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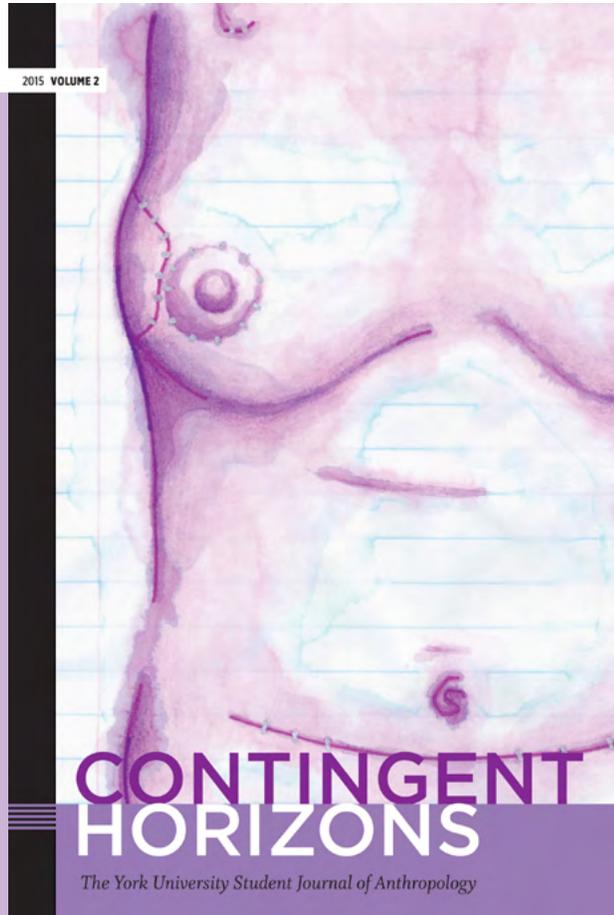
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On Beauty, Power, Resistance, and More

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On Beauty, Power, Resistance, and More

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This paper uses an ethnographic exploration of women's body hair to reflect on anthropological frameworks for understanding. It asks how beauty and power connect to anthropological theories of emergence through everyday practices of body hair maintenance. This article considers these connections through an exploration of women's relationships with their body hair and body hair maintenance practices. These practices are situated within an emergent world through narrative vignettes. The outcome of the methodology used for this project challenges the existing power binaries, questions what lies beyond them, and inquires about ways of resistance.

KEY WORDS beauty, body hair, body mapping, feminist ethnography, witnessing

We had just finished tracing our bodies onto long sheets of paper and were mapping our hair onto them (Figure 1 and 2). As we drew, we talked about issues that came up for us around hair: sexuality, puberty, relationships with our parents and friends, political affiliations . . . We also gossiped and caught up. I had initially been worried about tracing bodies. I was working with women of different sizes, some of whom have histories of eating disorders; but the first three workshops had gone so well, and one friend I had been concerned about told me how great it made her feel to see her body mapped out next to ours. Upon reflection I think size was the only consideration I had really given in terms of how seeing ourselves mapped out might affect us.

My map and Penelope's lie next to each other on my bedroom floor and we laugh because we had both expressed feeling self-conscious about our neck hair.¹ Penelope draws breasts on to her map. They are triangles pointing at the ground (Figure 3 and 4). They sag. They looked the way that I fear mine might one day. Michele says, "That's not what your breasts look like." "How do you know? You aren't the one who sees them in the mirror every day," Penelope responds. We are silent for a moment and then get back to talking about American Apparel's new mannequins with pubic hair. We discuss whether they further commodify and sexualize women's bodies or if they are a genuine celebration. A feeling nags but I can't name it.

A week after Michele and Penelope's exchange, I am at a meeting in Caledonia. We mill about afterwards and a friend tells me she is learning a new language and it is exhausting



Figure 1



Figure 2

because of all the tenses. In English, she explains, words can just be things on their own. In most other languages words only exist in relation to other things.

