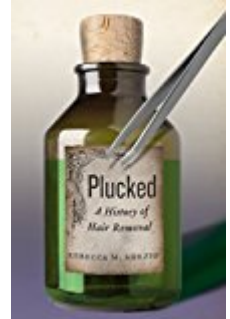


Rebecca M. Herzig. *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*. Biopolitics Series. New York: New York University Press, 2015. 280 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-4082-3.



Reviewed by Katelyn Smith

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Commissioned by Ashton W. Merck

Rebecca M. Herzig's recent book, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*, chronicles the development of hair removal in the United States. While readers may expect the subject matter to inform the tone of the book as anecdotal and quirky, Herzig instead draws on the serious concerns of racism, sexism, and medicalization throughout America's history. She extensively documents varying views of body hair, including pictures of historical advertisements, body hair diagrams, and political cartoons.

In her introduction, Herzig recounts the recent phenomenon of "forced shaving" as a torture device at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. She uses this controversial example of hair removal as a jumping-off point for the rest of her book. Rather than fixate on the standard of "freedom" or "suffering" in describing techniques of removal, she claims that she will instead reveal the history of developments in hair removal, showing that by "tracing the history of choice in

this way, we come to see how some experiences of suffering, and not others, come to matter" (p. 17).

Plucked explores the history of the science of racial divide, a theme that is present in all of Herzig's books. Most notably, a book she coedited with Evelyn Hammonds, *The Nature of Difference* (2009), explores the shifting focus of racial studies from groups, populations, and genomes. Similarly, *Plucked* begins by addressing another so-called racial characteristic, body hair, and in particular, early Americans' obsession with Native American (lack of) body hair. She opens with a passage on the subject by Thomas Jefferson, and concludes that many settlers viewed body hair as an indicator of race, with abounding debate on whether Native Americans were a race that could be assimilated. This hair-based racial divide is eerily echoed much later in the book when Herzig discusses laser hair removal at the end of the twentieth century, in which doctors would often select the laser strength based on their own perceptions of patients' race.

These societal expectations are mirrored in the historical gender divide on hair removal, specifically in regard to shaving. Before the twentieth century, the act of shaving was associated with masculinity and dominated by professional barbers. Women struggled with removing hair from their faces because their only options were potentially dangerous homemade or, later, industrial depilatories. However, beginning in the twentieth century, women became the new target market for shaving. Herzig documents the changing view of sex associated with hair in chapters 3 through 5, explaining that developments in the science of endocrinology revealed by the 1930s that both male and female bodies contained the “masculine” and “feminine” hormones. As the century progressed, changing fashion and technology led to shorter skirts and more sophisticated hair removal techniques. With the advent of fewer raw materials at the height of World War II, women began to try shaving—stockings were in short supply. By 1964, over 90 percent of women aged fifteen to forty-four shaved their legs (p. 127).

By the time of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, some women began to view body hair differently. In contrast to the battle against hair waged for hundreds of years, some radical feminists instead began to embrace body hair as natural, resisting shaving. Herzig claims that this women’s liberation movement inevitably associated feminism with body hair. The current rhetoric of hair removal took shape during this time of social protest. Advertisements began to focus on the choice and will to shave, attempting to empower consumers to decide which method of hair removal they wanted. Simultaneously, “visible body hair on women signaled political extremism” (p. 134).

The last 3 chapters of Herzig’s monograph feature more recent hair removal techniques, largely intended for women, including Brazilian waxing, laser hair removal, and research into

gene-based hair removal. She claims that now the vast majority of the American public accepts that body hair on both men and women is largely “unwanted.” Herzig says this view is part of the larger movement of medicalization in America, with many categorizing hair removal as a medical practice by employing waxing specialists and family doctors for treatments like laser hair removal. She also includes the overlooked or hidden stories, from the Gillette corporation predicting an increasing interest in World War I soldier hygiene to family physicians using laser hair removal to help pay for practice costs.

Herzig concludes that the history of hair removal could demonstrate broader changes in American life. Rather than focus on one narrative, she claims that this history ties into “shifting gender roles, immigration patterns, labor practices, and manufacturing processes,” among others (p. 187). While she quite convincingly argues this history, she claims that Americans consider themselves independent of a larger narrative and are instead autonomous and freethinking. While others may be influenced by the work of advertising, each person believes he or she is making an autonomous decision. Herzig therefore claims that the narrative of hair removal in America could be considered a study of the rising importance of personal choice. She only briefly mentions this observation in her conclusion, but this raises the question of further research on the American self-perception, and in particular how the American attitude of independence can influence how we view ourselves as well as cultural practices. Rather than place this observation at the conclusion, keeping this perspective in mind while reading the text could enhance Herzig’s narrative.

This culture of individualism is also a theme in Herzig’s earlier work. *Plucked* is an interesting follow-up to her 2005 book, *Suffering for Science: Reason and Sacrifice in Modern America*. The book chronicles the stories of self-sacrifice that arose among American scientists after the Civil

War. Rather than exploring stories of intended suffering—as described in her 2005 book, many scientists put their life on the line for their research—*Plucked* instead reveals how suffering can be understood as normative and even expected. According to Herzig’s studies, America seems to be a place where “objective” suffering can be transformed into empowerment through individual choice, whether in the form of sleep-deprived research scientist or a Brazilian-waxed woman.

Herzig’s engaging and well-researched work is a case study for larger themes in history of science, including gender and race studies, medicalization, and the rise of industry. Accessible to scholars and informative for amateurs, the book held my attention because of Herzig’s attention to detail and inclusion of historical events, like the advent of hormone treatments or the creation of the feminist magazine *Ms.* The intended audience remains rather mysterious. Although the topic might attract more general readers, its scope and content favor those with historical training. The structure follows a strict academic format, with the introduction including an explanation of how historical terms are used. Having a grasp of literature in history of science, gender studies, or American pharmaceuticals is not required to appreciate this book, yet that knowledge proves extremely beneficial to a deeper understanding of its contents. For an academic or historian, this book is a quick, insightful read that makes you think twice the next time you shave.

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