

Breaking body hair boundaries: Classroom exercises for challenging social constructions of the body and sexuality

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Abstract

Courses in women's studies and gender studies within US contexts have long prioritized content that critically examines the social construction of bodies and sexualities, consciousness-raising about how social identities interface with disciplinary and institutional practices, and the notion that 'the personal is political.' This article examines the social and pedagogical implications of an extra-credit assignment where I asked women to grow out their body hair and men to remove their body hair for 10 weeks in several upper-division women's studies courses. Students' response papers and weekly logs from 87 students over four semesters highlighted the social policing of gender and sexual identity, pervasive disgust and misinformation about body hair, raced and classed dimensions of students' experiences, configurations of masculinity as agentic and powerful, and postexperiential reflections on challenging social norms. This assignment showed how temporary excursions into rebelling against body norms can generate sociopolitical awareness, particularly for living as Other (e.g. queerness, fatness, disability). I also consider implications for 'ripple effect pedagogy' and 'peer generated pedagogy,' along with pedagogical reflections about using the assignment as a consciousness-raising tool in feminist classrooms.

Keywords

body hair, consciousness-raising, depilation, feminist pedagogy, heterosexism, sexism, shaving, women's studies

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Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. (Foucault, 1978: 86)

Most people adamantly believe that they *choose* what they do with their bodies and that these choices exist wholly outside of social forces that govern the conditions within which they make such choices. Courses in women's studies and gender studies within US contexts have long challenged such assumptions and have prioritized content that critically examines the social construction of bodies and sexualities,¹ consciousness-raising about how social identities interface with disciplinary and institutional practices, and the notion that 'the personal is political.' Teaching students to see how their bodies move through gendered spaces in family life (pregnancy, child-rearing, domestic labor), careers (maternity leave, managing 'oozing' bodies at work, grooming, anti-aging ideologies), cultural and media constructs (responding to magazine imagery, films, books, and so on), and interpersonal dynamics (negotiating relationships, body image, beliefs about sexuality, sexual practices) constitutes a central goal of many women's studies courses.

Feminist academics face many challenges when introducing students to the provocative content in their courses. Reluctant students communicate resistance to feminist ideas and course content, often dismissing it as not relevant to their lives (Webber, 2005), sometimes expressing *more* resistance toward feminism after taking a women's studies course (Thomsen et al., 1995). Perhaps more troublingly, even though students rate women's studies classes more highly than non-women's studies classes (Stake and Hoffmann, 2000), students are generally more critical and derogatory toward women's studies academics even when rating those instructors highly (Hartung, 1990). That said, after taking women's studies courses, students reported a more progressive gender role orientation, lower prejudice toward women, more agency and control over their lives, more support for affirmative action, greater involvement in the women's movement, more activism, and more identification with feminism compared to students who did not take such courses (Bryant, 2003; Harris, Melaas, and Rodacker, 1999; Henderson-King and Stewart, 1999; Stake, 2007; Stake et al., 1994).

Feminist classrooms can serve as spaces for active intervention in the power dynamics of the classroom (Maher, 1999) and for highlighting troubling power dynamics within larger institutions (Enns and Sinacore, 2005). Women's studies students and instructors describe strong emphases on critical thinking and open-mindedness in the classroom, and relatively weaker emphases on personal experience and political activism (Stake and Hoffmann, 2000), raising questions about how women's studies classrooms can better inspire personal and activist-oriented experiences within the work they already undertake with students. Combining activism and academic work can lay a foundation for undergraduates to continue confronting imbalanced power dynamics after completing their university coursework.

Designing effective, unique, and impactful assignments represents a challenge for tertiary educators, particularly in courses like women's studies and ethnic studies that emphasize intensely personal and deeply political learning experiences.

Students typically benefit most from experiential assignments that prioritize reflection and ‘applied feminism’ rather than assignments that merely catalogue existing scholarship (Copp and Kleinman, 2008). Assignments that prioritize consciousness-raising and move students out of their comfort zones by exposing them to different identities, ideologies, and experiences can help them to understand the matrix of oppressions people face in raced, classed, and gendered dynamics more broadly (Enns and Sinacore, 2005; Golden, 2002). Classroom assignments may also benefit from drawing from the ‘potentially eroticized space’ of the classroom, where students engage in learning that unifies the body, laughter, and imagined spaces of resistance (Trethewey, 2004).

Kenway and Modra (1992: 162) argued that ‘researching and theorizing our own educational practice and sharing our knowledge is one way of moving [women’s studies] forward.’ This article takes this statement seriously by relaying my experiences teaching an optional ‘extra credit’ assignment over four semesters that asked students to engage in non-normative body hair behavior in order to reflect upon social constructions, body norms, and the (dis)empowering implications of non-conformity. The assignment asked women *not* to remove hair on their legs, underarms, and pubis for a period of ten weeks; for men, they were asked to remove hair on these areas of their body for the same length of time. This assignment, far from being a silly or benign jaunt into Otherness, has become a key site of intervention in my pedagogical practice for teaching students to conceptualize their bodies as circulated within, controlled by, and rebelling against social norms that dictate gender in narrowly prescribed ways. This intervention helps students understand social norms of hairlessness/hairiness and grooming as related to bigger norms that carefully manage masculinity and femininity.

After reviewing the importance of body hair as a site of unifying the personal and political, I discuss the challenges of designing and implementing the body hair assignment to different groups of students. I provide highlights from the past four semesters of the assignment, including specific statements from students about their experiences. I conclude by examining ‘ripple effect pedagogy’ and ‘peer-generated pedagogy,’ after which I outline some strengths and limitations of the assignment. In doing so, I hope to communicate the surprisingly influential role this assignment has had in conveying to students personal, experiential-based learning about sexism, gender, sexuality, and the body. I also want to encourage others—students, academics, and readership at large—to *personally* and/or pedagogically attempt a body hair rebellion of their own as a tool for reconfiguring the body as a site of discipline, resistance, and empowerment.

