

# Gender & Society

<http://gas.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Dreaded "Otherness" : Heteronormative Patrolling in Women's Body Hair Rebellions**

Breanne Fahs

*Gender & Society* 2011 25: 451

DOI: 10.1177/0891243211414877

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gas.sagepub.com/content/25/4/451>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[Sociologists for Women in Society](http://www.sociologistsforwomen.org)

**Additional services and information for *Gender & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://gas.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://gas.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://gas.sagepub.com/content/25/4/451.refs.html>

# DREADED “OTHERNESS”

## *Heteronormative Patrolling in Women’s Body Hair Rebellions*

BREANNE FAHS  
*Arizona State University*

*Research on bodies and sexualities has long debated ideas about choice, agency, and power, particularly as women conform to, or rebel against, traditional social scripts about femininity and heterosexuality. In this study, I have used responses from 34 college women who completed an extra credit assignment in a women’s studies class that asked them to reject social norms and grow out their leg and underarm hair for a period of 10 weeks. Responses reveal that women confronted direct and anticipated homophobia and heterosexism from others as well as hostility for rejecting traditional norms of femininity. Heterosexual women regularly encountered demands that they acquire permission to grow body hair from their male partners, while queer and bisexual women expressed reluctance about further “outing” themselves via their body hair. I consider implications for linking sexual identity discrimination and body hair practices, and for imagining bodies as sites of resistance inside and outside of pedagogical settings.*

**Keywords:** *deviance/social control; race; class; gender; sexuality*

### INTRODUCTION

Fear of being perceived as the “dreaded Other”—in particular, hairy, manly, angry, and lesbian—has long been the basis for women’s shunning of the feminist movement (Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek 1992). As feminist professors can attest, students often enter women’s studies classrooms with particular stereotypes about what or who a feminist might be, at times relaying the fear of dreaded “Otherness” to their classmates (Carter and Spitzack 1990; Farr 2000). Negotiating the interplay between compulsory heterosexual assumptions that “everyone is heterosexual and

---

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Thanks to Eric Swank and Jennifer Bertagni for their contributions to this manuscript.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 25 No. 4, August 2011 451-472  
DOI: 10.1177/0891243211414877  
© 2011 by The Author(s)

opposed to feminism” and the realities of a sexually diverse classroom has proven challenging to students and professors alike (Clarke and Braun 2009; Sinacore and Enns 2005). Similarly, the mainstream media promotes images of feminists as frightening, unkempt, unfeminine, and “hateful” of men (Cole and Daniel 2005; Terkildsen and Schnell 1997). Even within the feminist movement, there are debates about how to market or promote women’s studies programs to students and administrators (Eudey, Lukas, and Correa 2007; Lind and Salo 2002), particularly in a climate that delegitimizes critical fields like women and gender studies, race and ethnic studies, and American studies. As such, the complex relationship that has developed between the feminist movement and its accompanying stereotypes continues to shape feminism’s pedagogical, activist, and community goals.

In a related way, women’s body alteration practices represent a tangible manifestation of how women (including feminist women) internalize social control mechanisms; such practices reveal much about the gendered context of women’s lives. Women do gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and do body work not only to manage their own anxieties but also to manage the anxieties and expectations of others (Gimlin 2007; Kwan and Trautner 2009), particularly along racial lines (Patton 2006). Within these body modification practices, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia all appear in full force, as social norms translate into women’s everyday routines, expectations, and interactions with their bodies (Lovejoy 2001; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003). Women internalize ideas about their bodies as central to “proper” femininity and become other-directed, concerned about the male gaze, and oriented toward the (heterosexual) dating market. Women learn to dislike or deny their bodies (van den Berg et al. 2010); hide their menstruation (Stubbs and Costos 2004); women of color often adopt hair-straightening and skin-lightening procedures (Byrd and Solomon 2005); poor women are subject to harsher birth control methods and enforced sterilization (Roberts 1997); and sexual minority women are often encouraged to pass as heterosexual to escape workplace discrimination, violence, and negative judgments (Anderson and Holliday 2004; Button 2004; Rosenfeld 2009). Women disguise and conceal their “natural” bodies and undergo a vast array of bodily modifications, procedures, grooming habits, and maintenance behaviors to conform to social norms. Embedded within such behaviors is an insistence on the social maintenance of heterosexuality—particularly *appearing* heterosexual—and its accompanying body practices (Nielsen, Walden, and Kunkel 2000; Pitman 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

This study examines one such body practice—the growing of body hair—as an example of how gendered body norms connect to larger discourses of sexism and heterosexism. By examining a social norm that pervades U.S. culture (and much of the Western world), and often carries with it sexist and heterosexist ideologies, the growing and shaving of body hair represents an emotionally and culturally charged practice worthy of further analysis. Specifically, this study addresses sexual identity implications of body hair practices, particularly as body hair elicits ideas about compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980).

Body hair removal and traditional femininity have long been intertwined. Recent studies suggest that 91.5 percent of U.S. women shave their legs, 93 percent of U.S. women shave their underarms (Kenyon and Tiggemann 1998), and more than 99 percent of U.S. women removed body hair at some point in their lives (Choi, Toerien, and S. Wilkinson 2005). Nearly 97 percent of Australian women shaved their legs and underarms (Lewis and Tiggemann 2004). Given these numbers, surprisingly few studies have interrogated body hair removal, particularly for its heterosexist connotations. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how women—particularly feminist-leaning women—make meaning about their body hair in light of the demands of compulsory heterosexuality.

