I’ve known who’ve expressed a preference for shaving have spoken of the increase sensitivity they receive as the soft skin on their mons pubis rubs against the partner’s body. Many happy shavers have mentioned that removing their pubic hair increased their partner’s interest in oral sex, too, so it isn’t just men who benefit. Since visual stimulus are sexually very important to men – hence magazines like this – the sight of a fully developed woman so openly exposing her vaginal area is a great turn on for a large number of men. It signifies both her willingness to throw herself off to him, and also a real enjoyment of sex. 119

*Fiesta: Shaven Haven* echoed the notion of the equality of sexual pleasure that *Sexpertise* promoted in the early 1970s. Pubic hair shaving was argued to improve both the physical enjoyment of sex and increase interest and willingness of sexual partners by providing a better tactile and visual experience. The suggestion that shaven women were both constantly more willing and also enjoyed a greater frequency of sexual orgasm was reinforced through fictionalised stories in which female characters confessed how shaving transformed them. In

118 The hygienic benefits of pubic hair are frequently rehearsed in *Fiesta*, particularly when close proximity through oral sex is initiated: ‘Fur-free fannies make for outstanding oral… many men are put off cunnilingus because early in their sex-life they came across a horrid, smelly, foul-tasting hair-pie.’ in B. Sterne, ‘12 Good Reasons to Trim Your Quim’ *Fiesta* pp.53-55.
‘Confessions of a Denuded Dame’, ‘Linda’ described: ‘…once my bush had gone, my excitement would be clearly on view…It was the first time I’d experienced oral since I’d been shaved and I found it far more intense’.120

Throughout *Fiesta* reference was made to the pleasure in being able to observe women’s genital arousal as a result of their hairlessness; a kind of advertisement for ‘visually-stimulated’ men. Through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens, we might recognise this desire for a greater sign of visible excitement as a desire to compensate for the lack of female phallus. It could be suggested that in making female clitoris ‘clearly on view’, the process towards hairlessness was constructed in *Fiesta* as an equivalent transformation to that of the flaccid to erect penis. This calls for a reworking of Freud’s initial conceptualisation of the fetishisation of pubic hair as ‘a substitute for the mother’s penis’ to consider it in broader terms.121 If the presence of pubic hair symbolised women’s lack, then its removal signified redemption and/or purification of female sex. Finnish porn scholar Harri Kalha’s use of Freudian theory to explore foreskin fetishism in US male homosexual porn iconography is useful here: akin to depilation, the removal of foreskin as a kind of castration ‘invokes a temporal logic: from uncut to cut, from original filth to aestheticized filth… suggesting not just cleanliness but social coherence and normalcy’.122 Kalha argues that fetishistic fascination with the process of revealing relies not only on the desire to see the phallus, but is equally and paradoxically underpinned by disgust and denial of this ‘natural’ ‘un-sanitised’ state.123 There are parallels here to be drawn with the framing of pubic hair and its ambiguously complicated power to stimulate both disgust and desire. Pubic hairlessness, although manufactured, was conceptualised in *Fiesta* as more desirable due to its purifying effect, thus reinforcing codes of idealised virginal femininity. And

---

123 Ibid.
yet, it also signalled women’s transformation to a more transgressively active and insatiable sexuality, reproducing masculine codes of virility. Attwood neatly captures this sense of contradiction which she argues is prevalent in British downmarket porn in her proposal that:

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Fiesta’s depiction of women is the way in which they are used to represent its utopian and dystopian fantasies, to stand for sexual difference and equivalence, and to embody convention and its overturning by carnival. “Woman” becomes a sign of pleasure-seeking, release from the constraints of domesticity and respectability, bodily celebration and of fearfulness and distaste.¹²⁴

Fiesta prided itself on its commitment to content that was ‘smutty, disgusting and downright depraved’ but its simultaneous adherence to social norms of hygienic decency in its shaving specials threatened to destabilise its transgressive potential.¹²⁵ To compensate, depravity was articulated instead through an exaggerated rhetoric describing the repulsive and offensive nature of pubic hair, reinforcing the symbolic link between women’s ‘natural’/raw body and deficiency. Grotesque was frequently conveyed through the use of nature-based metaphors. Some notable examples include the suggestion that pubic hair resembled ‘a ghastly tangle of unkempt bush, a jungle into which a man might enter and be seen no more’ and ‘a thicket of wiry curls’¹²⁶ Models were described as going ‘early to the shearing shed’ to be processed like a herd of animals, whilst the smell of pubic hair was frequently compared to different types of rotting fish.¹²⁷ In Ravers: Clean Shaven, John Mason the ‘Bush Barber’ suggested: ‘another problem with a fanny like a nest of hedgehogs is that unless the girl has just scrubbed it with bleach or sink cleaner, chances are it will hold its odour longer than a bald beaver’.¹²⁸ Elsewhere, Mason writes ‘real-life fannies that don’t get trimmed by their owners tend to be

¹²⁶ Fiesta (1997), 9, p.5; B. Sterne, ‘12 Good Reasons to Trim your Quim’, p.53.
hairy growlers the size of the Black Forest. And, like any unkempt wild animal, they also have a tendency to smell like the docks at Grimsby’.129

Such examples echo the conflation between animals and women in Sexpertise’s portrayal of the repulsive nature of pubic hair. It also supports Attwood’s evaluation of ‘bawdy humour’ in Fiesta as relying on ‘grotesque exaggeration and repetition of stereotypes, rude puns; a masculine view of the world…[and] a resistance to refinement’.130 Editors played into the socially constructed stereotypes of gender, situating female sexuality as uncivilised, animalistic, lacking in its natural form. The binary notion of male sex as norm and female sex as ‘other’ is replicated in frequent reference to the inhospitable and foreign conditions of pubic haired women through terms like ‘jungle’ and ‘scrubland’, which male readers were encouraged to colonise and take ownership of by ‘deforesting the twat’.131 The pubic-haired female body in this instance is made comparable to the way historian Catherine Hall has described the colonising mission of Eighteenth Century Evangelical British colonists; as a territory to be acquired, rescued, disciplined and ultimately civilised.132 And, just as enslaved Africans newly ‘emancipated’ as Christian subjects by colonialists would ‘become grateful, obedient, industrious and domesticated’, Fiesta dictated that shaven women would be constantly ‘up for it’ and available for sex.133 This analysis makes clearer why pubic hair shaving in pornography has been considered by some to be sexual and symbolic violence against women.134 It also draws upon and demonstrates the longevity of the imperialistic discourse explored in Chapter Two concerning the de-humanising of hairy women.

131 B. Sterne, ‘12 Good Reasons to Trim your Quim’, p.53.
133 Ibid, p.779.
134 See B. Thompson, Soft Core: Moral Crusades Against Pornography in Britain and America (Cassell: New York, 1994), p.157, for example of this debate. During the research phase of this study, Thompson recalls feminist anti-pornography campaigner Catherine Itzen argued for depilation to be included as examples of violence in pornographic texts. Thompson disputed this logic, suggesting ‘the Reading Group know that it is undertaken to ensure public decency or as part of sex play’.
*Fiesta* basked in its own primitiveness, echoing *Sexpertise’s* wistfulness for a ‘golden age’ of pornography. This was illustrative even in its endorsement of shaving, as a traditional, masculine form of hair removal over alternative ‘modern’ methods of depilation as the ‘Intro’ to issue three demonstrates:

In these dark days of modern technology (I use the word “dark” ‘cos none of it fuckin’ works!), depilation cream, electric razors, wax, and those bloody things that pull the hair out, it’s like a breath of fresh air to see a girl using the good old fashioned method, or “wet shave” as we call it in the trade. Yes! We at *Fiesta* aim to bring you the traditional British way of doing things. None of this new-fangled, namby-pamby girlie stuff.¹³⁵

This embrace of ‘tradition’ and ‘Britishness’ within the *Fiesta* brand again demonstrates the function of nostalgic myth-making in pornography and is indicative of the magazine’s response to changing technological environment within the pornography industry in the 1990s. Unable to compete with the ‘harder’ content offered by imported video and satellite channels from Europe and the United States, *Fiesta* used its seemingly old-fashioned format and content as its unique selling point, devoting itself to maintaining and defending British pornographic traditions.

As a result of this dedication to tradition, *Fiesta* and *Ravers* photography varied very little in composition between the 1990s and the 2000s, combining photosets of both ‘pre-shaved’ models and ‘shaving scenes’ in which they were depicted removing their own or another model’s hair.¹³⁶ The majority of models, identified by first name only, presented as white, blonde-haired, under thirty years of age and conforming to ideal body size.¹³⁷ They posed in mundane domestic locations such as living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms seemingly incongruent to sexual fantasy. Attwood suggests however this was key to *Fiesta’s* framework

---

¹³⁶ Photosets including two or three models include ‘Candy and Jane’ *Fiesta* (2004), 16, p.96; ‘Kathy and Mo’ *Fiesta* (1996), 8, p.57.
of sexual arousal, underpinned by ‘resolutely “ordinary”, accessible, physical, everyday pleasures’.

This ‘everydayness’ was doubly-enacted in the shaving specials, in which the mundane surroundings were compounded by the mundane act of depilation. Pleasure, it was suggested, was in the ability to access voyeuristically this traditionally private act, in which knowing models consciously engaged with the ‘theatrical elements of the striptease’ to produce a gradual unfolding of genital exposure.

Another key factor in the striptease mise-en-scène was the additional inclusion of the razor and excessive use of shaving foam portrayed mid-action, in close proximity to the genital area. Using Linda Williams’s conceptualisation of the striptease show as emphasis of ‘artistry of performance [which] comes to compensate for what is missing in discursive exchange between performer and audience’, we might recognise the props as performing a compensatory function.

In the absence of men and unable under censorship to depict genital contact or ejaculation, visual evidence of sex was instead replaced in Fiesta and Ravers by the phallic-shaped razor and the white thick liquidity of the shaving foam. Again, lines between sanitisation and defilement were blurred as the visual messiness of the foam on models’ breasts, stomach and genitals symbolised both the defiling act of sex and the process of ‘cleaning up’ the female body.

Toward 2003-4, fewer shaving scenarios were published in Fiesta. The editors observed that most models attended photoshoots already depilated because of the increasing general popularity of pubic hair removal. Another noticeable key alteration in shaving special photography over the decades was how costuming transformed. This reflects Church Gibson and Kirkham’s assertion that pornography is ‘susceptible to the shifts in fashion that govern

---

140 Ibid, p.77.
141 Fiesta (2002), 14, p.84.
other forms of visual representation’.142 Fiesta in particular shows departure in the late 1990s from highly sexualised costuming featuring stockings, garters and high heeled shoes which were uniform in the early 1990s issues. Instead, from its 1999 issue onward it showed a significant increase in attire coded both as ‘every day’ and associated with feminine youth: frilly white ankle socks, cotton knickers, and cartoon-printed t-shirts and pyjama sets.143 Although Fiesta stated in the small print of each issue that its models were over eighteen, this distinctive shift in emphasis toward signifiers of childhood indicated a strong association between the erotics of shaving and sexual fantasy of the pre-pubescent female ‘virginal’ body. It is this type of association which led some of my oral history participants to convey their unease with pubic hair removal, often referring to the physical response of disgust it initiated for them:

And it just feels like, we’re... they’re trying to keep us as girls – completely hairless from like the eyes down and... I don’t know it feels like... which makes me feel a bit sick, because I just think, well why – you should be attracted to somebody with evidence that they’ve gone through puberty.144

I have this sought of erm... gut reaction against this move to remove all pubic hair and whether it’s a sort of erm... trying to keep women like pre-pubescent…145

That being said, it is intriguing that this costuming implying the sexualisation of children only developed in the later years of Fiesta’s publication. It may demonstrate Fiesta’s attempt to re-instate the transgressive potential of pubic hairlessness, as it became increasingly normalised and expected by consumers. It also encourages us to reflect, as Church Gibson and Kirkham

143 For example, in the ‘Heather’ photoset in Fiesta (1999), 11, pp.5-11 a young girl is dressed in blue cotton pants that read ‘Friday Night’ and situates her in a teenage girls’ bedroom. In Fiesta (2002), 14, pp.5-7, ‘Saskia’ wears white ankle socks and a t-shirt with teddy bears on it, in the same issue ‘Belinda’ wears Mr Men pyjama set, pp.48-49. In Ravers (1996), 2, pp.58-63, ‘Vicky’ wears her hair in pigtails and has frilled white ankle socks. ‘Linzi’ Ravers (2001), 7, pp.54-61, holds a towel with a teddy bear on it, ‘Esther’ is dressed in school uniform, Ravers (2002), 8, pp.22-27.
144 Present Author, Interview with Emily, (2016).
suggest, on changing women’s fashions more broadly within popular culture in the late 1990s.\textsuperscript{146} The utilisation of ‘girlie’ and infantile coded costuming was not isolated to soft core pornography: we might recognise a similar aesthetic embodied by ‘Baby Spice’ Emma Bunton from the Spice Girls during their initial UK success in 1996, and the schoolgirl identity performed by American popstar Britney Spears in her breakthrough video for the single ‘Hit me Baby One More Time’ released in 1998. This suggests a reworking of the conceptualisation of ideal feminine sexuality toward the end of the twentieth century within the soft core genre, emphasising the visual, embodied performance of purity and its associations with youthful innocence.

\textit{Cosmopolitan}

Just as \textit{Fiesta} and \textit{Ravers} re-styled their presentation of pubic hairlessness in the late 1990s and early 2000s, women’s lifestyle magazine \textit{Cosmopolitan} also adapted the way it framed the ritual of pubic hair removal. Until the early 2000s, \textit{Cosmopolitan} rarely discussed pubic hair removal overtly outside of the remit of summer body maintenance. The placement of ‘the Brazilian Wax’ within the ‘passion package’ section in its October 2001 issue signalled a significant shift in the conceptualisation away from its previous framing within the beauty section and into the pages of sex advice and guidance. Heralded as the ‘latest sex innovation’ by sex editor, Rachel Morris, in her account of test-running the Brazilian she declared:

Highlighting this most erotic but feminine part of my body felt fantastic – naughty, rude, sexy and confident... I’d certainly recommend a little playful pubic pruning to any woman who loves to feel sexy, desirable and just a little bit naughty – for herself and her man. I am officially converted.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{146} P. Church Gibson and N. Kirkham, ‘Fashionably Laid’, p.151.
Morris’s description echoes that of the sexual transformation narrative depicted in *Fiesta* and *Ravers*. Not only did pubic hairlessness modify Morris’s feelings about her body and her sexual desirability, she also acknowledged the pleasurable aspects of depilation for both sexual partners.

It is worth taking a moment to expand upon the identity of the ‘Brazilian Wax’ and its emerging cultural capital within the fashion and beauty industries towards the late 1990s. The self-identified ‘inventor’ of the Brazilian wax, Janea Padilha first began offering the treatment in 1994 at the beauty salon she co-owned with her sister in Manhattan, New York after moving from Brazil in 1987. By 1999, the J Sisters salon and its celebrity clientele had made the beauty news pages of *Vogue US*. Britain’s most high-profile waxing experts of the 2000s similarly evoked this exclusivity by working in high-end zo or stores – Arezoo Kaviani worked in Harrods, and Otylia Roberts started out as a beauty therapist in Harvey Nichols in London.

The reconceptualisation of extensive pubic hair removal as the Brazilian wax was thus instrumental in transforming the popular perception of the practice from a seedy pornographic context to its re-signification as part of an aspirational and sexually-empowering commodity. The success of this transformation was first of all, down to the embedding of the Brazilian wax within the aspiration context of middle-class global conspicuous consumption. The developing popularity of the Brazilian wax coincided with the flourishing of Brazilian supermodels identified with restoring the sexy body to the runway after a long period in the 1990s of so-called ‘heroin-chic’.

High profile names including Adriana Lima, Alessandra Ambrosia and Gisele Bündchen assisted with the production of ‘Brazilian’ beauty as a specific entity,

---

associated with ‘exotic’ glamour, confidence and above all ‘healthy’ looking bodies featuring tanned-skin, rounded breasts and buttocks and muscle-toned waist and limbs. The reference to and depiction of the Brazilian Wax on an episode of the HBO series *Sex and the City* which premiered in the UK on channel 4 in September 2000, also enhanced the public visibility and further aspirational quality of Padilha’s invention. The show was perceived as an authoritative voice and ‘a potent symbol of fashion kudos’ in the early 2000s, and thus assisted in adding validity to the glamourised reconstruction of pubic hairlessness.

*Cosmopolitan*’s self-fashioning as a platform for celebrity glamour and global trend-setting similarly enabled pubic hairlessness to be framed as a commodity for any budding fashion consumer-citizen. One of the major departures between *Fiesta, Ravers* and *Cosmopolitan*’s construction of pubic hairlessness was a transition in terms of spatiality and class; a shift away from the traditional realm of British working class domesticity that the shaving specials had conjured, towards a sense of modern global-facing consumption and cultural capital attainment.

However, Padilha’s conceptualisation of the Brazilian Wax in other ways seamlessly replicated the framing of pubic hairlessness in soft core pornography. Notably, in her discussion of the treatment as both sexually empowering for women and simultaneously sanitising, interlinking cleaner bodies and better sex in a way which paralleled the discursive framing of pubic hair shaving in *Fiesta* and *Ravers*. Padilha described the effects of Brazilian waxing in her part self-help, part autobiography *Brazilian Sexy* as the following:

> Here’s the thing – I’ll admit that when I did that first Brazilian on myself, I did it because I thought it would look better… what I didn’t know was that there are lots of other results – some amazing things happen. First of all, it’s a lot more sanitary, because you can just wash that area and get it really clean. No more hair to interfere. When you wipe your self, nothing gets tangled in your hair. It’s as if you were never really clean before… but here’s the best part – the Brazilian makes sex so much better, because

---

152 ‘Sex and Another City’, *Sex and the City*, series 3 episode 14. HBO, (17 September 2000).
there is nothing between you and your man…. [clients] tell me that I was right, that they are cleaning themselves in a way they never did before, that sex is better, that they feel better in many, many ways.\textsuperscript{154}

The binding together of sexual pleasure, mental well-being and cleanliness in this construction of the Brazilian Wax demonstrates the enduring paradoxical positioning of female sexuality as both ‘liberated’ and in need of regulation. It is suggestive of a continued cultural unease with the status of female sexuality, lying at the fault lines of public/private, licit/illicit, desirable/contaminating which we explored in Chapters Two and Three. The Brazilian Wax as a strategy of containment and yet also a sign of sexual visibility holds parallels to historian Peter Bailey’s conceptualisation of ‘parasexuality’ in his examination of the changing sexual economy in Victorian England.\textsuperscript{155} Parasexuality, he argued, refers to the management of an ‘open yet licit’ sexuality: ‘sexuality that is deployed but contained, carefully channelled rather than fully discharged; in vulgar terms it might be represented as “everything but”’.\textsuperscript{156} I use the term ‘safe sexiness’ to signify how the constructed ideal of regulated female (hetero)sexuality manifested within commercial sex guidance from the late 1980s to the 2010s. I argue it is within this context of safe sexiness that pubic hair removal emerged as a normalised part of sexual interaction and performance for women. Sex guidance in \textit{Cosmopolitan} demonstrates how female sexual citizen-consumers were supposed to navigate this precarious positioning in which the danger and the indulgence ascribed to female sexuality was attempted to be reconciled.