The importance of body hair

Tracing the history of body hair helps to situate it in its sociopolitical context, particularly for Western people who now consider body hair removal for women (and, at times, hairiness for men) a cultural inevitability. Historically, body hair has helped to define masculinity and femininity as opposite, as hair for men symbolized virility and power while hairlessness for women symbolized proper femininity and

powerlessness in most Western cultures (Synnott, 1987; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003). In European societies, women's hairiness has historically been linked to 'female wantonness,' insanity, and witchcraft, while men's hairlessness signified submission to God (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003). For Western women, enforcement of body hair removal norms appeared in full force after the 1920s, when advertising campaigns ushered in body hair removal (first underarms, then legs) as 'sexy,' photography became widespread as a mode of communication, and 'beauty experts' advocated changes in typical fashion (e.g. outfits that revealed underarms and legs along with the celebration of 'prepubescent' non-curved bodies) (Hope, 1982). Prior to the 1920s, few Western women ever routinely removed body hair (Adams, 1991; Hope, 1982), primarily because exposure of legs and underarms occurred minimally in public spaces. Thus, more *revealing* clothes corresponded with different body norms. Aside from brief rebellions from 'hippies' and feminists (particularly black and lesbian feminists) during the 1960s and 1970s, women's body hair removal norms have remained in effect. Today, feminist scholars argue that women's lack of body hair—particularly pubic hair—signifies that Western cultures (particularly Anglophone cultures) see women's power as threatening and thus respond by eroticizing girlhood (e.g. emaciated bodies, no hips or fat, shaved pubic area) instead of womanhood (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003).

Trends in body hair removal for women have only increased in recent years, as countries that once embraced women's hairiness (e.g. Greece, Spain, Italy) now advocate norms of depilation for women (Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998). Hair removal for women is so normative, in fact, that it often remains invisible as a social practice. Recent studies have shown that 91.5% of US women shaved their legs regularly, and 93% of US women shaved their underarms regularly (Kenyon and Tiggemann, 1998), though a more recent study found that over 99% of UK women reported removing body hair at some point in their lives (Choi et al., 2005). Similarly, one study of Australian women found that nearly 97% of women currently shaved both their legs and underarms (Lewis and Tiggemann, 2004). While feminist identity, lesbian identity, and older age predicted decreased likelihood of women removing their body hair (Basow, 1991; Toerien et al., 2005), women have generally been found to appraise their bodies as disgusting when they have body hair (Basow, 1991). Further, women's pubic hair removal—either partial removal or complete removal—has become much more normative in recent years, particularly for younger and partnered women (Herbenick et al., 2010).

Like all social norms, violations of typical behavior—however socially constructed—often result in negative sanctions for those who deviate, including violence, overt hostility, internalized negativity, and unfavorable social evaluation. Women who resisted shaving body hair felt negatively evaluated as 'dirty' or 'gross' (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004), an evaluation particularly evident for women of color and working-class women (Fahs and Delgado, 2011). Many women also judged other women who did not remove body hair as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women (Basow and Braman, 1998). Further, women rated other women with body hair as

less friendly, moral, and relaxed, as well as *more* aggressive, unsociable, and dominant compared to women who shaved their body hair (Basow and Willis, 2001). Men also negatively evaluated women who did not remove body hair (Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004). Women's ideas about depilation reveal similar trends, as women reported removing body hair in order to feel cleaner, more feminine, more attractive, and more confident, and more appealing to men (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008). Women's removal of body hair also correlated with other negative attitudes and behaviors, including more disgust with their bodies in general (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004), feeling unacceptable in their natural state (Chapkis, 1986), and engaging in more extreme dieting, cosmetic surgeries, and general body dissatisfaction compared to women who did not remove body hair (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008).

Studies of men's body hair practices have rarely appeared in the body hair literatures, though existing studies point to sexual identity as a key determinant in men's experiences with body hair. Tenets of hegemonic masculinity generally frown upon any male efforts to shave their armpits and, to a lesser degree, to fully shave pubic hair (Filiault and Drummond, 2007; Boroughs et al., 2005). That said, the concept of 'metrosexuality' has created cultural space for some heterosexual men to adopt 'feminine' behaviors like visiting spas, shaving body hair, eating healthy foods, and grooming pubic hair (Anderson, 2008). Nevertheless, even though 63% of men practiced some kind of body hair removal (trimming, grooming, and/or shaving) at some point in their lives (Boroughs et al., 2005), men's body hair removal was generally not attractive to women (Dixon et al., 2003). Looking more specifically at sexual identity, heterosexual men expressed less preoccupation with body hair removal than with other dimensions of their bodies (e.g. penis size, weight, and muscularity) (Tiggemann et al., 2008) while gay men described body hair and muscularity as the most dissatisfying dimensions of their bodies (Martins et al., 2008). Thus, having men as sexual partners—whether for men or women—led to more dissatisfaction with body hair and, theoretically, more interest in removing it.

Body hair growth and removal is thus *not* an inconsequential or benign activity, especially for women. It carries with it a host of ideologies about 'appropriate' gender, normative behavior, conformity, and the (lack of) acceptability of hairy or hairless bodies. The relative frequency of body hair removal, combined with the strength of negative evaluations for those who engage in non-normative body hair behavior, make body hair an ideal site for a feminist pedagogical intervention.

Designing and implementing the body hair assignment

Group 1: Spring 2008

As a professor at Arizona State University² teaching primarily upper-division (junior and senior undergraduates) in gender, sexuality, health, and body courses,³ I had long noticed that discussions of body hair provoked heated debates and discussions among my students. Until 2008, I had never considered an assignment that would ask students to *do* anything with body hair; we simply *discussed* it.

