

The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic Hair

By

Meredith Suzanne Dault

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the theoretical component to a blog I wrote as part of an academic program in Cultural Studies for a period from March 2, 2011 until September 30, 2011. Called *The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics* (<http://www.thelasttriangle.com>), I set out to explore the increasing normalization of pubic hair removal among women in North America. The reasons for the upswing in the popularity of pubic hair removal are hard to pinpoint, but seem to be motivated by a number of forces. From the ready accessibility of pornography, where pubic hair is currently so rare it has spawned its own fetish, to the widespread attention Brazilian waxing has received in the media, pubic hair removal is merely one among a myriad of body grooming practices many women increasingly indicate they feel obliged follow. This paper will explore some of those ideas, taking a critical view of the practice in light of questions around performing femininity, how pubic hair removal pertains to body control, and how pubic hair removal is, for many, increasingly viewed as a practice closely connected with good hygiene. Because it is intimately tied to the purchase of dedicated products, pubic hair removal will also be considered in as much as it relates to capitalism. Because the blog was a fundamental component of my research experience, excerpts of both my own writing, as well as comments from readers, will be included in conversation here with the theoretical questions.

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PREFACE

In the first chapter of his 2004 book, *After Theory*, cultural critic Terry Eagleton makes a strong, disparaging statement about pubic hair as a subject of academic study. In a segue that takes him from a lament about the passing of the “golden age of theory” and the ivory tower’s current fascination with pursuing sexually titillating research, to the current rise of post-colonial studies, Eagleton writes the following: “not all students of culture are blind to the Western narcissism involved in working on the history of pubic hair while half the world’s population lacks adequate sanitation and survives on less than two dollars a day” (6).

It was hard not to take it personally. He was, after all, talking about me – an educated, middle-class white woman indulgently embracing “Western narcissism” by focussing my research on the current trends in pubic hair styling, while half the world’s population was struggling to survive.¹

Naturally, I found Eagleton’s statements problematic for a number of reasons. Most significantly, in dismissing pubic hair as a subject worthy of academic research, Eagleton seemed to be suggesting that some subjects of study are more valid than others. While I saw pubic hair as being intimately connected to issues around body control, gender performance, and capitalism, Eagleton (writing, it should be noted, from a place of intellectual, gendered and racial privilege) seemed to suggest that the politics

¹ It should be noted that others have written pointedly about Eagleton’s remarks as they pertain to pubic hair, most significantly Louise Tondeur who, in her essay “A history of pubic hair, or reviewers’ responses to Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*”, points out that not only has there been little scholarly work done on the history of pubic hair, but that dismissing it as an area of study ostensibly reveals academia’s tendency to views areas related to women’s bodies and health as apolitical and inconsequential. In her essay, she puts forward a number of alternative ways of reading Eagleton’s statement about pubic hair, ultimately revealing it to be an area of study that should be seen as “highly political, Marxist, radical, even.” (Tondeur 62)

around bodies (a research area, it should also be noted, that is more commonly taken up by female scholars) was frivolous and apolitical.

I did my best to push these issues aside on a subsequent re-reading, deciding to focus on the fact that Eagleton's issue wasn't really with pubic hair at all, but was instead with what he felt it represented. One of his arguments is that academia's current obsession with sex (and the eschewing of socialism, politics and other intellectual fodder in favour of concentrated studies in subjects like French kissing, the erotic body, and sadomasochism) create a "seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life" (Eagleton 3). Taking a quietly mocking tone, he writes that "intellectual matters are no longer an ivory-tower affair, but belong to the world of media and shopping malls, bedrooms and brothels. As such, they re-join everyday life - but only at the risk of losing their ability to subject it to critique" (3).

So while his dismissal of certain areas of study as being unworthy for the ivory tower was still deeply troubling for me, I decided he was right in one regard: current trends in academic work *are* pushing past the boundaries of its traditional sphere and deliberately seeking ways to connect with "everyday life." But unlike Eagleton, I see this connection to everyday life as a positive and fruitful move amongst academics. After all, when I set out to investigate the waning of women's pubic hair in mainstream North American culture, I knew I had no interest in operating within the confines of Eagleton's ivory tower – where some areas of study make the grade, while others are dismissed as frivolous and narcissistic. Nor was I intent on producing the sort of academic document that would linger on the dusty shelves of an underused library. I knew, instead, that I was quite intent on doing work that was both engaged in the world while remaining

steadfastly critical. After all, it was apparent to me that this small area of hair on the female body was a valuable place from which to consider important issues around the body as a site of power (or, as the case may be, lack of power), and gender as a social construction. Working within the flexible confines of an academic program that both fostered creativity and encouraged activism, I set out to do work I hoped would be critical, publicly engaging and academically rigorous, with very little navel-gazing. And contrary to what Eagleton seemed to imply, I was quite sure it was possible.



(figure 1 - frame grab from *The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic Hair*. <http://www.thelasttriangle.com>)

INTRODUCTION

Only July 28, 2011, I received the following email from a young woman I'd never met before:

I know I've internalised a lot of messages from magazines, movies and books about female pubic hair as unattractive and gross, and these messages made me very confused and insecure because I started to wonder what everyone else was doing 'down there', and about what I should be doing as well (and also, what guys expected). Your blog helped me to realize, though, that I'm not the only one feeling that stress/pressure, and also that the pressure to wax it all off is perverse, and unnatural, and very problematic.

Emily, university student (via email)

Hugely satisfying, the note convinced me that I was doing something right. It was written in response to something I'd posted on my blog, *The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic Hair*. Written as the project component for my master's thesis in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University, I embarked on the blog as a place to explore the things I was reading, thinking and learning about over the course of my research regarding the increasingly normalized practice of full pubic hair removal among young, North American women.

Over the last twenty years or so, pubic hair grooming practices for North American women have undergone a notable transformation. Where young women once may have removed their underarm and leg hair (while perhaps keeping their pubic area trimmed or their bikini line groomed), mainstream practices are increasingly dictating that pubic hair now should be removed in its entirety. The reasons for this shift in body practice is complicated and hard to pin down, though technology's pervasive influence seems like a safe direction in which to point fingers. Where women might once have come of age knowing about their bodies only what they could glean from books and

from other women, a readily accessible online world means we can now get whatever information we need with the click of a mouse: from discussion forums and videos devoted to opinions about hair removal, to the readily accessible models for sexual performance and body practice found in online pornography.

And while I was intrigued by the relatively recent shift towards hairlessness I was more interested in the baggage that seemed to accompany the trend: that untended pubic hair on the mature female body was increasingly being seen as disgusting and dirty. I was taken aback by a discourse that seemed to have little do with women's own desire, but was instead oriented around body grooming predominantly for the visual pleasure of others. At the same time, I was feeling increasingly dismayed by what appeared to be the waning of feminism, right along with female pubic hair. I would hear stories from university colleagues about female students saying that we no longer needed it because "women already had the vote." And yet, it seemed to me that women were holding their own bodies (or was it that their bodies were being held?) to more extreme standards than ever when it came to grooming practices.

In creating a blog, I knew I wanted to generate content that would be engaging and critical while providing a venue for discussion and debate - a site that would provide an alternate viewpoint to the material I was already seeing widely disseminated on the internet around mainstream body practices. I also knew I wanted to create a place to engage with audiences. My intention was to create a space for conversation and debate, which would also would serve as a sort of holding place for information and ideas. My hope was that it might also inspire and inform my readers (which is why the note from Emily, excerpted above, proved so very thrilling!).

As part of my research, I also conducted interviews with eight women, including one professional aesthetician, and one self-identified female-bodied man. My original intention was to include these interviews on the blog, either as short videos or audio clips, primary documents from which to glean insight. Regretfully, that hasn't been as readily doable as I had first anticipated, as most of my interview subjects have wanted to maintain some anonymity, due to the personal nature of my line of questioning. And while I've learned a great deal from the one-on-one interviews, I haven't found the blog to be lacking as a result of not being able to include that material in its original form; I've still been able to distill the interviews into anonymous-yet-informative text. It is important for me to acknowledge, however, that in choosing not to include those primary interviews (either in their original audio or video form, or as written transcripts) my own voice (as author) becomes the mediating force between subject and audience in the blog. My own interpretation of and commentary around each interview – along with my choices about what to share and what to omit from it – is, as such, an integral part of the methodological process at play within this project.

In pursuing this project, I have looked at the issue of the normalizing of pubic hair removal on female bodies in North American culture. I've worked within a framework that considers the body as a site of power, and views gender (and normative femininity) as socially constructed, while considering the impact of capitalism on the body. As such, I have considered the issues in conversation with seminal writings by Susan Bordo, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, along with ideas from more popular and accessible writing by people like Ariel Levy and Pamela Paul. Though there isn't a lot of published work around body hair (and even less on pubic hair), I have been able to turn to a

handful of critical articles and empirical studies which I will examine in more detail as a means of providing a background for this paper. I will then consider some of the key issues I see as being fundamentally at-play around the issue of body hair grooming. Throughout, I will also analyze my own experience of writing the blog, and of using a non-academic means to engage a public audience, as well as the feedback I have had from readers in response to my research.

It is also important for me to acknowledge that in a bid to narrow down the scope of my project, the interviews I conducted for my blog (some of which have been extracted for use in this paper) have been largely generated from within a very specific milieu. Due to the snowballing effect of conducting research within an academic environment, I found many of my subjects through word of mouth. Many agreed to talk because they had heard about my research and were interested in the subject matter. The result, however, is a relatively homogenous group of university educated, white subjects whose understandings of their bodies and body grooming habits have been formed in a middle to upper middle-class environment. I want to acknowledge the fact that as a result, this research does not adequately address how questions of pubic hair removal and body control may manifest themselves in different economic or social spheres, or indeed, among other racialized groups. It is also important for me to note that in general, my scope is heteronormative in nature. Again, this is largely due to the sexual orientation and experiences of my subjects.