Safe sexiness, I argue, emerged from a collective feeling of insecurity about the sexual body towards the end of the twentieth century, brought about most pertinently by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. This juncture marked a turning point in the population’s


\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, p.148.
consciousness of the meaning, function and healthiness of certain sexual interactions, and in turn, facilitated greater public discussion regarding sexual practices and the supposed decline in the nation’s moral economy.\textsuperscript{157} Historian of sexuality Jeffrey Weeks argues that AIDS prompted a major change in how society as a whole reacted to risk.\textsuperscript{158} However, the impact of AIDS has multiple ‘histories’ to untangle, indicating the multiplicity of experiences and responses to the crisis.\textsuperscript{159} The empirical findings of the Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP) undertaken in the early 1990s demonstrated how in the wake of HIV/AIDS epidemic young women in Britain approached risk, responsibility and danger within sexual activity in complex and often contradictory ways, and often resulted in a disembodied sense of female sexuality.\textsuperscript{160} The discussion of HIV and AIDS within Cosmopolitan from 1987 to the mid-1990s gives an illustration of how mainstream media discourses such as women’s lifestyle magazines sought to react to and shape the new sexually-risky climate. It is within this context of elevated panic about penetrative sex and the search for alternatives, coupled with the growing distaste for sexual excessiveness and a heightened desire for visual signs of bodily cleanliness and purity that led to the emergence of the trend for extensive pubic hair removal within Cosmo’s ‘Passion Package’ a decade later.

Cosmopolitan helped to shape and was shaped by a narrative which implied that ‘post-AIDS’ sexual intimacy significantly departed from the imagined sexual promiscuity of the previous decades. ‘AIDs has changed everything’ wrote editor Marcelle D’Argy Smith in March 1989, ‘I know I loved sex, but goddamit, I’ve been put off. Why would I want to do

\textsuperscript{157} B. McNair Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture (Arnold: London, 1996), p.18, discusses how religious fundamentalists and moral conservatives considered AIDS to be ‘divine retribution’ for the sexually permissive era. It is also important to note that even though at the time AIDS was considered to be most efficiently spread through penetrative sexual intercourse. Those not sexually active were also seen at risk if in contact with bodily fluid e.g. those requiring blood transfusions and intravenous drug use.
\textsuperscript{158} J. Weeks, The World We Have Won, p.102.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, p.98.
something associated with disease’.\(^{161}\) Marcelle Clements surmised, ‘Now when we think of sex (at least of the wonderful unexpected or illicit kind), we think of death’.\(^ {162}\) The late eighties was conceptualised as a period dealing with a backlash against the ‘s-excessiveness’ of the previous decades. In ‘Sexual Pursuits: No Longer Trivial’, Candida Crewe cited twenty-eight-year-old ‘John’ who declared,

There are none of the advantages of the sharing young communities of the Sixties. Now all we get are the drawbacks. It’s like we’re paying the bill. It’s no wonder people are seeking consolation and clinging onto things like God, old-fashioned morality and marriage.\(^ {163}\)

Crewe argued that a growing disillusionment with casual sex had developed out of a ‘new morality’: terms such as ‘old-fashioned morality’, ‘Victorian family values’ and ‘New Puritanism lifestyle’ were used in a number of articles in the late 1980s to denote a temporal rupture, a disjuncture from sexual revolution, and a shift towards caution and restraint, which Victorian and fifties eras denoted as times in popular cultural memory. This sense of a shift towards sexual conservatism, instigated by a combination of anxiety around the HIV/AIDS crisis, the return to religion, the increasing career ambition and busy-ness, a growing perception of promiscuity as hollow, unstable and lacking in emotional fulfilment was further narrativised through the pages of *Cosmopolitan*.\(^ {164}\)

As AIDS became a matter of national security towards the late 1980s, guidelines around what constituted ‘safe’ or at least ‘safer’ sex were disseminated through various channels. In 1986 and 1987, the Department of Health and Social Security issued to every household in the country its formal guidelines on protection against AIDS. ‘Safer’ sex, it stated, revolved around

\(^{161}\) *Cosmopolitan* (March 1989), p.120.


\(^{164}\) Ibid, pp.116-7.
‘fewer partners, less risk’ and ‘use condoms for safer sex’. In the same year, Diane Richardson’s *Women and the AIDS Crisis* defined ‘safe sex’ as the avoidance of ‘sex which involves an exchange of body fluids with men or women who may be at risk for HIV infection, their sexual partners, or with people who have AIDS or HIV-related illness’. Richardson categorised sexual practices according to ‘risk’: high risk sexual practices included any forms of contact or exchange of fluids without some kind of barrier such as condom or glove such as vaginal, oral or anal intercourse, the sharing of sex toys, rimming, or blood, semen, urine or faeces in the mouth or vagina. Lower risk practices on the other hand focused upon ‘any sexual activities that do not involve the exchange of body fluids such as massage, hugging, kissing, rubbing, sex toys (although not shared), mutual masturbation, sharing sexual fantasies’.

*Cosmopolitan* reflected and promoted this low risk strategy to sex, even citing *Women and the AIDS Crisis* in an April 1991 article entitled ‘It’s Time to Rethink Oral Sex’. Articles such as ‘Smart Girls Carry Condoms’, ‘Not Getting It’ and ‘When Exactly Should You Do It?’ promoted not just the importance of condom use but a re-evaluation of the place for sex outside of long term monogamous relationships. *Cosmo*’s discussion of the AIDS crisis in this period, is an example of its contradictory approach to sex more generally. With a reputation as a magazine obsessed with sex, actually its guidance and social commentary was rather more conservative and aligned with moral establishment than this reputation suggests. The discussion of monogamy and celibacy as viable alternatives to risk-laden intercourse, evolved into what *Cosmo* dubbed the ‘nervous nineties’, described as ‘the decade of public

167 Ibid, p.72.
responsibility’. This reflects agony aunt Petra Boynton’s assertion that, ‘the mass of sexual content in the media is often seen as a sign of an open sexual culture, but sex coverage itself is actually often limited and much of it is repetitive and conservative’.171

The undesirability of penetrative vaginal sex and the opportunity to explore ‘low risk’ sexual activities, Cosmopolitan reframed as an opportunity to expand women’s sexual fulfilment. The search for alternatives to penetrative sex led to debate about who sex was really for (i.e. who was getting the most pleasure out of sexual interaction) and what the scope of sex could really entail. In ‘Smart Girls Carry Condoms’, this was described as an opportunity for women to explore what they wanted from sex with men: ‘The scare of sexually transmitted diseases can be a real ally in getting sexual activity right for the woman, too… It is up to us to act on that’.172 Similarly, in ‘Why Outercourse is In’ Valerie Frankel argued ‘the sad, plain truth is women have been on the playing field, but never really had the chance to bat, so, why have we followed the game plan so closely, even though it left us unhappy?’.173 Using this sporting analogy, Frankel depicts a sense of female dissatisfaction with standardised vaginal sex with men. The opportunity to think beyond penetrative sex gave women the chance to readdress their own needs for sexual satisfaction and reflect on what really turned them on. Sally Vincent described this new opportunity for creative exploration away from vaginal sex as ‘gourmet sensuality’: ‘Instead of sex for sex’s sake, should we not cultivate, or re-learn our own sensuality? Become sort of gourmets of sensuality?’174 Self-empowering rhetoric citing ‘it is up to us to act’ and ‘re-learn our own sensuality’ echoed the Women’s Liberation Movement call for female sexual liberation, agency and self-actualisation through development

---

of a more authentic sexual self. In *Cosmo’s* terms, it meant an embrace of fantasy, fetish and foreplay into everyday ‘ordinary’ sexual interaction.

In a number of ways, the undesirability of bodily contact post-AIDS facilitated the transition of pornographic imagery into mainstream media discourse. This echoes McNair’s suggestion that, ‘pornography acknowledges, stimulates and promises the satisfaction of sexual desire without the need for, or the complications of, real human interaction… in conditions of sexual epidemic, pornography and the masturbation it encourages is the safest sex there is’.175

In her December 1989 article, ‘Give me Dangerous Sex’, Kimberley Leston illustrated how this new ‘porno’ sensuality might take shape: ‘The fact that AIDS is going to spread its tentacles further in the lives of heterosexuals doesn’t mean that the demand for sex will lessen… more and more [people] are demanding the kind of sex that involves gadgetry, role playing and all manner of ingenious “kinks” – but not actual physical contact’.176 Fantasy, she suggested, could be stimulated through the consumption of (what has now been defined as) porno-chic discourses, citing Steven Soderbergh’s *Sex, Lies and Videotape* and Dolores French’s autobiography *Working: My Life as a Prostitute*.177 *Cosmopolitan* was explicit in defining the boundaries between acceptable porn consumption within relationships and unhealthy or harmful individual use. In a letter to agony aunt Irma Kurtz in 1999, one reader expressed her distress at discovering her husband’s solo porn consumption, to which Kurtz counselled:

Like you, I am not unreservedly anti-porn. And yes, married men – and women – can masturbate from time to time without doing harm to their relationship. But when porn and masturbation replace lovemaking, someone has a problem… Your husband says he doesn’t want you controlling his sex life, but has he heard about sharing it?178

---

175 B. McNair, *Striptease Culture*, p.41.
In the following issue, couples’ participation and engagement with pornography was embraced in the feature ‘How to Make Your Own Sexy Video’ in which journalist Anna Maxted investigated practical tips for making pornographic home videos with help from pornstar Ben Dover: ‘Sexperts say it’s a great relationship-enhancing exercise’ she explained, ‘so what happens when you commit your sex life to video?’ It was within this context that the ‘waxed’ body, as a conventional styling of professional pornography was incorporated into Maxted’s preparation for sex on camera: ‘I intend to wear a ton of make-up and undergo a full-body wax’, she noted. This piece exemplifies McNair’s concept of porno-chic, integrating porn production and consumption into everyday sexual culture through the use of domestic home setting, the pornstar as sexpert, and the incorporation of porn aesthetics into everyday ‘couples sex’ scenarios.

The integration of pornography into everyday hetero-sexual relationships also highlights Cosmo’s efforts to eroticise ‘low risk’ sexual interactions as a solution to the post-AIDS undesirability of penetration. In Women and the AIDS Crisis, Richardson discussed why the eroticisation of safe-sex was essential, not necessarily for women’s pleasure but as a strategy of male appeasement. The ‘off-limits’ female body she explained, had the potential to represent an assault on both masculinity and the rights and freedoms of the ‘natural’ biological drive of male sexuality. Rather than an opportunity for female empowerment, she argued eroticisation of low risk sex was an attempt to pacify men who may reject safe sex as dull and ultimately unsatisfying due to the heteronormative construction of ‘sex’ as solely vaginal penetration by a penis.

The eroticisation of lower risk sex thus exemplifies women’s work as ‘negotiators’ of safe sex. Although not a new role, HIV/AIDS and in the following decades further moral

179 A. Maxted, ‘How to Make your own Sexy Video’ Cosmopolitan (April 1999), pp.80-84.
180 D. Richardson, Women and the AIDS Crisis, p.69.
panics around sex such as teenage pregnancy, and ‘date rape’ would incite *Cosmopolitan* to draw greater attention to ways in which its female readers should embody this role.\(^\text{181}\) According to *Cosmopolitan* women had a responsibility to not only ensure ‘safe’ sex but to ensure that this interaction were also sexually fulfilling. Despite columnist Jonathan Rutherford’s plea that ‘men need to help create a new sexual morality’ it was clear that women would be accountable for HIV/AIDS prevention.\(^\text{182}\) In April 1993, Nora Johnson’s article ‘Sex: Why can’t a Woman be More Like a Man?’ explained how this accountability manifested: ‘we learn to be careful. The contraceptive must work; the disease must be avoided… women clean up men’s messes. Somehow emotionally, our brooms are always at the ready’.\(^\text{183}\) The *Cosmo* woman found herself rooted in a context of ‘safe sexiness’, paradoxically positioned as consistently ‘up for it’ by demonstrating an expanding sexual repertoire, while at the same time exercising responsibility and caution through hyper-vigilance of her body and her male partner’s. Hair removal subsequently became positioned as another way for women to ‘clean up men’s messes’ as Johnson had described.

Two examples of hair removal advertising in *Cosmo* in the early 1990s demonstrated how safe sexiness was to be embodied. In the summer of 1993, the Flicker Personna Lady Shaver’s half-page advert depicted the black and white image of a woman straddling a motorbike, a man standing close behind her, his hand on her waist.\(^\text{184}\) The tagline, ‘Get Really Close but Don’t Get Hurt’ signalled a multi-layered warning attached not only to the symbolic

\(^{181}\) See for example ‘The Growing Problem of Teenage Pregnancy’ *Cosmopolitan* (June 1993) and ‘Lower Your Rape Risk Instantly’ *Cosmopolitan* (April 2001), pp.69-70; ‘How to Talk Your Way Out of a Date Rape’ *Cosmopolitan* (August 2001), pp.114-116,118; ‘Are You Entering a Rape Zone?’ *Cosmopolitan* (October 2001) pp.82-84,86. Holland et al. also discuss condom use as an example of this ‘management’ of risk undertaken by young women in order to reconcile danger with expectations of male sexual partners in *The Male in the Head*; See also N. Garvey, K. McPhillips, and M. Doherty, “‘If It’s Not On, It’s Not On – Or Is It!’ Discursive Constraints on Women’s Condom Use” *Gender and Society* (2001), 15 (6), pp.917-934.


\(^{183}\) N. Johnson, ‘Sex: Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Man’ *Cosmopolitan* (April 1993) pp.120-121, 200-201.

\(^{184}\) *Cosmopolitan* (May 1993), p.212; *Cosmopolitan* (June 1993) p.236.
danger of the motorbike or the potential risk of injury from the use of razors, but warning of the potential risk of close sexual contact. This was further compounded by the line, ‘For a smooth safe ride you can’t beat Personna Lady Flicker’ in which the verb ‘ride’ intentionally obscured motorbike ‘riding’ and having sex. The advert illustrated the precariousness between close intimacy and danger and inserted the act of hair removal as a way to avoid risk.

Similarly, in 1995 a summer advertisement campaign for Wilkinson Sword’s ‘Lady Protector’ offered another instance of hair removal as a way out of sexual danger. Stating ‘Nice girls Don’t Get Plastered’ and accompanied by the tagline ‘the safety you want with the closeness you need’ echoed this need to negotiate the risks attached to intimacy. The use of ‘nice’ girls in this context added a classed aspect to this too, echoing the rhetoric of respectabilisation exemplified by Immac advertisements in Jackie. The ability to avoid risk becomes individually-located, failure to do so is positioned as a sign of lack of personal self-control or adequate care. The plaster is the symbolic conclusion of high risk behaviour, signifying carelessness and corporeal injury, the expulsion of bodily fluid, the potential for contamination. As the name, ‘Lady Protector’ implied, Wilkinson sword ensured the connection between female sexuality, self-surveillance and body work. It reminded women that intimacy always comes with a cost, a warning and the imperative need for self-regulation.

Elsewhere, the incorporation of pubic hair removal as part of foreplay was explored in a number of Cosmopolitan features from 1999 onwards. In Cosmo’s Ultimate Sex Goddess Manual, published free with the February issue of the magazine, a feature explaining ‘35 Ways to Send a Naked Man Insane with Desire’ included: ‘trim his pubic hair into a neat heart shape, then dye it red’.

---

185 Cosmopolitan (June 1995), p.15.
186 ‘35 Ways to Send a Naked Man Insane with Desire’ Cosmopolitan: Your Ultimate Sex Goddess Manual supplementary magazine (February 1999), pp.16-17.
sexual behaviour as one of the answers to the question: ‘if your partner asked, which of these would you be willing to try? Which have you done?’:

Role play; bondage; watching/reading porn; anal sex; threesome; partner-swapping; sex outdoors; let him shave your pubic hair; have an intimate body piercing.\(^{187}\)

The integration of pubic hair shaving in such a list would suggest a continued conceptualisation of pubic hairlessness as transgressive but also increasingly permitted sexual behaviour according to *Cosmo* in 1999. Frequently, pubic hair removal was discussed in the context of advice about oral sex. The standardisation of oral sex as a rudimentary sexual practice amongst younger generations of sexually-active individuals growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s, was reflected in the data from the successive Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in 1993 and 2003.\(^{188}\) Although still performed less frequently than vaginal sex, Farvid and Braun have claimed that oral sex, along with ‘hand-jobs’, were ‘constituted as *givens* within heterosexual (casual) sex; as possessing routine status’ in contemporary sex advice.\(^{189}\) Gill similarly suggests that by the mid-2000s anal sex had replaced oral sex as ‘the favourite heterosexual taboo in women’s magazines’.\(^{190}\) As a result oral sex was treated in 1990s-2000s commercial sex advice as both a rudimentary practice and highly technical to perform properly. As sexpert Tracey Cox claimed in *Hot Sex*, ‘If you’re not good at giving oral (even worse, can’t be bothered learning), give up now on ever graduating from sex school’.\(^{191}\)

Pubic hairlessness became integral to ‘good’ oral sex predominantly as a function for good hygiene and greater sexual pleasure, emulating the sexy-sanitisation rhetoric found in

---

187 ‘Dare You Take Part in… *Cosmo’s* Ultimate 1999 Love and Sex survey?’ *Cosmopolitan* (July 1999), pp.166-8.
188 A. Johnson, J. Wadsworth, K. Wellings, J. Field and S. Bradshaw, *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1994), speculated that the growing popularity of oral sex may have been to do with ‘cultural influences’ as well as recognition of the AIDS risk and undesirability of penetrative sex, pp.163-166.
190 R. Gill *Gender and the Media*, p. 11
In ‘Steamy Sex’ for example, Dr Pam Spurr suggested in ‘Developing Steamy Oral Sex Techniques’ to:

Ensure you’re nice and fresh down there... Carefully trim your pubic hair so you’re likely to keep smelling fresh and it’s easier for your partner to give you oral sex. No point in them having to fight their way through a pubic jungle.¹⁹²

In ‘Oral Sex for You’, a guide to ‘turn your man into a cunnilingus king’, Cosmopolitan reasserted the benefits of pre-sex pubic hair grooming: ‘wear a silky negligee… but leave your knickers off and wax or at least trim your pubic hair. The barer you are down there, the less comes between you and his tongue – and the greater the pleasure for both of you’.¹⁹³ Critically, his expertise in giving good oral sex was located here in the reader’s preparation and work on the self.