The actual body hair assignment—where women received extra credit for growing out their body hair and writing a reflection paper about it—began in 2008 after I jokingly stated to a small, women-only class of ‘Women and health’ students that I wished I could ‘have them all grow out their body hair and write about it.’ This comment occurred in the context of a lengthy discussion of women’s pubic hair removal following readings we had done about sexual socialization, puberty, and menstruation. Several students responded that they wanted to try growing their body hair, and I (somewhat reluctantly) agreed by creating a 2-point extra credit assignment where they would begin growing their body hair in week 4 of the semester, and would remove body hair (if they chose to) in week 14, after which they would submit a reflection paper about the experience. Three of the 12 women (2 white, 1 woman of color; all under 30) in the course—all self-identified as radical feminists, who removed body hair *and* identified as having positive body image—participated and turned in response papers filled with vivid and intense reactions to the assignment. All described, much to my surprise, *severe* social punishments, struggles with self-confidence about their bodies, and feelings of social ostracism; yet they also expressed personal feelings of empowerment and rebellion from the assignment which they claimed helped them to further develop their ideas about feminism, sexuality, health, and the body.

Group 2: Autumn 2008

The success of these first three papers inspired me to continue the assignment in earnest the following semester, this time seeking ethical approval to collect responses from the students that I could publish (using pseudonyms). I constructed the extra-credit assignment with several goals in mind: first, to make the invisible visible, so that students could see the workings of power and social control in their own lives; second, to challenge students to assert autonomy and independence with their bodies, particularly when responding to the tension between *choosing* to participate versus blaming their ‘crazy feminist professor’ for *making* them participate; third, to help students see the power of social norms, the difficulty of resistance, and the diffuse pressures to conform to body norms; and lastly, to push students to feel more aware of their bodies and less self-conscious when they do not conform to cultural expectations. This last goal was particularly important, as the assignment was designed as an *excursion* to help students recognize the difficulty of *living* in bodies that are marked as socially non-normative (e.g. queer, fat, disabled, of color, and the like).

With these conscious goals in mind, I introduced the assignment more formally to this second, highly diverse student group (20 students; all women except one; 65% white, 35% of color; two over age 30). I framed the assignment as ‘something we’re trying out,’ adding that they should keep, and eventually turn in, a weekly log of their experiences along with their more formal reflection papers. Sixteen women and the one man all initially agreed to participate, leaving three who initially opted out. During that semester, explicit peer-group pressures to try the assignment (and ironically to conform to the *new* norm in the classroom) convinced the remaining

three students to participate. Students informally discussed the assignment every day at the beginning of class, particularly surrounding the racial differences they saw in hair growth, reactions from family members, and shame about their bodies. Their response papers at the end revealed numerous experiences with disgust and social policing, continual challenges to any feminist politics they advocated for, and clear raced and classed dimensions in the body hair assignment. Analysis of these responses has been published elsewhere (Fahs and Delgado, 2011).

Group 3: Autumn 2009

I decided to try the extra-credit assignment in a larger (65 student) ‘critical theories of sexuality’ course, in part so I could involve a larger group of male students. In total, eight men and 34 women participated in the assignment (over two thirds class participation, with more men proportionally participating than women), again from highly diverse backgrounds (59% white, 41% of color; 3 over 30). Because the assignment had been a much-discussed event in autumn 2008, many students expected and wanted to try the assignment.

This group of students’ experiences revealed profound gender differences at play between men who *did* and women who did *not* remove body hair. Women took pleasure in discovering men’s shock and surprise about the physical and emotional labor of removing body hair, often giving tips or laughing loudly in class when a male student relayed his body hair removal mishaps (e.g. misusing hair removal creams). Many women openly discussed and commiserated about their experiences—primarily the negative social appraisal they faced outside of the classroom. The men joined together to blog about the experience, and they collectively showed tendencies to ‘masculinize’ the experience of removing body hair (e.g. using box cutters, refusing to use shaving cream or pink razors, saying aloud that it showed off their leg muscles, and so on), at times flaunting their comfort with it compared to women’s frank discomfort with not depilating.

Of all the groups who have participated in this assignment, students in this group (both women and men) received the most outright negative, judgmental, and harsh appraisals from others during the assignment. Here, heteronormativity—including the frank policing of gender and sexual identity—loomed large, as both men and women who violated depilation norms were constructed as deviant *and* queer (see Fahs, 2011, forthcoming).

Group 4: Autumn 2010

This group included 22 students (13 women and nine men; 73% white, 27% of color; 2 over 30; 40% GLB identified) drawn from *two* smaller classes. In order to potentially recreate some of the interesting and troubling peer-pressure group dynamics from Group 2, I intentionally framed the assignment as something I hoped the entire group would participate in. In one class, 7/9 students participated; in the other, 15/23 participated. This high rate of participation seemed to result in stronger relationships between students about the assignment. For example, in one

class students spontaneously initiated a ‘shaving tutor’ system where women students paired up with men students to teach them how to shave and to ‘supervise’ their progress. This group included several gay-identified men, who generally found that depilation led to positive social and interpersonal outcomes (e.g. more hook-ups, friends giving positive comments about their bodies). This group also included one female student who worked at a strip club and another who competed in beauty pageants, both of whom stopped removing body hair despite their anticipation of negative social consequences at the strip club and during pageant season. (Notably, the student who worked as a stripper received *more* money and *more* attention during that semester, as some men in the strip club fetishized the hair, sought her out, and paid higher prices for lap dances from her in the club; this represents another moment where supposed resistance can be quickly assimilated and co-opted).