I think it is also important that I acknowledge my project's title, *The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic Hair*. While there may be an air of tragedy to it, particularly as it relates to the notion of loss, my intention has been to consider the

pubic area as the final zone of commodification on the female body. As I will discuss, women have been removing their leg and armpit hair since the early twentieth century. Complete pubic hair removal, as a normalized practice among North American women, is a relatively recent phenomenon. As women internalize messages about how they should be grooming their pubic hair, this region of the body ceases to be a private one and is instead held up to increasingly public standards. Leg hair removal, for example, has become so normalized in North American society that we barely remark on it – not removing it is commonly seen as an act of defiance or a political gesture rather than a viable choice. In contrast, what a woman did with her pubic hair was, until recently, up to her, in part because that region of the body remained largely unseen. Increasingly, however, women are internalizing messages that a hirsute vulva is unacceptable in contemporary culture. Pubic hair, while still largely out-of-sight in the day-to-day, is increasingly held to a public standard. An issue closely tied to class, capitalism and gender politics, I believe the pubic area on the female body has become a contentious site of social and political struggle – and indeed, perhaps the last to be fully capitalized upon. My hope is that my work not only refutes Eagleton’s claims about pubic hair being a worthy area of study, but in fact, turns them on their head by tapping into exactly the sorts of issues (supposedly) glorified during the “golden age of theory.”

BACKGROUND

Though common practice for North American women, there has, to date, been very little academic research around body hair. While Karin Lesnik-Oberstein’s collection of essays, *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*, does an effective job of

introducing some of the social and cultural issues around body hair, it stands currently as the sole readily available book on the issue. As Lesnik-Oberstein points out in her introduction, when it comes to feminist takes around body control, the academy has been much more focused on the question of body weight, an issue which, just like body hair removal, “regulates and controls, or produces (the terminology will depend on theoretical orientation), the female body” (2).

On August 15, 2011, I wrote about some of the connections between body hair and body weight on the blog:

Though normalized hair removal for women is one of the most fundamental means of body control we’ve got in this culture, it simply hasn’t garnered the same kind of attention that body fat has.

If it’s mentioned at all, as Lesnik-Oberstein points out in her fascinating book *‘The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair’*, it is often seen as the issue solely of concern to a certain kind of feminist:

“In fact, it is one of the ways in which (popular or academic) feminists may define, and distinguish themselves from, ‘extremist’ feminists: ‘extremists’, then, are, apparently (there are several versions) man-haters and/or separatists, lesbians (seen negatively), bra-burners, women who wear no make-up, do not shave and see themselves as ‘victims’ of the patriarchy, and – often presented as the most damning charge of all, especially by popular writers on feminism – are not ‘fun’.”

But as she points out, feminists exploring issues around body weight (and there are LOTS of them) aren’t forced to align themselves along the same kinds of lines. Instead, body weight activism is *“accepted as both an area of serious concern for feminism, and by the same measure it is used as a legitimisation of the continued seriousness and relevance of feminism itself in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: as long as women can so visibly be seen still to be controlled, damaged or even killed by their attempts to comply with a patriarchal ideal, feminism cannot quite so easily been seen as superfluous or superficial by those who would wish to claim it as such”*. (*“Body-Fat-vs-Body-Hair.”* www.thelasttriangle.com, August 15, 2011. Web)

As I wrote in the blog, “freeing women from the demands of constant body control - at least when it comes to weight - is a legitimate concern in feminist scholarship,” however body hair is barely ever included in those conversations even though women may “hate their natural (unshaved, unwaxed) legs and armpits as much as they abhor their fleshy bellies or thighs. In each case, the body in question doesn’t measure up to the (culturally created) ‘ideal’.”

Over the course of my research, however, I uncovered two seminal papers that did consider the question of normalized body hair removal among women, and they proved to be an important starting point for my work. The first was Susan A. Basow’s “The Hairless Ideal: Women and Their Body Hair” which was published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* in 1991. In it, she explores the question of why women remove their leg and underarm hair, acknowledging that, until her study, “virtually no empirical research” had been done on the issue, even though body hair removal is a ubiquitous North American body practice (Basow 83). In 1998, Australian researchers Marika Tiggemann and Sarah J. Kenyon followed suit, with an empirical study looking at underarm and leg hair removal among university students in their country. The study, which was published in the journal *Sex Roles*, found that “irrespective of their feminist beliefs,” body hair was “negatively related to self-esteem” in their sample group, and that removal was practiced by 92% of their participants (873). As thorough and groundbreaking as these studies were, however, neither touched on the issue of pubic hair removal.

While there was some evidence of cultural analysis having been done around the question of pubic hair removal (most notably Magdala Peixoto Labre’s 2002 essay “The

Brazilian Wax: A New Hairlessness Norm for Women?”), there were few concrete numbers to support the changes in body practices I was observing, reading about, or hearing about anecdotally from young women in mainstream culture. In fact, the first empirical study investigating pubic hair removal among women does not appear in an academic journal until March 2005, when it is published in *Sex Roles*. “Body Hair Removal: The ‘Mundane’ Production of Normative Femininity” by Merran Toerien, Sue Wilkinson and Precilla Y. L. Choi, explores the issue of body hair removal among women in the United Kingdom and concludes, among other things, that there is a relationship between a woman’s age and the likelihood that she would have ever removed her pubic hair (with more women under the age of 20 removing it, for example, than among women over the age of 51) (403).

Marika Tiggemann and Suzanna Hodgson’s 2008 study “The Hairlessness Norm Extended: Reasons for and Predictors of Women’s Body Hair Removal at Different Body Sites,” is the second empirical study touching on pubic hair removal. Using a sample group of Australian undergraduate university students, their results indicated that women who did remove all of their pubic hair did so by waxing more often than by shaving, with the primary reason for underarm and pubic hair removal given as “it makes me feel cleaner,” along with reasons related to “feeling feminine and attractive” (893).

As a final point of comparison, the most recent empirical study on pubic hair removal was conducted in Canada in 2010 by Lenore Riddell, Hannah Varto, and Zoë G. Hodgson. Published in the *Sieccan Newsletter*, in *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, their study, “Smooth Talking: The Phenomenon of Pubic Hair Removal in

Women,” found that by the time they were 32 years old, 96% of their sample group had performed some type of pubic hair removal, citing reasons such as “it looks better in a bathing suit,” “it makes me feel attractive,” and with feelings related to being “more comfortable” and “more feminine.” Reasons related to both the perceptions of men and sexual preferences (“my partner prefers it,” “oral sex feels better,” and “it encourages my partner to (perform oral sex)”) were similarly cited (125).

All three studies reveal a correlation between age and pubic hair removal, indicating that it is more normalized among younger women. Bearing that research in mind, I used the blog to ask rhetorically whether women who were raised to see pubic hair removal as a normal body practice would ever feel empowered to let it grow in naturally again. It was a question one reader, Amanda, felt compelled to try and answer:

I am a 26 year old, and I am an esthetician by trade. I have had my fair share of young ladies come to the spa/salon for various waxing procedures, and over the years I've had many conversations with them about the reasons why they choose to remove their body hair. Many of them, whether they are straight up honest or not, cite reasons that are closely connected to their sexuality or cleanliness. It's rare that a girl around the age of 15 is going to come through the doors for a bikini wax, unless she has a boy she's interested in tell her that she should.

However, I have many more mature clients (40 plus) that come through the doors wanting treatments that are much more related to self care, such as facials, massages and pedicures. When I ask them the reasons, one of the most resounding ones is that they realize more and more as time goes by that they have inherent value as women and that self care is essential to their health and happiness. Essentially, they are comfortable in their own skins, and more likely to come to the spa to 'just relax' and to enhance what they already like about their bodies, than to come into the spa to change something that they don't like (or that society tells them they shouldn't like).

Watching my own mother go through the early stages of menopause has enlightened me to the amazing emotional connection between women and their bodies. So often when we are younger, societal messages matter so much more than our own instincts and we are more concerned with

conformity than with being content with who we are naturally. I would like to believe that as we age and come to know ourselves better, we start to realize that our own respect for ourselves becomes more important than the pressure of outside influence, whether that be through media, culture, or romantic relationships, etc. (“Stuff Mom Never Told You - comments”. www.thelasttriangle.com. August 9, 2011. web)

While her answer wasn't conclusive, Amanda's insights, gleaned in working intimately with women of all ages, helped to highlight some important points: namely that when it comes to grooming practices, younger women are motivated by different forces than older women, with younger women generally being more driven by a desire for conformity and readily influenced by the opinions of men. The questions still stand as to why complete pubic hair removal has risen in popularity, why it has so readily been taken up by young women, and whether the trend will wane with age, and these inquiries will help to inform the following analysis.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The existing empirical studies around body hair removal proved a valuable tool for putting my own research into context while providing a jumping-off point from which to more deeply explore the questions of individual motivation and experience that the numbers couldn't readily disclose. Because while they are clear on the fact that complete pubic hair removal has become increasingly prevalent as a body practice for young North American women, none of the studies draw a conclusive answer as to why it is happening. The seeming ubiquity of the practice among younger women does, however, make it a compelling issue to consider from a feminist perspective. After all, unlike leg and armpit hair, which can be seen publicly and as such, can be held to public standards (even if those standards are unspoken), the pubic region is a private area of

the body. One might, as a result, presume that it would not be held to the same standards of public expectations around grooming and maintenance. The widespread normalizing of a body practice that prescribes its removal, however, indicates that this might not be so – that in fact, a generation of young women are internalizing messages that they should be removing their pubic hair, even if that hair can't generally be seen. A number of forces may be impacting the trend towards pubic hairlessness. In the following section, I will briefly consider some of the factors that may be contributing to the current upswing in pubic hair removal.

History

On May 4, 2011, I introduced the relationship between history and female hairlessness on the blog:

Those of you keeping up with this blog regularly will know a couple of things about it: 1) that I am keeping it as part of my Master's thesis research, and 2) that I am most driven by the question of how we got to the current state of the widespread normalization of pubic hair removal among young, North American women.