Sex advice columns revealed ongoing anxiety from women about the expectations regarding pubic hair removal for oral sex. For example, in August 2001, one eighteen-year-old asked resident agony aunt Irma Kurtz, whether it was reasonable for her boyfriend of three months to request she shaved her pubic hair before he performed oral sex. She queried ‘I know men are visual but how can they be so insensitive?’¹⁹⁴ Kurtz’s reply was contradictory: she first berated the reader for confusing honesty for insensitivity and suggested she may be over-reacting by describing how pubic hair removal was generally accepted by women for a number of reasons including sexual pleasure. But then concluded by stating at her young age it would be unacceptable to ‘start tampering with natural assets’.¹⁹⁵

Men similarly sought advice, but focused on tips to negotiate their preferences for pubic hairlessness: ‘How can I ask her to get a Brazilian, without offending her?’ asked one anonymous male reader in February 2005. Rachel Morris, Cosmo’s sex psychotherapist

¹⁹⁴ ‘Advice on life and love from Irma Kurtz’ Cosmopolitan (August 2001), p.133.
¹⁹⁵ Ibid.
responded by suggesting they share the labour of pubic hair removal: ‘if your girlfriend had a problem with your pubic hair, would you do this for her? If so, suggest you both get waxed together as an experiment’. Such a response suggests a consciousness on the part of Cosmopolitan of the inequality surrounding expectations of women’s body work in preparation for sex in relation to men’s. Morris’s solution to share the burden of work as a sort of ‘experiment’ captures a sense of novelty and tentativeness to the ritual of pubic hair removal for men or as part of a couple’s activity.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to trace the erotics of pubic hairlessness from the 1970s to the 2000s and explore what the popularity of extensive pubic hair removal as a preparation for sex reveals about the construction of female sexual identity in the late twentieth century. The first section examined how the eroticism connected in the transition of hair to hairlessness is tied to the concept of revealing and concealing, veiling and unveiling and denotes pubic hair’s peculiarly fluctuating significance in the history of British obscenity regulation. This has meant that at different times hairlessness has signified both the beauty ideal and deviant sex. The analyses of shaving special magazines, a niche genre of the British soft core pornographic market, demonstrates the paradoxical functioning of pubic hairlessness in even greater complexity. Both Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special in the 1970s and Fiesta: Shaven Havens and Ravers: Clean Shaven in the 1990s and 2000s depicted pubic hair removal as a means of purifying the female body, thus distinguishing it from animal or primitive being, and simultaneously facilitating greater exposure of the body and generating sexual pleasure for both sexual partners. Although the featuring of the Brazilian Wax in Cosmopolitan in 2001 elevated

196 ‘I’d Prefer a Brazilian’ Cosmopolitan (February 2005), p.29.
the aspirational status of extensive pubic hair removal in line with middle class consumptive tastes, analysis of the magazine’s guidance on sex reveals how the beauty treatment continued to be underpinned by the discourses of sanitisation and women’s responsibility to ensure not only sexual fulfilment but health and well-being within sexual relationships. The temporal scope of this chapter, which spans sexual transformation after the sexual revolution, interrogated the assumption that the trend for pubic hairlessness in the 2000s was rooted in the mainstreaming of pornography or indeed, was a result of the so-called ‘pornographication’ of culture. Although certainly, this chapter has identified soft core pornography as a key cultural text in the circulation of ideas about pubic hair removal, this examination has shown the multiplicity of ways in which pubic hairlessness has been tied to women’s sexual identity construction: for example, through frameworks of art history, national censorship regulation, sexual health advice and guidance, and television and film. The examination of these discourses, and of the significance of pubic hairlessness in relation to sex, illustrates the ongoing negotiation of sexual identity as a balance between work and leisure.
5. THE BUSH IS BACK: BODY HAIR POLITICS AND FEMINISM’S GHOSTS

Introduction

In 2014 the British press declared that finally, after years in fashion exile, pubic hair was ‘back’.¹ The results of an online survey undertaken by British pharmaceutical distribution company UKmedix, revealed that women could no longer be bothered to wax and men no longer cared.² Celebrity endorsement was considered to add further momentum to the backlash against pubic hairlessness. Gwyneth Paltrow’s confession that she ‘works a seventies vibe’ on The Ellen DeGeneres Show in April 2013, was followed by Cameron Diaz’s prompt to ‘consider leaving your vagina fully dressed, ladies’ in her self-help book The Body Book published in 2014.³ On the high street, confirmation that this was going to be ‘The Year of the Bush’ was bolstered when American clothing company American Apparel used merkins to adorn their mannequins for their Valentines marketing campaign in their New York city store window displays, further cementing the company’s controversial reputation for stunt-marketing and pushing the boundaries of taste.⁴ Despite the seeming rebelliousness of such a spectacle, there appeared to be something familiar and nostalgic in American Apparel’s presentation of pubic hair according to Daily Telegraph journalist Louise Peacock: ‘putting pubic hair on full display for the American public feels like a scene from some ‘70s porn film,

¹ B. Turner, ‘Pubic Hair is Back Ladies’ The Telegraph (15th November 2013) [online]; S. Barns, ‘Design Your Vagina: It’s No Longer Cool to be Bare Down There’ Daily Express (16th April 2014) [online]; C. Stroud, ‘Brazilians? So Last Century’ The Telegraph (25th May 2014) [online].
² M. De Lacey, ‘Put Down the Hot Wax…Pubic Hair is Back! Women Shun Intimate Grooming, and Men Prefer a More Natural Look on Partners’ Mail Online (18th November 2013).
³ Gwyneth Paltrow interview on Ellen DeGeneres Show (April 2013), reported in online British tabloid press articles such as C. Fahy, ‘Gwyneth Paltrow is talking about her bikini line again as she returns to Ellen DeGeneres Show five months after admitting she “rocks a 70s vibe”’ Daily Mail Online (17th September 2013) [online]; C. Diaz, The Body Book (Harper Collins: London, 2014), p.178.
when big bushes were all the rage’. The framing of pubic hair in terms of its ‘pastness’ and its ‘porn-ness’, both in this description and in Paltrow’s ‘seventies vibe’ reference, reveals a shared understanding of pubic hair as retro; an ephemeral style belonging to, and characteristic of a particular historical moment. In this light, the pubic bush is framed in terms of an adornment or vintage relic, akin to shoulder-pads of the 1980s, or the ‘60s miniskirt, rather than an innate part of the body itself.

We might recognise from Chapter Four how and why pubic hair and the 1970s have developed a lasting connection in people’s imagination. The fluctuation of censorship guidelines in the late 1960s and early 1970s preceded a period of pubic hair ‘unveiling’ in film and print media, reinforcing (and tying pubic hair to) the packaging as the permissive eras of social change. An association more generally between the ‘growing-out’ of hair for men and women in the 1970s, which correlated with the emergence of counter- and subcultural movements, has further stimulated popular memories of the era through stylistic and material terms. Stella Sims’s work on Fifties revival culture is useful here in helping us to reflect upon how our remembering of the past in ‘particular ways’ is shaped by and circulated through a combination of ‘memory, media and commodities’. Sims distinguishes ‘The Fifties’ from ‘the actual historical time of the 1950s’, to highlight the way in which nostalgic, mythic constructs of the past take on meaning in the social world. This is not to suggest the existence of a division between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ pasts as two separate entities. As James Hinton argues in his discussion of public memory and nostalgia in the Mass Observation Archive, ‘to describe such representations of the past as myths is not to deny that they contain elements of truth’. Instead,

---


Sims recognises that recollections of ‘the Fifties’ encompasses ‘a melting pot of mediated sources, actual memories, old photographs, authentic artefacts and retro facsimiles’.

Sims illustrates how these interpretations are imagined, re-enacted but also contested through participation in retro culture and ‘vintage lifestyles’. Furthermore, she argues that the revival of totems, symbols and lifestyle practices seen to encapsulate the consumption tastes of a particular era is more than merely fashion choice, but a political statement alluding to ‘a response to the here and now’. Revival culture therefore reveals not only the processes through which our knowledge of the past is constructed, but illustrates how the past is deployed in the present in strategic and meaningful ways, to respond to, critique and reflect on societal and cultural change.

With this in mind, the meaning of the 2014 ‘Bush is Back’ rhetoric assumes a greater complexity, alluding to a process of reclamation and revival which does not just convey information about changing cultural tastes, but indicates how the past operates in the present through shared popular memory in order for us to make sense of contemporary life. The pubic hair revival narrative indicates a process of remembering and forgetting that intertwines past and present and has significant repercussions regarding how societal norms of hairlessness have been and continue to be adhered to, resisted or disrupted by women.

So far this investigation concerning the cultural history of body hair removal has focused upon the normalisation of female hairlessness in Britain in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this final chapter, I examine the idea of resistance; instances in which the compulsory (and often implicit) demand for women to become hairless, to embody hairlessness, has had doubt cast upon it. In the introduction to the edited collection *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Stephen Duncombe describes how the concept of ‘cultural resistance’ should be

11 Ibid, p.22.
understood as both an ideological and material form of political engagement in response to or as a rebellion against dominant frameworks of power.13 How these moments of resistance operate and impact wider society can be amorphous and wide-ranging, dependent on what he calls the ‘scales of resistance’.14 These scales refer to the spectrum of activity and engagement, acknowledging that resistance can take the form of one individual or a group, a conscious effort or an unintentional outcome, a means of survival or a tool for revolution.15 The display of female body hair can be understood within a similar spectrum: resistance has ranged from the creation of online communities built as ‘a way to say “FUCK YOU” to unrealistic beauty standards and dichotomous gender roles’;16 to the unintentional non-conformity to the hairless norm by women with hirsutism; and includes the ambivalent women with body hair uninterested by grooming practices.

If the ‘Bush is Back’ narrative pinpoints a particular moment of cultural resistance to the hairlessness norm in Britain in 2014, the adornment of hair as a form of cultural disruption has a much longer, intertwined history within subcultural and identity politics. For this study I focus in particular on resistances to body hairless norms as part of feminist activism from the 1960s to the present day. Although far from being a homogenous or unified political movement, the relationship between feminism and body hair is a historical one which highlights the tensions between public memory, personal testimony and myth-making. This has impacted upon how feminist pasts are recalled and how contemporary feminist movements interact with their histories and the possibilities of community-building.

This chapter examines how resistance is implicated on the body, but it also considers feminism’s relationship with its past through the idea of the ghost. The ghost is a useful concept here to investigate not only how myth-making functions and manifests within feminism, but

---

15 Ibid, pp.7-8.
16 Hairy Pits Club, ‘About the HPC’ page http://hairypitsclub.tumblr.com/about, [accessed 16/12/2017].
also to open up discussion around how feminist pasts and present may co-exist and interact by means of ‘haunting’. Munford and Waters have considered the aptness of the ghost analogy within feminism, arguing that the description of feminist activism in the twenty-first century as ‘post-feminism’ is in itself indicative of the movement’s assignment to a ‘rhetorical (after)life…suspended somewhere between life and death’. Similarly, for a special issue on feminist ghosts in the graduate journal Diffractions, Daniela Agostinho described how the continued circulation of misconceptions about feminism resembled ghostly hauntings – creating blindspots, impairing the visibility of key issues and ‘inspiring fear and loathing’. She argued that contemporary feminism required ‘ghostbusting’: to get ‘rid of the ghostlike feminism that keeps feminist ideas alive through depletion and (negative) appropriation, and do away with the ghosts of misconceptions that continue to mar critical debate and the full materialization of feminism’. If ‘ghost-like’ typifies feminism’s liminal and shadowy status in British contemporary culture, Avery Gordon’s conceptualisation of the ghost as a ‘social figure’, and Victoria Hesford’s utilisation of this to examine the spectral nature of the ‘feminist-as-lesbian’ demonstrate further layers to feminism’s haunted relationship with the past.

Citing Gordon, Hesford explains:

We know when we are being haunted because a particular figure, a particular image or representation of a past event keeps making its presence known to us. A ghost bothers us; it is the nagging reminder of something that is unsettled and “improperly buried”.

---

19 Ibid, p.3.
Hesford argues as a ghost of second wave feminism, the figure of the ‘feminist-as-lesbian’ operates in this way: ‘often “cast as the big drag”, the antiquated monster, of essentialist identity politics’, the ‘feminist-as-lesbian’ embodies all the ‘unrealised possibilities’ that have been lost or repressed since the second wave.\textsuperscript{22} I argue the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ fulfils a similar role, as a ‘hyper-visible’ symbol and part of a collective cultural remembering of the second wave movement which emphasises not only its perceived essentialist failures but represents its supposed monstrous and obtuse mutation over time. Hesford urges us to consider how ghostly presence is felt rather than known; pain and unsettled feelings give evidence of haunting rather than ‘cold knowledge’.\textsuperscript{23} The presence of absence, or, what is not being said can also provide clues, as Hesford argues, ‘to have a haunted relationship to the past is precisely to engage with what has been resisted, feared, or actively forgotten about the past’.\textsuperscript{24} This chapter traces the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ ghost in this manner, through non-fiction writing, oral history testimonies, \textit{Spare Rib} magazine and readers’ letters, locating its presence when feelings appear unsettled, in the blindspots when histories are forgotten or resisted.

As we encounter the feminist ghost appearing and existing in both present and past popular memory, we see a queering of time, no longer linear in appearance. This disrupts the notion of ‘second wave feminism’ or ‘postfeminism’ as allocated to and existing only within an historic date range, and recognises that feminist dialogues co-exist, are recycled and take shape outside a progressive and successive construction of time. This builds on an expanding school of thought within feminist historiography which seeks to break down and revise the assumed linear model of generational feminism, with its boom-bust lifecycle.\textsuperscript{25} Graham, Kaloski, Neilson and Robertson’s edited collection \textit{The Feminist Seventies}, a publication

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p.232; p.245.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p.230.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p.234.
originating out of the same-titled conference at the University of York in 2002, similarly examines how the concept of ‘seventies feminism’ can be understood ‘not simply as a particular decade’ but functions discursively as a ‘product of a specific second wave feminist linear history’ to shape the feminist present. In other words, ‘seventies feminism’ as a label still holds meaning in the present day as a shorthand way of referring to a set of ideas, experiences and politics we associated with second wave feminism. Graham et al. argue that this controlled remembering and forgetting is political; affecting how we perceive feminism’s failures and successes, its legacies and limitations.

The first section of this chapter will revisit the making of the feminist ghost: the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ we associate with ‘the feminist seventies’. I will examine how the Women’s Liberation Movement inadvertently assisted in the construction of their own haunting using oral history testimonies from the Sisterhood and After archive, located at the British Library. Subsequently, I examine the readers’ letters pages from feminist magazine publication Spare Rib to investigate the emotional consequences experienced by women in the 1970s and 1980s who struggled with the negotiation of their feminist identity and their desire to depilate. The combination of readers’ letters and prominent feminists’ oral testimonies in this section prompts us to reflect upon the inadvertent hierarchies within the movement, revealing how acknowledgement of bodily differences as well as class, race, sexuality and geographical location worked to situate feminists in relation to each other.

Part two of this chapter returns to the ‘Year of the Bush’ to explore how feminism continues to be haunted by the figure of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ in the 2010s. I examine two publications by popular ‘celebrity feminists’ Caitlin Moran and Hadley Freeman to explore their interactions with ghosts as part of their body hair politics. I argue that whilst the ghost

---

27 Ibid.
still haunts Moran’s and Freeman’s conceptualisation of modern day feminism, reminding us of past failures and ‘unrealized possibilities’, the feminist ghost is also present in the celebration of the 1970s as a ‘simpler’ and more liberated era of sexual identity-formation.

The conclusion to this chapter examines how the feminist ghost shapes the way in which body hair grooming is negotiated and managed by four women in the present day. Building upon Ahmed’s conceptualisation of feminism as ‘sensational’, I examine how resistance to norms of body hairlessness are shaped through the processes of becoming feminist and the consequences and reactions to this through oral history. The historical study of politics of body hair within feminism highlights the precarity of affective bonds when resistance is embodied. The issue of body hair was a source of friction, confusion, pain, laughter and ambivalence for the women who contributed to this research project. This chapter demonstrates how the ‘hairy-legged feminist’, as a ghostly ‘outsider’ figure, has significant political impact upon how second wave feminism is recalled and new feminist movements have interacted with their past and present contexts.

This requires a move beyond the formalised spaces of feminist activism to uncover moments of resistance, compelling us to think about how we uncover voices of disruption and alienation within a collective. Oral history research has become an effective way of gathering and recording the psychological processes of resistance, both in the re-use of the *Sisterhood and After* oral history archive and within my own investigation. Similarly, readers’ letters pages from *Spare Rib* magazine offer an insight into relationships both past and present: between the reading community, editors and feminist ghosts who underpin notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminist practice. This is also then, an investigation of feminists’ relationships with each other; a look at how hierarchies and statuses are built inadvertently within a social movement, and how bodies, as well as intersections of class, race, sexuality, and geographical location can

---

underpin senses of inclusivity and exclusivity. The sources used in this chapter combine the perspectives of prominent or in some cases ‘celebrity’ feminists such as Caitlin Moran and Hadley Freeman, and key activists identified through the *Sisterhood and After* oral history project, and that of ‘ordinary’ women’s experience of feminism through letters and my own oral history interviews. This encourages us to ask what the capacity to resist depends on. How might a deliberate refusal to conform to the hairless norm (by choosing to have body hair) be a different experience to unintentionally failing to conform (by identifying as hirsute)?

**Body Hair Politics and the Women’s Liberation Movement**

Body hair removal, as a political issue, was part of a wider critique developed within the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) regarding the gendered inequality within the fashion and beauty industries and the exploitative nature of consumer culture. Although the politics of appearance was not new within feminist thinking; dress reform for example, having been a matter of debate and point of resistance within previous women’s rights movements, re-examining the link between body work and women’s economic, psychological and social oppression became an important part of some feminists’ activism and consciousness-raising between the late 1960s and 1980s. Notably, Elizabeth Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams*, published in 1985 historically traced a division in feminists’ approach to dress and fashion consumption between those that saw fashion as oppressive and ‘popular liberalists’, who saw dress as part of individual self-expression. Reflecting on the WLM’s approach to fashion consumption, Wilson argued that both these stances failed to acknowledge that the

---

29 ‘Ordinary’ is a mutable category, for further discussion see C. Langhamer, “‘Who the Hell Are Ordinary People”: Ordinariness as a Category of Historical Analysis’ *Transactions of the RHS* (2018), 28, pp.175-195.
development of a ‘feminist style’ bore a close relationship to circulating fashions of the time: echoing 1970s trends of naturalism and hippie-styles.\textsuperscript{32} She commented, ‘feminism, in evolving a style among these styles, joins the discourse rather than breaking with it, capitulates rather than transcends – which it could in any case never do’.\textsuperscript{33}

More recent work by Joanne Hollows builds on the idea that competing perspectives on fashion, beauty and consumption divided feminists, but she principally examines how these divisions stemmed from divergent understandings of the feminine/masculine dichotomy. Hollows argues that although femininity came to be understood as a ‘cultural product’, how this sustained women’s oppression and how it could be resisted were debated amongst feminists.\textsuperscript{34} Whilst some wanted to assume masculine dress, thus strengthening the idea of masculine norm, others sought to abolish gender altogether and advocated androgyny, and some individuals considered femininity a false consciousness to be thrown off to uncover ‘real’ femaleness.\textsuperscript{35} The adoption of masculine dress or the attempt to ‘escape’ fashion and reclaim the natural self, established critiques in ‘women’s investment in what is seen as the shallow, trivial and irrational world of fashion’ thus creating an opposition between ‘bad’ feminine identities and ‘good’ feminist identities.\textsuperscript{36} The notion that the adoption of ‘the feminist style’ was a means of transgressing or escaping consumer culture and the fashion industry was however, complicated by the fact that feminist style itself became a marketable trend which circulated through popular culture in the 1970s. Jill Tweedie, for example, reported in \textit{The Observer} in 1975 that US feminist magazine \textit{Ms.} had become a major platform for the marketing of feminist Christmas items, or ‘consciousness-raising Christmas gifts’.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.240.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p.242.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} J. Hollows, \textit{Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture} (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2000), p.17.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid, pp.14-15.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p.137.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} J. Tweedie, ‘Feminism is a Major Industry, Particularly at Christmastime’ \textit{The Observer} (10\textsuperscript{th} November 1975), p.9.
\end{itemize}
The Daily Mail celebrated the return of ‘feminine’ fashion in 1982, bemoaning the past ten years of ‘aggressive’ fashion seemingly inspired by the WLM.\(^{38}\) It remarked, ‘In the early days of Women’s Lib, women dressed in unisex clothes and tried to look as tough and businesslike as men. Now they are beginning to see the sense of what their mothers knew all along…’ \(^{39}\) Rather than transcending mass consumer culture, ‘feminist style’ as a category of dress and bodily adornment was solidified and made legible through such media channels.