## Literature Review

Body hair removal practices are relatively new; prior to the 1920s, few women ever removed leg, underarm, or pubic hair. Historians suggest that advertising campaigns from the 1930s—which ushered in changes in fashion (e.g., the revealing flapper girl), obsession with beauty as a status symbol, and widespread use of photography—launched body hair removal as a widespread social norm (Hope 1982). Worldwide, there is still variation about shaving, but most agree that it has become normative in countries including Italy, Turkey, Uganda, England, Australia, Egypt, Greece, France, and the United States (Cooper 1971; Kenyon and Tiggemann 1998). More than 80 percent of women in these countries report hair removal, typically beginning at puberty. These findings indicate that the decades-long rebellion against shaving that most European women embraced has long since ended, and that associations with hairiness as a 1960s and 1970s bohemian or countercultural choice no longer persist. Among women in the United States, some variation exists for who shaves, as feminist identity, lesbian identity, and older age predict decreased likelihood of hair removal (Basow 1991; Choi, Toerien, and Wilkinson 2005).

The removal of body hair is sufficiently pervasive that it retains its invisibility. As Fahs and Delgado (2011, 15) suggest, "That hair removal seems trivial and relatively unnoticed makes it all the more potent as a means of social control, as women adopt ideas about idealized femininity without considering the ramifications of those ideologies and accompanying practices." Women typically construct body hair removal as something they do almost unconsciously—a rite of passage adopted in their teens and perpetuated throughout their lives. Women overwhelmingly construct body hair removal as a normative and taken-for-granted practice that produces an acceptable femininity (Choi, Toerien, and Wilkinson 2005).

Women's hair removal practices represent an important marker of gendered social control, as those who resist face stigma. "To be hairy . . . is to risk a range of negative connotations, which serve as sanctions against non-conformity to the hairlessness norm. This norm may, therefore, be understood as a form of social control" (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003, 341). Departure from these norms often provokes social punishments for those who rebel, again revealing critical intersections between gender and sexuality. Women who resist shaving feel negatively evaluated by others as "dirty" or "gross" (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004). Hairy women are rated as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women (Basow and Braman 1998), less friendly, moral, and relaxed, and *more* aggressive, unsociable, and dominant compared to women who remove their body hair (Basow and Willis 2001).

Body hair practices consistently reveal the pervasiveness of sexism and heterosexism. Hairiness connotes masculine qualities, while hairlessness connotes feminine qualities. Hair has historically (at least in some contexts) represented power, so women's routine hair removal symbolizes their lack of power (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003). Hair removal has signified submission to God (e.g., nuns and monks who routinely shave their entire bodies), women's tameness and less than fully adult status, women's difference from men, and women's outright unacceptability in their natural state (Basow 1991; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003). Across race and class lines, hairlessness on bodies has become a feminine ideal, in part generated by mass media and marketing campaigns (Whelehan 2000). Shaving products like razors, shaving cream, and sprays for women and men appear on television frequently, as do salon advertisements for bikini waxes, eyebrow waxes, and permanent hair removal (Hodgson and Tiggemann 2008).

Studies find a variety of motives for compliance with body hair removal norms. Women shave their legs and underarms to achieve femininity and overall attractiveness, to feel sexually attractive, to feel cleaner, more feminine, more confident about themselves, and more attractive (Hodgson

and Tiggemann 2008). Some women like the "soft, silky feeling" of shaved legs, while others enjoy feeling sexually attractive to men (Hodgson and Tiggemann 2008). Research has shown that women with negative attitudes toward body hair also report more body disgust (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004) and stronger feelings that their bodies are unacceptable and unattractive in their natural state (Chapkis 1986). Partnered women—dating either men or women—report more consistent pubic hair removal than nonpartnered women (Hodgson and Tiggemann 2008). Women who comply with other body norms like dieting, cosmetic surgeries, and general body dissatisfaction also more often shave, implying that women comply with body hair norms more often if they comply with other body norms (Hodgson and Tiggemann 2008). Also, women of color and lower socioeconomic status women describe more negative reactions from family members and friends when they resisted shaving (Fahs and Delgado 2011), indicating that shaving norms, while pervasive, differently affect different groups of women.

To date, no studies have directly and systematically addressed the sexual identity implications of body hair practices, even though some research has included sexual minority women (Basow 1991; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004). This points to a serious gap in the literature about the intersections between gender and sexuality, particularly given the power of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) to dictate compliance to heteronormative mandates. Deviations from such scripts—particularly acted out within body practices—have the potential to reveal (and transform?) the networks of power that maintain links between heterosexism and sexism, just as they can also result in harsh punishments for those who deviate (e.g., hate crimes, see Lombardi et al. 2001; Szymanski and Sung 2010).

This study asks two central research questions: How might heterosexism, sexism, and control of women's bodies link together and inform women's experiences of their body hair? When women temporarily stop shaving, what do the social penalties they face—both internally and externally—reveal about the social maintenance of femininity and heterosexuality?<sup>1</sup> This study analyzes the way that body hair *provokes* thinking about, and confrontation with, sexist and heterosexist attitudes and the social currencies of femininity and heterosexuality.

## METHOD

The findings I discuss in this article emerge from a content analysis of a class assignment undertaken by women enrolled in an elective upper-division women's studies course at a large public southwestern university.

During the Fall 2009 semester, students were asked to participate in an extra credit assignment that asked them to grow out their body hair (underarm and leg hair) for a period of 10 weeks. Students kept weekly logs of their personal reactions to their body hair, others' reactions to their hair, changes in their own or others' behavior, and thoughts about how changes in body hair affected their health and sexuality. They turned in their logs (average of five pages and more "free flowing" diary format responses) and a reflection paper (average of two to three pages and more formal analysis of the entire assignment) about these issues at the end of 10 weeks. Participation was optional, as students were given two points (the equivalent of 1 percent of their overall grade) for successful completion of the assignment. If students terminated the assignment early, they were given one point for turning in a paper about their experiences along with their partially completed logs. No official "checks" were ever completed to confirm whether students were participating; students simply informed the professor (and often their classmates) of their participation and kept track of their feelings and reactions throughout the semester.