I was used to thinking in binaries: power and resistance, right and wrong, thin and fat. Bodies do not easily conform to binaries. I have come to understand that bodies occupy a space in-between. My exploration of bodies has also allowed me to reflect on some of the limitations and potentials of current anthropological discourses invested in power and resistance. In understanding our everyday body hair maintenance practices, the simple narrative teaches us that growing body hair is part of growing up, and removing it is part of becoming a woman. But body hair maintenance practices are more complex than this narrative allows; as our hair grows we become, we teach each other the right ways to be, we do the wrong thing, we protect each other—our bodies are constantly becoming through these processes. We are never done and there is always more than we can name.

Through weak theory, Kathleen Stewart's (2008) work examines those nagging forces and feelings, the ones that itch with their own life—even without names. Stewart explores the constant becoming and the unfinished nature of ordinary lives. In this paper I explore ordinary moments in order to critique anthropological frameworks for understanding.

Time passes again. I am reading an essay from *Black Girl Dangerous*. The author writes on the experiences of women of colour with eating disorders,

I remember being hugely troubled by the language many of the speakers and health educators would use about their experiences: that 'eating disorders were about power and control, not beauty.' As if this were a dichotomy. As if beauty were something other than a system of control and domination. There is nothing shallow about beauty; I have drowned in it. [Balasubramanian 2014]

When I read this I think about being at the coffee shop when Penelope told me how she felt about her exchange with Michele weeks back during the body mapping exercise. "For me," Penelope asserted, "It's like telling your fat friend they are not fat; what you are telling them is that they are good or pretty and being fat is not good or pretty and therefore they are not fat." This is not a statement about the lived reality of your friend—it is a statement

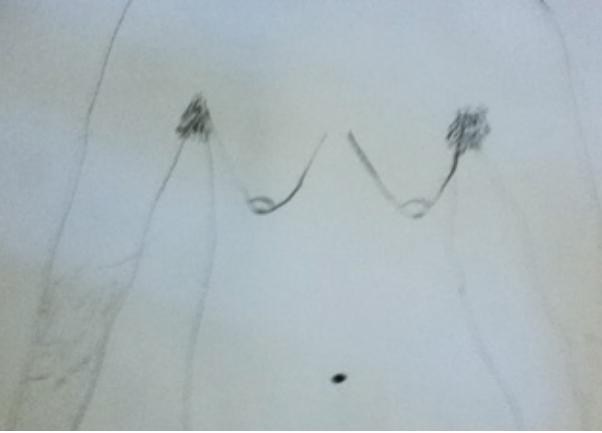


Figure 3

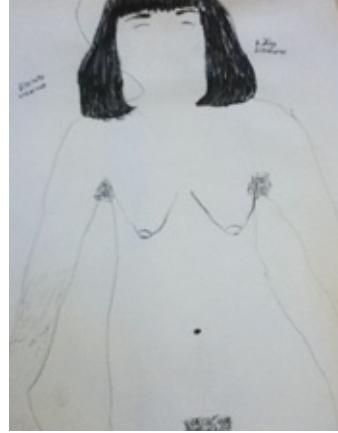


Figure 4

about you and what a good friend you are; yet it is more than that. It is about convincing your friend that they are beautiful, because people can do dangerous things to themselves when they don't think they are beautiful. It comes from a place of love. It is how we learn to be. We are not taught to love our bodies. If we were, what would that mean? Would it mean to accept our bodies the way they are? Or believing they should be something they are not? Or something else entirely? If beauty is a system of power and control, what would it look like to reject it? What would be just one step in that direction?

Penelope says she is the way she is because she is a woman in this society. She feels and embraces the pain her body has caused her as well as the moments of joy. She tells me about seeing a friend in a bathing suit with a similar body type to her and the joy she felt in recognition. That joy she felt was transformative — at least for a moment.