Within the movement, growing critical consciousness of beauty norms as a source of inequality translated into public spectacle in 1970, with a demonstration at the Miss World pageant contest at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The Daily Mail reported smoke bombs, stink bombs, football rattles and whistles filled the auditorium as pamphlets ‘rained’ on to the stage.\(^{40}\) Historian and member of the WLM, Sheila Rowbotham, has since reflected on the various theoretical underpinnings of the protest:

The demonstrators produced their own pamphlet, Why Miss World?. Again the disruption of “the spectacle” was linked to resistance against material oppression. Why Miss World? traced the economics of the competition and Mecca’s business interest. It tried to connect the women in the contest with the social subordination of women. Beauty was a source of inequality and division among women. Compliance with men’s gaze made it impossible for women to find their own identity.\(^{41}\)

Sue O’Sullivan similarly discussed how the demonstration was influenced by international movements such as black power, the new left, and the anti-Vietnam war lobby, for whom direct action and public spectacle had been central strategy for gaining support.\(^{42}\) Despite the complex conceptual work underpinning the demonstration, O’Sullivan highlights the limitations of such political action in furthering the feminist cause. In particular, the interpretation by many that

---

\(^{38}\) T. Skelly and G. Rolfe, ‘Back to Those Smart Suits and Frilly Blouses’ Daily Mail (19th November 1982), p.15
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
the campaign principally attacked women and female identity, thus pitting feminism against femininity in a way that alienated many women from the cause.43

The belief that feminists were opposed to femininity gained further traction through coverage of the WLM’s political developments in the national press. Studies of the representation of feminism in the British press conducted by co-authors Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey and more recently by Kaitlynn Mendes have demonstrated how the characterisation of feminists as anti-feminine was part of an overall packaging of the supposedly extreme and militant radicalism they promoted; including their ‘anti-men’ stance, a desire to overthrow traditional structures and institutions of family life, and the redistribution of male and female roles in society.44 Appearance thus became a tool with which the critics of feminism could measure deviance. For example, in a commentary on the WLM for The Guardian in 1971, journalist Joyce Egginton perceived a direct correlation between radicalness of appearance and extremism of politics: ‘a convention has grown up about the kind of clothes to be worn at Women’s Lib meetings. Slacks are essential for the radicals; so is an absence of cosmetics and foundation garments…in fact, the more leftist the philosophy, the more disreputable should be the slacks’.45 Historian Christopher Moores’s analysis of the Greenham Common peace camp oppositional group, Ratepayers Against the Greenham Encampments (RAGE) in 1984-5, also highlights how the appearance of women was used to undermine the protestors moral and political standing.46 Commentaries on the camp occupants’ lack of cleanliness, their similarity to ‘male labourers’ and consequently their ‘unnaturalness’

43 Ibid, pp.81-84.
illustrates how feminists’ transgression of the gender binary was used to weaken their political message and thus contributed to their impossibility to transcend it.\textsuperscript{47}

An emphasis on appearance by the critics of feminism also worked to de-legitimize and trivialise feminist politics through caricatures such as the ‘bra-burner’ and the ‘hairy-legged women’s libber’, attaching ridicule and humour which thus neutralised feminism’s potential threat to femininity. \textsuperscript{48} Mendes argues that such coverage ‘legitimized a narrow conceptualization of feminism’ within the public eye.\textsuperscript{49} Responses to the Mass Observation Project’s Autumn 1991 directive on ‘Women and Men’ further supports this assertion.\textsuperscript{50} To the question ‘do you think a liberated woman is the same as a feminist?’, one male Mass Observer answered, ‘to me there is not a more revolting spectacle than the bibulous butch harridan feminist’.\textsuperscript{51} Several female respondents demonstrated a feeling of alienation principally due to feminists’ perceived rejection of conventional beauty and grooming standards, as these testimonies illustrate:

Rightly or wrongly my idea of a feminist is a rather strident female who aggressively wears no make up, refuses to wear a bra. What point that is meant to make I don’t know.\textsuperscript{52}

I tend to associate “women’s libbers” with pale faces, aggressive rather than assertive attitudes and casual, masculine clothes. For myself, I actually look and feel better with a bit of “war paint” on and care about how I dress for different occasions.\textsuperscript{53}

But a LIBERATED woman is not the same as a FEMINIST…A feminist would in my opinion appear to put men down, would appear to want to dominate men rather than be their equal, to want to dress like men, to be unfeminine, pushy, unladylike, to want other women to be sexless, to abandon marriage in its present form and to be totally self-reliant without the male sex… Liberated women are still women, are still feminine…\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p. 213
\textsuperscript{48} K. Mendes, \textit{Feminism in the News}, p.61.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p.88.
\textsuperscript{50} Mass Observation Project, Autumn 1991 (1) ‘Women and Men’ University of Sussex, SxMOA2/1/35/1/1.
\textsuperscript{52} M-O Directive, ‘Women and Men’, G1416.
We can see the uniform of the feminist ghost taking shape within these testimonies, as a ‘kind of remembering – a collective cultural remembering of the second wave movement – that is also a haunting’. Recorded in 1991, these polemic responses to feminism in the ‘Women and Men’ directive signify a period Susan Faludi has identified as reaching the peak of the ‘backlash’ against feminism. Regardless of the veracity, the media portrayal of the feminist caricature as ‘anti-feminine’ and its purchase in collective remembering has had significant impact on how the politics of body hair was discussed within the WLM.

The *Sisterhood and After* oral history archive demonstrates how these engagements have been remembered and exposes the way in which past and present feeling collide through recollection. A number of participants of the project showed how consciousness raising groups and communities were one vehicle through which perspectives on body hair politics circulated at a grassroots level. Sue Bruley’s historical and autobiographical account of her experience at her Clapham group in south London demonstrates the centrality of consciousness-raising (CR) in building women’s sense of personal and collective identity at this time. She argued, ‘the most fundamental feature of the movement was the idea of “the personal is political”, that women looked to their own lives and learnt from their own experiences… It was through CR that women sought to reinvent themselves as well as their world. Women developed a new identity, new friends and a supportive sisterhood’. Similar experiences have been retold by Sally Alexander, historian and activist who participated in the Miss World demonstration in 1970 and who reflected on the innovativeness of discussion within her CR group, allowing women to open up all aspects of their lives, identities and beliefs including beauty, fashion and grooming norms:

---

55 V. Hesford, ‘Feminism and its Ghosts’, p.228.
…oh I do remember one occasion in our local group about dress and clothes, and people going around the room and talking about – one woman with beautiful thick long black hair, but cut all her hair off…And – and I remember thinking, oh my goodness what’s she done to her beautiful beautiful hair, and then she took – and she took off all her make-up and she, you know, and she talked about why she had done that and why she wanted to appear different and how she wanted to dress differently. And then, everyone, we went around the room and everyone then talked about how they dressed and why they dressed and what their sense of themselves was as women, as a woman in her own body and her appearance. And so you’re always, you know, you are raising your consciousness on very specific themes… So that’s how we did it and… and also the purpose was to – from each woman speaking about her experience and her thoughts and feelings, there was always a sense that a collective sense of femininity and what it meant to be a woman and what the political demands of women might be, vis-à-vis men or in relation to the, you know, local government or local communities, or in relation to the wider issue of law.\(^{59}\)

Alexander’s testimony demonstrates how beauty norms came to be understood as indivisible from other aspects of patriarchal oppression and social inequality. There was an acknowledgement that ‘what it meant to be a woman’ was a question which worked on intra and inter-personal, micro and macro scales, in both the decision of her fellow group member to cut her hair, as well as in the wider demands for political and social justice. Una Kroll, doctor, priest and campaigner for women’s ordination, similarly spoke of the interconnectedness between her political beliefs and her decision not to adorn her body:

I don’t believe that adorning your…yourself to make yourself look beautiful to be really feminine, is wrong. I do not believe that. But I don’t want to be valued as a sex object. And therefore, when I say I am an old-fashioned feminist, I myself decided for instance not to dye my hair. Now I would have liked to have dyed my hair, but I decided that I wanted to age in an appropriate way so that I wouldn’t be taken as a sex object…So that’s what, that’s my place, my sacrifice.\(^{60}\)

This idea of sacrifice suggests a tension between duty and personal desire. By associating it with what she termed ‘old-fashioned’ feminism, Kroll implied her politics was temporally-specific and no longer a framework for decision-making used by modern day feminists. Kroll may have been potentially influenced by observing the relationship feminists in the 1990s and

\(^{59}\)R. Cohen, Interview with S. Alexander Sisterhood and After (2012), Track 4.

\(^{60}\)M Jolly, Interview with U. Kroll Sisterhood and After (2013), Track 7.
2000s had had with sexual subjectification and the feminine. But her sense of sacrifice also supports the idea that a uniformed feminist style was developed within the WLM. Kroll therefore implies a dual sense of haunting – both in relation to ‘seventies feminism’ and also to the youthful self. Disability activist, Kirsten Hearn, similarly describes a sense of feminist uniformity in her oral history testimony:

…it was quite a relief to be engaged with people who weren’t fussed about what you looked like, but that of course everybody did mind about what you looked like, even though we did this whole thing about, of you know, we don’t pander to the feminine stereotypes and, you know, long hair and miniskirts, high heels… There was another uniform of course [laughs]… people would say why have you got long hair, and that sort of stuff, you know, because I think we adopted as an alternative equally rigid structure really or that’s what we believed we did.  

This pressure to have short hair was similarly felt by peace campaigner Rebecca Johnson and youth worker Sandie Wyles, who both recalled having their identities as lesbian feminists brought into question due to their initial resistance to cut their hair. Whereas for these activists the idea of conforming to a feminist style felt somewhat restricting, for others like Jan McKenley the embrace of her Afro along with African clothing and adornment was an important part of her resistance to racial and gendered oppression:

I took to feminism like a duck to water, I couldn’t wait to not wear a bra and I couldn’t wait to think differently about my body… but it was big stuff for me to put my hair in an Afro.

The discussion of the politics of hair was not always a sombre one according to Mary Kennedy and Sue O’Sullivan. Having been involved with the WLM since attended the first Women’s Liberation Conference at Ruskin College Oxford in 1970, Kennedy’s memories of the discussion of appearance in her CR group were light-hearted:

---

We used to meet in each other’s houses, you know, here in this very room, across the road at Juliet’s, or with Jean Radford just down the road there. And, we were a conscience-raising group initially, and would sometimes have very funny debates over why we wore jewellery… and fashionable clothes, and, not that I did. But did we do this to please ourselves, or to attract other people?  

Kennedy’s description of such debates supports Withers and Chidgey’s challenge to the assumption that the WLM was dominated by a serious dogmatic ethos, illustrating how ‘humour was a fundamental strategy…used with varying success to raise consciousness as well as personal and collective strength’. O’Sullivan similarly reflected that during her time working as a member of the editorial team on Spare Rib magazine, body hair was the source of much humour: ‘I mean I really felt that I had laughed so much, I mean we’d…we had very funny conversations about all sorts of things from shaving legs or not, to sex’.  

These accounts reveal the multiple layered way in which feminists emotionally engaged with the politics of hair as a feminist issue: with disbelief, humour, a sense of sacrifice, liberation, and also reticence. The Sisterhood and After oral history project also reveals contested opinions and approaches to consciousness-raising itself. Some feminists critiqued the apparent focus on matters like body hair and appearance, questioning what this indicated about the accessibility of the groups to all women and all issues. Journalist and campaigner Lesley Abdela recounted how she associated ‘not wearing make-up and feminism [which was] sort of academicky…’ with this collective approach. A growing sense that CR promoted a ‘navel gazing’ type of feminism that was strongly linked to issues of bodily appearance was similarly exposed in a letter published in Spare Rib in 1978:  

Are there any women in Manchester who wish to form a group of a practical nature rather than academic? I am a working class office worker in my late thirties…One of my beliefs is that nothing is going to change for women unless they go into business  

---  

64 R. Cohen, Interview with M. Kennedy, Sisterhood and After (2010), Track 3.  
67 M. Jolly, Interview with L. Abdela, Sisterhood and After (2011), Track 5.
for themselves…Such people as GEO Wimpey and Billy Butlin didn’t make their economic independence by sitting around discussing body hair and penis.68

Body hair politics became a shorthand way of referencing a kind of feminist politics perceived to be hampered by its middle-class, puritanical and out of touch roots. It implied the emergence of a gap between ‘academic’ feminist pursuits and what this reader termed ‘practical’ demands. This was also highlighted by Sheila Rowbotham who described why consciousness-raising remained inaccessible to many working-class feminists:

They didn’t want to come to the Women’s Liberation consciousness raising groups because they were, usually they had kids, they also had jobs and they wanted to be in a group that was actually doing things, so the ways in which working class women came into the Women’s Liberation Movement was not through that sort of classic consciousness raising local group form…69

In fact, for a number of interviewees in the Sisterhood and After project, body politics were deemed either irrelevant or minor in significance. Beatrix Campbell, for example, commented upon having an ‘unproblematic body’ and therefore much of the consciousness raising about appearance had had little relevance to her experience of the movement.70 Ursula Owen similarly explained that, although there was talk about appearance in her women’s group, she ‘was not one of those women who looked in the mirror and didn’t like what she saw’.71 For others it was a conscious choice not to get involved in the politics of fashion and beauty and risk reinforcing the prominence put upon appearance in a way that minimised the other work and wider demands of the movement. Zoë Fairbairns, for example, explained, ‘…I feel that the emphasis that was placed on whether or not women, feminists were nice looking or whether or not we shaved our legs or shaved under our arms… I think it was a deliberate distraction and I

68 J. Ecroyd, Spare Rib (March 1978), 68, p.5.
69 R. Cohen, Interview with S. Rowbotham Sisterhood and After (2010), Track 3.
70 M. Jolly, Interview with B Campbell, Sisterhood and After (2010), Track 6.
think it has been over-emphasised’.\textsuperscript{72} Lesley Abdela recounted how, as part of the 300 group, she worked to avoid the hairy feminist stereotype by consciously adopting what she saw as a professional image:

It was, you know, hairy arm-pitted feminists, it was terribly unfair. But going back to Suffragettes days we all know, you know, that was how it was portrayed. And we felt that if we were going to say women were going to run the country, we had to look like it to some extent.\textsuperscript{73}

The diverging and often conflicting ways in which discussions of body politics were remembered in the \textit{Sisterhood and After} project, reflect the wider differences between schools of thought within the movement itself. As we have seen, opinions on what constituted oppression, long and short-term goals, and strategies of resistance were often influenced by other social factors like class, sexuality, race, age, and geographical region. That being said, the testimonies also illustrate how the movement developed and imposed its own ideals of dress and grooming, which participants in the \textit{Sisterhood and After} project acknowledged and recognised either through their conformity or resistance.

Berenice Fisher has examined how the formation of ideals within the feminist movement precipitated feelings of guilt and shame for some feminists when they failed to live up to these principles.\textsuperscript{74} She has argued the consequences of this were sometimes personally unsettling: ‘in the context of a social movement, exposure of our failings threatens our claim to a political identity and our standing in the group. Fear of exposure stems from fear of exclusion – that we will be judged not good enough to be a member’.\textsuperscript{75} If the \textit{Sisterhood and After} oral history project reveals the eclecticism with which prominent feminist activists approached the challenge of body hair politics, the \textit{Spare Rib} readers’ letters page illustrates how failure to

\textsuperscript{72} M. Jolly, Interview with Z. Fairbairns, \textit{Sisterhood and After} (2011), Track 6.
\textsuperscript{73} M Jolly, Interview with L. Abdela, Track 5.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p.192.
fulfil the WLM’s body hair ideals generated a sense of exclusion and shame for feminists on an everyday level. For the remainder of this section, I explore how *Spare Rib*’s readers negotiated their outsider identity as hirsute women both within society and within the movement itself.

The early years of *Spare Rib* were considered very much a work-in-progress, particularly when it came to developing a stance on advertising and articles on beauty and fashion: the collective editorial team was often criticised for being hypocritical in its examination of consumer culture.\(^76\) The magazine’s first article on body hair in issue four, published in 1972, exemplifies this ambiguity. The article began by promoting individual choice and personal taste in regard to body hair maintenance, proceeding then to advise only on approved methods and acceptable feminine styles of growth. For example, for underarm and leg hair it prescribed:

> The most usual approach is to shave it all off…. The hair grows back quickly and cactuslike legs can be revolting. The alternatives: bleaching, after letting it grow. If the growth isn’t heavy, it looks pretty.\(^77\)

The magazine moved away from consumer-type features to focus on campaign news and issues, not revisiting body hair again until January 1978. The article entitled ‘Hairy Story’ in contrast to the 1972 article on removal methods, was a medical summary concerned with the causes of hirsutism and attempted to dispel the myths surrounding a recent medical study which had shown a correlation between women taking up careers and an increase in excessive female hairiness.\(^78\) What the article did not do was discuss what it was like to identify as a hairy woman. The article positioned superfluous hair as something women ‘had to come to terms with’ or be less ‘sensitive’ about.\(^79\) The dismissal of hirsutism as anything but a cosmetic inconvenience

---


\(^77\) C. Maxwell-Hudson, ‘Splitting Hairs’ *Spare Rib* (October 1972), 4, p.33.


\(^79\) Ibid, p.6.
was evident in the article’s conclusion that hirsutism was just one of several symptoms of bodily disorder or imbalance, and ‘probably the least of a sick woman’s worries’.  

The experience of living with hirsutism remained unexamined until in January 1983, when a reader called Jan wrote into Spare Rib’s letters page. Jan wrote that the magazine, in its recent coverage of female baldness and alopecia, had overlooked the suffering felt by women who experienced hirsutism or ‘hairiness’. She described the emotional pain hirsutism had caused her mother in undermining her sense of womanhood and given her a deep sense of inadequacy. Jan appealed to Spare Rib for advice and information and to ‘publish an article… which might benefit or bring together other silent sufferers’. Her request demonstrates the multiplicity of roles that Spare Rib performed for its readers: as information broadcaster, as a counsellor, and also as a vehicle to gather collective experiences, and act as a facilitator of consciousness-raising. The editors responded directly underneath Jan’s letter, informing her that they already published an article on body hair (referencing ‘Hairy Story’), and if readers wanted to ‘contribute’ to a new one then they should get in touch. But Jan’s letter highlighted the secrecy and shame surrounding female body and facial hair, providing a catalyst for other readers to write in with their own experiences.

It is important to note here how Spare Rib encouraged its readers to contribute to its content. The magazine became not only an organisation but a discursive site, and a resource for the women’s movement. Amy Erdman Farrell’s work on Ms. magazine in the United States, a comparable national feminist publication to Spare Rib, demonstrates the importance of readers’ letters pages to explicate this dialogic relationship and offer a legitimating space.

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
This was for the dual purpose of firstly, allowing readers to communicate with each other and therefore participate in a community of consciousness-raising, particularly when they might be geographically isolated from grass-roots activism and secondly, also communicate with the editors their concerns and expectations of the magazine. Farrell’s assertion that ‘in writing to the magazine, readers literally worked to write the magazine itself’ describes how the issue of body hair ended up garnering so much space in multiple issues as a result of one initial letter.  