While 65 students enrolled in the class, 42 participated in the assignment, including eight men and 34 women.<sup>2</sup> The sample for this study, with 34 participating women, included 41 percent women of color (primarily Latina and African-American) (N=14) and 59 percent white (N=20). Nearly all participants were under age 30 (only three students were over age 30). I did not ask directly about students' sexual identities, but in all of the response papers, the students identified their current or past sexual partner(s) as, for example, "my boyfriend" or "my girlfriend." Roughly 70 percent (N=23) of women described having exclusively men partners, while 18 percent (N=6) described both men and women partners, and 12 percent (N=4) described having exclusively women partners. I did not collect information about social class, though this campus draws from a range of social classes and boasts a high percentage of nontraditional students (e.g., married, with children, working full-time, outside the 18–22 age range). While I did not solicit information from students about their current shaving habits, one student disclosed that she already did not shave; all other women likely engaged in body hair removal prior to beginning this assignment. There were no requirements about making the hair visible or discussing the assignment with others; students could choose if/when to disclose to others about this assignment (though most eagerly discussed it). All 34 women chose to sign the IRB consent forms, allowing their responses to be used for research purposes.

This study likely self-selected for feminist-leaning students who had completed more readings on feminism, body politics, and social constructions

of gender than the general student population. While this course had no prerequisite and did include some students who had never taken a women's studies course before, most students had cultivated feminist attitudes prior to beginning this assignment. While this may limit the findings in important ways, this study also showcases the power of experiential learning to facilitate deeper levels of consciousness and awareness about gender (Kenway and Modra 1992), even for those predisposed to feminism. After completing this assignment, students understood differently how their bodies entered discourses of femininity and heterosexism.

I coded sentences in their written assignments using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on students' attitudes and feelings (e.g., "accusations of lesbian identity"). To conduct the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by reading all response papers thoroughly and then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by students. I reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the response papers and logs, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing body hair. I selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between students. After creating these themes, I compared them to previous themes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. These themes produced rich and textured examples of the most common experiences within their response papers. This study utilizes those themes to illuminate how heterosexism and homophobia informed women's choices about body hair removal.

## RESULTS

Though women discussed many reactions to growing their body hair, including misinformation about body hair (e.g., "Bugs grow in it!"), raced and classed ideas about the policing of body hair (see Fahs and Delgado 2011), and confrontation of social responses to growing body hair, this study focuses specifically on women's discussion of how growing body hair provoked confrontations with sexist and heterosexist social norms, regardless of whether their partners were men or women, or whether they were partnered at all. The most common theme identified numerous moments of heteronormative social control women experienced when growing out body hair. Specifically, women described the following three concerns and gendered anxieties: (1) direct and anticipated homophobia; (2) concerns about deviating from traditional gender expectations; and (3) control and possession of women's bodies by men (particularly boyfriends).



## Homophobia: Direct and Anticipated

As a repeated theme both in women's papers and in class discussions, nearly a third of the women faced direct heterosexism from others, assumptions about their body hair revealing their queer identity, or internalized anticipation of homophobia.

*Direct homophobia.* Bisexual and lesbian women who grew their body hair confronted issues of sexual identity disclosure and direct homophobia and heterosexism, often prompting them to feel outed in public, less in control of identity disclosure, and fearful about others' negative responses. Valerie conveyed a story that communicated fear of disclosure: "Since I am an open lesbian to only my friends and family, I think not shaving would give people another reason to look at me weird. My mom would freak out if I stopped shaving because she already thinks that I want to be a guy. She doesn't realize that being a lesbian and liking other women doesn't mean that I want to be a man." While heterosexual women feared deviance (see below), queer women feared disclosing their stigmatized identity to unfamiliar others.

Mona, openly bisexual, described how her mother's homophobic fears ballooned into fears of transgendered identity, illustrating how threats to traditional ideas of gender can evolve into a full-fledged panic:

I have never been a "girly girl" by any means, and one of my mom's main hang-ups has always been that I never really conformed to traditional female roles. About a year ago, my mom found out that I am a bisexual and in a relationship with another woman. This made her even more sensitive about my gender identity. Upon talking in class about this assignment, many women that were participating made the remark that someone asked them if they were turning into lesbians. I guess since my mom cannot be worried about me being a lesbian, she just jumped to the next step and asked me if this assignment was really just an excuse because I wanted to get a sex change. In actuality, I am very comfortable being a female and I even had to show her the paper for the assignment to reassure her that I was not just making something up so I could prep for a sex change operation that I do not want. Her horrible comments throughout this entire period made me feel very uncomfortable about my body. It seemed like she wanted me to feel ashamed of my lack of normality.

Perhaps her mother's internalized homophobia becomes somehow safer to express if launched at Mona's alleged sex change. The literal moment of *proving* her motives reveals the deep-seated qualities of perceived deviance

to gendered scripts. Mona astutely perceives an equation where becoming trans is the "next step," a kind of *heightened* deviance in the mother's eyes and a more extreme version of being "merely" queer (Elliot 2009).

Similarly, the student in the class who previously did not shave also reflected on homophobic reactions from others, remembering a childhood story: "A group of the more popular girls followed me home after school calling me a dyke because I hadn't started shaving my legs yet, like all the other girls in my grade, I cried and asked my mom that night to show me how to shave." She later noted that, despite her pride about not shaving, she often felt self-conscious about revealing her legs to others:

When there are meetings in my dorm room, I find myself hiding evidence of my sexual orientation (taking down posters, etc.) or dressing differently than I normally would so that I can make them feel comfortable even though it's my environment. So I have realized, thanks to my roommate's stare, that although I mostly do whatever I want, I'm still under the control of others and their culturally biased opinions of me. This makes me very sad.