Obviously, that statement cuts a wide, generalizing swath: there are all kinds of variations among body hair practices in this part of the world, and they are all impacted by a huge number of forces, including things like (but not limited to) race, class and religion, as well as factors like exposure to pornography and the tendency to read fashion magazines.

But obviously, pubic hair removal is not a new phenomenon for women. Though now widely hailed in mainstream culture as the preferred manner for dealing with the pesky, pheromone-laden stuff stuff, pubic hair has come and gone from fashion over the years. ("How Long Has This Been Going On." www.thelasttriangle.com. May 4, 2011. web)

From there, I segued chattily to my unseen audience into the issue of pubic hair grooming throughout the ages, pointing out that while its removal is not necessarily a

new body practice for women, developments in the last two decades or so have seen it become an increasingly routinized one in North America.

After all, as Toerien and Wilkinson write, hair removal has long been practiced in various forms by women around the world: “accounts of women’s hair removal come from ancient times and diverse cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Tobriand Islands, Uganda, South America and Turkey” (333). According to a 2009 article by Sarah Ramsey, Clare Sweeney, Michael Fraser and Gren Oades called “Pubic Hair and Sexuality: A Review,” published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, most of what we know about early pubic hair practices has been gleaned through art. In existing Ancient Egyptian paintings, women are depicted with “small triangles of pubic hair, with bronze razors placed in tombs for the afterlife” (2103). They also write that “relics from Ancient Greece clearly illustrate body shaving of some form, and Sharia law advised the removal of all body hair” (2103). Indeed, in Muslim culture today both men and women are encouraged to depilate most body hair, including armpit and pubic hair, as instructed in the Qu’ran (Olwan).

Pubic hair is generally believed to make its appearance with puberty because of the role it plays in “social and sexual communication through pheremonal signalling” (Ramsay 2103). That’s because there is a higher density of pheremone-emitting apocrine sweat glands in the pubic region. As Ramsey, Sweeney, Raser and Oades write, “it is widely suggested that pubic hair has been retained to improve dissipation of pheremonal secretions, to improve our attractiveness to the other sex.” Their study also suggests that pubic hair acts as a “dry lubricant” to allow “transmission

of friction during swinging arms of upright gait and intercourse, respectively.” They acknowledge, however, that both theories are speculative (2103).

According to Basow’s seminal study on the subject, body hair removal wasn’t commonplace among North American women until after 1915. That’s when “The Great Underarm Campaign” began, and Gillette began marketing a new razor designed especially for women: the “Milady Decollete” (Basow 84). As Basow writes: “most ads were instructional and informed women that the new dress styles [sleeveless or very sheer sleeves] made removing underarm hair important since visible hair not growing on the head was ‘superfluous,’ ‘unwanted,’ ‘ugly’ and ‘unfashionable’ ” (84). Until Gillette started to tell them that their bodies as-is were problematic, it is probably safe to assume that most women were perfectly fine with their armpit hair.

Following fashion trends, widespread leg hair removal for women only became popular in the period between 1941-1945 when a wartime shortage of silk stockings lead to an increase in “bare-legged style and the introduction of sheer nylons” (Basow 85). “By the end of this period, the majority of women removed both leg and underarm hair as part of their personal hygiene routine in order to be clean, neat, attractive and ‘modern’ ” (Basow 85). As I will discuss at a later point in this paper, it is clear that body hair removal had already become intrinsically intertwined with capitalism’s need to sell women more products. Though there is no precise moment when pubic hair removal became normalized, it does seem to have become increasingly common in the last twenty years or so, driven by both heteronormative sexual preferences and fashion (Riddell, Varto, Hodgson 121).

My raising these issues in the blog garnered a response from a growing (and encouraging) readership base, many of whom reported feeling thrilled to find a venue discussing pubic hair in the public sphere. As one reader, Raya Leary, posted on Twitter:

@thelasttriangle I really love your blog. I think we are often unaware of the politics of everything around us.

I later received an email from a reader in Maryland, USA, who was engaged by what I was writing. She expressed dismay with the way women have been historically viewed and controlled via their bodies and was enthusiastic to find my blog:

I ran into your blog, The Last Triangle, over the weekend and have been captivated by what you're writing. I studied women's studies in school and after my eyes were opened, have always been fascinated by the seemingly subtle (and not so) ways (mostly american) society diminishes of women (and our general malaise in recognizing, caring, or standing up to it).

-Julie Strange (via email)

Pornography

The influence of readily available pornography can not be underestimated when it comes to considering pubic hair removal. As I wrote on the blog on July 13, 2011:

So I've been thinking about porn again... and yeah, not in that way. I've been thinking again about the influence that porn is having on our sexuality in a post-internet (PI?) age. I'm not the first person who has suggested that there's a close connection between normalized pubic hair removal among young women (and, increasingly, young men) and the fact that the the generation of people coming of age now are doing so with easy access to online pornography (where the bodies on display are, generally, sans-hair).

The stuff I'm hearing anecdotally seems to back up a connection between pubic hair removal and the social glorification of the porn star. I recently spoke with a beautiful young 19-year old who talked at-length about her own grooming practices which she seemed to perform against a backdrop of profound body-hatred. Sexually active, she made unabashed comments about the fact that keeping her nether regions waxed made her feel "like a porn star."

She later told me that her first boyfriend (and sexual partner) watched a lot of porn. “He just said he likes it better with no hair,” she said about his own expectations for her body, never conclusively drawing a connection between his love of on-line porn and what he expected his own sexual partners to look like. Though he never explicitly told the girl she had to be hairless, she understood what was expected of her.

“And then whenever I didn’t (wax), I thought... or I would feel like... oh, so he doesn’t like me, you know what I mean?” she told me, frankly. “And that was the first (sexual experience). So that’s maybe why I like it (now).”

Though she’d never been asked to think about her own body practices critically, she then made the wise observation that perhaps she’d internalized his expectations for her body and now believed she preferred her own body when completely hairless. She couldn’t otherwise explain it. Porn is powerful – and pervasive. And it’s affecting us all more than we probably notice. So it’s worth talking/thinking about, I think. (“Make Love Not Porn.” www.thelasttriangle.com. July 13, 2011. web).

When considering recent changes to mainstream pubic hair grooming practices among young women, it is almost impossible to ignore the impact pornography has had – from changes in the way women are depicted in pornographic material, to the very fact of its ready accessibility by an online audience. While the centerfold models featured in Playboy magazine in the 1980s displayed an abundance of pubic hair, as Labre explains, it dwindled throughout the 1990s and 2000s (120). “By 2001, pubic hair seems to almost have disappeared from the pages of this magazine – with most women sporting a Barbie doll-like, hairless crotch, that would only occur naturally among pre-adolescent girls” (Labre 120). The result might have been one of mere association – bare genitals soon came to be seen as more erotic in mainstream pornographic material (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser and Oades 2105).

Exploring similar ideas in her essay “Clean Porn: The Visual Aesthetics of Hygiene, Hot Sex, and Hair Removal,” Susann Cokal considers hairlessness as an increasingly common pornographic aesthetic because of the way it “yields up the

vulva's secrets to the male gaze, makes the woman more naked, the spectacle – for the female body is always a spectacle – more striking” (139). Cockal also points to a connection between the shift in the way pornography is consumed as a means of explaining the move towards a hairless aesthetic. Where pornographic films might once have been viewed on large screens in sticky theatres, sexual material is now largely consumed at home, or at the very least on private devices (145). As she explains, the advent of VCR technology in the 1980s meant pornography could be readily consumed in private, with the benefit of a fast-forward button – which fundamentally changed what producers opted to show on-screen, as well as how they chose to script their stories. “A smaller screen makes for decreased visibility, and camera work had to change in order to display those hard-to-find “naughty bits.” As a result, the “action’s pace had to pick up and the objects of interest to be more prominently displayed than ever before. The narrative art was lost and the visual component made even more prominent” (Cockal 145). Smaller screens, along with at-home consumption, set up a more intimate experience for the viewer, which necessitated a “close look at what’s usually concealed, a shaved or otherwise groomed vulva creates deeper intimacy as well as improved small-screen visibility” (Cockal 145).

It is also worth noting that the generation of young people coming of age today have always had access to the internet, and as such, have been able to access graphically sexual images with little effort. In her 2005 book, *Pornified*, Pamela Paul cites a study reporting that “on average, boys said they saw their first [pornographic] film at age eleven; girls at age twelve” (174). It’s difficult not to presume that early exposure to mainstream images of female genital hairlessness would set some ideas about how

men and women are expected to look and perform sexually. In fact, Paul writes that 51% of Americans believe pornography raises men's expectations of how women should look, while 48% believe it changes men's expectations of how women should behave. She writes that younger men, particularly 18-24 year olds, are "more likely to think pornography affects their expectations of women's looks and behavior than older men" (Paul 94).

On June 14, 2011, I wrote an entry on the blog about an article called "Looking Through the Bushes: The Disappearance of Pubic Hair" that had been posted on the *Huffington Post* website. Written by Roger Friedland, a professor of Religion and Cultural Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the article effectively explores the issue of normalized hair removal among young women, particularly as it relates to their sexuality and the increasing ubiquity of 'hook up' – i.e. casual and non-committal – sex among younger people:

I know I've written about the link between our ready access to online pornography and the absence of pubic hair on a generation of young women before – but Friedland adds to the conversation so eloquently:

American women are, in fact, striking a pornographic pose, one that first appeared in the hard-core porn films that have increasingly shaped the sexual imagination of legions of young men. The eye of the hard-core porn camera hovers over female body parts; it's a visual excess of physical acts with a minimum of sentiment. It is not a love story. Porn displays pubeless bodies to emphasize the organs — the female genital slit (and the erect male shaft) — and thereby defines the standard of erotic desirability. As nether hair disappeared on screen guys increasingly wanted sex with girls who looked like the porn stars they'd fantasized about. They asked and women struck the pose.