Detailing the assignment

I introduced the assignment as an optional extra-credit assignment where women would not remove leg, underarm, and pubic hair for 10 weeks while men would remove this body hair during this time. All students kept weekly logs that detailed specific thoughts and events that occurred from week to week, followed by a more formal reflection paper at the end of the semester about the assignment. The assignment specifically asked students to reflect about four sets of questions: 1) What did you feel like emotionally when adopting the ‘non-feminine’ norm of not removing body hair, or the ‘non-masculine’ norm of shaving body hair? What was this experience like for you?; 2) In what way (if at all) did this affect your sexuality, health, and/or your feelings about your own body? Did anything change behaviorally? What about internally?; 3) What kind of external feedback, if any, did you receive about this? How did others respond? What did that feel like?; 4) How has this experience allowed you to reflect upon the social construction of bodily norms, particularly as they relate to sexuality?

Participation was optional, as students were given two points (the equivalent of 1% of their overall grade) for successful completion of the assignment. One week after introducing the assignment, I asked students to commit to participation and gave them a ‘start date’ so that all students went through the various stages of hair growth at approximately the same time (or, for men, they all needed to shave by the same date). 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. Some students participated in the assignment but did not ultimately turn in a paper at the end of the semester; thus, only those who submitted a paper are counted as ‘participating.’ No official ‘checks’ were ever completed to confirm whether students participated; students simply informed me (and often times, their classmates) of their participation and kept track of their feelings and reactions throughout the semester. As a guideline, men were asked to remove body hair every few days to mimic expectations placed upon women. Although no ‘official’ class time was devoted to discussing the experiment, informal conversations occurred

regularly either before or during class, particularly between students who sat nearby each other.

To gauge long-term behavioral and attitudinal changes, I sent all participating students a follow-up email one year after they completed the body hair assignment. This email asked students to respond with any thoughts they had about how the assignment affected them and whether it changed their body hair behavior. In total, 38% of students responded to this email.

This article utilizes responses from 87 students. I directly collected basic demographic data about race and age from students, but gleaned sexual identity information primarily from the papers themselves (until Group 4). The total sample included 79% women, 21% men; 36% people of color, 64% white; and 8% over age 30, 92% under age 30. Roughly 65% mentioned opposite sex partners/interests while roughly 35% mentioned same-sex partners/interests in their papers, logs, and/or class discussions.

Highlights from women's experiences over four semesters of the assignment

Social policing of gender and sexual identity from students' social networks

Heterosexism and gender policing (that is, behavior designed to ensure traditional gender role behavior) occurred both subtly, as female students heard accusations that they could not 'get a man' with body hair, and in more direct ways, as students heard accusations about their alleged (and 'deviant') queerness. For example, Beth⁴ relayed a story about her brother's insistence that body hair would lead to celibacy or lesbianism: '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.' As a more direct example of homophobia and the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality, Paula communicated fear of being physically harmed 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.' Interestingly, Elaine's friend suggested that her leg hair would *protect* her from being violated in a parking lot, supposedly because she surrendered some of her vulnerable femininity: 'He said, "You'll be fine. If anyone tries anything they'll just see your legs and conclude you're one of those tough chicks".'

Students who already identified as queer also experienced intensified homophobia from others. Mona, an out bisexual, offered a story about how her mother's homophobic fears ballooned into fears of her becoming transgendered as 'the next step':

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. I always played

football with the boys and refused to wear pink or dresses. About a year ago, my mom found out that I am a bisexual and that I am 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.

Mona's reaction reveals the panic that many women's social networks expressed surrounding their body hair, as they saw it not only as a marker of Otherness, but as a symbol of extreme gendered upheavals.

For women who felt shamed by growing their body hair (over two thirds felt this way), these gender policing moments enhanced their embarrassment and self-loathing, as women often faced being treated like 'circus animals.' Women encountered severe negativity like gagging noises, disgust, eye rolling, and metaphors that likened body hair to things like 'the juice in the bottom of a garbage can' (Zoe). Others wanted to pet and sniff their body hair, treating it like a curiosity and/or an overt repulsion. Lynn noted a story about 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 her friends, noting that they made her feel ashamed and publicly humiliated:

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. I was the same way. Body hair is so rare, no one has it! And when someone does, they become a circus act!

Interestingly, even women who embraced the assignment—and whose partners embraced their body hair—often faced social punishments from *extended* networks of men (e.g. coworkers, male partners' friends, and so on). Deena articulated the

shaming she experienced by her boyfriend's friends, who:

ask him about it all the time. They wanted to 'know what it was like' and one specifically asked him if I was 'beastly.' Once he told me about what they were asking, I felt like they were thinking I wasn't good enough for him, or that 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.

As an even more direct indicator, nearly all heterosexual women with current partners said that the *first* comment they received upon describing the body hair experiment to others involved some notion of whether not depilating was 'okay' with their boyfriends/husbands.⁵ Lynn described a confrontation with her future father-in-law:

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.

Laura also heard that she should seek her boyfriend's approval before going forward with the assignment:

They'd say, 'Is he alright with that?' That was from my best friend! This was the first thing she said after I informed her that I was officially doing the body hair assignment. She wanted to know if I had received *permission* from the person I was dating. It was just a smack in the face.

Cindy relayed a similar story, noting that people are more concerned with her husband's feelings than with her own:

If someone asks anything about my hair, it is usually about how my husband feels. I specifically say husband because 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.

Tatu also communicated that her family expressed concerns about her husband's reactions to not depilating, even insisting that he would leave her if she continued not removing body hair:

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.

Women also worried about how their male partners would react to the assignment, noting their reliance upon their partners' assessments in order to gauge their own feelings. At times, women's boyfriends and husbands reacted with extreme negativity and disgust; for example, Kim wrote, 'My partner said, "I'm not going to wipe my ass until you shave," as if that was the same thing!' Even those male partners who claimed to support women often did not. Cris's partner, who allegedly supported her in the assignment, reacted with aggressive humor: 'My partner jokes about how many rolls of duct tape he was going to need, or sharpening up the chainsaw.' Sarah described the paradox of her boyfriend's acceptance combined with implicit prohibition:

The assignment did, however, make me wonder how my boyfriend would react to me doing this assignment. 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 as my mom kept implying, and as society in general silently states with its classification of 'natural' body hair as taboo.