These responses reveal that queer women faced particularly aggressive and direct homophobia when forced to "reveal" their sexual identity via the body hair exercise, as managing body hair can symbolize the management of negative stigma affiliated with sexual minority status. Furthermore, the compounding of stigmatized identities seemed particularly traumatic, and even though queer identity itself can function as an *embraced* form of Otherness, this did not translate into a desire for hairiness.

*Perceived links between women's studies and queer identity.* Perhaps because women's studies courses encourage students to reflect on (and change) their social status, heterosexual women's family and friends often communicated a threat that the assignment signaled newfound lesbian or queer identity. For example, Cezanne expressed surprise and resistance to others' questions about whether she had "turned lesbian":

The experience made me much more aware of body hair as a social construction. I had a few people ask me if I was a lesbian. I found it interesting that just because I did not shave, my sexuality was automatically questioned. Perhaps what people should begin questioning is why women shave at all.

Women faced particularly harsh heterosexist comments from their parents and siblings, as not shaving provoked questioning about their "deviant" sexual identity. For example, Cindy described her mother's fears about her becoming a man:

My mom was a mixture of amused and slightly concerned. She said to me, "If you do this assignment, I'm having nothing to do with you until it's over." She says I am "turning into a man." She also tells me that I have man's legs now. I said that my legs are just the same as they were before and that I'm just more of a "natural woman," but she disagrees and just says that they're more like my brother.

Several women also had family members express concern about how the assignment reflected stereotypes about women's studies majors and/or feminists. Beth described her brother's associations between body hair, lesbian identity, and "not getting a man": "He asked me if this was some kind of sign that my women's studies degree was corrupting me and turning me into a big lesbian. He said that any woman with body hair certainly couldn't get a man, so I'd have to start dating women if I wanted to ever have sex." Here, getting a man represents the assigned goals of women's body practices; rather than indicators directed at women themselves—comfort, confidence, and so on—attractiveness by male standards stands as most important.

*Anticipated homophobia.* In addition to social penalties from family members, a few women communicated alarming fears that they would face homophobic hate crimes from strangers, possibly leading to physical harm. These reactions showcase compulsory heterosexuality as pervasive and deeply entrenched in women's lives, as women literally feared physical harm for not meeting (hetero)sexist standards. Paula communicated fear of physical harm because of others' homophobic reactions: "I had read that a lot of women were afraid of growing their hair because they have heard of women getting beat up by homophobes or whatever. I had considered this possibility, but nothing has happened. Yet." Evelyn noted similar fears of men in bars, linking deviance from heterosexist scripts with physical violence:

I keep worrying that it's not just fun and games having body hair. Maybe some guy at a bar will see my armpit hair and think I'm a lesbian and he'll round up a group of guys and attack me. I have heard about it happening to women who are perceived as dykes. I've seen guys harass women who don't want anything to do with men.

The powerful links between sexual identity, gender, and power persist in these narratives, as compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) appear in full force. Women must not deviate because those who deviate face violence and harassment (perceived or real). Consequently, women internalize

mandated conformity to heterosexual scripts in order to ward off negative (male) attention and avoid homophobic attack—a gesture placed exclusively in the realm of their responsibility.

### Concerns about Deviating from Traditional Gender Expectations

Though not directly couched as fear of women becoming lesbians, most women faced concerns about, and patrolling of, their femininity from others. As women surrendered some currency of femininity, others suggested they could not “get a man.” Cherise faced this concern from her sister and grandmother, who believed body hair would repel potential husbands (yet another fusion of sexism and heterosexism) and construct her as promiscuous:

My sister asked me, “What if guys saw it?” I told her, “Then they’d see it.” She told me I should be glad I wasn’t dating anyone right now because if I were, I wouldn’t be able to go through with it. I didn’t say it out loud to her but to myself I admitted she was probably right. . . . My grandmother almost had a heart attack on top of her dinner plate when I told her I was growing my body hair. She told me I’d never find a husband if I carried myself like a tramp. She said it was bad and unladylike.

As a more elaborate example of tensions between empowerment and disempowerment, Kelly faced critiques from male coworkers even while she resisted such criticisms and embraced the assignment:

I was asked a question by a male coworker if my husband and I have sex during my body hair growth. I replied by saying yes. He asked if my husband thought he was having sex with a “dude.” I told him, “Why would he think that, the rest of my body is still there, I still have boobs and a vagina. I’m still the same person as before, I just have some hair.” I have really enjoyed making the guys at work cringe.

The enforcement of gender here—again shadowing fears of trans identity, gender bending, and crossing lines of femininity—speaks to the networks of power that enforce both heterosexuality and femininity. Kelly must reassure others she is “still woman,” as anything representing a middle ground becomes too threatening.

Many women (more than half) described feeling like a publicly-displayed oddity while growing their body hair; some even described feeling like a “circus freak.” These stories convey others’ horror when women violate traditional gender expectations, sometimes combined with awe for women

who willingly surrender the currency of femininity. Lynn described a family gathering where she felt uncomfortably on display: "I came downstairs and everyone was looking at me funny. When I was halfway to the table, my 19-year-old sister lifted up my arm for everyone to see and said, 'Look!' I was so embarrassed. I got at least 10 'Ewww's' and lots of 'Why?' and 'That's so gross!' 'You look like a man.' My sister put me on the spot in front of everyone. I was so mortified." She later described a similar event with friends, noting that she felt ashamed and publicly humiliated for having body hair:

My friends took a picture of us all lifting one arm in the air, with me (and my hairy armpit) in the middle. They all used me as some kind of tourist attraction. I laughed it off, but I'm still a little uneasy about how uncomfortable women are with body hair. Body hair is so rare, no one has it! And when someone does, they become a circus act!

The repeated experience of mentioning these "circus act" qualities reveal people's discomfort with embraced abjection, perhaps explaining why women often mentioned that they grew their hair for a class assignment rather than from personal choice.