He touches on the chronology of pubic hair removal in porn (starting in *Penthouse* magazine in 1970) and creeping more regularly into mainstream images by the 1980s. Friedland also describes the connection between the eroticization of young female bodies and the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s:

Two things happened just before the pubic hair disappeared. The timing is not arbitrary. I will reverse the sequence. In the 1970's the female teen body became an erotic fetish. In 1974 Larry Flynt began publishing Barely Legal, with frontal shots of eighteen year-old girls. In 1976, an underage Jodie Foster played a 12-year-old prostitute in Martin Scorcese's Taxi Driver; in 1978, Brooke Shields did the same in Louis Malle's Pretty Baby. Both were underage when they played these parts.

As feminism encouraged women to avoid being the object of gaze while triumphantly embracing their body hair, "the female teen fetish went mainstream." As Friedland writes, "*this eroticization of young girls recaptured the pure feminine, the subordinate, hairless virginal female against whom a man was clearly a man.*"

We often hear that we are now living in a "post-feminist" era, where young women are (theoretically) reaping the benefits of (ahem) living in a free and equal society (cough). One of the ways it sometimes plays out is through a recently modified script, where young women seek casual sex rather than eternally looking for love and babies. Friedland suggests that it is the Brazilian wax that becomes part of this "new erotic repertoire, a perpetual reminder that you are always ready for action."

(Interested in reading more about hook-up culture? Try "[Hook-up Culture's Bad Rap](#)," a smart article by Kate Harding that was on [Salon.com](#) last year)

Clearly I should stop writing and you should all turn to [Friedland's article](#) ASAP. Before I do, however, let me leave you with one of the most spot-on sentences (describing the hygiene issue around women and oral sex) I have read in a long time:

"Hairlessness, like the vaginal mint, advertises that a vagina has been purified for male taste." Thanks, Roger Friedland, for getting it so right. (Now we just have to figure out how to fix things...) ("Huffington Post Does It Again." www.thelasttriangle.com. July 14, 2011. web)

The post generated some interesting feedback, most notably from Remittance Girl, a writer and blogger who specializes in erotic fiction. She objected to many of Friedland's claims, raising the important argument that for some women, waxing away pubic hair is a vital, empowering sexual practice with an important sensual component:

I did think it was an interesting article. I appreciate the semiotics and memes he examines and appreciate his reading of them. However, I think it made some grave generalizations and assumptions about why women

get rid of their pubic hair. The implication is that anyone who does must be a victim of male hegemonic imagery in society and doing it to accommodate male fantasy.

I wax for myself and for my own (kinky) reasons that have nothing at all to do with men or prevailing pornographic images of 'ideal women'. And I would like to think that 'feminism' would allow all of us the right to do whatever we WANT with our pubic hair.

If we don't like the homogenizing effects that a prevalence of imagery is imposing on us, then I suggest we get girls into classes on critical thinking instead of telling them what to do with their snatches. ("Huffington Post Does It Again - comments." www.thelasttriangle.com. June 18, 2011. web)

While I'm still inclined to feel Friedland's argument has significant merit, Remittance Girl's points can not be discounted when it comes to considering the relationship between body hair and sexuality. Interestingly, Friedland explained to me in an email that his article had received a significant amount of negative feedback "from all sides of the aisle, from evangelical Christians, as well as some young feminists," indicating that the issue of female body hair as it relates to sexuality is far from cut-and-dried, with objections to Friedland's opinions coming from both sides of the political spectrum (R. Friedland, email, June 14, 2011). He had clearly touched a nerve.

Popular Culture

The influence of popular television programs and the pervasiveness of celebrity culture should not go unmentioned when it comes to considering the upswing of mainstream pubic hair grooming practices. One of the most often cited sources for bringing talk of Brazilian waxing into mainstream popular culture is the television show *Sex and the City*. The issue is first discussed in a 2001 episode, when the show's main character, Carrie Bradshaw, goes with her friends to Los Angeles for a holiday where she has her first Brazilian wax. The experience leaves her feeling "bald," and she

reports to her friends that she feels like she is “nothing but walking sex,” an experience Carrie describes as pleasurable, and which ultimately leads to more adventurous sexual escapes (Cockal 147). As Labre writes, “from then on, the show repeatedly portrays the procedure in a positive light, associating it with increased sexual attractiveness and sexuality.” (121) For young women in their twenties now, *Sex and the City’s* popularity would have peaked just as they were coming of age, wielding an cultural influence that should not be ignored.

The celebrity tabloids have also been intrigued by the procedure. For example, when Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow whisked away her pubic hair for the first time thanks to a Brazilian wax, the media went wild. “It changed my life,” Paltrow is reported to have declared publicly, citing increased sensitivity, among other benefits (observations echoing those of Remittance Girl), and initiating a barrage of public interest in the practice(Ramsay 2106).

It is also worth noting that the trend towards pubic hairlessness has spawned industries which have earned a significant amount of titillating media traffic in the last decade, including ‘vajazzling’ (a process wherein the pubic hair is removed only to be replaced by crystal decals) and ‘va-tooing’ (where the pubic hair is replaced by an airbrushed temporary tattoo). As I wrote on May 23, 2011:

For those of you who don’t keep tabs on what the Swarovski crystal people think you should be doing with your nether region, here’s the idiot’s guide:

‘Vajazzling’ is the practice of waxing away your pubic hair only to have it replaced by stick-on crystals in various patterns. Word is that this strange phenomenon is gathering something of a following (at least in North America), with fans apparently declaring that practice makes them feel like they have a sparkly secret hidden beneath their briefs.

For anyone not up on their useless pop culture, Vajazzling first hit the big time when actress Jennifer Love Hewitt appeared on Lopez Tonight, an American talk show, to promote her new biography (Jan 2010). There she famously told Lopez and the audience about having a friend Vajazzle her “precious lady” when she was trying to get over a nasty break-up. Love Hewitt made headlines by declaring that it “shined like a disco ball”, later declaring that all women should “vajazzle their va-jay-jays”. (“Vajazzling, Pejazzling and Other Sparkly Fun.” www.thelasttriangle.com. May 23, 2011. web)

Indeed, Jennifer Love Hewitt’s very language reveals something of the sanitized state of the vulva in popular culture: while titillating to talk about on television, it can only be talked about with cute euphemisms, as if it is a girly accessory (tied to capitalist consumption) and not an vital component of female anatomy. As I explained in the blog:

I don’t think there’s anything new I can add to this conversation on Vajazzling. After all, in a culture where women are forever being convinced that their intimate bits are gross and dirty, it makes perfect sense that we’d devise a product/service that could make everything “prettier” and more sparkly. After all, girls like sparkly things, right? right? Maybe if our vulvas are sparkly we’ll like them better, too! (“Vajazzling, Pejazzling and Other Sparkly Fun.” www.thelasttriangle.com. May 23, 2011. web)

A quick online search revealed that my post on Vajazzling had garnered some interest: I found the following entry on a blog written by Jennifer Hanley wherein she wrote:

I was recently introduced to a great blog that discusses this issue in detail that I was looking forward to sharing with you all. [The Last Triangle](http://www.thelasttriangle.com) was introduced to me by Nola and the author of the paper zine [Lady Garden](http://www.ladygarden.com). Written by a graduate student in Ontario, the author has great insight on the "politics of pubic hair." After spending a few days casually reading her posts I have been thinking a lot about my own personal views on hair. I also learned about [vajazzling](http://theroaringwave.blogspot.com)... (“The Last Triangle.” <http://theroaringwave.blogspot.com>. June 16, 2011. web)

While for many the conversation around ‘vajazzling’ was laughable more than anything else, it is impossible to ignore the coverage the issue (and its subtle influence: ‘vajazzling’ is now available, for example, at a student-oriented Kingston spa) has had in

the mainstream media. At once sensational and titillating, popular culture increasingly celebrates the female anatomy as a source of flirty, high-maintenance, celebrity-endorsed ‘fun’ while subtly sowing the seeds of insecurity in women who may choose to eschew such grooming practices.

FURTHER ANALYSIS

As I have stated, while the reasons for the upswing in pubic hair removal are hard to pin down, it is evident that the young women who are embracing the practice are getting their messages from a variety of different sources. When it comes to trying to understand the motivation behind the practice, however, things get even more complicated. In a culture where leg and armpit hair removal for women is ubiquitous (if understudied) and pubic hair removal appears to be on the upswing, it is worth considering the varied forces which compel these kinds of normalized body practices.

Performing Femininity

On August 30, 2011, I posted an article inspired by a conversation about body hair that I had engaged in with a 24-year-old woman I called Angela²:

She’d said something along the lines of “growing up, I always just understood it’s what women had to do: remove their leg, arm pit and pubic hair.” Naturally, I was curious about where young women get those kinds of messages — and hence the follow-up chat.

Angela is funny and blunt, and one of the first things she said yesterday was “I remember I once saw pubic hair dye at Winners, and I thought ‘weird... who has pubic hair?’”

Angela grew up in Halifax and works in the media. She recently broke up with a long term boyfriend and has been experimenting with more casual liaisons for the last year or so. With an undergrad degree in Cultural

² Her name has been changed to protect her privacy.

Studies, she also has the education and theoretical background to be able to think critically about the world. But when it comes to her own body, Angela knows what it takes to make her comfortable with it.

“No guy has ever asked me to get rid of (my pubic hair),” she told me, explaining that she started removing it herself when she was about 15 — six weeks into a relationship with her first boyfriend, and just before things got sexual.

“I had tried shaving it off before, but I’d never been consistent (until then). But (my boyfriend) wanted to go down on me, and I was like.. shit...I have to do something about this. And it wasn’t ‘cause he was like, you’ve got to clean that up. I just felt it would be cleaner, and more pleasant for him. And it wasn’t explicitly said, but it was for me to be more comfortable.”