Laura felt dismayed by her reliance on her boyfriend's opinion about the assignment, writing, 'This would reaffirm the notion that if a male validates a woman's "practice or behavior," that then and only then is it acceptable.'

Disgust and misinformation

Women also reacted to the assignment by arguing that body hair—especially armpit hair—was inherently dirty (sometimes even 'bug-laden'), prone to excessive bacterial growth, resistant to deodorant and anti-perspirants, smellier than shaved armpits, and fundamentally unnatural and unsanitary. At least half of women's responses included direct references to body hair as 'gross,' revealing how body hair provokes visceral reactions of disgust for many women. Elaine could not shake the feeling that her unshaved body felt dirty:

I personally had a difficult time with the constant feeling of being unclean. I didn't mind how I physically looked, but I mentally felt dirty. Even after I showered I would still feel unclean simply because I hadn't shaved. This consistent feeling of being unclean—which I knew was inaccurate—is still what I had the most trouble with.

Consequently, women changed their behaviors in order to avoid negative social penalties and to ease their shame about body hair. The substantial list of behavioral changes women made included refusing to wear certain kinds of clothes (e.g. dresses, bathing suits, shorts, tank tops, Capri pants), hiding in their houses rather than going out with friends, avoiding exercise at the gym, having sex less often or not at all, not going on job interviews, putting on more moisturizing lotion, taking more showers, wearing what they called 'excessive' amounts of deodorant, and adopting 'men's' deodorant (apparently perceiving it as stronger and more effective for underarm hair). Women also discussed spaces of hyper-femininity and bodily exposure as particularly shaming, such as attending a wedding while they had armpit hair, visiting the gynecologist, wearing tank tops and shorts around the house in front of roommates, or engaging in oral sex where they worried about their genitals being 'unclean.' Elaine noted that body norms became visible during the assignment: 'Often times body norms don't warrant a response unless we are *not* doing them.'

Raced and classed dimensions

Reactions to body hair carried raced and classed elements, as women of color and/or working-class women reported more familial regulation about body hair and far more social penalties for growing out their hair than did white or middle/upper class women. Women of color often expressed that body hair exacerbated their 'differentness' from white or middle/upper-class women in the course. For example, Ana compared the quality of her body hair with her white classmates:

When I compared my hair to the hair of the other girls in class, there was an obvious difference. My hair grew in thick and course. The other Latina women in the class understand that the white girls had it easier because their hair was thinner. I felt like people would think I was a 'dirty Mexican' because of the hair, that I was doing something nasty, and people would connect my body hair to my being lesbian or Mexican.

Body hair for some women of color became a marker of racial status, which made it harder to assimilate into white middle-class educational settings. White students also frequently commented that the assignment demanded less of them because of their lighter hair color. Elaine layered a raced analysis onto her experiences: 'When looking at some of the legs and underarms of other girls participating in the assignment, I did realize that my leg hair is significantly lighter than theirs which may be why my reactions were so minimal.'

Women of color also experienced more policing of sexual identity and gender expression, as being 'good women' meant conforming to particular boundaries of gendered expression. For example, Cecilia said,

My mother was so upset that she scolded me and asked if I needed money to purchase razors or if something was wrong. She thought she did not teach me the proper way to

clean myself. My mom could not look at me and asked that I cover up. She called me a lesbian and wanted me to stop my women's studies classes because they were corrupting my mind, my beliefs, and my identity.

Lupe also felt that respectability loomed large in her body hair decisions:

I come from a family that didn't have much money, and to let yourself go is going against everything I have been taught. I'm always careful about coming across as respectable and clean, just so I don't confirm all of those stereotypes people have of me as dirty and low class.

Both of these comments reflect the association of body hair with both a lack of femininity and a lack of respectability, as women of color implicitly faced judgments about how their bodies circulated in public spaces as indicators of their racial or class statuses. Women of color constructed their bodies as having more at stake in this supposed loss of respectability.

Confronting stereotypes about women of color and poor women as 'dirty' also appeared in women's narratives about body hair. Ruby confronted her own sexism and racism about body hair: 'I also thought, like most people, that women who did not keep up on their appearance through body hair removal were lazy, dirty, and kind of crazy... I never thought that it could be a choice.' Sharon, who could not finish the assignment because she found it intolerable, described her fear of dirtiness as a raced dimension: 'As a black woman, I know what it's like to be looked down upon by white people. I don't need to be made aware of that any more than I already am.' Ana similarly commented on her body hair by noting its raced *and* classed dimensions:

I found myself wearing makeup more often, at first unconsciously. Before I'd stopped shaving, I hardly ever wore makeup. I started because I didn't want anyone to think that I didn't 'take care of myself' and I'm always aware of the fact that, as a Mexican, I have to go that extra mile. I'm not a college professor and I don't live and work with other feminists like some of my girlfriends do. I'm a waitress, and my coworkers would think I was a freak.

Highlights of men's experiences over two semesters of the assignment

Configuring masculinity

While the men who depilated had some similarities to the women's experiences—particularly surrounding homophobic reactions, policing of gender, and belief that body hair removal was 'unnatural'—they also communicated far less concern with their *partners'* reactions and more often embraced the assignment as something that represented their personal agency. This could reflect more

permissiveness from partners or that men cared less about partners' reactions. Men cared more about how their bodies related to *other men* (non-partners) rather than how their bodies created a sense of shame, negative reactions from (female) partners, or concerns for respectability.