This paper explores the process of my understanding of body hair maintenance practices and beauty as simultaneously coercive and resistive, but also containing more than that binary can account for. I attempt to open up space between power and resistance where potentials live. This article is a reflection on practice, methods, and anthropological theoretical frameworks. Through exploring my friends' relationships with body hair maintenance and everyday practices, I have been able to reflect upon subjectivities and emergence. In an exploration of women's relationships with body hair maintenance I argue for anthropological approaches that emphasize becoming. I will argue that anthropologies of becoming can reject binary imaginations of the world — for example, the hegemonic ideas of how to be a woman Michele had internalized or the resistance of these ideas by Penelope — and that this engagement allows me to complicate these moments and see them as multifaceted.

There are many ways I could have interpreted the 'data' I gathered through body mapping workshops, semi-structured interviews, and critical self-reflection. I found that the way that many of the women I worked with, myself included, received this knowledge through small corrections, like being teased for having armpit hair. Most of us talked about our body hair maintenance practices (which varied) as if they were personal choices. I initially read this as some sort of internalization of power and control, but a moment of astonishment caused me to re-evaluate this understanding.

Astonishments cannot be planned for—they are the moments an anthropologist hopes and waits for, when what is normal becomes extraordinary and what is extraordinary



Figure 5



Figure 6

becomes normal (Shweder 2000, Taussig 2011). The moment between Penelope and Michele showed me the limits of my modes of understanding and highlighted a dangerous assumption I had made—that we could talk about body hair without talking about bodies. This moment demonstrated that there were aspects of our relationships to body hair that were not captured through the reductionist framework of power and resistance. My friends' decisions were not only about individual choices or structural forces.

Despite the fact that I have related the small bodily corrections I witnessed and experienced to a system of control called beauty, I think it is important to understand the examples I give not as representative of this system, but as situations that are part of a world emerging and full of potential. These moments are informed by power but have the potential to subvert it, re-inscribe it, or complicate it. Engaging in the world this way is complimentary to my feminist upbringing and my continual engagement with feminisms. This worldview has made me critical of the concept of culture or seeing the world as static, and it has undoubtedly influenced my research, methodology, and interpretations. This has also informed my choice to take a weak theoretical approach (Sedgwick 2003; Stewart 2008), allowing me to seek potential rather than trying to capture my research in a modernist framework which can be reductive.

What does it mean when Michele tells Penelope that her body is not the way she sees it? Is this love or coercion? Is this protection? What happens when love means denying someone's experience of their body? What happens when we love but have internalized these systems of control and domination? Can we subvert them? Can we resist them? What would this look like?

Theories of power and resistance provide easy frameworks to answer my research questions, but they cannot account for everything. I think it is more productive and interesting to ask after what is left out of these frames. Kathleen Stewart (2008) suggests to add to, not add up, or to allow the world to be multifaceted rather than forcing it into a theoretical framework. This has been invaluable for this exploration.

The modernist approaches to anthropology most readily available to me have been critiqued for supporting colonial logics of representation (Mitchell 1988). Many anthropologists' before me have explored knowledge production and examined connections in order to avoid continuing this violence. I was particularly influenced by Ulf Hannerz's



Figure 7

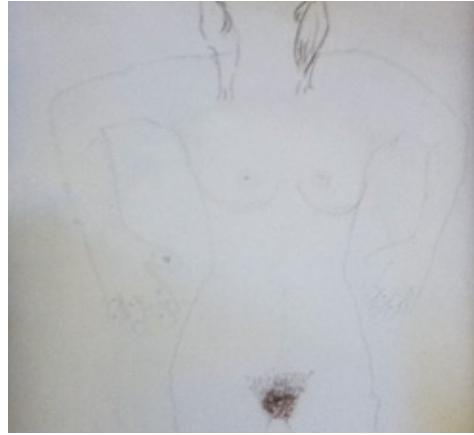


Figure 8

(2012) “Reflection on Multi-Sited Ethnography.” He argues for approaching the field as an unstable entity and focusing on connections, rather than searching to describe a stable and bounded entity called culture, in order to avoid reproducing a violent anthropology. Violence in anthropology occurs as the researcher over-determines and influences the production of certain acceptable ways of being; this mode of anthropology is the handmaiden of colonialism. I will continue in the critical tradition of Hannerz and, like Stewart, add to rather than attempt to produce the seminal text on women and body hair.