She says complete removal was pretty ubiquitous among girls her age by then — in fact, Angela says she can only remember one friend sporting full pubic hair when she cast her eyes about the change room after gym class in grade 10. “I was like...whoa.. surprised. Because nobody else in the change room was rocking that.”

But while it’s easy to imagine that the pressure to remove comes (explicitly or not) from men, Angela says that’s never been the case. As she explained it to me, “no guy has ever asked me to get rid of it.” She did admit, however, that she thought it would be “shocking” for a guy her age (24) to see pubic hair.

“I can intellectualize it all I want,” she laughed. “We can bring up Foucault...or any cultural theorist, but when it comes to shower-time, I’m hacking it off.” (“When It Comes To Shower Time, I’m Hacking it Off.” www.thelasttriangle.com. August 30, 2011. web)

With my blog entry, I hoped to illustrate that even while Angela was conscious, on an intellectual level, that her body hair practices were problematic, she had internalized powerful ideas about what kind of body grooming was required to be viewed as feminine and sexually ready. While she wasn’t able to pinpoint how she first understood that pubic hair removal was a necessary female duty, she had an early grasp of body hair as one of the easy-to-read distinguishing characteristics between men and women: men have body hair, while women are smooth and hairless. Increasingly, it would seem

that pubic hair removal is a key part of that distinction between what is understood as masculine and feminine.

Toerien and Wilkinson consider the effort required in “producing an acceptably feminine appearance” in contemporary North American culture, pointing out that the “process of conforming is made more complex by the assumption that femininity should appear ‘natural’. The result: a cycle of effort to maintain the illusion that femininity is effortless,” requiring that women make both the “effort to be hairless and make the state of hairlessness appear ‘natural’ ”(339).

These ideas exemplify Judith Butler’s seminal views on gender performativity. Revisiting her ideas in the revised preface to her text, *Gender Trouble*, she describes performativity not as a “singular act, but a repetition, a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration,” later explaining that the “view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (xv).

For the women who choose to challenge the ‘performance,’ the experience can be frustrating and alienating. As one reader, Dawn, commented on August 8, 2011:

As a woman in my early twenties who happens to like her bush, I am still amused how many people (besides my sexual partners) who seem to have an opinion on what I like to do, (or rather “should” be doing) with my pubic hair. I really fail to see how it’s any of their business or concern. Occasionally I have had hairy armpits because I find the skin there gets extremely irritated if/when I shave, and people, including my friends seem to think that it is their job to “remind” me to shave. I didn’t forget, I just chose not to.

I am unaware if you have seen either the book or documentary of *The*

Petals Project. <http://www.nickkarras.com/ILoveMyPetals.html> , which more deals with cosmetic genital surgery than with hair removal, but I digress. I watched it in one of my human sexuality classes at university and afterwards my group had a discussion. I personally was surprised that none of the models in the original version had more than a landing strip of pubic hair. I was also the only one in my discussion group to bring up pubic hair, and also the only one to admit to having pubic hair. When I said I didn't like shaving, didn't want to and wasn't doing so, one of my classmates "helpfully" suggested that I should go get a Brazilian. ("Ben and Bodies - comments". www.thelasttriangle.com. August 8, 2011. web)

For young women like Angela (and Dawn's classmate), who routinely remove their pubic hair on an understanding that it's 'what women do', it is merely an extension of the practice of creating ultimate feminine body: smooth, controlled, soft, youthful. In their study looking at the phenomenon of pubic hair removal in women, Riddell, Varto and Hodgson note the most commonly cited reasons for removal include "it looks better in a bathing suit," followed by "it makes me feel attractive." Similarly rated were ideas about feeling "feminine" (125), a state of being that can only be understood in a framework that acknowledges what femininity, in fact, feels like, and which can only be learned and determined by a barrage of cultural and economic forces.

It is also worth noting that one of the most common reasons cited by those critical of normalized pubic hair removal among women is the concern that genital hairlessness constructs the mature female body as childlike – an issue I raised in the blog on July 27, 2011:

One of the arguments I've mentioned (because it comes up again and again) as a reason that people are opposed to full pubic hair removal for women is because it makes them look like little girls. Now while I think the issue is a lot more complicated than that, I can certainly understand why there is a knee jerk reaction around it. It's easy to see how hairlessness can be equated with youth, and as such, with the way little girls look before they become women. ("Youth And Power." www.thelasttriangle.com. July 27, 2011. web)

I then used the blog to further explore some of the ideas in support of that argument put forward by feminist scholars and cultural theorists. For example, as Toerien and Wilkinson point out, “given that body hair may be understood as a signal of [sexual] maturity, and as a symbol of masculine strength, the requirement for women to remove their hair may thus reflect the socio-cultural equation of femininity with a child-like status, passivity, and a dependence on men” (338). Labre builds her argument along similar lines, suggesting that the Brazilian wax supports women’s “submissiveness,” and “inferiority” (126). And while she acknowledges that it may “seem to increase women’s control over men by enhancing female attractiveness and power of seduction,” she argues that it also “reinforces the idea that women’s main role is to attract men while at most providing women with access to secondhand power achieved via control of men”, an idea which aligns with what women like Angela told me about their own experiences with sexuality and with performing the version of femininity that feels right for them (126).

As Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi point out in their 2005 study on body hair removal among women, it is “one of the most frequent ways women alter their bodies to achieve the ideal of youthfulness and attractiveness,” fundamentally reinforcing the idea that “a woman’s body is unacceptable if left unaltered” (400). Interestingly, anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that these norms increasingly apply in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts in the sense that the idea of female attractiveness is internalized by both parties in a sexual coupling, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The indicator for sexual “attractiveness” for women is thus determined, I would argue, by external cultural and economic forces.

It is also worth taking a quick step back in history to consider the role of pubic hair in European art as it relates to the “male gaze,” a concept very much at play when it comes to looking at performing femininity. Female pubic hair doesn’t make an appearance in European art until the late 19th century when the Spanish painter Goya added some discreet fuzz to his work “The Naked Maja” (c.1800-1803) (Ramsay 2103). Before then, nudes tended to be completely hairless — though the reasons aren’t entirely clear.

Art critic John Berger notes in his 1972 text, *Ways of Seeing*, however, puts forward his ideas for the practice: “in the average European oil painting, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture, and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger - with his clothes on” (54). As Berger explains, the tradition of not painting hair on a woman’s body aided in denying the female subject her own sexual power. Hair, particularly on the genitals, is associated with sexual power and passion. “The woman’s sexual power needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion,” writes Berger, continuing with “women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own” (55).

This notion is similar to one Laura Mulvey touts in her renowned essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” wherein she describes a “pleasure of looking” inherent to narrative cinema (though, I would argue that it is applicable in non-film environments as well). Established between active/male and passive/female, the “determining male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly” (750). “In their

traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (750). While the pubic region is hardly ever public, removing pubic hair to signal lack of sexual prowess or desire, or to resemble a prepubescent condition, all align themselves with a notion of the woman as the object of desire, not the agent of her sexual life.

It is a dynamic continually at play for young women growing up in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in North America. From the ubiquity of nearly-naked women on billboards and in music videos, to the public worship (and scrutiny) of young wealthy starlets, barely-dressed pop stars, and porn actresses, the woman-as-object dynamic is well ingrained in day-to-day life. As Berger writes, "women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47). These forces are certainly at play in pornography, and thus extend to women who model their sexual behaviour after what they glean from it, whether they are active or passive consumers: "women who remove their pubic hair are catering to a particular version of sexiness that is focused on the viewer (one might even say "the consumer") and his expectations" (Cockal 139).

My commentary on these issues on the blog struck a chord with readers, many of whom posted comments including Lara Szabo Greisman, who wrote the following on May 4, 2011:

This is a fantastic project that is super important, especially in terms of the contradictions women live daily. While being aware of the constructed,

objectifying and demeaning expectations on female bodied people, often there can be a gap between the intellectual critique and the emotional defence mechanisms that are really susceptible to not meeting expectations, being alienated, unattractive, less...etc. But all that to say, this is great. (“How Long Has This Been Going On - Comments.” www.thelasttriangle.com. May 4, 2011. web)

Amy L, another reader, responded to her comments:

The thing I find interesting in discussions about how women are viewed — or objectified — is how we internalize both the experience of being viewed AND the knowing that we are socialized to being viewed. The above comment touches on that strange murky zone between what we internalize and and what we express: how we ‘prepare’ our bodies for the world, and at the same time have inner dialogues that approve or disapprove of the various choices that are out there. (“How Long Has This Been Going On - Comments.” www.thelasttriangle.com. May 4, 2011. web)

These issues are particularly interesting to consider in light of an interview I did for the blog with Ben, a 21-year-old self-identified female-bodied man or CAFAB (Coercively Assigned Female At Birth). As I wrote on August 8, 2011:

Ben only has limited use of his hands/arms, and uses a wheelchair to get around. He has grown up having help from others in order to perform many day-to-day tasks, including many aspects around his own body care and grooming.

Ben says he remembers feeling upset by his mother’s tending of his armpits. “I was also confused, because it was not like her to try and compel me into some kind of feminine norm.” Though Ben says he ultimately gave his mother consent to perform the grooming, he says it was “elicited aggressively.” “It was like, I was persuaded, but I really didn’t have a choice,” he explains.

At one point, Ben switched from having his mother tend to his body grooming, to have a female personal support worker (PSW) — a paid stranger — do the job. “I was more comfortable with that, really, than with having my mom do it,” he explains. But Ben says that on more than one occasion the PSW commented inappropriately on his pubic hair — which was as yet untended. “They would be dressing or undressing me, or showering me. And they would like, ask me why I didn’t shave. Or suggest that it would be a good idea. But my mom was really against it. And so then I was able to say no to them because her authority trumped theirs.”