The subsequent and unusual on-going publication of letters about body hair in the following April, May and June issues of *Spare Rib*, and a two-page feature dedicated to readers’ body hair letters in November shows the power of readers to influence content, and exemplifies Margaretta Jolly’s understanding of letter writing as providing ‘an implicit solution to women’s isolation in the very fact of their writing to one another’. The continual reference to Jan’s original letter published six months earlier demonstrates letter-writing as a process. Liz Stanley has utilised the term ‘an epistolary gift exchange’ to signify an ongoing social bond between writer-giver and addressee-receiver. The choice by *Spare Rib*’s editors to continue to publish letters about body hair also reflects changes in the magazine and the movement more widely at the beginning of the 1980s. Entitled ‘Excess hair - You’re Not the Only One!’, the introduction to the two-page November letters feature stated:

> As feminists begin to engage more and more with the vast areas of oppression and exploitation which exist all around us based on race, class, age, disability as well as sex, these ‘small’ individualised, debilitating worries and realities about our bodies such as weight, too much hair, too little hair, acne, breast size, still cloud our lives and sap our energies.

Such an introduction is suggestive of a broader, intersectional view of what constituted oppression within *Spare Rib*. And yet the classification of hair in this instance as ‘small’ and a

---

86 Ibid
89 ‘Excess Hair – You’re Not the Only One!’ *Spare Rib* (November 1983), 136, p.32.
'sap’ on energy in comparison to more pertinent issues again reinforces the conceptualisation of body hair politics as a way to refer to tedious inconveniences rather than key political themes. The ‘hairy-legged feminist’ figure in this instance, illustrates Hesford’s assertion that the feminist ghost ‘bothers us’, looming as a distraction to key issues of the day.90

Responses to Jan’s letter between April and November 1983 exemplifies D-M Wither’s argument that ‘traumatic experiences are central to the collective imaginary of feminist politics’.91 The letters were explicit in sharing these stories, some gave personal reviews of certain removal methods, others spoke of efforts to conceal hair from partners or instead choose celibacy.92 There were also mentions of avoidance of public or social activities like swimming, memories of bullying, and even one description of how a Freudian psychotherapist had convinced one reader her real problem was penis envy.93 The sharing of these experiences shows how mutual care for each other’s suffering became a political act of resistance, as one reader wrote: ‘I think we can (and should) gain strength and comfort from knowledge of each other’.94 The spate of letters to Spare Rib also highlighted how little medical knowledge and understanding there was about body hair. One woman who had had the courage to go to her GP recounted, ‘he, however, took a quick look at me, said “is that all?” and told me to go to a beautician’.95 This exemplifies the liminal positioning of hairy women within medical science that was explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

Feminist epistolary or letter writing within the second wave has been explored by historians and literary theorists such as Margaretta Jolly, Liz Stanley and Celia Hughes, who argue that the letter exposes the conflicted negotiation of ‘the complex interplay of politics and

92 H Brandford, Spare Rib (April 1983), 129, p.4; Anon, Spare Rib (May 1983), 130, p.5.
93 Hilary, Spare Rib (June 1983), 131, p.27; ‘Excess Hair – You’re Not the Only One’ Spare Rib (November 1983), 136, pp.32-33.
94 M ‘Excess Hair – You’re Not the Only One’ Spare Rib (November 1983),136, p.32.
95 ‘Problems with Hair’ Spare Rib (May 1983), 130, p.5.
emotions’.

Hughes’s study of a long-lasting exchange of private letters between two feminists in the 1970s illustrates how letters can document ‘the active process of female self-fashioning’, and reveal the importance of female friendship in the mapping and remaking of identity. Exploring the WLM through letters highlights how identity-making was a relational process, as Jolly succinctly puts it: they acted as ‘a textual looking glass’ which also allowed women to assert themselves as female autonomous subjects. It was therefore not only letter content that was political, but the form and practice of letter writing itself. However, although feminist letter writing was often intimate and full of mutual care, sometimes this need for care was also demanded, and letters were confronting and antagonistic. This highlights the fragility of those relational bonds and friendships and reminds us that reconciling self and activism was not always easy.

Significantly, the letters describe not only dissatisfaction with the help and support from medical professionals, but also exasperation with what little understanding the women’s movement had imparted. With most letters signed anonymously, a sense of being both voiceless and also tentative came across in sentiments like, ‘I hate to send an anonymous letter but there’s no way I have the courage (yet) to sign it’. Anonymity served to protect these women; it illustrates their feelings of shame and also highlights how vulnerable they felt – even within the movement. It suggests that there was ‘no recognisable, legitimate, shared social space from where they could speak’. Many readers acknowledged this directly in their letter writing. For example, one reader wrote in, ‘I’m caught in a terrible trap – hating all the hair on my body, but feeling that as a feminist I can’t do anything to get rid of it’. Another confessed,

97 Ibid, p.876.
98 M. Jolly, In Love and Struggle, p.10.
100 D. Withers, ‘Women’s Liberation, Relationships and the “Vicinity of Trauma”’, p.83.
I felt doubly guilty: (a) for looking like I did in the first place and (b) for caring so much about the way I looked.102 These testimonies portray how identifying as a feminist and simultaneously removing body hair culminated for many readers in expressions of guilt, internal conflict and cognitive dissonance: ‘…as a feminist I hate myself for allowing myself to be pressured enough by society to feel I have to remove the offending hair’;103 ‘I coped with this at first by removing the hair, but I too felt that this was not a “right on” way of dealing with it and it wasn’t helping me to feel good about my body the way it is’.104

The haunting of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ manifested in this discord between readers’ lived experiences and their activism, in turn causing a perceived divide between their political and personal selves. Some readers accused feminists of lacking any understanding of what it was like to live with excess hair, giving women no choice but to remove it to fit in: one reader explained, ‘I still find my involvement with the feminist movement of little help. It’s alright flaunting “hairy” legs when they don’t look like a man’s’.105 Another wrote, ‘underarm hair and light leg hair are OK now thank god, but believe me, bearded ladies with legs like gorillas are just never going to make it as an accepted minority!’.106 One reader requested, ‘I just feel that we could also look closer at the oppressions that feminism allows’.107 Readers’ self-consciousness about their inability to transcend their body hair concerns, and thus their inadequacy as feminists mirrors Lucy Delap’s exploration of Edwardian feminism and the politics of the ‘superwoman’.108 As a paradigm adapted from Edwardian political thinking, the ‘superwoman’ encapsulated the idolised figure of female genius, free of external constraint and dependency. But Delap shows how readers of the periodical Freewoman similarly felt that this

102 ‘Problems with Body Hair’ Spare Rib (May 1983), 130, p.22.
103 Hiliary, ‘You are Not Alone’ Spare Rib (June 1983), 131, p.27.
model of feminism was unattainable and subsequently a site of anxiety and tension. The ‘Superwoman’, like the ‘hairy-legged feminist’, functioned as a model of feminism that inadvertently instated a sense of exclusivity and a confining of political ideals.

For some readers of *Spare Rib* this tension was resolvable. Re-appropriation of the ‘coming out’ narrative, traditionally recognized as a process of LGBTQ identity formation, was referred to in two letters, one who identified herself and the other writers as ‘closet shavers’ and another who wrote, ‘the more people who “come out” and admit they have what is known as “excess” body hair, then the less abnormal people will feel’. The inference was that like the gay body, the hairy body remained deviant in a society constructed in and through heteronormative discourses and discursive practices. By coming out of the shaving closet, so to speak, one would be able to subvert these ideas and to see the body in a new way. In *Spare Rib* the act of coming out was presented as not only coming out in society as a hairy woman, but also coming out to the women’s movement as a hair remover: one reader wrote ‘the point I’ve reached is to accept myself as I am but also to accept that I feel better removing some of the hair’.

But the notion that simply the acceptance of oneself leads to empowerment very much ignores the physical and psychological work that goes into such a process of becoming. Fat activist and scholar Samantha Murray highlights how ‘coming out’ narratives oversimplify the multiple and contradictory ways she lives in her body, she writes: ‘even for the activist, this moment of resistance is an ongoing internal conflict rather than a moment of discursive rupture’. We see this reflected in one reader’s letter who recounts what it was like for her during a period of consciously growing her body hair. She wrote:

---

112 *Spare Rib* (November 1983), 136, p.32.
It was too hard for me as an individual to take on my shoulders the challenge of social prejudice. I am glad I did it and I feel stronger for it but I do not intend to be a martyr. I cannot accept a challenge which is as oppressive and painful as the convention itself.114

The moral value bestowed on being ‘out’ as good and healthy neglects to acknowledge the barriers, emotional hardship and continual labour in some cases of doing so. That this is deeply traumatic, emotional work exemplifies Hughes’s understanding of the ‘complex interplay of emotions and politics’ that goes into identity-formation.115

The discussion of body hair in readers’ letters demonstrates that emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to the movement were not always clear-cut. Even those women who felt marginalised by the sisterhood still expressed a ‘familial’ bond with and mutual care of each other through their letters and consciousness raising. Letter writing transformed readers into active agents, not only via their content but through the practice of writing itself. However, anonymity meant that the struggle for empowerment remained liminal, and many readers found it difficult to reconcile their political selves with their personal experiences and anxieties. Penny Summerfield has shown how writing the self can facilitate an all-important sense of ‘composure’, a kind of ‘psychic ease’ in making sense of recent experiences.116 We see this exemplified in the 1983 body hair letters: how the sharing and mutual acknowledgement of suffering was an essential part of the women’s liberation movement, and writing to each other served an invaluable political function.

Unlike the private letter exchange, which Jolly and Hughes have predominantly focused upon in their work, readers’ letters in Spare Rib ensured the two-way relational aspect of letter writing became a multi-dimensional web of interaction between readers and magazine editors. Of course, this exchange was both facilitated and obstructed by the editors’ intermediary

---

114 *Spare Rib* (November 1983), 136, p.33.
115 C. Hughes, ‘Left Activism, Succour and Selfhood’, p.877.
selection and translation of letters for publication, which according to Liz Stanley makes them ‘ontologically different’ from original letters. But Farrell argues that still, examining these pages give historians the opportunity to learn how readers were decoding the magazine’s representations of feminism, and decoding the movement more widely, emphasising the multi-layered nature of commercial media and the capacity of readers to use the texts in ways unintended by the producers. Readers’ letters also awkwardly straddle that artificial public/private divide, and often this position was interpreted differently by each reader, some who addressed the magazine, others to the ‘sisterhood’ and some directly to other previously published writing. In writing to the magazine, readers were already conscious of the exposure that could result, and unlike private letters, their experiences were meant to be read widely.

In this section we have traced the building of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ ghost within the Women’s Liberation Movement, pinpointing how the figure itself was a reference point through which feminists in the 1970s could identify with or against. The use of oral history testimonies and the letters page of Spare Rib magazine highlight the challenges in relation to transgressing the gender binary, as well as participating in a shared political movement. As a case study, exploring the politics of body hair removal resistance allows us to reflect on the limitations of feminism; what feminism has, can and cannot do in relation to identity-making and selfhood; the fault lines between the individual and the collective. In the next section, we continue to explore how this haunting manifests in subsequent discussions of body hair politics. We return to the affective dimensions of resistance at the end of this chapter, exploring how contemporary feminists continued to negotiate their political identity and societal conventions of hairlessness through the prism of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ ghost.

Feminism and body hair in the 2010s

In her best-selling 2011 ‘part memoir, part rant’ *How To Be A Woman*, journalist Caitlin Moran declared that when it came to ‘decisions you must make with your follicles, about who you are and what you want to say about yourself - it is pubic hair that is now the most politically charged arena’.

Moran’s claim shows more than simply an acknowledgement of the importance of hair in the construction of social identity; she was reflecting on how the pubic hair debate had become re-positioned as central to understanding women’s continued sexual confinement and exploitation in contemporary culture.

No longer dismissed as a subject of ‘radical feminism’, popular resistance to the hairlessness norm attributed in part to the flurry of publications by ‘celebrity feminists’ such as Moran who advocated against genital waxing, suggests a significant shift over the decade towards legitimization of the topic as one of public political interest.

This discursive visibility of the ‘intimate’ topic of pubic hair seems at odds with critical theorist Lesnik-Oberstein’s claim in her 2006 edited collection on the representation of body hair in film and literature, that the subject of female body hair was considered a concern ‘solely for “extremist” feminists’ facilitating its relegation as ‘the last taboo’ of public discussion in mainstream and academic culture.

On the contrary, vocalised opposition to pubic hairlessness appeared to coincide with and signify a new feminist zeitgeist emerging in Britain in the early 2010s. How this new generation of feminist engagement intersected with a reframing and reclamation of female body hair will be examined in this section; focusing on why and how resistance to pubic hairlessness became a symbol of feminist identity and key ground for mobilization of resistance around 2014. In turn, this prompts us to

---

119 C. Moran, *How To Be A Woman*, p.46.
120 Ibid, p.50.
121 A. Taylor, “‘Blockbuster’ Celebrity Feminism” *Celebrity Studies* (2014), 5 (1-2), pp.75-78 refers to ‘celebrity feminists’ as ‘women whose fame is the direct product of their feminist intervention into public discourse’, p.75.
question what ‘The Bush is Back’ might illustrate about feminist activism and consciousness raising at this time. In particular, does it provide evidence for, or exposure of, what some feminist media scholars have suggested was the ‘revival’ or ‘new cultural life’ of feminism emerging in British post-recessionary politics?\footnote{See for overview, R. Gill ‘Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism’ Diffractions: Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture (2016), 6, pp.1-8; R. Gill, ‘Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times’ Feminist Media Studies (2016), 16 (4), pp.610-630.}

Notably, I focus on two publications by ‘celebrity’ feminists Caitlin Moran and Hadley Freeman. Both Moran’s How to Be a Woman and Freeman’s Be Awesome: Modern Life for Modern Ladies rejected the norm for extensive pubic hair removal and tied their identity as feminists to this stance. However, neither Moran or Freeman considered underarm or leg hair removal to be a feminist issue in the same way they politicised pubic hair depilation. We return to the idea of haunting to examine the way in which Moran’s and Freeman’s discussions of body hair politics both shed light and sustained shadow on the gendered inequalities of normalised female hairlessness. I suggest that the veiled framing of body hair politics is significant in three ways: firstly, it reaffirmed the moral distinction between the ‘sinister’ trend of pubic depilation and other areas of body hair removal discussed in the previous chapter, in which pubic hairlessness signified sex in ways that hairless underarms did not. Secondly, it reflected the ongoing complex tension between feminism and neoliberal consumer culture illuminating the various ways in which contemporary feminists sought to resist, negotiate and embrace participation in beauty, fashion and porn consumption. Finally, it showed the persistent presence of the haunting spectre of the feminist ghost: the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ who continued to be a reference point and lens through which resistance to the hairlessness norm was understood and observed. This haunting illustrates how feminists inhabit their feminism in ways that incorporates the past; queering our understanding of chronological
timekeeping, and demonstrating how ‘the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present’ merge within political and emotional narratives of resistance.\textsuperscript{124}

To understand why the politics of pubic hair became a key battleground for new cultural feminism, it is crucial to explore more widely how this ‘wave’ manifested. Recent scholarship within feminist media studies has examined the popular resurgent usage of feminist rhetoric and self-identification amongst young women in the 2010s, asking whether this ‘new cultural life’ of feminism demonstrates that the ‘pastness’ of feminism associated with ‘postfeminism’ of the 1990s and 2000s is still applicable.\textsuperscript{125} Indicative of feminism’s revival is arguably its increasing hypervisibility and staging through popular culture, in particular the increased ‘circulation of feminism via celebrity culture’.\textsuperscript{126} Well-established female celebrities aligned themselves with feminist identity: for example, Beyoncé performed at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) in 2014 in front of an illuminated backdrop featuring the word ‘feminist’ and \textit{Cosmopolitan} awarded Emma Watson the title ‘Celebrity Feminist of the Year’ as a result of her United Nations #HeforShe Twitter campaign.\textsuperscript{127} In addition to celebrities publicly embracing feminism, feminist writers and activists ‘whose very fame [was] the product of their feminist enunciative practices’ consistently made their way into best-seller lists thus cementing feminism’s place in the terrain of ‘the popular’.\textsuperscript{128} In so doing, feminist media scholar Rosalind Gill argues feminism ‘seemingly moved from being a derided and repudiated identity among young women, to becoming a desirable, stylish, and decidedly fashionable one’.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{124} V. Hesford, \textit{Feminism and its Ghosts}, p.230.
Though the existence of high-profile celebrity feminists is not a new phenomenon – Anthea Taylor for example has demonstrated how the role of the icon has served a long and on-going political function within feminism, ‘new media’ changed the way in which celebrity culture has been used as a tool of feminist engagement and promotion.\textsuperscript{130} Social media and digital publishing have facilitated self-publication and self-promotion with a DIY (Do it Yourself) ethos, creating high-profile feminist figures out of campaigns such as Laura Bates’s Everyday Sexism Project.\textsuperscript{131} It has also encouraged women to DIT (Do It Together) as feminist collectives in magazine-format blogsites such as The Vagenda, The F Word and Jezebel, and online zine collectives and catalogues such as ‘grrrl zine network’ and ‘grassroots feminism’ that facilitate the recycling and reclamation of feminist history.\textsuperscript{132} Although there is not space in this study to do an extensive examination of feminist online activism, scholars such as Hester Baer, Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs and Jessalynn Marie Keller have highlighted how digital platforms have democratised feminism, and allowed for the negotiation and discussion of ideas as women respond by producing their own media and create their own campaigns.\textsuperscript{133} According to Khoja-Moolji, who utilises Berlant’s notion of ‘intimate publics’ to explain how strangers ‘form communities through affective ties’, this has also been facilitated through image-sharing, hashtag activism and blogging/vlogging practice.\textsuperscript{134} Although the technological shift to online social media platforms has created a feeling of newness around 2010s feminist activism, an historical lens demonstrates how many of these strategies of resistance are re-uses and re-interpretations of ways previous generations of feminists have

\textsuperscript{130} A. Taylor, “‘Blockbuster’ Celebrity Feminism”, p.75.
\textsuperscript{131} L. Bates Everyday Sexism Project ; http://everydaysexism.com/, [accessed 06/05/2019].
organised. For example, the embrace of DIY culture, taking control of the means of production, the reclamation of language, the re-appropriation of images, the importance put upon affective ties and community-building are reminiscent of the principles advocated by the Riot Grrrl post-punk movement which emerged in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{135}

Body hair activism is just one instance illustrating how online culture has facilitated single-issue networking, consciousness-raising and debate. By 2014, the so-called Year of the Bush, the ‘We’re Against Non Essential Grooming’ Group (WANG Club) had been active on the image sharing site Tumblr for three years and on Facebook for four.\textsuperscript{136} Participation within this group ranged from simply joining, to sharing photos of body hair, asking advice and support and engaging with critiques of projects and events. Hairy Pits Club, a Tumblr page created in 2010 to demonstrate how ‘having pit hair is a way to say “FUCK YOU” to unrealistic beauty standards and dichotomous gender roles’, existed as a photo sharing site exhibiting the range and variety of female bodies with hair.\textsuperscript{137} Armpits4August (A4A) an online campaign active roughly between 2011-2014 across multiple online platforms, aimed to raise awareness and fundraising for polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) charity Verity by encouraging women to participate in growing their underarm hair for a month for sponsorship.\textsuperscript{138} Their aim was to normalise the sight of visible female body hair in order to tackle the stigma of hirsutism which many PCOS sufferers experienced. As well as fundraising, members of A4A also participated in forms of direct action: ‘arm-bushing’ statues and organising a ‘pitpride’ march and party in London in 2012 and 2013.\textsuperscript{139}

Scholars remain conflicted as to whether this manifestation of online activism and the embrace of feminism by celebrity culture is effective. ‘Popular feminism’ has been criticised

\textsuperscript{135} L. Cofield and L. Robinson, “‘The Opposite of the Band”: Fangrrrling, Feminism and Sexual Dissidence’ \textit{Textual Practice} (2016), 30(6), pp.1071-1088.
\textsuperscript{136} WANG Club, https://www.facebook.com/groups/353902130900/, [accessed 29/12/2019].
\textsuperscript{137} Hairy Pits Club, https://hairy pitsclub.tumblr.com/about, [accessed 29/12/2019].
\textsuperscript{138} Armpits 4 August, https://armpitsforaugust.wordpress.com/, [accessed 29/12/2019].
\textsuperscript{139} Armpits 4 August, www.twitter.com/Armpits4august, [accessed 29/12/2019].
for its seeming lack of substance. In a piece on the ubiquity of feminist rhetoric in popular culture for *The Guardian* in 2014, Jessica Valenti asked ‘when everyone is a feminist, is anyone?’ highlighting a distinction between identifying as a feminist and actually participating in feminist action.\(^{140}\) Rosalind Gill has questioned whether, apart from its ‘luminosity in popular culture’, this particular iteration of feminism differs significantly enough from that of postfeminist sensibility of the 1990s and 2000s.\(^{141}\) She maintains that an emphasis on individual empowerment rather than the examination of wider structural inequalities in ‘New Gen Fem’ continues to preserve a lack of visibility for issues and experiences from minority ethnic and working class communities.\(^{142}\) This, Gill asserts, demonstrates New Gen Fem’s corroboration with (and reassertion of) postfeminism’s central tenets underpinned by dominant ideologies of individualism and neoliberalism.\(^{143}\) Indeed, there is discussion about the pertinence of ‘postfeminism’ to the lives of black women and there certainly remains room for further research into the interrelationship between black women, feminism and body hair removal.\(^{144}\)

Thinking then about visibility, Gill reminds us ‘it is worth asking not just about the amount of visibility but also about the kinds of visibility on offer in any seemingly “democratized” media space’.\(^{145}\) Again, the idea of the veiling of body hair works here to describe the varying shades of visibility afforded to feminist body hair politics in the popular and the policing it can invite, particularly when this activism disrupts gender norms. Scholar and feminist activist Emer O’Toole for example, received threats of violence following her appearance on ITV daytime television show *This Morning* to discuss her choice to grow her

\(^{140}\) J. Valenti, ‘When Everyone is a Feminist, is Anyone? *The Guardian* (24\(^{th}\) November 2014) [online] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/when-everyone-is-a-feminist [accessed 29/12/2019].