When faced with critiques about their apparent loss of femininity, many women reflected on social punishments they endured from others, often expressing surprise at how others controlled their bodies. Mona recalled her mother's negative reactions and how this sparked heightened awareness of "Otherness":

Even my own mother said that I was no longer pretty with my leg and armpit hair. It seems like our society desexualizes women who break the normal standard of what we consider attractive, such as women of color, disabled women, overweight women, and women who have a little more hair than is socially acceptable. Anything not adhering to normalcy is labeled a freak or something only someone with a weird fetish would like and is stripped of sexuality.

Tatu, a recent African immigrant to the United States, also described some intense self-reflection about the many negative social penalties she faced for not shaving, as she spent most of her adult life *not* shaving before immigrating and yet still faced intense punishments for not shaving:

Some of my friends were disappointed that I had reverted back to not shaving, as if there was something wrong with it. Some would just rub on my arms

and underarms for long periods. Some were like, "That is so disgusting and I would never do that." Some petted my underarm hair. Most of the negative comments I got were from women who have so internalized their oppression that they would rather die than keep their body hair. Several of them even mentioned to me that they would rather fail the class than participate in this extra credit assignment. . . . By our cultural definition women are beautiful, which means they do not have hairy legs, moustaches, bushy eyebrows, or any other unsightly body hair. Any woman who is less than beautiful is less than a woman. By definition this would include stereotypical views of lesbians and feminists as man-hating and hairy legged. Being a hairy female can be very challenging but I am ready to take up that challenge not only because it resists societal norms but because I refuse to line the pockets of the cosmetic industry. . . . After this assignment I don't believe I will ever go back to shaving my body hair. I believe that resistance can not only be done on a societal level but it can also be done on an individual level.

By reconfiguring definitions of "womanly," Tatu found new ways to resist traditional definitions of femininity, even while faced with intensifying scripts of heterosexualized (Western) gender norms. Indeed, the assignment inspired her to *revert* to not shaving despite these pressures, showcasing yet another moment of resisting compulsory heterosexuality. Like all social norms, the moment one is forced to comply, a sea of resistances spring up (Foucault 1978), revealing both the impermanence and "unnatural" qualities of body norms.

Similarly, June, who already had body hair but decided to instead shave, noted how her *lack of body hair* inspired feelings of strangeness and distance from her true self:

I honestly felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. I felt bald and exposed, disgusting, almost as if everything were exposed all at once. It even felt weird to walk and sit; it was simply just an unnatural feeling. It certainly wasn't womanly, and if it was then it's a frightening, degrading, disgusting feeling I want nothing to do with. I felt weak, frivolous, and a trivial woman girl. I felt like a fish person, like a non-mammal creature that should be swimming in the ocean somewhere in all my sleek baldness.

Both June and Tatu subverted the assumed links between gender and sexuality by revealing them as powerful social constructions that they can upend. Their resistance narratives serve as powerful testimonies to how non-normative body practices can influence consciousness, as June's caricature of shaving as "trivial" and Tatu's critique of Western beauty ideals threaten unspoken and often unchallenged norms.

## Control and Possession of Bodies by Men

While direct heterosexism and concerns about losing femininity illustrate discursive mechanisms for patrolling women's bodies and sexualities, many women also discussed the *direct* ways that male sexual partners controlled their bodies. Nearly all partnered heterosexual women recounted that the *first* comment they received on describing the body hair experiment to others asked whether their boyfriends/husbands had *approved*. For example, Lynn confronted her future father-in-law, revealing his deep-seated assumptions of patriarchal control over her body:

My fiancée told his father about the body hair thing I'm doing. He was very offended by it. The first thing he asked was, "Did she ask for your permission first?" I was so offended by this. As if my fiancée is in control of what I do to my body! I don't need anyone's permission for anything I want to do with my body. And if my fiancée said absolutely not, I would do it anyways and probably wouldn't be marrying him right now. I guess his dad went on and on about how women need to have smooth bodies, that he couldn't be with his own wife if she didn't shave. "Women with hairy legs, it's just not right!" Guys like him are the reason why I was so obsessed with shaving my entire body. Those guys ruined my self-esteem, my self-worth, and my confidence. Body hair isn't gross. Men like him are!

Cindy relayed a similar story, noting people's concern for her husband's feelings more than her own: "If someone asks anything about my hair, it is usually about how my husband feels. People are concerned about a man dealing with a hairy woman. People don't really seem to believe that my partner doesn't care about the hair and that he actually thinks it's normal and kinda funny." As another example of patriarchal control, Tatu communicated her family's concerns about her husband's reactions, even insisting that he would leave her if she continued not shaving:

My family said that I needed to start grooming myself. What does your husband say when you let yourself go like that! Men like well groomed women! Even when I told them my husband doesn't mind, they still insisted that he *does* mind and that he was just being polite to not hurt my feelings. They told me if I continued like this he would go out looking for a good-looking woman.

Here Tatu must comply or she will face competition from other women—another facet of compulsory heterosexuality.

Some women encountered heckling and control from their partners' men *friends*, implying that social pressures to "control your woman" influence

men's appraisals of their hairy girlfriends/wives. Deena confronted the disapproval and disgust of her boyfriend's friends:

My boyfriend's friends ask him about it all the time. They wanted to "know what it was like" and one specifically asked him if I was "beastly" . . . like they felt sorry for him that his girlfriend was now manly. Even though he laughed about the situation, it made me feel unwanted and not as feminine as a girlfriend "should" be.

The entire social network of prohibition communicated to Deena that not shaving was completely unacceptable and threatened her status as an acceptable heterosexual woman. Further, Deena's experience suggests that men use peer groups as mechanisms of control for *both* men and women, demanding harsh conformity from themselves and their female partners.