The desire to move past representation and description has informed my methodology. My primary method of body mapping attempts to escape anthropology’s traditional methods such as interviews or participant observation, although I conducted semi-structured interviews following the body mapping workshops. A method I had not initially expected, but one that became important, was astonishment. This method cannot be planned; for moment of astonishment, one that reorients you to your field, is by definition unexpected. In my case this was the seemingly ordinary correction that Michele gave to Penelope. I could not make sense of it through my usual frameworks of understanding that saw power and resistance as important forces, so I allowed this moment to challenge these frameworks (Taussig 2011).

In order to approach my field with a focus on connection, I began by asking how body hair and identity are related. Only recently have I realized that I was actually asking different questions: how are notions of beauty and power related? How does resistance fit into this picture? What doesn’t fit into this picture at all? However, as my approach to the field was influenced by the former initial research question, there were challenges and painful moments, albeit unintentional ones.

The first challenge I faced was around representation and the composition of my group. I knew my time was limited so I decided to only speak to women. Although I reached out to a diverse group of friends, the women who were most responsive were white cisgender women, and the data I collected reflects this. I am sure there are a number of factors that account for this but time and space limits this discussion. After some careful thinking and internal debate I decided to work with the people that had expressed interest in these workshops and make it clear that the women I spoke to were not representative of all women.



Figure 9



Figure 10

Although women may share certain oppressions, such as misogyny, I am sure the data I would have obtained from speaking to primarily non-white women would have been very different, just as it would have been if I had spoken to women of different ages or from different geographic locations. As a researcher, I think this experience taught me the difficulties of being representative without being tokenistic. Instead, I have attempted to move away from representation in order to see potentials rather than seeing my friends' experiences as representative of some hidden reality.

Doing this project also highlighted another difficulty researchers deal with: how to approach knowledge without immediately putting it into a theoretical framework or comparing it to our own experiences. What I admire about anthropology is its ability to see possibilities and other ways of being. As a feminist I believe other modes of being are possible and anthropology has allowed me to explore these other life worlds. At first I understood shaving, waxing, and other body hair maintenance practices as coercive but also possibly as resistive. It was coercive because we had internalized certain acceptable ways of being, and resistive because we sometimes shaved or didn't shave for ourselves. My friends taught me that it was not so dichotomous. I could have interpreted our workshops using this binary if it wasn't for that moment between Penelope and Michele which showed me how power and knowledge work in intimate and loving ways that are not easily appropriated into a binary of power and resistance. What this moment produced is not easily captured in words. Part of what it exposed was how body mapping, as a methodology, reproduced a modernist, potentially violent anthropology.

Eve Sedgwick (2003) and Kathleen Stewart's (1991, 2008) writing on weak theory was indispensable in my approach to this challenge. Sedgwick writes that the 'paranoid' or 'strong' approach that critical theory often carries can be a hindrance in the way that it encourages everything to be understood within frameworks and consequently cuts us off from the full potentialities that exist in every moment. Weak theory attempts to explore these potentialities by not appropriating or explaining every moment through a larger structure or system—or culture. Kathleen Stewart's writing revealed to me one form this approach can take. My experience with body mapping showed me the difficulties of not interpreting data immediately and through familiar, comforting frames.