\(^{142}\) Ibid.

\(^{143}\) Ibid, p.621.

\(^{144}\) Ibid, pp.619-620. Although this is not to suggest that the politics of hair has not also illuminated by Black feminists and minority ethnic women in the 2010s: for politics of afro hair see P. Robinson, *You Can’t Touch my Hair: And Other Things I still have to Explain* (Plume: New York, 2016) and E. Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair* (Allen Lane, Penguin Random House UK: 2019).

\(^{145}\) Ibid, p.616.
body hair, illustrating what Banet-Weiser points to as the flourishing of popular misogyny that has pursued feminist hypervisibility. In her semi-autobiographical work *Girls Will Be Girls*, O’Toole reflected upon ‘briefly becoming the international face of female body hair’ and the disproportionate amount of upset it caused: ‘anything capable of generating so much irrational shock and disbelief can’t fail to draw attention to the gendered nature of our society’. O’Toole’s experience demonstrates how personal risk can be involved when ‘unveiling’ resistance to the hairlessness norm in public spaces, as well as how harassment can function as a silencing strategy. Trolling has for example, pushed online communities such as The WANG Club to limit its membership and put in place guidelines for participation so as to maintain a safe space and support. In this compromise, exclusivity and a reduction in public visibility is exchanged for protection against abuse. Although we might recognise the idea of ‘trolling’ as a contemporary online-specific phenomenon, we can also draw parallels here to the previous section and the way feminist activism in the 1970s was policed through ridicule and critique of appearance.

Another example of how the visibility of body hair politics remained closely policed in the public domain is the coverage of the ‘Bush is Back’ news story in the June 2014 issue of women’s lifestyle magazine *Company*. The article examined whether evidence that pubic hair was back in fashion was consistent with the experience of waxing experts. It adopted feminist argument and vocabulary: ‘But isn’t it good that women are uniting against the patriarchal porn industry’s ideal of a hairless lady garden?’, before determining that the decline

---

148 Feminist Media Studies (2018), 18 (4), (a special issue on online misogyny); see also K. Lumsden and H. Morgan, ‘Media Framing of Trolling and Online Abuse: Silencing Strategies, Symbolic Violence, and Victim Blaming’ Feminist Media Studies (2017), 17 (6), pp.926-940.
of extensive pubic hair removal was a myth: ‘in fact, the trend for no hair at all is on the rise’.

The article concluded with a suggestion:

Let’s not all freak out though – it doesn’t mean everyone’s waxing because they want to join the porn industry or satisfy some undeserving man’s sexual predilection. Let’s not judge each other for our pubic topiary choices, because it is just that – a simple matter of choice. And it’s the choice that empowers us. Besides, the only judgement that matters is yours.

Such advice is consistent with a postfeminist sensibility which Gill and Orgad argue emphasises emancipatory power through individual choice rather than collective action. The issue of pubic hairlessness is depoliticised by the suggestion that it remains an individual lifestyle choice, neglecting to address any of the broader structural and emotional constraints which might impact upon decision-making like experiencing the threat of violence, public shaming or financial constraint. Company’s promotion of choice is further trivialised by the inclusion underneath the article of an advertisement for market-leading hair removal brands Veet, Nair, Venus Gillette, and Parissa, further encouraging that ‘choice’ be consumer-led. An emphasis on consumption is not surprising considering Company was a commercial magazine, as my analysis of Jackie magazine in Chapter Two has demonstrated. But it also epitomises the way in which the politics of body hair removal were only partially unveiled and articulated within these texts. Illustrating this point even more plainly was Company’s avoidance of any visual representation of pubic hair throughout the article, opting instead for six illustrative pictorial shapes and symbols to signify different styles of pubic grooming. This veiling supports Tennent and Jackson’s claim that the ‘forms of feminism given more visibility in

\[150\text{ Ibid, p.76}\]
\[151\text{ Ibid.}\]
contemporary media culture are those that pose less challenge to the neoliberal logic of postfeminism.¹⁵³

The remainder of this section explores Moran’s and Freeman’s discursive framing of pubic hair politics and their justification for why it was so necessary for women at this time to ‘reclaim the bush’. This examination demonstrates the imbued signification given to pubic hair removal, as a symbol encapsulating twenty-first century society’s ongoing uneasiness with the commodification of sex and female sexual agency. The perceived sense of societal moral decline within this narrative, which facilitates the comparison of sexual wellbeing in a linear ‘then’ and ‘now’ model, celebrates an imagined sexual past as both a simpler and more authentic experience. This resonates with Sims’s framing of revival/reclamation culture outlined at the beginning of this chapter as an interaction between past and present. Secondly, the examination of Moran’s and Freeman’s politics shows how the feminist ghost continues to haunt feminist debates about body hair and, in so doing, continues to police the demarcation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminist practice in the present. The presence of the feminist ghost in these publications demonstrates that interactions with the past are not always celebratory – sometimes they may be threatening or uncomfortable. These varying and often conflicting ways in which the past is threaded through contemporary debates about female body hair, helps to expose the underlying tensions and ambiguities felt when negotiating how to live a feminist life.

Both Moran’s How To be a Woman and Freeman’s Be Awesome: Modern Life for Modern Ladies, are characteristic of an emerging genre of non-fiction feminist writing in the new millennium, described as ‘tits-n-wit-lit’ by critic Miranda Sawyer in The Guardian.¹⁵⁴

Literary scholar Suzanne Ferriss has similarly identified this genre as ‘chick non-fic’, noting the regular fusion of personal memoir and humour within these texts ‘to construct a younger remembered self, very like the popular chick-lit heroine’. Diane Negra has explored the connection between the proliferation of female-authored print texts in the early 2010s and recessionary economics and popular culture. Distinctive from the self-help books of the 1990s, she argues publications such as Tina Fey’s *Bossypants*, Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* and Moran’s *How to Be a Woman* signify a new willingness to align with feminist identity, and a shift in the recuperation of pro-women and feminist rhetoric consistent with Gill’s observations of ‘post-postfeminism’. The chick non-fic genre however, also embraces and shows compliance with ‘older’ postfeminist sensibilities associated with third wave feminism. For example, Negra highlights the continuing emphasis authors put on female entrepreneurialism, self-belief and perseverance as solutions for overcoming structural constraints, promoting celebration of the self. Ferriss also pinpoints the ongoing negotiation in chick non-fic of the ‘postfeminist paradox’ which both simultaneously critiques and accepts ‘contemporary consumerist and cultural pressure to conform’. I selected Moran’s and Freeman’s publications because they exemplify these aspects of the contemporary popular feminist genre, grappling with issues of self-empowerment and the demands of neoliberal capitalist culture. I also selected them because of the luminosity afforded to the politics of pubic hair within these texts, emphasised by the inclusion on both blurbs of promotional patter highlighting this content. The decision to premiere pubic hair politics as promotional marketing to prospective readers demonstrates not only the cultural capital the ‘Year of the Bush’ rhetoric had acquired,

---

157 D. Negra, ‘Claiming Feminism’; R. Gill, ‘Post-postfeminism?’.
159 S. Ferriss, ‘Chick Non-Fic’, p.213.
it also shows the indivisibility of pubic hair politics from both Moran’s and Freeman’s branding as modern day celebrity feminists, and the indivisibility of pubic hair politics in the commercial rebranding of twenty-first century feminism more broadly.

*How To Be a Woman* documents Moran’s relationship with her changing body from girlhood into adulthood, putting emphasis on the corporeal and the confessional which Ferriss argues is central to this genre. Chapter titles and focused on these discoveries, for instance, ‘I Start Bleeding!’ and ‘I Need a Bra!’ In the chapter entitled ‘I Become Furry!’, Moran documents her first observations and experimentation with depilation and later delineates her own political views on hair removal. Moran’s tone is above all humorous and self-deprecating, assisting in the crafting of her ‘just like us’ public persona. She recalls finding her first pubic hair aged thirteen years old; the dilemma shared with friends about shaving before a big party, and dying her armpit hair red for Glastonbury music festival. Through this personal model, Moran’s life story traces ‘becoming’ into womanhood as she recounts a linear ageing process. But she also discusses ‘becoming a woman’ with the understanding that the concept of ‘woman’ is socially constructed, citing de Beauvoir’s ‘one is not born a woman – one becomes one’.

The exploration of situations and choices encountered in the formation of womanhood she recognises on a micro-scale in questions like:

What’s your signature style? Can you walk in heels? Who are your heroes? Are you getting a Brazilian? What porn do you like? Do you want to get married? When are you going to have kids? Are you a feminist?

The presence of the ‘Brazilian’, a form of depilation, in this list shows Moran’s acknowledgement of the significance of body hair in the construction of gendered bodies. It

---

160 Ibid, p.207.
161 Ibid, p.207.
highlights her motivation to take seriously gendered practices conventionally seen as mundane and trivial and recognise the personal as political. She explains why this is the case:

That palm-sized triangle has come to be top-loaded with more psychosexual inference than marital status and income combined. Over the years, pubic hair has gone from the very least of a woman’s worries – when I was 17, around BritPop, the idea of waxing your bikini line was bizarre, marginal, for porn models only – to a pretty routine part of “self-care”.165

It is this transformational status of pubic hair in the lives of young women that Moran focuses upon in this chapter, to understand what this might signify about what it means to ‘become a woman’ in the twenty-first century.

Published in the ‘post-Moran/Fey’ furore, Hadley Freeman’s 2014 *Be Awesome: Modern Life for Modern Ladies* was recognised by critics as both a product and a continuation of the emerging ‘tits-n-wit’ genre.166 A features writer and style columnist for *The Guardian*, Freeman’s *Be Awesome* adopted a similar journalistic-style prose and structure, with chapters comprising individual short essays, mock-up problem page-style Q and A’s, and ‘top ten’ lists evocative of women’s lifestyle magazine content. The topics discussed, as the title insinuates, dealt with contemporary everyday themes that the ‘modern lady’ had to negotiate: dating, friendship, office politics, disordered eating, fashion and sexism in the media. In contrast to Moran’s *How to Be a Woman* however, Freeman did not lead with the confessional voice. References and recounts of Freeman’s own personal experience, when present, remain subtly sprinkled; for instance, in the admission that she’s ‘more Molly Ringwald than Sissy Spacek’ in an essay on how film influenced her visions of adolescence.167 The exception to this was Freeman’s account of being hospitalised for anorexia in her chapter on eating disorders, although this retelling remains heavily censored. She reasoned,

---

165 Ibid, p.46.
166 M. Sawyer, ‘Be Awesome’ *The Guardian*.
167 H. Freeman, *Be Awesome*, p.47.
I don’t believe personal experience imbues one with expertise. Nor is this a part of my life that I particularly enjoy discussing. In fact, I try to avoid talking about it altogether, mainly because I hope that I have something more to offer than my history.  

This purposefully detached approach similarly frames Freeman’s discussion of pubic hair removal, debated principally within the chapter ‘Sex Tips for Smart Ladies’. Rather than a recitation of her grooming history akin to Moran, Freeman assumes an agony aunt type role, herself first posing the hypothetical question: ‘So I’m about to sleep with a new gentleman caller for the first time. Should I go get a Brazilian Wax?’ and subsequently discussing the politics of gender this question raises. In so doing, Freeman maintains a balance between being instructional and relatable, retaining her authoritative voice without relinquishing the need to delve too deeply into the personal:

Now, I am very much of the belief that, as long as it’s legal, a woman should be allowed to do pretty much anything if it makes her feel happy and confident in herself, and yes, that does include the styling of her pubic hair. What she should not do, however, is feel pressurised to torture her genitals because she assumes that it is what sexual partners and society itself expects of her.  

Freeman’s response sits comfortably within the parameters of ‘postfeminist sensibility’, championing above all else individual choice and self-confidence as key components of women’s liberation. A discomfort with the normalisation of pubic waxing for sexual pleasure however, indicates a moral dilemma for Freeman regarding the underlying gendered inequalities that compel women to remove their pubic hair for others and not themselves. Freeman goes on to compare the normalisation of Brazilian and Hollywood waxing as ‘the twenty-first-century western version of genital mutilation…’. She explains:

My objection to the Brazilian is that it is such a weird combination of the aesthetics of porn and paedophilia and it encapsulates so many of the very wrong ideas that exist about women, sexuality and sexiness. Bikini waxes, for me at least, have nothing to do
with sex. They are about not wanting to flash my pubes on the beach… A bikini wax is about, at the very least, privacy.\(^\text{171}\)

Freeman situates her argument not against consumerism or the beauty industry as a whole: she accepts the desire to depilate and participates herself in salon culture. Instead, she questions the sexual undertones of complete genital hairlessness.

Moran similarly utilises her literary platform to negate the morality of the pubic hairlessness trend. She explains,

> My beautician told me she has had girls of 12 and 13 coming in for Brazilians – removing the first signs of adulthood even as they appear, in a combination that – with its overtones of infantalisation, and impetus in hardcore pornography – is pretty creepy, whichever way you look at it.\(^\text{172}\)

This recollection invites readers to observe Moran’s participation and familiarity with conventional beauty culture in the identification of ‘my beautician’. Like Freeman she inverts the paradigm of feminists opposing femininity. Instead, it places Moran’s discomfort with Brazilian waxing not with the grooming practice itself, but by citing the youth of the girls desiring hairlessness, and the sense of foreboding that accompanied that. Crucially in these two texts, pubic hair was embroiled within an emerging moral imperative which pinpointed genital waxing as emblematic of the harmful and insidious impact of pornography on norms of sexual behaviour, particularly within younger women’s heterosexual relationships.

The trend for pubic hairlessness as a result of the mainstreaming of pornography was explored in the previous chapter. But it is important here to highlight how, even though Moran and Freeman pinpointed pubic hair removal as a contemporary and historically-specific phenomenon, this condemnation of pornography built upon a longer history of feminist critique of the exploitative nature of pornographic culture. In particular, the prominence of a feminist

\(^{171}\) Ibid, p.43.

\(^{172}\) C. Moran, *How To Be A Woman*, p.50.
anti-pornography stance reached its peak during the 1980s ‘sex wars’, a term used to describe the highly contested debates ‘characterised by polarisation between radical feminist and libertarian positions, broadly representing “anti-pornography” and “sex-positive” perspectives’.173 ‘The Bush is Back’ narrative is suggestive of a re-engagement with the arguments of anti-pornography feminists of the 1980s, that pornography could not only provoke violence against women but incited sexist attitudes and reinforced stereotypes of feminine attractiveness. In Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism, Julia Long has similarly traced a growth in a new wave of feminist anti-porn activism in the 2010s.174 Building on the idea of feminism’s past haunting feminism’s present, she suggests that anti-porn feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin have subverted their status as ‘spectres of a censorious and dreary past’ to be reinstated as figures of credibility.175 Long’s argument is supported by the contemporaneous publication of non-fiction writing such as anti-porn scholar Gail Dines’s Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality first published in 2010 and psychologist Linda Papadopoulos’s 2010 Home Office report entitled Sexualisation of Young People Review.176 Both publications were explicit in highlighting the risks caused by the evolution of the internet in making pornography more accessible and harder to regulate, citing the trend for extensive hair removal as indicative of the internalization of porn imagery by young audiences. Concern about the waning wholesomeness of sex in the internet age was also exemplified by Channel 4’s ‘Campaign for Real Sex’ which launched in August 2013. Pinpointing pornographic sex as the antithesis to ‘real sex’, the campaign aimed to ‘reclaim sex from the airbrushed, surgically-enhanced, depilated, gymnastic fantasies and celebrate the

174 Ibid, p.5.
175 Ibid, p.4.
joy of real sex’, posing a dichotomy between the seemingly unfulfilling, hairless sex of the present day and the more authentic (and it would seem) hairier sexual encounter of yesteryear. This situated ‘The Bush is Back’ narrative within a broader rejection of the transformation of sex in the twenty-first century. Channel 4’s celebration of ‘the joy of real sex’, a reference to Alex Comfort’s 1972 sex manual *The Joy Of Sex*, builds upon this narrative; hailing the 1970s as a golden age for pubic hair and with it, healthier and more wholesome sexual relationships.

Evans and Riley pinpoint a similar sense of sexual realism as located in the past amongst their participants in their 2015 study on sexual consumerism and female identity-making. These ‘Functioning Feminists’ as they identified this cohort of women aged between 45-55, constructed historical sexual identities set in the 1960s and 1970s as more ‘agentic and authentic, in comparison to contemporary young women who engage in non-politicised consumer-oriented sexiness’. Nostalgia in this instance was used as a critique of contemporary postfeminist consumer culture and technological advancement, which also constructed a dichotomy between ‘authentic feminist sexuality’ and capitalism. This supports Sims’s assertion that ‘myths of the past are frequently packaged as powerful simplistic symbols with which to provide the starkest possible contrast to the lacks of the present’. The rejection of pubic hair removal, as an example of the commodification of sex therefore tells us something about present day uneasiness with commercialised consumer culture, as well as how historical story-telling is utilised as part of an identity construction.