Women also worried about their own partner's reactions, and often judged their own comfort based on their partners' assessments. Sarah described her boyfriend's paradoxical acceptance combined with implicit prohibition: "I explained the assignment and asked him if he thought he would still be attracted to me if I had hairy armpits and legs. He told me that he would always be attracted to me no matter what. He did add, however, that if I had just stopped shaving on my own he probably would think I was crazy but since it was for an extra credit assignment then it was okay." Mona admitted that her partner helped her to buffer the negative reactions of others: "I think that without having my partner to put things in perspective for me, I most definitely would have felt ashamed and disgusted about my body." In these cases partner approval trumps internal assessment of body norms, again relegating control and power over women's bodies to men.

Sometimes, messages about proper femininity, acceptable heterosexuality, and control of women's bodies all occurred in tandem, as with Caroline's description of her boyfriend's reactions to the body hair assignment:

My boyfriend told me that he could "tolerate" my body hair, and claimed that he did not find me less attractive for it, yet he said that he was not attracted to hair on women. He feels that hair on women makes them appear somewhat masculine and threatens their femininity. He wants to know that the person he is in a sexual relationship with is strictly "female" in appearance, and not "in between." I did feel less attractive after he insinuated that my natural bodily hair was lesser than his.

Such descriptions of the dreaded "in between" body—clearly referencing sexual minority women—reveal how heterosexism weaves into heterosexual partnered dynamics around gender and bodies.



Collectively, these narratives suggest that the strict control of women's bodies—and the enforcement of conformity to social norms—conveys clear messages and gender, sexuality, femininity, and heterosexism. Even more strikingly, descriptions of men's attempts to control and patrol women's bodies appeared almost universally, across race and class groups,<sup>3</sup> suggesting strong ties between sexism and heterosexism related to body hair.

## DISCUSSION

Collectively, these results demonstrated that heterosexism—and specifically the ways that multiple forces control and patrol women's bodies—permeated women's narratives about body hair resistance. While some women experienced direct forms of homophobia (e.g., hearing others fearfully equate their leg hair with “becoming a lesbian”), most women experienced more subtle, and perhaps more insidious, forms of social control over their bodies, sexual expression, and femininity. These results indicate that, despite the seemingly benign qualities of a simple assignment—in this case, asking women to grow their body hair for extra credit in a college course—small acts of rebellion can inspire reactionary backlash from others. Women confronted the vast social networks within which their bodies and body practices are controlled, disciplined, monitored, and contained. This raises questions about what it means to *choose* to shave: If shaving is a choice, can women also choose *not* to shave? What social ramifications will they face if they rebel against shaving norms? In what ways are the mechanisms of controlling women's bodies invisible to them?

Feminist scholarship has long addressed the rhetoric of choice about body practices—that is, controversies surrounding *how* women choose certain body practices, *under what conditions* they choose these practices, and the *punishments* they face when not conforming to traditional constructs of normative bodies. There have been considerable advances in understanding the coercive methods—both direct and indirect—that women encounter when dealing with the cosmetic surgery, beauty, and fashion industries. Recent scholarship on female genital surgeries, for example, has suggested that women seek genital plastic surgery after being inundated with negative and narrow messages about women's genitals (e.g., pornography) (Braun 2005). Similarly, scholars have addressed the alarmingly narrow framing of appropriate bodies that women internalize when seeking breast augmentations or face lifts (Heyes and Jones 2009) or in their understandings of bodies that change after pregnancy (Dworkin and Wachs 2004).

In a similar way, this study evokes discussion about the intersections between gender, sexuality, race, and other social identities that manifest in body politics (Andersen 2008; Stein 2008). Women of color in this study faced harsh punishments from family members when not shaving, commented on having darker and more visible body hair than white women, and *mentioned* race as salient in their narratives (Fahs and Delgado 2011). Interestingly, heterosexist norms appeared similarly in *all* women's narratives regardless of race, a finding that warrants further exploration. If women of color and white women face similar heterosexist pressures, yet face different notions of appropriate femininity (Byrd and Solomon 2005; Patton 2006), how does this translate onto the body? Furthermore, do queer women of color face intensified pressures to conform to traditional body norms to avoid further outing themselves *and* further marginalization? Certainly, more work on intersections between gender, sexuality, and race could better illuminate the precise and insidious workings of heterosexism and its links with racism, sexism, and classism.

Strikingly, women in this study, across groups, faced an astonishing chorus of negative (and frankly heterosexist) messages when they disobeyed shaving norms. While some women received affirmations, overwhelmingly women heard that not shaving their body hair was unfeminine and, at times, an assault on their (assumed) heterosexuality or a mark of deviance. While these attacks may primarily reveal the power of norms surrounding femininity, they also represent examples of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Making oneself attractive to men is not just a choice, but a mandate, one communicated not only by women's parents and friends but also by complete strangers, coworkers, and friends of friends. At the surface, these are concerns about women surrendering femininity. Read more deeply, the threat posed by women's refusal to remove their body hair symbolizes women's *departure from sexual contact with men*. Such departures open up possibilities for women to reject heterosexual sex (itself threatening to social norms about women and their bodies), but also for women to prioritize *themselves*. These networks of social pressures ensure conformity not only to ideals of femininity but also to ideals of *heterosexual* femininity, particularly heterosexual femininity that always ensures men's dominance over women's decision-making power.

Notably, women's *families* also played a major role in ensuring femininity *and* heterosexuality: mothers worried for their daughter's romantic prospects, fathers worried what their daughter's boyfriends would think, brothers expressed concern for their sister's ability to attract men (and so on). These dynamics speak to a much-understudied dynamic in

family relationships—not only do families express concern with preventing young women’s promiscuity (a more studied phenomenon) but also with *ensuring their attractiveness to men* via dress, body practices, social norms, and appropriate expressions of heterosexual desire (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). This raises questions about how families with more permissive and less restrictive attitudes about femininity and heterosexuality may encourage daughters’ independence from traditional cultural scripts. Women look to their families to judge and guide their decisions about and feelings toward their bodies, sexually or otherwise. Additional research could explore how the interplay between self and family may figure centrally in other aspects of sexual selfhood.