Most men relayed the difficulty of depilation, as they found it labor intensive, time-consuming, and often quite useless and meaningless. Eli relayed his surprise at the difficulty of shaving his awkwardly-shaped underarms:

The pit is an exquisite body part. It is literally a PIT! Have you tried to shave inside of a pit? It is so hard to get it flat or to even look inside of it for long amounts of time!

Sergio expressed his difficulty with body hair removal combined with a new-found respect for women's labor of depilation:

I had difficulties for the plain and simple reason that [shaving] is alien to me. I found myself spending about 10–15 minutes shaving, thinking I did a good job, just to step out of the shower, put on my glasses, and realize that I did not do so well. I would then stop and go back and try to do it again, which was very frustrating. I slowly began to realize what women go through just to fit in.

Tom also directly confronted the double standards inherent in the shaving/not shaving assignment, noting:

I mentioned the assignment to a group of guys and they said it was fine for men to shave but disgusting for women not to shave. Just the look in their eyes about it made me feel bad for the women who weren't shaving.

Men did express a variety of social penalties from other men, particularly related to sexual identity. For example, Max expressed anticipatory fear of his coworkers' reactions: 'What will the guys at work think? I usually wear shorts when I'm out on runs but not anymore. They'll tease the shit out of me.' Chris conveyed a need both to fit in *and* to rebel against social norms, noting his need for male approval in particular: 'I usually think of myself as a rebel and an outcast but I still want to be liked and appreciated by other dudes. I guess hair matters. I'm not gay but I like their approval.' Ben experienced more direct homophobia and policing of his sexual identity during the experiment:

Initially, I felt that shaving my legs and armpits would be a very emasculating experience. I feared facing difficulties from my family especially, since they are very conservative/ex-catholic. I was raised to be afraid of catching the gay, or becoming gay, and my dad did his best to involve me in programs that would reinforce masculinity and stave off homosexuality... My fears were not without at least some basis in reality. My father started off on rants about homosexuality, and my mother kept bothering me about it, her concern over me shaving quite palpable... My dad kept

using the gay comment. I really hate it when he assumes shit. I keep telling him that it's nothing big. I'm JUST shaving my body.

On the other hand, gay and bisexual men more often found the assignment liberating and, at times, a boost to their self-esteem. Spencer wrote: 'The people at Walgreens would probably think I'm gay or really weird or getting in touch with my feminine side. This is precisely what I am doing. I'm getting in touch with my creative, free-bird, feminine side.' Eli encountered more sexual attention from a friend, which then led to feelings of liberation from gender norms:

My friend who is gay has a fetish for hairless men. For a while he kept texting me and eventually propositioned me to have sex. I was in a bit of a shock . . . I am proud to have fought back against the social norm and even get positive reactions for doing it. I feel times are changing and all it takes is one person to show everyone that it is ok to break the norm, and eventually, people will follow.

Not all men viewed the assignment as a way to express their 'feminine side'; many men found ways to 'masculinize' the experience of depilation, at times creatively reconfiguring it as manly, macho, and purposeful in fitting their reconfigured masculinity. For example, Jason admitted that his shaved body itched but he had no problem scratching himself:

I found myself scratching my genitals, arm pits, and buttocks in public, which generated stares from people and at times I found it embarrassing. On the other hand, I was uncomfortable so when it came time to scratch, I did it without any reservations.

Michael resisted shaving creams, labeling them as too 'feminine': 'I just shave dry now. It's bad enough to do this assignment in the first place so I'm definitely not using lady creams and pink razors and stuff.' Rick managed to sexualize the experience with his partner: 'For me, the shaving of my body parts charged our sexual performance in a more sensual way.' As a more extreme example of masculinizing the assignment, Ben resisted razors entirely, preferring more 'manly' methods of depilation:

My use of the buck knife, [a folding hunting knife] and box cutter made me feel even more intimidating and masculine. I caught many people's attention by shaving in public at my convenience. That part of was kind of fun.

Men's perceived bodily agency allowed them to engage in body modifications or changes without nearly the same network of social penalties and disciplinary practices that women faced. This frames men's relationships with their bodies as in part dictated by their acceptance from other men (whereas women factor in both acceptance from other women and, to a greater degree, acceptance from men). Consider this statement from Max where he claims agency by

asserting his masculinity:

As long as I could blame it on you, I enjoyed it. I would never do this otherwise but halfway through I started wondering why I kept repeating that it was for a class assignment to people who asked me about it. Why couldn't I just say that I did it because I felt like it? I'm a man. I don't need a reason.

Postexperiential reflections

Most students who attempted the assignment reported that they learned a great deal about their bodies, social constructions, and the deep investment others had in controlling and patrolling their bodies. Jason noted his surprise that the assignment taught him as much as it did:

I want to be seen as attractive by social standards for men. I think we as men are conditioned by society to have these needs. To be looked upon by other men with envy and desired by women . . . I never thought such a simple assignment would have this effect on me. This was totally unexpected. I now understand that I must take social construction very seriously, because our very lives are based upon it.

Several students commented that they wished everyone could try the assignment. Zoe felt jolted into a new understanding of her body not only in an abstract way but also in a tangible manner:

This experiment was a healing process in a way. If anything, it greatly made me more aware of my body. Often girls start shaving before their hair fully grows in and darkens, so in a way this is a part of ourselves (myself) that we never know, that we are fragmented from in some way. To watch my hair grow in was a journey in and of itself; to see my hair pattern as my hair fully grew in; to feel it in different stages of growth from prickly to rather soft and long—it was all part of the experience. I definitely feel more in tune with my body; its patterns and textures. I formed this weird attachment to my hair and I felt like 'we' really bonded. I don't think I would consider myself more masculine or feminine (non-feminine) throughout the duration of this experiment, but I felt more 'me,' or at least aware of *me*.

