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### Book Review: Rebecca Herzig, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*

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Herzig, Rebecca, M. *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*. New York: New York University Press, 2015. Print.

Over the centuries, people have attributed various cultural meanings to human body hair or the lack thereof. In *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*, Rebecca Herzig methodically explores mostly western constructions of human body hair from the late eighteenth century to the current time. In so doing, Herzig creates a fascinating historical narrative that implicates issues of gender, race, and ethnicity by tracing the constructed meanings that various peoples have attributed to hair placement, growth patterns, texture, length, and thickness. More specifically, Herzig provides a window into the historic and ongoing desire of people (mostly women and girls) to remove hair from places where its appearance has been culturally reified as ugly, unusual, or even unnatural. *Plucked* is more than a simple history, and Herzig borrows the lens of critical anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to interpret and critique these practices.

Herzig picks up the story of human body hair and its removal during American colonization, when white European colonists encountered various tribes of native Indians, all of whom appeared to possess smooth, hairless bodies and faces. Herzig describes debates among learned colonists about the nature of Indian's smooth skin: some felt that the native Indians were naturally hairless, while others believed they privately plucked all their body hair. Both positions worked to "other" native Indians by highlighting differences, and as a reader of these arguments quoted directly from their sources, I found myself growing increasingly uncomfortable about the judgments made of these bodies. Undoubtedly, that was Herzig's intention, and she makes quite clear that these deliberations were less about academic curiosity than concerns of power, dominance, and assimilation.

Herzig argues that as the American Indian's conquest became abundantly clear, debates about the meanings behind their body hair or lack-there-of became inconsequential. Upon the publication of Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* in 1871, debates shifted from differences between people to differences between animals, and most importantly, between man and ape. Then, as now, most Christian devotees rejected a link between humans and animals in favor of Biblical creation, but Herzig describes a fascination in North American popular culture with evolution and the possible connection between man and beast that often centered on body hair. Exceptionally hairy people of color often were written about or displayed in circus-like events as possible "missing links," and Herzig is careful to note that scientists were no less drawn to the spectacles related to evolution as it relates to hair than the side-show grifters.

After completing these thorough histories, which are appropriately peppered with compelling quotes from diverse primary sources, Herzig turns to the growing distaste for body hair and the increasing desire to remove it by twentieth century western women. By 1900, hairlessness was associated with female beauty, and Herzig dedicates a chapter to chemical depilatories made of harmful chemicals sold prior to any regulatory oversight. However, not until the twentieth century did the technological and industrial production of products for beauty and wellness intersect with the increasing cultural desire for feminine hairlessness, with the result being an ever-more hairless ideal for women to maintain. Importantly, the association of hairlessness with female beauty was not propelled merely by fashion, but also by patriarchy and dominance. For example, Herzig notes that political cartoons mocking suffrage activists often depicted them as hairier-than-normal women.

In the last five chapters of *Plucked*, Herzig describes the popular methods of twentieth century hair removal, intersected between discussions of the political and cultural implications for the women (and sometimes men) who engage such practices. More often than not, these

trends accompanied some capitalist interest in establishing cultural norms to sell grooming products. For example, Herzig notes that the Gillette Company was contracted by the United States military to provide razors for daily shaving during World War I, when hairlessness would serve to reduce instances of lice and infestation in soldiers living in the elements. After the war, Gillette created advertising for civilians to promote daily shaving, and soon women were shaving their legs to remove hair that was considered normal only a decade earlier. Herzig provides numerous other examples of hair removal trends and the means used to obtain the desired results. In addition to chemical depilatories and razors, she also explores the use of tweezing and plucking, x-rays and radiation, electrolysis, waxing, laser treatments, and medical treatments focused upon genetic factors or hormones.

Throughout her history of hair removal, Herzig is careful to always consider the political implications of these trends in wellness and beauty. In a powerful chapter called “Unshaven,” Herzig traces the ways that second-wave feminists used hair as a sign of resistance to patriarchy, proudly displaying hairy legs or arms as a sign of resistance. Conversely, of course, Herzig is careful to note that those opposed to 1970s feminism also focused upon these women’s hair, describing it as an aberration rather than a sign of strength.

Today, Herzig cites statistics that suggest 99% of American women choose to remove hair somewhere on their bodies. While legs, armpits, and upper lips may still dominate the business, Herzig does not avoid discussing the contemporary trend for women to remove some or all pubic hair from the perineum, vulva and anus (and increasingly for men to remove hair from their testicles and anus). She is careful to note that there will likely be a next frontier for hair removal, because the root cause is never removed from culture but is always constructed. Furthermore, these constructions are always accompanied with political implications.

With *Plucked*, Herzig has written a highly readable and well-researched review of western practices of hair removal, including the varied motivations that inspire it. The text does not attempt to be exhaustive, and while Herzig does mention occasional issues of race or ethnicity, she more consistently focuses upon issues of gender and sex. She does not privilege science in understanding hair removal and instead maintains a consistently cultural frame on the topic. As such, this book would be a useful addition to courses dealing with gender and sexuality, sociology, anthropology and interpersonal communication in addition to American history. Students and scholars alike will appreciate the well-documented research that represents the greatest strength of this effort, and both will undoubtedly learn something new about hair and its removal.

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Falls, Susan. *Clarity, Cut, and Culture: the Many Meanings of Diamonds*. New York: New York University Press, 2014. Print.

*Clarity, Cut, and Culture* is a truly intriguing text that provides an often-overlooked narrative about diamonds—an item of material culture that has become symbolic of everything from love and romance to class and power. Aside from more conventional interpretations that situate diamonds into a contextual model in which they are merely items of spectacle bound to conspicuous consumption and display, Susan Falls explains, “this book explores what diamonds mean, how those meanings come about, and what our interactions with these stones can tell us about ourselves and our relationships with material culture, especially mass-