What I find particularly interesting about Ben's story is in the fact that his coming of age involved the input of a stranger functioning in an intimate capacity. Ben talks about the PSWs being "put off" that nobody was doing any pubic hair removal. Without that intermediary, Ben might not have had any sense, at that age, of what his body was supposed to look like, and had little privacy around his own body/body practices. ("Ben and Bodies." www.thelasttriangle.com. August 8, 2011. web)

Ben's perspective around performing femininity are particularly acute because while he currently identifies as male, he is female-bodied and was seen as female growing up. Because he has very limited use of his arms, Ben has also had restricted agency over his own body's grooming practices and was, as such, more vulnerable to external pressures from those who had taken on that responsibility (particularly paid caregivers who pressured him to remove his pubic hair). It wasn't until he began a sexual relationship with a woman who had untended pubic hair that he began to feel that his own body, left to its own devices, was acceptable. As I explained in a later blog entry:

For me, that's why Ben's story is so fascinating. Blurring the lines around gender performance, he has experienced being in the world in different ways. Because of his disability, he has also had different forces impact his own body grooming practices. He is conscious of the messages many younger people seem to have internalized about pubic hair being undesirable. But it sounds like having had a partner who wasn't judgmental about hair (and was, rather, celebratory!) also provided an important point of comparison (and body confidence). We should all be so lucky. ("Ben and Bodies - The Conversation Continues." www.thelasttriangle.com. August 12, 2011. web)

Body Control

On August 17, 2011, I received the following note by email from a reader:

Hello Meredith,

My name is Caroline³, I'm 20 years old. I stumbled upon your blog, literally on Stumble Upon, and I have to say that I really liked it. It was refreshing to see someone say that pubic hair was okay. I then realized that I have no idea what I even look like with hair, i've been shaving since I ever started growing hair at around 12. I shaved even though it hurt and was super uncomfortable when it grew back. I decided that I'm going to go ahead and let it grow! I'm super curious now as to what it looks like on me. Who knows, maybe I'll prefer it haha but anyway I just wanted to thank you for helping me realize that it is okay to be natural, and even though I don't always accept this I feel like I am on my way.

*Take Care!
Your now faithful reader,
Caroline*

Like some of the other women I had interviewed, Caroline – who had grown up in Los Angeles – had always understood that grooming her pubic hair was one of her duties as an adult female. Although she was able to identify the fact that she wasn't comfortable with the practice, she had internalized the cultural pressures to look and act a certain way and had not allowed herself any other options. My writing had given her the courage to consider alternative ways of being in her body.

Caroline was working within the confines of a body produced and controlled by cultural norms. As Susan Bordo effectively points out, “the body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture,” and is, as such, created by a barrage of cultural forces (165). It is also, she explains with a nod to Bourdieu and Foucault, “a practical, direct locus of social control.” We learn how to regulate and squeeze our bodies so that they fit into recognizable categories, with ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ being two examples among them (165).

While women may not get a memo dictating when it's time to begin the normative ritual of hair removal, it is part of the practice of “femininity” that is readily embraced and

³ Her name has been changed to protect her privacy.

rarely questioned in North American culture. In fact, as a young woman matures she is expected to take on more and more rituals around body grooming and maintenance, which are sold to her as being “just what women do.” However, these normalized grooming, waxing, plucking, making-up, cleansing, exfoliating, and buffing rituals require a vast amount of time, energy and thought, not to mention financial resources. As Bordo points out, this endless pursuit of an “ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity – a pursuit without terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion – female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’ ”(166).

Not surprisingly, scholar Karin Lesnik-Oberstein points out that when it comes to body hair, women are expected to remove more and more from specific areas as they gain more authority in the public sphere. As she explained on CBC Radio, “there’s an idea that in the West, women’s liberation has freed women in terms of their choices in clothing, in cosmetics and so on, but with body hair it has become more and more restrictive and increasingly advocated as the norm that women remove. First it was their lower leg hair, and I guess many women are familiar with that, but then also the idea that you start removing your underarm hair, your pubic hair in the last twenty years, and so on” (“Mainstreet”, CBC Radio).

One reader, Joshua, posted the following on the blog on June 24, 2011:

Great blog. In addition to the very valid points you have listed on this website I can think of three other reasons to avoid body hair removal (and arbitrary beauty standards in general) off the top of my head. One reason is that throughout the course of our lives it is a monumental waste of time. I don’t know how much time the average women spends shaving, applying makeup, painting their fake nails, etc, but with life being

all too short as it is, can't we find something more meaningful to do with our time? ("About". www.thelasttriangle.com. June 24, 2011. web)

Joshua's comments align with Bordo's when she explains that in being increasingly encouraged to expend energy and financial resources on body maintenance, women are "rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification" (166). Women, Bordo writes, internalize messages of "lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (166). The women I spoke with talked about body hair maintenance as something they felt they were able to control when they felt so helpless, and unhappy, about many other aspects of their bodies and appearance.

Breeding insecurity is a remarkably powerful mechanism of social control, not only fostering the need to consume (purchasing an endless supply of products to improve and enhance the female condition), but encouraging (in accordance with Foucault's ideas) near-continuous self-surveillance requiring constant discipline. "Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies," he writes. "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (Foucault 138).

These notions of control are particularly acute when considering the removal of pubic hair, a constant and repetitive practice requiring regular surveillance and a significant investment of time. Women who have their pubic hair professionally waxed not only have to pay for the service, they have to endure both significant physical discomfort as well as the emotional discomfort of having an intimate part of the body exposed to a stranger. Women who choose to do away with their hair at home must exercise vigilance in the form of regular maintenance, as well as in the bumps and

irritation (not to mention itching and other discomfort) that often occur as a result of using a razor on sensitive skin.

But for some women, however, being in control of their body hair provides them with a means of feeling in control of their bodies, even if they have learned to abhor them. On July 14, 2011, for example, I included the following conversation in a blog entry I posted in response to a television spot promoting a cancer fundraising campaign⁴:

On that note, I recently spoke with a vivacious, pretty young woman (age 19) who broke my heart when she told me this:

“I hate my body. Every five seconds I’m thinking about how much I hate it. And when I eat something I’m like...Oh my gosh...What is this going to do? So I feel like when I get (Brazilian) waxed, I feel like it’s something I can control like, really easily. It’s an automatic response.”

I asked her if it was fair, then, to say that she was doing the Brazilian waxing for herself, rather than for the guys she has sex with.

“Yeah,” she answered, “but I think it’s both. It’s a little bit for the guys, because having them like it makes me feel good about myself. So...I guess it’s for me, too.” (“The ‘Julyna’ Problem (continued).” www.thelasttriangle.com. July 14, 2011. web)

It is also worth noting the connection between body control and the rise of labiaplasty among women in North America and the United Kingdom. As I wrote on April 29, 2011:

I recently came upon a journal article called “Brazilian bikini wax and the designer vagina”, by Mike Fitzpatrick, in the *British Journal of General Practice*. Though the article is dated December 2007, it’s chock-full of tasty stuff still utterly relevant for consideration here.

⁴ The campaign, called ‘Julyna,’ became a significant source of material for my blog. As a result, I was also provided a critical voice against the campaign in both print and broadcast media. See Appendix A for more detailed information.

The article draws a connection between the “remarkable disappearance of female body hair over recent years” and the increased demand for labial surgery (also called labiaplasty). The procedure usually involves reducing the labia majora and labia minora. As Fitzpatrick cites research indicating that “our patients uniformly wanted their vulvas to be flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora, similar to the prepubescent aesthetic featured in advertisements.”

The article goes on to describe women bringing along ‘pornographic photographs to illustrate the desired appearance’ when they come for their consultation.

The author also cites a Guardian article by Kira Cochrane (which I couldn’t get my hands on, regretfully) that draws a parallel between “the trend for pubic hair removal and the growing demand for the surgical procedure known as the ‘designer vagina’.”

Fitzpatrick seems to agree with Cochrane’s thesis, writing that he has seen the number of cosmetic labial surgeries more than double in the last five years (meaning 2002-2007, I presume), writing “I can confirm that demand appears to be growing.”

It’s not difficult to presume that pubic hair removal and the increase of labial surgery are related: after all, it’s harder to hate (and thus want to change) something you can’t see. If everything is out in the open, it’s a lot easier to find ways to compare what you’ve got with what you see around you. (“What Lies Beneath.” www.thelasttriangle.com. April 29, 2011. web)

The fact that women would willingly subject themselves to cosmetic surgery in one of the body’s most intimate and sensitive regions seems to me an extreme and troubling manifestation of Foucault’s ‘docile body,’ indeed.

Hygiene

The notion of body control can be further explored through ideas of hygiene, particularly as it relates to women’s bodies. As Toerien and Wilkinson, citing Hope, point out, “in contemporary Western culture, only women’s body hair is routinely treated as cause for disgust, much like other body products (such as blood, feces, sweat or odors) that are thought to be unclean” (338). The issue seems particularly pertinent with pubic

hair, where hygiene is routinely cited (both by my interview subjects and by a myriad of online material) as one of the primary reasons for removal.

As I wrote on July 21, 2011:

As part of my research, I interviewed a woman who runs a very popular salon which very much caters to the undergraduate student body here in Kingston. While she did say that the majority of her clients were young women, she said she did have women coming to see her for Brazilian waxes who were in their sixties and seventies. She told me that she didn't think 60 year old women were coming in to do it because they were seeing it modeled in porn or any such thing. She truly believed they were coming in for waxing because of a desire to want to be "clean." ("Stuff Mom Never Told You." www.thelasttriangle.com. July 21, 2011. web)

As I pointed out in my entry, the notion of cleanliness is, however, a social construct, intimately connected to notions of morality in North American culture. After all, 'dirty' is a loaded word, implying all sorts of social ills that have nothing to do with being unclean – from sexual deviance to corrupt politics. "Moral regimes are, to some extent commodified, scripted and embedded in the tools and infrastructures on which we rely," writes Elizabeth Shove in *Comfort, Cleanliness + Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (84). We have become, as a result, a dirt and germ-obsessed culture. We can beckon squirts of antibacterial hand sanitizer from dispensers in public places. We douse our floors and countertops with chemicals in a bid to banish microscopic bits of grime. We wonder about people who don't take daily showers. But as Shove states, a love of hygiene must be learned and performed: "whatever the beliefs and technologies of the day, doing what people think of as cleaning, whether of the person or of clothing, generally requires a rather high level of active participation. Cleaning consequently involves the routine reproduction not just of classificatory schemes of delicacy, propriety

and gender, but also of performance.” After all, she continues, “it is the every day activity of laundering or showering that convinces people there is dirt to remove” (85).