Many women confronted their feminist attitudes and challenged their belief that they 'choose' what they do with their bodies. Eva described the assignment as a wake-up call:

This experience was more painful than freeing because it made me realize that I have a lot of soul searching to do. Although I am always the first to reject many of our society's norms, they never quite affect me as directly as this assignment did. I can't yet deal with the backlash of others when resisting social norms about looking good.

This assignment did help me get one step closer to who I aspire to be. I want to accept myself.

Layla wondered about the evolution of her feminist identity: ‘I thought I had an in-your-face attitude about everything until it came to raising my hand with a hairy armpit in class. My feminism has a long way to go but I’m working on it.’

Students also changed their behavior in a more long-term sense, as over half of those who responded to a follow-up email one year later indicated long-term changes. For example, some chose sexual partners differently based on their reactions to body hair (as body hair became a litmus test for a partner’s attitudes toward women’s agency and choice about their bodies), broke up with partners who had criticized body hair or constructed it as disgusting, removed body hair less often (for women) or more often (for men), thought deeply about the friends and family they listen to for advice about relationships and sexuality, and felt more confident about their bodies in general. Angela said that growing body hair would be a ‘test’ for a future partner:

When looking for a soul mate when the time comes I am definitely going to see if he’s okay with me not shaving all the time or if he would still find me attractive... We should live our lives by our own standards.

Some reported no changes or a deep relief that they could now revert back to their old ways, and some felt that the assignment was a ‘fun thing to try in college’ but nothing more. Still, the majority expressed that the assignment had a lasting attitudinal and behavioral impact on their lives.

Pedagogical strengths and challenges

Ripple effect pedagogy

This assignment effectively intervenes in students’ thinking about social constructions, their bodies, and sexuality in part because it makes visible the *networks* of social control in students’ lives, particularly for women. Even for students who did not participate formally in the assignment, their *decision-making process* and the ensuing conversations they had with friends, family, and coworkers often provoked thinking about the social penalties they faced for non-conformity about body hair. For example, many students left class after the assignment was introduced and immediately mentioned it to others, allowing them to experience some of the intense reactions others have when resisting body norms. Several students decided against trying the assignment because their boyfriends threatened not to have sex with them (particularly oral sex); similarly, many students communicated that their mothers (or fathers, sisters, brothers, bosses, etc.) expressed such negative feelings about the assignment that they decided against it. These reactions *already* served as a pedagogical tool, as students learned much about their networks of social control in the first moments of their decision-making process.

In all four semesters of this assignment, I have been continually amazed at just how much students enjoyed *talking about the assignment to others*. This gave the assignment momentum, power, and efficacy as a pedagogical tool for feminist learning. Some students 'taught' their social networks about the meaning of social constructions and how depilation (or not) has an inconsistent history in the US. Cris introduced the assignment to her friends and heard responses that surprised her: 'I shared the project with people I worked with and my girlfriends were jealous, each of them told me they wished they could participate too!' Apparently, they could not stop removing body hair unless they had a *formal* reason to do so. Other students believed the shame and social punishment they heard from others, yet they meditated on its meaning in their lives (e.g. Barbara said, 'What other things will they disapprove of as I grow older?'). Still others took this punitive reaction as an opportunity to rebel against their parents or to challenge homophobia. Donald confronted his friend's hostile beliefs: '[My friend] tried to point out that men who shaved were most likely gay in some way and it decreases one's masculinity. After I let him speak on how he felt about the situation, I gave him reasons to think otherwise.' At times, students recruited others to join them in the assignment, taunting their friends to see if they, too, could participate and endure the negative social punishments that ensued. Finally, some students celebrated the acceptance they felt when others validated their personal choices about their bodies, noting how lucky they felt to have a wonderful feminist partner, or recognizing how much freedom they had to make *new* decisions for their bodies. This range of experiences allowed the assignment to ripple out into other spaces, perhaps educating students' social networks about some core feminist principles (e.g. social construction of reality, the disciplining of bodies, gendered double standards, choosing to rebel against norms, the consequences of non-conformity, and so on). As such, it may help recruit others to women's studies just as it educates others about the kinds of work done in women's studies courses.

Peer-generated pedagogy

Just as students discussed and engaged with their social networks about this assignment, they also learned from and taught each other in the classroom. Students continually discussed the assignment with classmates, in part gauging others' responses, learning from and reacting to others' experiences, and assessing the acceptability of the assignment based on classmates' reactions. In all semesters, many students revealed and compared body hair, noting its length, growth patterns, visibility, at times daring each other to wear more and more 'shameless' outfits (e.g. tank tops and shorts). The students became support networks for resistance, coaxing each other into more and more bold displays of rebellious body behavior. Angela commented upon this group dynamic, noting, 'Doing this project felt like being a part of a team. Knowing that others were doing that was motivating to keep going.'

Cultivating these dynamics in part required me to let the students generate their own dynamics around the assignment. I tried to avoid assigning meanings to the

experiences they had, and I often simply listened to them at the start of class when they chatted amongst themselves (as I fiddled with PowerPoint slides or shuffled papers) so that they could develop their own group dynamics around this assignment. As such, in an effort to allow them to generate their own assumptions and feelings about normative body hair practices outside of perceived ‘approval’ from me, I never directly disclosed or discussed my own body hair behavior. I absolutely believe that the students taught and learned more to and from each other than they did from me. This created group norms that sometimes (ironically) encouraged conformity to the *new* norm of rebelling against depilation norms; at other times, it allowed students to learn from each others’ experiences, particularly along raced, gendered, and sexual identity dimensions. For example, students in Group 4 wanted to take prideful pictures together of the women’s body hair and the men’s lack of body hair to prove their accomplishment to others.