---

180 Ibid, p.106.
Moran further emulates this when she identifies herself as ‘vagina retro’ in her stance on pubic hair.\(^{183}\) She clarifies, ‘[a]s far as pubic hair is concerned, I am like someone sitting in a pub, tearfully recalling how exciting it was to go into Woolworth’s and buy the new Adam Ant single on seven-inch vinyl’.\(^{184}\) The sentimental framing of pubic hair as comforting, familiar, and modest is replicated in Freeman’s recollections of the past:

Once women with hairless vaginas were something one saw on cards in public phone boxes. Now such a thought is as outmoded as the phone boxes themselves.\(^{185}\)

The fact that both authors utilise obsolescent technologies such as vinyl and public phone boxes to discuss changing pubic hair tastes, indicates not just a collective cultural understanding of how we mark the passing of time but also is an interesting way of representing what both Moran and Freeman perceive as society’s decreasing sense of naiveté and innocence when it comes to sexual culture.

However, Moran and Freeman’s celebration of pubic hair, as a symbol of society’s former healthier relationship with sexual intimacy, is not reflected in their discussions of female body hair politics more broadly. Again, this distinction highlights the exceptionality of pubic hair in the public imagination to represent sex in ways that other sites of body hair do not. The stance with which both Moran and Freeman approach armpit and leg hair removal is emphasised first and foremost by the comparably condensed page space devoted to the discussion. It is this demarcation and the unwillingness to confront the politics of armpit or leg hair as anything other than a matter of personal choice, that implies the presence of the feminist ghost. For example, Freeman simply proposes that ‘any feminist is smart enough to do with [body hair] as she sees fit’ in a chapter clunkily titled ‘Beyond the armpit: a ten-point (plus

\(^{183}\) C. Moran, *How To Be A Woman*, p.47.
\(^{184}\) Ibid.
\(^{185}\) H. Freeman, *Be Awesome*, p.41.
three addenda and some posh little footnotes) guide to being a modern day feminist’.186 The explicit call to readers to move ‘beyond the armpit’ imposes a sense of its seeming antiquatedness and irrelevance in Freeman’s present day politics. This dis-attachment from the ‘pastness’ of armpit politics underwrites Freeman’s own re-packaging of contemporary feminism or as the book’s subtitle suggests: ‘Modern Life for Modern Ladies’. As part of this re-branding Freeman uses her rejection of armpit hair politics to distinguish her ‘modern’ outlook from feminisms-past. This juxtaposition facilitates an implicit reading of feminism pre-2010s as bogged down by trivial matters of leg and armpit hair, rigid, opposed to femininity, individual choice and the pleasures of grooming and beauty. Simultaneously this feeds into both the stereotyped hairy-legged ‘wimmin’s libber’ constructed and circulated within popular memory, and uses the figure of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ as a benchmark with which to distinguish. In so doing, a line is drawn between different sites of body hair and their importance to the feminist cause.

Disassociation from second wave feminism was also part of Moran’s branding. Whilst Moran proposed that in growing out your pubic hair you can be ‘safe in the knowledge that you have… reclaimed a stretch of feminism that had got lost under the roiling Sea of bullshit’;187 growing out armpit, facial or leg hair did not achieve the same political ends: ‘What you do with your armpits is just an aesthetic concern – and not really part of “The Struggle”’, she explained.188

This reflects Moran’s principle contention in How To Be A Woman, which seeks to reclaim feminism not just from anti-feminist sentiment but from what Moran perceives as the ivory tower of academic feminism into the everyday.189 This signifies her ‘contribution’ to what she sees as the emerging ‘fifth wave’ of feminism: shining a light on ‘day-to-day’

186 H. Freeman, Be Awesome, pp.189-191.
187 C. Moran, How To Be A Woman, p.52.
188 Ibid.
problems, rather than focusing on theory and abstractions.\textsuperscript{190} We might reflect on how this parallels some of the critiques focused towards ‘academicky’-type consciousness-raising within the WLM earlier in this chapter. This also supports Negra’s assertion that for new feminist authors like Moran, authority ‘may be fortified by the increasing stigmatisation of the critical humanities in public discourse’ in recession era politics.\textsuperscript{191} Moran presents ‘old’, ‘traditional’ feminism as ‘shrunk down into a couple of increasingly small-arguments, carried out among a couple of dozen feminist academics’.\textsuperscript{192} This reading of ‘academic’ feminism as serious, unreadable and unrelatable still shapes how both Moran and her critics identify her feminism as refreshing and different. Miranda Sawyer for instance, in her review for \textit{The Guardian} writes, ‘[Moran] pins each topic out like a live, wriggling, sexist frog, ready for dissection. But, instead of scalpelling it into little bits, as, say, Germaine Greer would, Moran tickles it so hard that the frog has to beg for mercy and hop off’.\textsuperscript{193} The feminist ghost’s presence is felt here in the forging of a past which seems foreign and yet also an object that feminism has to place itself in relation to, in this case, the figure of Germaine Greer. In so doing, a historical narrative is conjured, at the same time as it is rejected. The use of the past in this context, is a mechanism of demarcation of time, as well as of bodies, politics and technology.

We see a complicated pattern of the uses of the past when it comes to female body hair and resistance in the 2010s. Despite the ‘newness’ of ‘New Gen Fem’ (related to its utilisation of new technology and online celebrity culture), there are a number of ways in which the past circulated within the discussion of body hair politics: in the DIY and community-building strategies of online activism, in the re-engagement with anti-pornography feminist arguments to critique pubic hair removal, in the locating of ‘authentic’ sex as part of the myth-building

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid, p.14.
\textsuperscript{191} D. Negra, ‘Claiming Feminism’, p.278.
\textsuperscript{192} C. Moran, \textit{How To Be A Woman}, p.12.
\textsuperscript{193} M. Sawyer, ‘How To Be A Woman’ \textit{The Guardian}. 
around the 1970s as a golden age of sexual liberation, and finally, in the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ as a figure of derision and disassociation from previous generations of feminism that took shape in Freeman and Moran’s publications. The reference to technological change in these texts assisted in conveying the perceived obsolescence and out-datedness that lingered like a haunting around Freeman’s and Moran’s modern day feminist body hair politics. However, instances of resistance, such as in O’Toole’s appearance on This Morning to discuss her armpit hair, demonstrates the sustained power of the visibility of female body hair to incite feelings of discomfort and unease within popular culture. The backlash that ensued illustrated how pertinently the gender binary is still policed through the threat of violence and the narrative of social abjection. In this final concluding section, I utilise testimonies of women from my oral history research to further explore the emotional consequences of resistance, when that resistance is embodied. The presence of the feminist ghost in these conversations demonstrates how the past can both anchor women’s experience and identity-formation and simultaneously create feelings of unease and discomfort.

**Conclusion: Living with Feminism’s Ghosts**

This chapter has explored feminism’s relationship with body hair between the late 1960s and the 2010s. The assimilation of body hair into the prescription of a feminist uniform style belonging to the Women’s Liberation Movement complicated women’s resistance against norms of hairlessness. From the late 1960s onwards, the figure of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ became a short hand reference within the mainstream media to denote feminism’s perceived anti-feminine standpoint. As the Sisterhood and After oral history project has shown, this

---

resulted in an anxiety within the movement that a focus on appearance detracted from the significance of their activism.\textsuperscript{196} The ‘hairy-legged feminist’ also became symbolic of a type of feminism considered out of touch, middle-class, academically-orientated; absorbed in navel-gazing rather than wider issues of economic, political and social oppression.\textsuperscript{197} Readers’ letters in \textit{Spare Rib} magazine demonstrated engagement with ‘the hairy-legged feminist’ as a type of ideal which many readers felt they could not live up to.\textsuperscript{198} Body hair thus highlighted a sense of divergence between the imagined ideal models of feminist praxis and the negotiation and resistance of structures of oppression and gendered norms in everyday life.

This chapter also explored the sustained presence of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ within public memory. It demonstrated how this figure has continued to complicate the politics of body hair removal and shows the complexity with which feminist history is both recalled and re-used. Hesford in her analysis of the ‘feminist-as-lesbian’ ghost, identified this kind of recollection as ‘a collective cultural remembering of the second wave movement that is also a haunting.’\textsuperscript{199} Haunting, she has argued, denotes the melding of representations or a particular image of the past alongside structures of feeling to make it feel both familiar and simultaneously strange.\textsuperscript{200} The ghost ‘bothers us’ in this way, by signifying both unfinished business and unrealised potential.\textsuperscript{201}

To conclude this investigation, I consider how four women from my oral history research have negotiated living with feminism’s ghosts, reflecting upon how this haunting continued to impact their personal navigation between their sense of self and their feminist politics. The birth dates of the four participants loosely divides them into two age groups mirroring the two temporal locations mapped out in this chapter. Born between 1963 and 1966, Lydia, Sarah and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item M. Jolly, Interview with Z. Fairbairns.
\item M. Jolly, Interview with L. Abdela.
\item \textit{Spare Rib} (November 1983), 136, p.33.
\item V. Hesford, ‘Feminism and its Ghosts’, p.228.
\item Ibid, pp.230-231.
\item Ibid, p.230.
\end{thebibliography}
Rita grew up as the Women’s Liberation Movement took shape. For Megan, born in 1990, the 2000s was the foundation of her adolescent years. An era referred to historically and within popular memory as third wave or post feminism characterised by ‘girl power’, girlie culture and ‘Blair’s babes’.\textsuperscript{202} Despite these seemingly different historical contexts experienced by the two age groups, it was not generational experience that structured and differentiated these women’s relationships with their body hair and with feminism. Space and relationships mattered more significantly than age as foundations which could assemble (or disassemble) the ability or desire to resist the hairless norm.

Sarah’s and Rita’s personal histories exemplify this in the accounts of their fluctuating relationships with their body hair over their lifetime. In so doing, it reminds us how relationships with and to feminism can also fluctuate over time. Friends since university, Sarah and Rita emphasised how their body hair politics were shaped by their experiences of university, travel and relationships with feminist friends in the South of England in their late teens and early twenties during the late 1980s. Rita recalled how during this time she perceived a ‘resurgence of female body hair and, particularly if you were a feminist’.\textsuperscript{203} Indeed, a flurry of scholarship on the topic of female body hair, and of the politics of bodily appearance more generally characterised 1980s feminist trade publishing, with popular texts such as Wendy Chapkis’s \textit{Beauty Secrets}, Susan Brownmiller’s, \textit{Femininity} and Naomi Wolf’s \textit{The Beauty Myth} published in 1990.\textsuperscript{204} Although she did not formally participate within women’s groups, Rita recalled ideas about feminist issues circulating by ‘just being around… having conversations with my girlfriends about feminism’.\textsuperscript{205} Rita stopped shaving her legs at university, but the decision to stop shaving her armpits occurred during a work experience trip

\textsuperscript{203} Present Author, Interview with Rita.
\textsuperscript{205} Present Author, Interview with Rita.
to the United States of America after graduating from university in 1988. When asked if grooming habits in America had influenced this decision she stated, ‘I don’t think it had anything to do with what anyone else was doing to be honest, it was just a moment in the shower when I thought, “well I don’t shave my legs, why should I shave my armpits?” and stopped’.  

Like Rita, Sarah described the initial influence of friends as significant in her choice to stop shaving in her late teenage years. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four she spent considerable time in Germany with older friends she described as being part of the ‘“68 generation’, indicating their liberal sensibilities. She described the contrast she perceived between expectations of female body hair grooming between German and British culture at this time, supporting the idea that spatial context was an important factor in the capacity to resist: ‘…seeing women with hairy legs was no biggy, in a way that would have been much more noticeable in England’. Also influential to her body hair politics were Sarah’s living arrangements back at university. She recalled,

…when all my friends were on their year abroad and I was still here I moved into a house where I didn’t know anybody […] and the landlady and her partner, they were lesbians … and obviously a lot of their friends were quite feminist and I think that’s probably the first… there was when I first saw Our Bodies Ourselves was on their shelf. So I think I probably absorbed a bit from them at the same time as the German thing.

Both Rita and Sarah discussed how growing their body hair was accepted and often normalised within the communities they circulated within in the late 1980s. By the mid-1990s however, both recalled how an emerging sense of self-consciousness caused them to re-evaluate their grooming habits. Rita could almost pinpoint this change to an exact moment:

---

206 Present author, Interview with Rita.
207 Present author, Interview with Sarah, (2017).
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
… Actually I do remember in South America in 1995 people laughing ‘cause I could see pointing and laughing at my armpit hair… And around that time I think I just started to become reluctant to wear skirts and stuff so I just thought this is ridiculous, you know, there’s no point actually making a point out of it if you’re not enjoying it. So then I started removing the hair again.²¹⁰

Rita echoes the sense of internal conflict between her politics and feeling good and comfortable in her body that was described in the *Spare Rib* letters. It also reflects a discordance between individual and collective action. For Rita, political ‘point-making’ and understanding how gender inequality manifested in society was as important as personal enjoyment. For Sarah, who by 1994 had just entered into the teaching profession, not depilating began to feel very radical. Wanting to maintain her feminist principles but also conscious of her new professional status, Sarah found a compromise by bleaching her leg hair:

> Although most women were shaved, it was quite an unusual thing I was doing, I don’t think… well as I say I think I was probably making a bit of a stand, to myself at least about “I’m not going to… conform completely, but I will bleach it [laughs] ‘cause it looks horrible!” … And this is the thing, all the time that, you know, I was busy making stands and not shaving my legs and blah-de-blah it just meant I never shaved my legs - I mean, I never wore skirts. Like I said, I can remember teaching, and bleaching on that occasion because I knew I was going to wear a pair of shorts for a day trip.²¹¹

On entering the work place, Sarah had to negotiate how she presented her body in this professional space, to be accepted and taken seriously as an authority figure. This echoes Lesley Abdela’s compromise of principles in her *Sisterhood and After* interview, in which she argued that conforming to gender stereotypes was a means of access into the professional, male-dominated sphere.²¹²

The emergence of Rita and Sarah’s unease about not shaving in the mid-1990s, coincided with a more general shift in the conceptualisation of feminism at this time. Identified as ‘Third Wave’ or ‘postfeminism’, the 1990s is suggested to have been the context for the development

---

²¹⁰ Present author, Interview with Rita.
²¹¹ Present author, Interview with Sarah.
²¹² M. Jolly, Interview with Lesley Abdela.
of a ‘generational divide’ in feminism thinking; with younger feminists re-appraising second wave’s approach to the politics of appearance as outdated.\textsuperscript{213} Angela McRobbie, whose scholarly work in the 1970s and 1980s was pivotal in contributing a feminist lens to cultural studies, observed in 2011 how postfeminism took second wave feminism ‘into account in order that it can be understood as having passed away’.\textsuperscript{214} Instead, postfeminism was seen to encompass a ‘new sexual contract [which] tied women to enjoying the freedom to consume’.\textsuperscript{215} Rita’s emphasis on enjoyment appears to echo McRobbie’s understanding of the shifts taking place in feminist discussion in the 1990s. However, the suggestion that second wave feminism had completely ‘passed away’ as McRobbie described, is refuted in Sarah’s case; her decision to bleach rather than remove her hair indicated a lingering presence of the feminist ghost not quite put to rest.

At the time of their interviews, both Sarah and Rita participated in the routine removal of their body hair. However, Rita in particular expressed uncertainty as to how her decision to routinely remove her pubic hair mapped onto her current feminist sensibilities:

\begin{quote}
Now that’s the trouble, it’s just personal preference but it feels political. That’s the trouble. And that spills into a few other things around sex like, whether you will go down on someone, or... whether a man will go down on a woman when she’s menstruating, whether you’ll have sex when you’re menstruating, you know all those things are just personal choice but they feel political, they feel like there’s more to it than just personal choice.\textsuperscript{216}
\end{quote}

This sense of conflict between what she ‘felt’ and her knowledge that ‘things are just personal choice’, Hesford has described as a separation between ‘a sensual knowing’ and ‘practical consciousness’.\textsuperscript{217} It is within this space that the feminist ghost ‘bothers us’ – ‘that’s the trouble’ as Rita herself noted.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[215] Ibid, p.182.
\item[216] Present author, Interview with Rita.
\end{footnotes}
For two women, Megan and Lydia, their body hair had been the source of failure at one point or another in their lives. This sense of failure was two-fold; in that they recognised a failure to conform to gendered norms of female hairlessness, but equally the removal of their hair provoked a compromised sense of attachment to feminism. Both interviews demonstrated the emotional faultlines of feeling excluded, both from society and from the sisterhood which was intended to support them.

Sara Ahmed’s work in *Living a Feminist Life* is useful here in helping us to think through how descriptions of feelings can reveal processes of theoretical thinking and generate alternative feminist knowledges. She explains, ‘by trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present, we generate what I call “sweaty concepts”’. For Ahmed, the ‘sweatiness’ of this intellectual labour comes from the entanglement of doing conceptual work and inhabiting this social world at the same time, acknowledging that neither can be separated from the other. ‘Sweaty concepts’, she also argues, ‘comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world…sweat is bodily…a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty’. Megan explicitly identified this difficulty when she reflected upon the interview process itself:

Like I was quite happy doing this, I was like, “oh yeah I can talk to someone about this”, and then you arrived and I was like, “oh yeah this is lovely I’ll get some tea” and then it was like right sit down, start talking about it and I actually got a little like, bit scared. And ever so slightly tearful... It still feels like a very shameful, difficult thing to talk about.

Megan articulated the emotional labour required to work on ‘sweaty concepts’; what ‘not feeling at home in a world that gives residence to others’ felt like to expose. Megan’s

---

222 Present author, Interview with Megan, (2016).
testimony reveals what it feels like to not ‘inhabit a norm’ and how this sensation both generated and put a strain on her feminist sensibilities.224

Guilt and shame in Megan’s case, was doubly enacted, in her sense of failure to live within societal norms of appearance, and in her failure to live up to her particular image of feminism. It is within this space that the feminist ghost lingered. Megan began to notice her facial hair in her early teens, but it wasn’t until she turned eighteen in 2008 that she began to dedicate time to removing it on a daily-basis in what she called ‘this little ritual’:

I would spend hours every day, like, plucking. Particularly if there was like strong light - so sitting next to a window was good ‘cause you could sit there with the magnifying mirror and a pair of tweezers... and you’d just get all of it.225

For the past eight years Megan had experimented with various methods of removal; balancing the quite substantial financial expense of repeated treatments like waxing and laser therapy, alongside pain and the longevity of results. At the time of the interview, she described how she continued to maintain a high level of privacy around her hair removal habits as a result of this sense of self-consciousness. For instance, she refused to let her boyfriend touch her face, only ever shaved in a separate room whilst he slept and had not told him specifically about her appointments at the laser clinic, using instead evasive terminology like ‘my appointment, I’m going to get my face looked at or, you know, they’re going to go and pamper me’.226 Megan struggled to reconcile her feelings of insecurity with her understanding of the female hairless ideal existing as a social construct:

…Yeah, and I think a lot about how our society genders things quite a lot. So you think about, you know, facial hair on women is actually incredibly normal like Frieda Kahlo and so on. But, you know, women must be hairless, men are the only ones that are allowed to be hairy…it’s very much I conform because people would… I know very

224 Ibid, p.115.
225 Present author, Interview with Megan.
226 Ibid.
much that people would judge me badly if I didn’t conform and so that’s why it’s a shameful thing, it wasn’t innate at all. Part of Megan’s desire to conform to the hairless ideal was underpinned by her understanding of how hairy female bodies are read and identified as outsiders in public spaces, and can be denied access to these spaces as a result. After university, Megan trained as a teacher and within this professional environment needed ‘to protect [her]self from comments’ from both students and colleagues. Like Sarah, although Megan didn’t ‘buy into’ the hairlessness norm, she recognised that conforming to it would help her to move more easily in these spaces. Her compromise demonstrates the capacity of hair removal to be a legitimacy-maker for women. This echoes Ahmed’s notion of ‘shrugging off’ sexism because for women ‘to get on, you get along’. Ahmed elaborates the complex workings of inhabiting the world in this way:

I think for many women, becoming willing to participate in sexist culture is a compromise, even if it is not registered as such, because we have been taught (from past experience, from what we come up against) that being unwilling to participate can be dangerous. You risk becoming alienated from all of the existing structures that enable survival within an institution, let alone a progression.

