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Plucked: A History of Hair Removal (Biopolitics)

Rebecca M. Herzig

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From the clamshell razors and homemade lye depilatories used in colonial America to the diode lasers and prescription pharmaceuticals available today, Americans have used a staggering array of tools to remove hair deemed unsightly, unnatural, or excessive. This is true especially for women and girls; conservative estimates indicate that 99% of American women have tried hair removal, and at least 85% regularly remove hair from their faces, armpits, legs, and bikini lines on a regular basis. How and when does hair become a problem—what makes some growth “excessive”? Who or what separates the necessary from the superfluous?

In *Plucked*, Rebecca Herzig shows how, over time, dominant American beliefs about visible hair changed: where once elective hair removal was considered a “mutilation” practiced primarily by “savage” men, by the turn of the twentieth century, hair-free faces and limbs were expected for women. Visible hair growth—particularly on young, white women—came to be perceived as a sign of political extremism, sexual deviance, or mental illness. By the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more Americans were waxing, threading, shaving, or lasering themselves smooth. Herzig’s extraordinary account also reveals some of the collateral damages of the intensifying pursuit of hair-free skin. Moving beyond the experiences of particular patients or clients, Herzig describes the surprising histories of race, science, industry, and medicine behind today's hair-removing tools. *Plucked* is an unsettling, gripping, and original tale of the lengths to which Americans will go to remove hair.

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