



## In Pursuit of Hairlessness

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## *In Pursuit of Hairlessness*

Rebecca M. Herzig,  
*Plucked: A History of Hair  
 Removal*, New York  
 University Press, 2015,  
 \$29.95 hardback 978 1  
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**A** MERICAN women go to great lengths to cultivate hairless bodies, but few know how this gendered grooming standard developed. In *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*, Rebecca Herzig offers a historical perspective to the ongoing social scientific and gender discussions about this ‘hairless norm’. Herzig’s book traces the evolution of hegemonic depilation within the American cultural context, effectively highlighting the relationship between consecutive intellectual movements and concomitant advances in depilation technology. Throughout this compelling narrative, Herzig directs the reader’s attention to the historical contingencies of the meanings we project upon body hair, supporting her central thesis that hair fulfils a unique function as a malleable visual marker of group identity. She weaves a second theme of suffering throughout her chapters, focusing on extreme depilation methods and their health consequences.

Herzig structures *Plucked* as a technological chronology, beginning with American colonial women who used home-made depilation creams on their faces to ensure smooth and virtuous complexions. This popular custom was exploited by early industrial manufacturers, who appropriated the creams and filled them with chemical agents; nevertheless, the product proved to be wildly successful on the market. The stigma that ensured women’s continued depilation solidified under the influence of evolutionary theory, which marked women’s facial and body hair as animalistic and sexually unappealing to men. By the end of this era, women’s body-hair removal was normative: ‘With body hair, particularly women’s facial hair, newly yoked to evolutionary atavism, individual pathology, sexual inversion, and mental illness, efforts to remove hair boomed’ (74).

In her middle section, Herzig describes how women’s depilation concerns spread in correlation with the twentieth century’s piecemeal ‘unveiling’ of the female form, leading to increasingly extreme depilation techniques. One Depression-era fad utilized X-ray technology to remove all traces of racialized dark shadows from privileged white bodies. Herzig describes in detail how ‘[c]ommercial hair salons routinely stressed the value of “smooth, white, velvety skin” in their advertisements, linking the

eradication of hair to the eradication of troubling racial markers' (90). Eventually, the harmful side effects of radiation became impossible to ignore, but the distaste for body hair remained. When wartime rationing of silk and nylon unveiled women's bare legs to the public gaze, women's shaving culture emerged, despite the razor's masculine connotations. By the 1950s, those who tired of the labour-intensive practice of daily hair removal considered more invasive treatment for their 'hirsute' disorders through gender-restorative glandular and hormonal solutions. 'For gland experts, the distinction between men and women was no longer seen as absolute but as a matter of relative quantities of particular chemicals' (104).

Herzig concludes with a consideration of the political meanings that have become encoded within women's body hair. She explains how, in the 1960s, '[t]he treatment of armpit, facial, or leg hair, like the changing head hair styles of antiwar hippies and Black Nationalists, provided women's liberationists with a malleable and visible symbol of their commitment to the "natural," unconfined body' (130). Although feminists such as Betty Friedan decried the sensationalism surrounding feminists' body hair, the controversial 'armpit feminist' came to represent the movement. Perhaps as a backlash, the next generation of feminists applied the same self-determination rhetoric to their right to unapologetically embrace hairlessness; this movement inspired 'Brazilian' full genital depilation and the advent of laser hair removal, which remains the most advanced depilation technique today.

Overall, *Plucked* offers a compelling history of the evolution of the United States' gendered hairless norm. Herzig draws on an exciting range of primary sources, including letters, government documents, visual art, satirical social commentary, advertisements and medical reports, while detailing the emergence of this sociocultural phenomenon. She illuminates the causal effects of women's fashion on depilation trends, and the influence of intensified depilation demand on technological development. By highlighting the most extreme hair-removal options, Herzig underscores the desperation behind women's efforts to eliminate from their bodies hair that came to be increasingly constructed as unnaturally excessive. She explains how women's body hair accumulated symbolic meanings, including masculinity, sexual deviance, and radical feminism.

It is a complex topic, and Herzig constructs a convincing narrative about the evolution of depilation *as practised by white women of means*. Herzig might have looked more deeply at the racial and economic privilege of her consumers, since, by ignoring their intersectionality, Herzig suggests that the consumer history of the privileged represents the depilation

practices of American women more generally. Additionally, Herzig begins and concludes with a thesis about suffering that she never fully defines. This broad theme of suffering is underdeveloped and ultimately overshadowed by the strength of Herzig's historical narrative.

Academic trivialization of body hair has contributed to a dearth of inquiries into women's hairlessness; as a result, every investigation into the subject is significant. *Plucked* is a unique addition to the growing corpus because it explores the hairless norm's history instead of its current practice. Furthermore, Herzig focuses on the fluctuating meanings society has variously projected upon women's flesh by situating hair-removal customs within the context of contemporaneous intellectual movements.

This history is timely in light of the media controversy surrounding women's armpit hair throughout 2014 and 2015. Moreover, as hair-removal culture expands, the risks associated with depilation come to implicate everyone, regardless of gender. Herzig's account of extreme and life-threatening hair-removal 'treatments' suggests that depilation is not a mere lifestyle choice, but rather a survival strategy. Herzig reserves her judgement about whether women's customary depilation is good or bad, but she encourages research into safer depilation methods. If history teaches us anything, it is that people will risk their personal health and safety in exchange for bodies that society deems normal.