In their study on pubic hair removal in women, Riddell, Varto and Hodgson cite a high level of participants reporting that they removed their pubic hair “because it is cleaner,” even though there is little evidence to support that claim. Indeed, their research indicates that pubic hair removal may, in fact, cause a myriad of health complications, from ingrown hairs and infections, to burns (121). Most critically, they consider cleanliness as it relates to “achieving the “American Dream” of wealth and success. After all, removal of body hair requires the resources of access to water, products and time” (121).

On June 28, 2011, I wrote about the aforementioned article on the blog, concluding thusly:

Because while many seem to view pubic hair removal as a ‘cleanliness’ issue, the authors of “Smooth Talking” suggest otherwise. Instead, they write that “several studies on preoperative genital shaving as compared to other methods of hair removal have consistently found increased bacterial infection rates related to shaving.”

“Microabrasions, contact dermatitis, and skin disruption due to methods of pubic hair removal may also increase the potential for the transmission of viruses (including HIV, hepatitis, herpes simplex and human papilloma).”

(I also keep thinking back to Roger Friedland’s [smart article](#) wherein he draws a connection between an increasingly always-sexually-ready ‘hook-up’ culture with a hairless “purified” vulva. Thinking about it in this context, I can’t help but note that the young women who are partaking in no-strings sex — and thus already more vulnerable to STIs — may in fact be made extra susceptible due to their grooming practices).

To top things off, Riddell, Varto and Hodgson write that salons and esthetician services in Canada remain largely unregulated — meaning that there’s no guarantee that the pot of hot wax your esthetician is using to do away with your pubic hair hasn’t been double-dipped into, etc etc.

Lots to think about next time you wield a razor in the general direction of your nether regions or lie back with your legs spread at the ol' salon. (" \$10,000/58.4 Days." www.thelasttriangle.com. June 28, 2011. web)

Others, like Labre, have written critically of the connection between Brazilian waxing and the construction of women's sexual organs as dirty and unattractive. "In a sexist culture, women are not only socialized to be narcissistically obsessed with their bodies, but also are constantly reminded that their bodies are deficient to begin with," she explains (126). "Women are made to feel embarrassed about the look and smell of their sexual organs," writes Labre, describing satisfied bikini wax customers who "repeatedly referred to feeling dirty before undergoing the procedure" (126).

It was certainly echoed in some of the conversations I had with young women. As I wrote on July 20, 2011:

A young woman (a regular waxer) recently told me about her reasons for pursuing a practice that was painful and that she couldn't afford.

"I guess I feel cleaner," she said. "I like having no hair." And then she paused. "I guess...vaginas are really...". She struggled to find the right words. "When you have no (pubic) hair, it's just less embarrassing. I feel like vaginas are...weird."

(And yes, I did point out that keeping it bare might make it seem MORE weird than if it were blanketed in hair). ("The 'Julyna' Problem (continued)". www.thelasttriangle.com. July 14, 2011. web)

When it is tied to hygiene, body hair removal becomes a moral practice, effectively encouraging women to practice social control through self-surveillance and discipline. As Riddell, Varto and Hodgson write, "multi-million dollar companies associated with hair removal continue to emphasize the cleanliness factor with the underlying message that hair is dirty, and thus, ensure that women continue to need

and use their products” (129). It’s certainly a sentiment that many young women embody regularly with their own hygiene rituals.

Capitalism

On July 20, 2011, in a blog entry I called “Another Day, Another Stupidly Offensive Commercial,” I critiqued an advertisement a particular brand of soap designed specifically for women’s nether regions:

Yup, here we go again.

This time it’s a commercial for Summer’s Eve ‘cleansing wash and cloths.’ This video has been raising a few virtual eyebrows in the blogosphere for being stupid, sexist and generally dumb (oh- and for perpetuating the idea that women should be buying extra products for cleaning their genitals, because in our hygiene-obsessed culture, apparently plain old soap and water won’t cut it. (“Another Day, Another Stupidly Offensive Commercial. www.thelasttriangle.com. July 20, 2011. web)

In the commercial, we watch a number of scenes (set at various points throughout history) wherein men, with great vigour, appear to be battling for an undeterminable cause. That cause, we later find out, is the humble vagina. The audience is then reminded to “show it a little love” by purchasing dedicated hygiene products.

In another advertisement (figure 2) this one for razors designed specifically for intimate grooming – a group of women push pink lawnmowers and sing suggestively (and perkily) about the merits of “mowing the lawn.” Describing it in the blog on April 13, 2011, I wrote:

I love that we start in a staid living room where our main character sits trapped between two bushy ferns, cuddling a particularly fluffy cat (be sure to note the shorn feline she’s holding in the final scene). She then bursts into the outside world (hair down and dressed in a flouncy skirt and bright pink top) rarin’ to clip her topiary along with a collection of bubbly neighbours.



(Figure 2 - Still from a television advertisement for the Wilkinson Sword Quattro for Women Bikini, United Kingdom)

We then learn that “some bushes are really big” (black woman) and that “some gardens are mighty small” (asian woman) — but never fear, because “whatever shape your topiary, it’s easy to trim them all.”

In other words ladies: you can do whatever you like with your shrubbery, as long as you do something. Selling women on the idea that they should “never feel untidy” is pretty much at the crux of what I’m on about in this blog: that the unkempt woman is unacceptable. Buying the “Quattro for Women” bikini trimmer, however, oughta get you fixed right up. (“Moving the Lawn and Other Cute Euphemisms.” www.thelasttriangle.com. April 13, 2011. web)

After all, when it comes to discussing female grooming practices, it is impossible not to touch upon the capitalist forces behind them. This is certainly true when it comes to normalized pubic hair removal and intimate grooming. “When it comes to the history of the market, pubic hair is an example of market forces in hyperdrive,” writes Louise Tondeur in an essay about pubic hair included in *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*. “Far from being a rather trivial, frivolous, girly subject, beauty and therefore hair, is one of the key players in the global market-place” (57). A practice requiring both time –

for removal – and money – for the purchase of the necessary products, or for hiring a professional to do the removing – the thriving hair removal industry neatly sums up capitalist forces, tapping into constructed insecurities around gender performance and sexual attractiveness in order to sell products. And it's working. As I wrote on September 15, 2011:

According to [this article in today's Sydney Morning Herald](#), “the vagina is becoming big business on American TV”. That's right, people: turns out there is money to be made in yonder genitalia.

Apparently, those of us who grew up with “more graphic language and sexual images in the media” can talk openly about vaginas, rather than skirting around the issue with cute euphemisms (perhaps like generations past?). We are (apparently) also more relaxed about our bodies, so we're less embarrassed about talking bodily-functions, etc.

But it's the numbers that are most interesting. According to the article, “ad spending for feminine hygiene products, including tampons, panty liners and cleansers, was up nearly 30 percent to \$218.9 million in 2010 from two years ago.”

That's a lot of money.

I'm fascinated by that increase: what, exactly, has changed? Are we really that much more open about our bodies, or does one or two racy, boundary-pushing ads pave the way for a whole bunch more? (and now it's been totally normalized. Or have we merely run out of ways to ‘shock’ audiences?). (“The Va-jay-jay Gets Her Day.” www.thelasttriangle.com. September 15, 2011. web)

While the article I described touched on pubic hair dye and ‘vajazzling’, it didn't mention the commercial impact that the normalizing of pubic hair removal has had on women, nor, as I pointed out in the blog, “the pot loads of money to be had in making them feel insecure about their untended, ‘natural’ bodies.” Because indeed, for many women, the practice of hair removal is deeply intertwined with the consumption of products and services.

Writing about menstruation (another bodily issue ‘dealt with’ through consumption of products), Elizabeth Arveda Kissling accurately points out that the primary goal of marketing and advertising is to convince the consumer that “she needs a particular product,” a situation that becomes inherently more challenging when it comes to “persuading the consumer that a particular product meets this need when there is little product differentiation” (11). That’s why the aforementioned ideas around hygiene are particularly acute in a market where a razor is a razor is a razor: advertising must sell women on the idea that being hairless will make them “cleaner” and more feminine, rather than on the technicalities of the razor itself. In describing advertising for menstrual products, Kissling writes “women are urged to ‘stay clean, stay fresh, stay free’ as if their freedom depends on their freshness” (123). But as she later suggests, “to enjoy that freedom, women must participate in the construction of their own otherness,” a position that can only be remedied (cleverly) through the purchasing of products (Kissling 123). The shaving industry targets women’s insecurities in a similar way, selling them on the idea that the purchase of products will leave them feeling more tidy, feminine, clean and, fundamentally, attractive.

I wrote about some of Kissling’s ideas around menstruation and capitalism on the blog on June 7, 2011:

Kissling uses existentialist Simone de Beauvoir to investigate this idea of Otherness — something she describes as being an artifact of a male-dominated society wherein women learn to feel “an alienation from their own bodies.” As Kissling writes, “a properly socialized woman develops a sense of herself as object, an Other that is both venerated and feared, as she internalizes her society’s dominant ideologies about women.” (p. 3)

It helps explain why women feel such shame and disgust at the idea of their own periods. Our monthly bleeding is marketed to us as a “hygienic crisis”. Talking about ads for menstrual products, Kissling writes:

“It is a hygiene crisis that one must clean up, in secret, so that one’s public projection of ideal femininity is not damaged or polluted.” (p.12)

Kissling quotes another scholar, Tomi-Ann Roberts, who makes this wise observation:

“One of the obligations that women have in a culture that sexually objectifies their bodies is to conceal the biological functioning of their bodies.” (p.20)

And that’s where we come back to pubic hair.