In addition to internalizing ideas about body hair and responding to their family’s ideas about body hair, women also responded strongly to reactions from men, whether proximal (e.g., boyfriends, husbands, fathers-in-law) or distal (e.g., coworkers, strangers, imagined others). While the confrontations women faced about “becoming a lesbian” or fears that that women’s studies classes had “turned them lesbian” indicate pervasive heterosexism, perhaps more disturbing were claims that women needed *permission* from male partners (e.g., husbands, boyfriends, and even boyfriend’s friends or fathers) to rebel against body norms. The heterosexist impact of questions like “Did your boyfriend give his permission? Is he okay with that?” is profound. Despite our cultural rhetoric of women achieving sexual liberation—particularly as they embrace adventurous practices or dress less conservatively than previous generations—our culture constructs women as direct property of their male partners (and their partners’ extended networks). This occurred in this study both in *external* feedback women received, but also internally, as women scrambled to negotiate shame about body hair. Even heterosexual women who fared well during the experiment (e.g., finding it empowering, encountering partner support, engaging in self-discovery) often reluctantly claimed that their male partners’ support greatly assisted them in having the courage to finish the assignment. Thus, even for women who felt empowered by growing body hair, men’s support figured centrally in that empowerment. No group of women retained immunity from the evaluations of others (including those without men partners). Consequently, women’s partners may help women subvert traditional body norms and social scripts about appropriate femininity, and in some cases, appropriate heterosexuality.

Deviations from traditional body norms can greatly affect women, even if temporary. This study offers insights about the critical importance of using the body to understand connections between sexism and heterosexism. The women who stopped shaving learned, immediately and directly, about the power of social constructions, the difficulty of rebelling against social

norms, the pervasiveness of homophobia and heterosexism, and the various figures *in their own lives* that controlled their bodies and ensured proper femininity/heterosexuality. It revealed not only their own "dreaded Otherness"—that is, what they feared in themselves or in others' perceptions—but they also confronted *others'* ideas about "dreaded Otherness"—that is, their mothers' homophobia, their boyfriend's concern about what his friends thought, or even their coworker's ideas about women's hair as "disgusting."

The detailed responses from both heterosexual and queer women reveal how heterosexism functions not only to terrorize heterosexual women into conforming to proper femininity and appropriate sexualities, but also how it forces queer women to carefully calculate their degree of—and the *costs* of—being out. Heterosexism functions not only by insisting on heterosexuality as the only normal and acceptable choice but also by imposing itself onto the *bodies* of *all* women. Future research should more closely address this problem, as even among feminists, progressives, sexual minorities, and other rebels, the containment and control of bodies and sexualities relentlessly persists, remade anew in the minutiae of a morning routine.

## NOTES

1. I take up the question of how class assignments may make students aware of the social forces that govern their body practices in more detail in Fahs (2011b) where I explore the pedagogical implications of the assignment.

2. Men in the class were asked to shave their underarms, legs, and pubic hair during the course of the assignment. I discuss the finding from this part of the study in Fahs (2011a). Men were also subject to intensely homophobic reactions, though the quality and texture of these reactions differed from those women faced.

3. Women of color routinely faced harsher punishments from family members when they did not shave, and they more often linked not shaving to ideas about improper femininity (see Fahs and Delgado 2011 for findings from an earlier sample).

## REFERENCES

- Andersen, M. L. 2008. Thinking about women some more: A new century's view. *Gender & Society* 22: 120-25.
- Anderson, S. C., and M. Holliday. 2004. Normative passing in the lesbian community: An exploratory study. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services: Issues in Practice, Policy, & Research* 17 (3): 25-38.
- Basow, S. A. 1991. The hairless ideal: Women and their body hair. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 15 (1): 83-96.

- Basow, S. A., and J. Willis. 2001. Perceptions of body hair on white women: Effects of labeling. *Psychological Reports* 89 (3): 571-76.
- Basow, S. and A. Braman. 1998. Women and body hair: Social perceptions and attitudes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 22(4): 637-45.
- Braun, V. 2005. In search of (better) sexual pleasure: Female genital "cosmetic" surgery. *Sexualities* 8 (4): 407-24.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (1): 77-101.
- Button, S. B. 2004. Identity management strategies utilized by lesbian and gay employees: A quantitative investigation. *Group & Organization Management* 29 (4): 470-94.
- Byrd, A., and A. Solomon. 2005. *Naked: Black women bare all about their skin, hair, hips, lips, and other parts*. New York: Penguin.
- Carter, K., and C. Spitzack. 1990. Transformation and empowerment in gender and communication courses. *Women's Studies in Communication* 13 (1): 92-110.
- Chapkis, W. 1986. *Beauty secrets: Women and the politics of appearance*. Boston: South End Press.
- Choi, P., M. Toerien, and S. Wilkinson. 2005. Body hair removal: The "mundane" production of normative femininity. *Sex Roles* 52 (5-6): 399-406.
- Clark, V., and V. Braun. 2009. Is the personal pedagogical? Sexualities and genders in the higher education classroom. *Feminism & Psychology* 19 (2): 175-80.
- Cole, E., and J. H. Daniel. 2005. *Featuring females: Feminist analyses of media*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Cooper, W. 1971. *Hair: Sex, society, symbolism*. London: Aldus Books.
- Cowan, G., M. Mestlin, and J. Masek. 1992. Predictors of feminist self-labeling. *Sex Roles* 27: 321-30.
- Dworkin, S. L., and F. L. Wachs. 2004. "Getting your body back": Postindustrial fit motherhood in shape fit pregnancy magazine. *Gender & Society* 18 (5): 610-24.
- Elliot, P. 2009. Engaging trans debates on gender variance: A feminist analysis. *Sexualities* 12 (1): 5-32.
- Eudey, B., S. Lukas, and E. Correa. 2007. The role of women's and gender studies in advancing gender equity. In *Handbook for achieving gender equity through education*, edited by S. S. Klein, B. Richardson, D. A. Grayson, L. H. Fox, C. Kramarae, D. S. Pollard, and C. A. Dwyer. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fahs, B., and D. A. Delgado. 2011. The specter of excess: Race, class, and gender in women's body hair narratives. In *Embodied resistance: Breaking the rules, challenging the norms*, edited by C. Bobel and S. Kwan 13-25. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Fahs, B. 2011a. Shaving it all off: Examining social norms of body hair among college men in a women's studies course. *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.
- Fahs, B. 2011b. Breaking body hair boundaries: Classroom exercises for challenging social constructions of the body and sexuality. *Feminism & Psychology*.