Questions

Although this assignment is clearly transgressive and appears to ‘make a difference,’ it is not perfect and questions remain in relation to its generalizeability, effects on feminist-leaning students versus non-feminist-leaning students, and how the assignment can grow and change over time. For example, students who take more than one course where I offer the body hair assignment need extra attention to push themselves further with it the second time around (or to make it relevant again) if they choose to do the assignment a second time. I have encouraged repeat students to engage in bolder and more visible displays of rebellion (e.g. lifting weights in a tank top at a gym) in order to reflect differently on their body hair. Repeat students described more confidence when going through it the second time; Claire noted that she did not discuss it as much but instead worked on her internal processes more directly:

This time around I took a different approach. I tried to not think about it and go on with my days as I normally would, such as working out, wearing clothes I wanted to and really not even bringing it up to people. Whereas the first time it seemed like having hair was all I could think about... It actually made me feel secure about myself. It made me feel in control and I didn’t care what anyone else really said or thought.

Also, several students *already* engaged in non-normative behavior, as some women already did not remove body hair and some men already did remove body hair. For these students, I asked them to continue doing this non-normative behavior and to simply consciously reflect upon its meaning. One female student, June, decided, in the spirit of the assignment, to remove body hair at the end of the semester along with the rest of the group, noting how it made her feel ‘unnatural’:

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. There's really just no way to describe what I felt, but 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.

Ultimately, I still debate how to maximize the relevance and impact for repeat students and for students who already resist depilation norms. Perhaps *any* shift in one's current behavior leads to learning and reflection, though I loathe the idea of encouraging conformity, particularly because the assignment is designed to teach students about non-conformity. Nevertheless, challenges to, and compliance with, conformity can both become teaching tools about gender, bodies, and sexuality.

Steps to making a difference: Pedagogical implications

The body hair assignment is essentially a consciousness-raising tool (Sowards and Renegar, 2004; Young, 2003) where students use the personal experiences of their bodies—particularly the reversible, tangible, and relatively harmless experience of body hair removal—to learn about key tenets of feminist ideology. Body hair becomes a platform for revealing social norms, making the invisible visible, and for challenging their awareness of how their bodies circulate in public spaces (and how they react and manage such circulation). It also teaches students to learn *about* their bodies—what bodies can do, how they feel, new sensations they experience, or even different ways of discovering shame and pleasure.

Discussions of body hair in many ways serve as a gateway drug to the more serious issues of fatness, queerness, disability, abjection, and (embodied) 'Otherness.' We cannot ask students to 'try on' these identities temporarily (and I believe efforts to do so often simply reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices), but we *can* provoke the discomfort and social punishments that fat people, queer people, disabled people, and people of color face on a near daily basis. Understanding these identities as simultaneous forms of oppression and resistance serves the project of social justice. Often times students fear difference, standing out, 'being' other, to a degree that limits their capacity to understand the interconnectedness of oppressions. This assignment moves them closer to understanding these tangled webs of power, particularly by making visible the way power exerts itself onto the body. Certainly, bodies are messy and contentious, unruly and difficult; as such, they are ideal sites of learning, resistance, and growth.

Given that feminist courses often spend much time deconstructing the ideology of personal choice (e.g. students framing plastic surgery as a personal choice of empowerment), the body hair assignment can serve as a useful and strategic intervention in helping students to personally deconstruct the overly simplistic 'rhetoric of choice.' When students directly confront powerful social norms about their bodies—usually in the direction of enforcing conformity to narrowly defined behaviors—they see the limitations of the 'choice' rhetoric readily and easily.

They learn, tangibly and clearly, that the personal *is* political. I have found this enormously helpful, as body hair is concrete, something everyone manages (or not) on a near daily basis, and something relatively benign compared to more socially-loaded and controversial bodily experiences (e.g. hair straightening for African-American women; Craig, 2002).

The body hair assignment can also prove useful when discussing more difficult concepts in advanced feminist courses, particularly (in my experience) the concept of sexual or personal freedom, decision-making and responsibility for sexuality and health, living within historical and social contexts, managing fluid and flexible social identities both publicly and privately, and relating to others' lived experiences of their bodies. When discussing, for example, the fetishization of girlhood and fear of women's social, political, and economic power, discussions of removing pubic hair can be quite helpful and instructive in illustrating these concepts. When discussing Muslim women's relationship to veiling or African women's relationship to female genital cutting, body hair discussions can help to illuminate the ways Western women remain eerily complicit with social and cultural expectations. And, of course, body hair can also serve as a powerful tool for our own self reflection as feminists, particularly for scholars, academics, students, and activists. As we inventory our own practices and beliefs, we can advance, pedagogically and personally, a more refined roadmap of the work we have done and the territory we have yet to traverse.

Notes

1. Celia Kitzinger (1995) differentiates weak and strong social construction, with the former focusing on how social norms influence and shape reality while the latter emphasizing how broader social categories define and govern our existence in a social, cultural, historical, and political sense. This article addresses both types, but particularly emphasizes weak social constructionism.
2. While Arizona has recently received much press about its notoriously conservative anti-immigrant policies (2010's SB-1070 legislation), Arizona State University's four campuses tend to be politically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse and the university as a whole could be categorized as a 'moderate' institution within a conservative state. The institution attracts students from both privileged and less privileged backgrounds; women's studies majors mirror these trends. Most of my students describe liberal attitudes and report some feminist political beliefs (though this varies by course and campus).
3. In terms of broadening this assignment, I wholly believe it could translate well in introductory courses and plan to try this soon.
4. I have not identified which group each participant came from, nor their sexual identity or racial backgrounds in order to protect their anonymity, particularly given the specificity of my previous discussion of each group's makeup.
5. Eerily, this is also a comment I receive as an instructor about this assignment, as others ask whether colleagues or administrators have 'approved' of the assignment. Just as this assignment pushes students to reframe their sense of 'permission' about their bodies, it also has pushed me to engage in bolder and more creative pedagogies that sometimes generate a 'buzz' that is both wanted and unwanted.

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