Women learn early on to treat themselves as objects. And getting rid of body hair, whether it’s on our legs or between them, is just another way of doing that. (“Hair and Blood.” www.thelasttriangle.com. June 7, 2011. web)

Arjun Appadurai’s ideas around consumption and commodity flows are particularly relevant to consider in the context of this consumption, particularly his ideas around the “fetishism of the consumer,” where “transformed through commodity flows (and the media and advertising that accompany them)” she is lead to believe that she is an actor, wielding his or her own agency around consumption, when in fact “she is at best a chooser” (42). That’s because, while advertising may lead the consumer to believe she has some agency in her decisions, the ultimate message is the same: buy stuff to fix biological ‘problems.’ Interestingly, it was my post on menstruation that generated the most interest and comments from readers. One reader, Ibanez, took objection to some of what I had written, as well as to some of the comments from other readers, but raised some interesting points:

To enjoy the liberty granted by tampons or cup or whatever someone uses to control the flow of her menstrual blood, women just need to buy them. Or craft those divices themselves.

Experiencing menstrual blood as something “alien”, as something” other” is not the price for using tampons etc., it’s the REASON why women would want them in the first place.

You don't need to think that menstrual blood is gross to experience discomfort from it: Like any kind of blood, it's wet, it smells like blood, it's red. It's just not very nice to have it in/on your pants. It is true that the period was and still is culturally connected with misogynic ideas. But this is no ontological necessity – we can just NOT look at the period as something metaphysically unclean. But blood coming out of your sexual organs is still unclean – in a very pragmatic sense. There's nothing wrong with it, but it's still something you might want to control. Like sweat, tears, hair, dandruff – whether you're a man or a woman or anything in between and beyond. (“Hair and Blood - comments.” www.thelasttriangle.com. September 13, 2011. web)

Because while it is women have been most readily targeted by the beauty industry in the past, it is increasingly reaching out to men – including around the question of hair removal. From the devising of terms like ‘manscaping’ and ‘metrosexual,’ to advertising campaigns specifically tailored to tap into male insecurities, the hair removal industry is currently creating markets where none might have existed twenty years ago. Once the domain of a specific facet of the population – i.e. gay males – hair removal is becoming increasingly popular for young men of all sexual orientations. As Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser and Oades write, where hair on men was once associated with “manliness,” men now report removing their pubic hair for reasons similar to women, primarily “improved appearance, though some reference were made to sexual reasons for doing so” (2106). As I mused in the blog on August 11, 2011:

Though I'd argue that it's less common to hear of a guy being seen as dirty or disgusting for leaving his pubic hair au-natural, I'm reading/hearing about men facing an increasing amount of pressure to go hairless.

Poking around on the internet this morning, I came across [a website selling \(surprise!\) hair removal products](#) (anyone see a theme when it comes to hair removal?) for men.

I was particularly taken by the narrative they were doling out: that in removing their pubic hair they would be more attractive to the opposite sex, and that, in general, things would be more ‘hygienic’ — essentially the same arguments women seem to be readily internalizing.

This site not only tries to sell men on the idea of whisking away their pubic hair (*“Back in the day having a hairy chest and body was sexy but these times have changed. Women now find smooth, clean male bodies more attractive. But pubic shaving isn’t just about impressing the oppisate (sic) sex but also about personal hygiene”*) but then it actually tries to sell them a fancy electric “bodygroomer”, as well as a special powder for the inevitable post-shave itching. (“Oh Boys.” www.thelasttriangle.com. August 11, 2011. web)

Finally, it is worth considering how these changes in intimate grooming practices for women have been readily taken up in different parts of the world. As I wrote on August 26, 2011:

Today’s London Evening Standard includes this story about “a new frankness about vaginas” in which the writer goes on about a movement geared towards celebrating all things vaginal (while also drawing my attention to a disturbing new word for female genitalia – “clunge”).

The author suggests that the trend towards vaginally themed crafts, drawing classes and pop-cultural frankness on the subject is “a reaction against the tyranny of waxing and vajazzling – porn chic culture where young men surfing the internet see only hairless models and are therefore surprised to discover that young women have pubic hair.” (“Vagina Love/Hate.” www.thelasttriangle.com. August 26, 2011. web)

For me, the notion of a “new frankness about vaginas” is particularly interesting; its newness indicating that at one point, we were less open about talking about them, but that something has changed. The idea of the vagina finding reach as an acceptable topic of conversation can be considered in the context of Appadurai’s ideas around global cultural flows. He writes about five different dimensions – ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples and ideoscaples – which can be viewed as building blocks from which to consider how ideas are disseminated and implemented in a world that is not as constrained by national boundaries (33). This deterritorialization is evidenced by the fact that the trend in complete pubic hair removal seems to be

spreading swiftly throughout North America, as well as in countries like Australia and the United Kingdom). It is his ideas around mediascapes that seem to make the most sense here. From the websites touting the benefits of hair removal, to the pornographic images that have increased the desirability of the hairless vulva, they all make up the mediascape.

As Appadurai writes, mediascapes tend to be “image centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (35). Young women coming of age today may only have the mediascape for reference when it comes to defining their own grooming practices and assessing their own bodies and their own sexual currency.

CONCLUSION

I've done some poking around the internet, and I believe you are the same person who runs The Last Triangle. If this is so: firstly: THANK YOU. It is a beacon of light in the sea of message boards discussing pubic hair as it relates to hygiene.

-Emily Armstrong (via email)

It is still unclear whether the current trends in pubic hair removal among young women are simply a fleeting fashion trend, or whether they are the result of more pervasive forces like online pornography. While my research has looked at the causal questions behind these shifts in body practices, I haven't set out to answer any of them. Instead, I sought to ask some of these questions in a public forum, encouraging people to think critically about the sorts of body practices that are often regarded as mundane,

inconsequential and even laughable. My qualitative research provided me with concrete examples and personal stories for use on the blog – and as such, a means of effectively engaging with a (growing) audience of readers. The blog continues to develop and thrive. Increasingly it is being referenced by other popular websites (including Stumble Upon and Reddit.com) allowing me to reach a more diverse audience with my writing, averaging about 400 unique hits a day and continually drawing in a more diverse readership, all of whom I hope will add their voices to the conversation.

@caleighminshall: New fave blog: "The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic Hair" by Meredith Dault. Smart, witty, relevant.

-Caleigh Minshall (via Twitter)

Because the fact is that the issue of pubic hair is complicated. It touches on sexuality and body image, and is at the centre – literally and figuratively – of questions pertaining to body control in a media-soaked world where it seems young people are being held to increasingly high standards when it comes to how they tend their bodies and their expectations for themselves and their intimate partners.

I started reading this blog just because of this issue—My girlfriend of 3 years left for college last month, and as she has only dated me I reluctantly agreed that she was allowed to see other people..... She came home to visit last week and I was SHOCKED to find her completely shaved bald! She had never done anything like that— when i asked her what would possess her to do that, she said its expected and that if you're sexually active you must be hairless.... She looks like a plucked chicken, its degrading and humiliating in my mind because she doesnt want to do it, but feels she must. She also said she is planning a tattoo....I am just shocked and in disbelief that grown women do this to themselves..... ("Pubic Hair - A Male View - comments." www.thelasttriangle.com. September 17, 2011. web)

The feedback I have received in response to *The Last Triangle: Sex, Money and the Politics of Pubic hair* has affirmed that we need to be having more open

conversations about these issues. Clearly, we need to be providing young women and men with more tools for asking questions about these ‘normalized’ practices. Though my blog is just one small venue for doing so, reader response is indicating that it’s working. In response to my writing, for example, Emily – the university student who wrote to me about how much she’d internalized media messages about what she was supposed to be doing with her pubic hair (saying she found the pressure to wax it all off “perverse, and unnatural and very problematic”) – was able to talk to her mother and sister about the pressures she was feeling. “It was the first time I’ve ever discussed pubic hair with anyone,” she wrote, “and I know I wouldn’t have been able to bring it up if I hadn’t had your blog to reference.”

Wow, not to seem shallow, or naive, or anything... but I’ve never had a boyfriend and I don’t know many straight guys, so I don’t know these things. I kinda thought that most women did shave their pubes, and i was the only one who doesn’t. Now, I know that its not the case. I feel relieved as well as enlightened to know that shaving my pubes isn’t the norm or even what guys like. Cool beans. 😊 I also really appreciated Rob’s comment, it made everything make sense and put things into a perspective that I understand. (“Pubic Hair - A Male View - comments.” www.thelasttriangle.com. September 22, 2011. web)

The conversation still has a long way to go before women feel secure with their natural bodies and freed from pressures to maintain themselves in order to meet the needs and expectations of other people – but at least it’s been started. We’ll see what happens next.

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Appendix - Media Interviews

Over the course of my research, I conducted a number of media interviews. These interviews came out of a blog post I wrote in response to a fundraising campaign called 'Julyna' that took the media by storm in July 2011. The campaign was billed as a female equivalent to 'Movember' – an annual endeavour wherein men grow mustaches during the month of November in a bid to raise money for prostate cancer research. In order to participate in 'Julyna' women were required to groom their pubic hair into a dedicated style or shape (or whisk it away in its entirety), and maintain it that way for the entire month of July. Needless to say, in the wake of my research, I found the campaign problematic. A number of media outlets turned to me for critical comment, which I offered.

They include:

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(this article was also syndicated to *the Winnipeg Free Press*, *the Montreal Gazette*, *the Windsor Star*, *the Vancouver Sun*, and *the Edmonton Journal*, among others).

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