- Farr, M. T. 2000. "Everything I didn't want to know I learned in lit class": Sex, sexual orientation, and student identity. *International Journal of Sexuality & Gender Studies* 5 (2): 205-13.
- Foucault, M. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. New York: Vintage.
- Gimlin, D. 2007. What is "body work"? A review of the literature. *Sociology Compass* 1 (1): 353-70.
- Heyes, C. J., and M. Jones. 2009. *Cosmetic surgery: A feminist primer*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Hodgson, S., and M. Tiggemann. 2008. The hairless norm extended: Reasons for and predictors of women's body hair removal at different body sites. *Sex Roles* 59: 889-97.
- Hope, C. 1982. Caucasian female body hair and American culture. *The Journal of American Culture* 5 (1): 93-99.
- Kenway, J., and H. Modra. 1992. Feminist pedagogy and emancipatory possibilities. In *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*, edited by C. Luke and J. Gore. New York: Routledge.
- Kenyon, S., and M. Tiggemann. 1998. The hairlessness norm: The removal of body hair in women. *Sex Roles* 39 (11-12): 873-85.
- Kwan, S., and M. N. Trautner. 2009. Beauty work: Individual and institutional rewards, the reproduction of gender, and questions of agency. *Sociology Compass* 3 (1): 49-71.
- Lewis, C., and M. Tiggemann. 2004. Attitudes toward women's body hair: Relationship with disgust sensitivity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 28: 381-87.
- Lind, R., and C. Salo. 2002. The framing of feminists and feminism in news and public affairs programs in U.S. electronic media. *Journal of Communication* 52: 211-28.
- Lombardi, E., R. Wilchins, D. Priesing, and D. Malouf. 2001. Gender violence: Transgender experiences with violence and discrimination. *Journal of Homosexuality* 42: 89-101.
- Lovejoy, M. 2001. Disturbances in the social body: Differences in body image and eating problems among African American and white women. *Gender & Society* 15: 239-61.
- Nielsen, J. M., G. Walden, and C. A. Kunkel. 2000. Gendered heteronormativity: Empirical illustrations in everyday life. *Sociological Quarterly* 41: 283-96.
- Patton, Tracey O. 2006. "Hey girl, am I more than my hair?" African American women and their struggles with beauty, body image, and hair. *NWSA Journal* 18: 24-51.
- Pitman, G. E. 1999. Body image, compulsory heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3: 129-39.
- Rich, A. 1980. Compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5: 631-60.
- Roberts, D. 1997. *Killing the black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty*. New York: Pantheon.

- Rosenfeld, D. 2009. Heteronormativity and homonormativity as practical and moral resources: The case of lesbian and gay elders. *Gender & Society* 23 (5): 617-38.
- Sasson-Levy, O., and T. Rapoport. 2003. Body, gender, and knowledge in protest movements: The Israeli case. *Gender & Society* 17 (3): 379-403.
- Schilt, K., and L. Westbrook. 2009. Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals," transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gender & Society* 23(4): 440-464.
- Sinacore, A. L., and C. Z. Enns. 2005. Diversity feminisms: Postmodern, women-of-color, antiracist, lesbian, third-wave, and global perspectives. In *Teaching and social justice: Integrating multicultural and feminist theories in the classroom*, edited by C. Z. Enns and A. L. Sinacore. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Stein, A. 2008. Feminism's sexual problem: Comment on Andersen. *Gender & Society* 22: 115-19.
- Stubbs, M. I., and D. Costos. 2004. Negative attitudes toward menstruation: Implications for disconnection within girls and between women. *Women and Therapy* 27 (3-4): 37-54.
- Szymanski, D. M., and M. R. Sung. 2010. Minority stress and psychological distress among Asian American sexual minority persons. *The Counseling Psychologist* 38: 848-72.
- Terkildsen, N., and F. Schnell. 1997. How media frames move public opinion: An analysis of the women's movement. *Political Research Quarterly* 50: 879-900.
- Toerien, M., and S. Wilkinson. 2003. Gender and body hair: Constructing the feminine woman. *Women's Studies International Forum* 26(4): 333-44.
- Toerien, M., and S. Wilkinson. 2004. Exploring the depilation norm: A qualitative questionnaire study of women's body hair removal. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 1(1): 69-92.
- van den Berg, P. A., J. Mond, M. Eisenberg, D. Ackard, and D. Neumark-Sztainer. 2010. The link between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in adolescents: Similarities across gender, age, weight status, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 47(3): 290-296.
- West, C. and D. H. Zimmerman. 1987. Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1: 125-51.
- Whelehan, I. 2000. *Overloaded: Popular culture and the future of feminism*. London: Women's Press.

*Breanne Fahs is an assistant professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University and a private practice clinical psychologist. She has published articles on women's sexuality, radical feminism, body politics, queer rights, and political socialization in a number of journals, including Feminist Studies, Archives of Sexual Behavior, Frontiers, Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, and Sexualities, and has a forthcoming book, Performing Sex (2011, SUNY Press), on the politics of women's sexual subjectivities.*