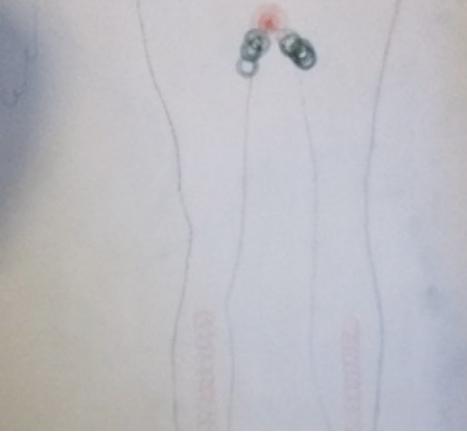


Figure 11

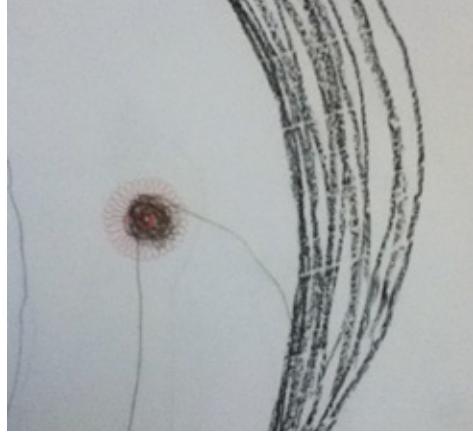


Figure 12

Body maps are, at their most basic, large-scale images of a body (Gastaldo et al 2012). I initially had felt that body mapping would be an interesting way of telling stories and having conversations that may not normally be had, even among close friends. The pictures throughout this essay are of some of the body-maps we produced (Figures 1 to 12). I had initially decided on body mapping as a method to avoid positivistic representations of bodies, but because of the way I used and understood the method it led exactly to what I had attempted to avoid. We produced images of bodies that looked how a body is supposed to; I realized this when Penelope deviated from the norm. I initially had felt this was a major failure but the conversations we had around the maps were reflexive and interesting.

The maps and drawings we produced of our bodies were telling of how we imagined ourselves—or feel obliged to in certain ways. This doesn't mean body mapping has to be done this way and, in fact, my friends gave me a number of ideas of how I could have used this method differently. One suggested that starting with a blank sheet of paper and not tracing our bodies would have led to something different and more expressive; another suggested starting with conversations meant to trouble stable ideas about our bodies might have helped. Other suggestions included encouraging the use of collage or beginning with blind contours.

One friend told me that the tracing aspect of the maps made them prescriptive from the start. This is perhaps part of the reason why Penelope drawing her breasts differently from the rest of us was so striking. I feel that if we had approached the drawings differently, and had a few conversations before we started, they could have looked different. Michele and I had talked pretty extensively before we started workshops and her map was very expressive and abstract (Figures 10 to 12). Perhaps another challenge was that four workshops and a few conversations did not give us enough time to re-imagine our bodies or even fully understand the way we feel about them.

Does the possibility exist that we can ever draw a body that looks how we feel? Although Michele's map expressed feeling, it was still positivist in many ways and needed words to explain the feelings it was expressing, and when Penelope tried to make an expressive map Michele corrected her. The stories that came up around the maps and in

the workshops were often about corrections. Corrections are a part of gaining knowledge about how we are supposed to be and look; we are not supposed to shave for anyone else but it is okay to do it for oneself; we are not supposed to shave our thighs, arms, or eyebrows but rather pluck them instead.

Some of this learning, in terms of where we are supposed to use body hair management practices and what implements we should use, was easy to pinpoint while some of it was more fleeting. We had all experienced a moment, usually around the age of 11 or 12, where we had shaved the wrong part of our body or used the wrong implement. In these cases the corrections came from our peers as many of us didn't have mothers who shaved or could teach us how.

Two friends had shaved the middle of their eyebrows and when questioned by peers had lied about it, suddenly realizing it was wrong. However, no one said they had shaved, trimmed, or plucked because of these moments of correction they previously experienced. No one said they changed their hair for a lover. Explanations were always about how nice it felt to be smooth or to do something small for oneself. Of the women who didn't shave, not one said they didn't because of coercion or for anyone else. That was also framed as an individual choice. Before experiencing astonishment I interpreted these explanations as internalization of a neoliberal white feminism that privileges choice.