When the participation in hair removal means inclusion, occupying femininity becomes a means to an end. Megan echoed this sentiment:

…Like society means that it’s difficult to have facial hair as a woman at the moment. And it would be nice to fight back against that but I just can’t be bothered really, you know? It would put a tension on me that I don’t really want…I’m quite ok at resisting a lot of that sort of pressure but not all of it.

The threat of alienation, of outsider-status, the labour required, we have seen reflected in Spare Rib readers’ letters and the activism of contemporary figures such as Emer O’Toole.

---

227 Ibid.
228 S. Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, p.36.
229 Ibid.
230 Present Author, Interview with Megan.
Megan identified as a feminist, having studied feminist theory during her university degree. She also described how she had designed lesson plans and teaching resources for key stage 3 PSHCE lessons to engage students with feminist issues. The bookcases in her living room were crammed with a variety of feminist texts, and Megan also discussed how she engaged strongly with female protagonists from comic and popular culture she had grown up with like *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*. But when asked if feminism had at all influenced her relationship with her body and facial hair, Megan remained ambivalent:

It’s made me think that... I think it’s just solidified the opinions that I already had which is there is nothing intrinsically wrong with it, you know? But I, as a professional, need to protect myself from comments that I know I would get. And so I need to deal with it. I know the feelings of upset-ness and shame that I have about talking about it is something I shouldn’t have but it’s… and you know I’ve been doing my best to deal with it. Coming into this research was part of that – me thinking, it’s not something to be ashamed of so why shouldn’t I talk about it? But you know, saying that an emotion is irrational is one thing but, actually dumping that emotion is something else.\(^\text{231}\)

The feminist ghost makes an appearance here in the void between knowing ‘there is nothing intrinsically wrong’ with facial hair and ‘the feelings of upset-ness and shame’ she continued to deal with. This demonstrates Megan’s understanding of the limitations of feminist praxis; that understanding and accepting feminist argument does not necessarily translate easily into everyday practice and implementation.

Lydia’s story exemplifies how failure to conform to the hairless norm can be dangerous. As a transwoman, Lydia had experienced public assault and violation particularly during her transition in her late thirties in the early 2000s. She described, ‘I got spat on once. I got filmed, photographed, laughed at’, and consequently developed a mechanism of hyper-vigilance in public spaces.\(^\text{232}\) She reflected on why it was that people were so uneasy, and reacted violently to subversions of the gender binary:

\(^{231}\) Ibid.
\(^{232}\) Present author, Interview with Lydia, (2016).
...if there’s a suspicion that you don’t conform then what will happen is that people will look for… they’ll look for “the tells”. They’ll look for height, they’ll look for stature, they’ll look for, you know, kind of how big your hands are. I mean I’ve seen articles in the papers about this, ‘How to tell’ […] hair would be one of those things I think.233

American writer Julia Serano has discussed western media’s fascination with the ‘feminization’ of trans women in her chapter in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. She has argued that societal obsession with catching transwomen ‘in the act’ of trying to dress or behave in a feminine manner is underpinned by society’s reading of femininity as artifice and other in the first place: ‘the media’s and audience’s fascination with the feminization of transwomen is a by-product of the sexualization of all women’.234

Lydia referred to her body hair, as ‘one of the symbols of my imprisonment’ within her previous male identity.235 The day she accepted her marriage was over and she was going to transition, she described the relief she felt taking a bath and removing all her body hair: ‘taking all that hair off that day I suppose was about me saying “Thank God”’.236 This idea of ‘imprisonment’ echoes Sarah’s and Megan’s understanding of hairlessness as granting access to women to public space. But imprisonment by hair is also significant when we consider the policies of gender identity clinics: who decides who can access medical services, and through what terms. In her analysis of trans fiction and autobiography, Juliet Jacques discusses ‘the demand that patients “pass” in their acquired genders and hide their histories’ in order to obtain gender reassignment surgery and other forms of medical intervention.237 In this vein, the removal of body hair for Lydia was not just a physical or emotional transition, it is a political one which permitted her access into institutional service and healthcare. Hair removal for Lydia

233 Ibid.
235 Present author, Interview with Lydia.
236 Ibid.
was an emancipatory step but Lydia herself admitted this complicated her relationship with feminism because this disassociated her from the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ model.\footnote{Present author, Interview with Lydia.}

Although she identified as ‘a very strong feminist’ and felt that feminism had been hugely influential in her life, Lydia referred to the complicated relationship between trans-exclusionary feminism and transwomen.\footnote{For overview of current debates about the relationship between feminism and transgender see S. Hines, ‘The Feminist Frontier: On Trans and Feminism’ \textit{Journal of Gender Studies} (2019), 28 (2), pp.145-157.} She was encouraged by the growing visibility of genderqueerness, fluidity and the creative performance of gender in recent years, citing Eurovision song contest winner Conchita Wurst as one example of a subversive role model.\footnote{Present author, Interview with Lydia.}

This had made her reflect upon how growing up in a cis-gendered social context has been entrenched within her own ideas of self-identity and decision to remove her body hair:

I’ve taken a road that is very binary, and I kind of don’t know why I’ve done that in a way…I can’t tell why I’ve done it, it’s just what made sense to me, it’s just what I felt was right for me. I can’t really unpick that by going back to when I was about eleven and going “hang on a minute, am I just responding to a set of societal tropes that’s very much embedded in the binary?” …. And so when it came to dealing with my stuff, it made the most sense for me to deal with it like that. Now, if I was born now and I was going through it all, would I get the same answers? I don’t know, you know, and hair’s part of that. Hair’s one of those big symbolic things that says where you are on the spectrum, you know?\footnote{Ibid.}

We might recognise here the ghost in Lydia’s conceptualisation of past, present and future. Lydia’s speculation about what might have been different had she been born into a future generation from her own, exemplifies what Hesford described as haunting which ‘offers a promise…inherent in every haunting are the as-yet-to-be-articulated possibilities of a different sociality’.\footnote{V. Hesford, ‘Feminism and its Ghosts’, p.229.} In this instance, the past is utilised to shape ideas of the future.

I end on Lydia’s concluding thoughts about feminism; her reflection that, ‘I’d like feminism to do more for me, I’d like feminism in that sense to come to me a bit more as well’.\footnote{Present author, Interview with Lydia.}
This plea or aspiration for the future of feminism is a poignant reminder of the themes this chapter has examined. Namely, how we think about the limits of feminist resistance; how exclusions are drawn and felt; what and who feminism is for. By tracing the figure of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ through both prescriptive discourses and women’s experiences, this chapter has highlighted how feminism’s past is redeployed and recycled in the present. This has had sustained resonance, particularly in the way in which the issue of body hair removal is still spoken of in terms as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ feminist practice.

This chapter has sought to move beyond a discussion which categorises body hair removal as either ‘feminist’ or ‘unfeminist’ behaviour. Instead, it prompts us to reflect upon what these historical narratives of progress and failure do to the capacity to resist in our contemporary context. For historians, the history of body hair politics within feminism allows us to reconceptualise feminism as time divided into waves which supplant each other. Instead this chapter has demonstrated how feminism becomes meaningful through popular cultural memory and individual feeling.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the ritual of female body hair removal in twentieth and twenty-first century Britain, focusing primarily on the dynamic between the practice of hair removal and the prescriptive discourses which have informed what it means to be hairless. It has highlighted the multiple functions depilation has served, often simultaneously: as a form of personal hygiene, a medical treatment and as a procedure for cosmetic enhancement. Consequently, hair removal as a social custom has occupied a liminal position within British culture; viewed as both essential and trivialised, mundane and yet presented as a feminized commodity giving access to glamour and beauty.

What then has this project revealed about the hairlessness in relation to the construction of femininity and/or femaleness? Most notably perhaps, this thesis highlights how constructions of femaleness and ideal femininity are predicated upon notions of containment and sanitisation of the body. The prominence of ‘hygiene’ as a motivation to enact the ritual of depilation builds upon sociologist Bev Skeggs’s understanding of femininity as a product of middle-class respectability, which class-based notions of hygiene and sanitisation underpin.\(^1\)

Frequently the norm of hairlessness was couched in the abjectification of hairy women. In Chapter Two, for example, we witnessed how medical science had routinely brought into question hairy women’s gendered and sexual identity, their reproductive and child-bearing capacity, and their mental stability. In Jackie magazine in the 1960s and 1970s, girls with hairy bodies were considered not ‘nice’ enough to enjoy the aspirational lifestyle of modern adolescence; Immac advertisements demonstrated how hair removal could grant access to busy social lives, romantic encounters and recreational pursuits. Pornographic magazines Fiesta: Shaven Havens and Ravers: Clean Shaven exaggerated the abhorrence of pubic hair as the basis

---

\(^1\) B. Skeggs, Formations of Class and Gender, pp.100-106.
of its humour in its editorial content. Descriptions of pubic-haired women emulating wild animals and uninhabitable wastelands emphasised the long historical association between hairy bodies and uncivilised, primitive social status. This imagery demonstrated how the policing of female body hair was (and continues to be) inextricably bound to maintaining the dominance of white heteronormativity. The advent of the Brazilian Wax in the early 2000s only solidified this connection between hairlessness and purification of the female body as a means to upward social mobility, glamour and greater sexual autonomy. The study of female body hair removal thus reveals something about the way in which female sexual identity has continued to be a paradoxical process of formation which fluctuates between disgust and desire. Women must persistently regulate and sanitise their sexuality, and yet also signal sexual readiness and willingness through conformity to cultural ideals of beauty.

This project highlighted the diversity of cultural expertise on hair removal over the twentieth and twenty-first century, but focused specifically upon the circulation of ideas within medical science journalism, women’s and girls’ commercial lifestyle magazines, soft core pornography and feminist print culture. Each chapter explored how hair removal was presented in these texts and traced how these conceptualisations may have adapted and transitioned over time. The aim was to make visible the underpinnings of the norm of hairlessness, to deconstruct the taken-for-grantedness of women’s participation in this ritual, building upon Butler’s assertion that repetitions of acts and language assist in making the social process of gender appear natural. The ‘practices and prescriptions’ framework helped to expose the intersections between these different types of print culture and allowed us to consider how hair removal was re-presented, reconfigured and recycled within these different contexts, creating what Butler has described as a ‘congealing’ of ideas in regards to the production of gender. The use of oral

---

2 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp.43-44.
3 Ibid, p.44.
history, readers’ letters pages in magazines and the Mass Observation Project added a further dimension to this investigation, highlighting how readers and consumers actively engaged with the expertise bestowed by these various sources, often challenging authority and using personal experience as a comparable form of expertise. This study therefore contributes to recent historical discussions on the role of experts and the fashioning of expertise in modern Britain. Concerns about a devaluing of traditional sources of expertise and the rise of populism in recent times appears to ignore (in the case of female body hair removal, at least) how sources of expertise have consistently been called into question and re-evaluated throughout the twentieth century. Chapter Three in particular explored a multiplicity of formal and informal sources of advice-giving on personal hygiene and hair removal that young girls navigate: from beauty professionals, to mothers, to magazine advertisements and advice columns. The attainment or occupation of femininity was as much a process of learning how to get hair removal right, as it was achieving the finished result of hairlessness.

This thesis has also explored moments in which the norm of hairlessness has been resisted and disrupted. Chapter Two demonstrated how diagnoses and treatments of hair diseases was continually disputed amongst medical professionals, repeatedly bringing into question the medical necessity for depilation. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the unveiling of pubic hair on screen, in print and on stage and a relaxation around the visibility of pubic hair in soft core pornography. Many social commentators at the time recognised the unveiling of female pubic hair as symbolic of social and sexual change in the permissive era. Even Jackie magazine relaxed its instructive guidance around depilation in 1980, momentarily encouraging readers to embrace their underarm and leg hair. In greater detail this thesis explored feminist resistances to body hair removal as part of their critique of beauty ideals and consumer culture. In Chapter Five, the use and re-use of oral history testimonies in addition to readers’ letters from Spare Rib magazine illustrated how feminists have grappled with the politics of body hair removal,
and how the choice whether or not to depilate affected women’s sense of belonging within the movement. This thesis attempted to move beyond the question of whether or not the practice of hair removal was ‘feminist’ or ‘unfeminist’, to consider why it was that the ritual was still discussed in these dichotomous terms at all: the ghostly figure of the ‘hairy-legged feminist’ complicates our understanding of what it means to be liberated. It continued to haunt feminist debates of body hair removal into the 2010s, encapsulating tensions around feminism’s past, its misconceptions in media and popular press, and contradictions around public memory, personal testimony and myth-making.

Finally, this thesis of female body hair removal has illustrated how popular myths about the past are recycled, and how narratives of social change in the twentieth century are constructed. Mass Observers for example, constructed a sense of national identity around habits of cleanliness and personal grooming. The magazine *Sexpertise* discussed pubic hairlessness in terms of being a tradition of British pornography and thus celebrated ‘nudie cuties of yesteryear’ as part of its patriotic duty. Pubic hair more generally is remembered as a relic of the 1970s, symbolising and encapsulating authentic and wholesome sexual expression in contrast to the ‘pornified’, hairless sex of the twenty-first century. Journalist Caitlin Moran encapsulated this sentiment in discussing how having pubic hair made her a ‘vagina retro’, akin to collecting vinyl records. The historical examination of body hair removal allows us to reflect upon the purpose of nostalgia and popular myth-making within identity-formation. Body hair and body hairlessness has provided a means for people to express a sense of the passage of time as well as air anxieties around technology, mass media, sexual change and generational ageing more broadly. Writing a history of body hair removal has muddled my sense of time and any overriding meaning of ‘progress’ or change. Instead, it has suggested that women’s habits, bodies and domestic culture are inherently tied to number of different frameworks of time: oscillating between seasonal and annual transformation, demarcation through special
social events and milestones of age, and the everyday routine of becoming ‘respectable’. Body hair removal illustrates the transience of femininity, as a continued process, constantly challenged, learnt and re-learnt. Rather than a trivial or frivolous pursuit, body hair removal and in turn the adherence to ideals of femininity has been part of women’s negotiation of the parameters of inclusion and exclusion; being allowed access to public spaces, to power and to capital, to being a woman and gaining respectability and to being able to resist.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Printed Primary Sources

Greer, G. *The Female Eunuch* (Flamingo: London, 1999)
Thompson, B. *Soft Core: Moral Crusades against Pornography in Britain and America* (Cassell: New York, 1994).

Newspapers, Journals & Magazines

British Medical Journal
Company
Cosmopolitan
Daily Express
Daily Mail
Daily Mirror
Fertility and Sterility
Fiesta: Shaven Havens
The Guardian
Jackie
Knave Close Shave
Lancet
The Observer
Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Park Lane: Shaving Special
Ravers: Clean Shaven
Sexpertise: Shaved Pubes Special
Spare Rib
The Telegraph
Vogue US

Oral Interviews


Present Author, Interview with Emily, Unpublished (2016).

Present Author, Interview with Lydia, Unpublished (2016).

Present Author, Interview with Megan, Unpublished (2016).


Archival Documents


‘Hair Apparent or Not?’ *Chemist and Druggist* (11 June 1977) Wallgreens Boots Alliance Archive, Nottingham [uncatalogued at time of visit].


Hanna Corbishley’s Papers and Correspondence: Enemas and Shaving, National Childbirth Trust Collection, SA/NCT/A/7/5 Box 10, Wellcome Library.

Mass Observation Project (MOP) Directives

‘Women and Men’ Autumn 1991 (1) University of Sussex, SxMOA2/1/35/1/1

G1803; G1416; G226; N399.

‘Personal Hygiene’ Spring 1992 (1) University of Sussex, SxMOA2/1/36/1/1
A1292; A1473; A1530; A2212; B1440; B1654; B1989; B2238; B36; B58; B786; C108; C1786; C1883; C2050; C2091; C2177; C2185; C602; E1510; G1531; G1846; G2481; G2524; H1451; H1745; H259; H260; H2283; K1626; J2520; M1201; M1375; M1979; M362; O1682; P1282; P1500; P1730; P1743; P1906; P428; P878; R1026; R1321; R1452; R446; R860; S1012; S1089; S1399; S1570; S2248; S2271; S2275; S2519; S2577.

Film and Television

*Deep Throat* (dir. G. Damiano 1972)
*The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (April 2013)
*Sex and the City,* HBO (Channel 4, 17 Sept 2000)

Internet Sources

BBC Genome Project, *Keep It Clean*, https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/65803d67adae44ef8c7ce7b94dfcc488, [accessed 21/05/2020].
BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03k2s9p (9 Feb 2016) [accessed 26/05/2020].
‘The Business of Women’s Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing’
http://businessofwomenswords.org/ [accessed 21/05/20].
Cofield, L. ‘A Veritable Feast of Thoughts and Accepting My Life Revolves Around Food’
Modern British Studies, University of Birmingham Blogpost
Cofield, L. ‘Guestpost: The “Burden” of Facial Hair’
Cook, I. ‘Spare Rib Archive – Possible Suspension of Access UPDATE’, British Library,
https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2019/10/spare-rib-update.html (26 Jan 20) [accessed 21/05/20].
The F Word, https://thefword.org.uk/, [accessed 06/05/2019].
Grassroots Feminism, http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net/cms/, [accessed 06/05/2019].
Hairy Pits Club, ‘About the HPC’ http://hairypitsclub.tumblr.com/about [accessed 16/12/2017].
Jezebel, https://jezebel.com/, [accessed 06/05/2019].
Observing the 80s, https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/, [accessed 18/05/20/20].
The Vagenda, http://vagendamagazine.com/, [accessed 06/05/2019]

Secondary Sources

Books

Braithwaite, B. Women’s Magazines: The First 300 years (Peter Owen: London, 1995).


Gill, R. *Gender and the Media* (Polity: Cambridge UK; Malden, MA, USA, 2007).


McNair, B. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire* (Routledge: London and New York, 2002).


Oudshoorn, N. *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archaeology of Sex Hormones* (Routledge: London and New York, 1994).


Robinson, P. *You Can’t Touch my Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* (Plume: New York, 2016).


### Edited Collections


**Journal Articles**


Cofield, L. and Robinson, L. (2016), ‘“The Opposite of the Band”: Fangrrrling, Feminism and Sexual Dissidence’ Textual Practice, 30(6), pp.1071-1088.


Langhamer, C. (2018), ‘“Who are the Hell are Ordinary People?” Ordinaryness as a Category of Historical Analysis’ Transactions of the RHS, 28, pp.175-195.


PhD Theses