The small moment I witnessed between Penelope and Michele complicated my interpretation and called the very idea of choice into question — it astonished me (Shweder 1991). Did Michele choose to correct Penelope? Were we all choosing to make almost identical maps because we all felt the same way about our bodies? Alternately, were we being coerced? For whatever reason this moment could not be interpreted through my previous frameworks. So I did what Taussig (2011) suggests and sat with this 'not-knowing' moment and allowed it to change me and the research.

Reflecting helped me see that the corrections we experienced were not simply about structures limiting our agency or discipline and control. It was not as simple as people coerced into changing or removing their body hair or people choosing to do these things. The moment I witnessed was not particularly exemplary of corrections, but it complicated this idea I had been wrestling with, the feeling that made me itch. This moment taught me viscerally how beauty and power are aligned. But there was beauty in Penelope's refusal of this correction too. What Penelope did by drawing her breasts as she saw them was resistance but not just resistance. I want to avoid naming this moment as long as I can, as the naming of a moment moves it from a place of potential and movement, to a place where it is reduced and loses its power (Massumi 2002). To do this moment justice I must allow it to be many things at once and have many implications.

It could be Penelope asserting her agency.

It could be transformative.

It could be friendship or love.

What I am trying to say is that this moment is full of possibility and potential; it may not have simply re-oriented me, it may also have the potential to re-orient Penelope to her body. It could re-orient Michele to hers. I want to let this moment be all of the things that it could be. I don't want to capture it in a theoretical framework; I want to let it be all of this and more simultaneously.

The weak theoretical approach that I took to this project adds to a growing literature in anthropology that uses anthropology's ability to explore both the macro and the micro to see a world in becoming (Biehl and Locke 2010), to track potentiality (Stewart 2007), and to understand and interrogate our own understandings (Tausig 2011). João Biehl and Peter Locke look at worlds in becoming that cannot be explained by "the kind of theory readily available in the current anthropological toolkit—Foucault inspired 'biopolitical' approaches for example, focusing on rationalities and discourses, technologies of power and subject making, or overly deterministic neo-Marxist frameworks such as 'structural violence'" (2010:332). Biehl and Locke critique these approaches as limited and limiting. These theories are strong and add up rather than add to. They cannot aid in opening up the potentials, like those Kathleen Stewart (2007) tracks through everyday lives. Finding a space outside of power/resistance means that people make their own lives meaningful and have a space where their lives aren't shaped by either of these forces (which are two sides of the same coin). This is very exciting for me as someone who is an activist and an academic because it gives me real hope for a future, or a present, in which self-determination is actually possible. It makes me feel like anthropology can escape the colonial discourses it has been mired in since its inception.

A criticism of this type of theorizing could be that it is individualistic, as it does focus intensely on individuals. This focus on individuals could miss larger structural forces. For me this aspect of theorizing worlds in becoming was appealing because I was attempting to look at a small group of people without universalizing their experiences. I wanted to understand the forces that might shape their worlds but also see them as agents. This mode of theorizing allowed me to do exactly that, but this potential criticism is one I will reflect on moving forward.

The stories I have told at the beginning of this paper all contain a force or charge that have made me reflect on the ways in which they connect, and other ways in which they do not. My friend who told me that English words existing on their own and not in relation to other things was also telling me that it was foolish and naïve of me to think that we could talk honestly about body hair without talking honestly about our bodies. Body hair only exists in relation to the rest of our bodies, and the rest of our bodies only exist in relation to the space they move through. These relationships are more than coercive or resistive—they are both, while also something in between. In trying to reflect upon our relationships with our bodies and hair, which has been painful at points, I may have inflicted more pain. I hope that my methodology has been reparative (Sedgwick 2003, Stewart 2008) and offers hope and possibility. For me, the appeal of anthropology is in the way it sees the world optimistically, and people as meaningful agents in their own lives while still recognizing the ways in which structural forces can affect people's life choices. Through anthropological methods I have been able to explore how our everyday practices, such as body hair maintenance, are full of potential and not easily reduced to a binary opposition.

Notes

- 1 Names have been changed.

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