

Title: Review of *Unshaved: Resistance and Revolution in Women's Body Hair Politics*, by Breanne Fahs

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Fahs, Breanne. *Unshaved: Resistance and Revolution in Women's Body Hair Politics*. (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2022), 308 pages.

When Breanne Fahs was still an undergraduate, she caused a campus furor by inviting the death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal to record a graduate address. The university put a stop to it, but Fahs and her co-conspirators played the address at the baccalaureate ceremony instead. For this action, they were nominated *Hustler Magazine's* "Asshole of the Month" (*Unshaved* 252). Fahs' academic career has logically proceeded along this trajectory—she's biographer to Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Andy Warhol; she writes on menstrual activism; on BDSM dynamics and the paradoxes of sexual liberation; on sex work; on radical histories; and even has a recent edited collection of feminist manifestos, subtly entitled *Burn It Down*. Fahs tells us in *Unshaved*, "I have written about many topics in my career, several of which are, in my view, more controversial, radical, political, and frankly risky than body hair, and yet body hair continues to be the topic that gets under the skin of misogynists with the greatest efficiency and speed" (251).

For over 15 years, Fahs has been offering students in some of her classes an extra credit assignment in which they can choose to grow out their body hair (for women), remove their body hair (for men), or get kind of gender fucky with the whole thing (for non-binary people). In 2014, the right wing US media got wind of this and went berserk. Fahs ended up on the receiving end of a barrage of violently homophobic and misogynistic hate mail and death threats. She underwent a security evaluation for her home and had all of her work e-mails reviewed by a team of experts (93).

This extraordinary capacity of body hair to provoke vitriol might surprise the uninitiated reader. But it did not surprise me, because, during a surreal period of my life circa 2011, I had my Warholian 15-minutes when I appeared on a British TV show, put my hands up in the air, aimed my (voluminous) underarm bush at the camera, and sang, "Get Your Pits Out For the Lads." Funny? Yes. Wise? No. As a global broken telephone reproduced the AMAZING TALE of the woman who does not shave, I found myself inexpertly navigating a media storm. Sometimes it was fun. Sometimes, men told me they wanted to

rape me with jagged sticks. In short, I know the stakes of being what Fahs terms a “body hair rebel.”

In *Unshaved*, Fahs gives voice to dozens of body hair rebels—from the students who participated in her extra credit assignment, to artists both grass-roots and establishment, to photographers and models, feminist activists, and a host of other women and non-binary people who choose—for reasons political, personal, aesthetic, environmental, economic, medical, or cultural—not to subscribe to the gendered double standard of compulsory female body hair removal. *Unshaved* documents the pleasure and joy of resistance, of freedom from social strictures, of ditching the discomfort of shaving, and of learning to love your hairy body. And it gives us the hard fucking grind of it all too—the stigma, the shame, the conflict, the professional penalties, and the abuse from strangers.

In my experience, when people are mad at you (whether in all caps or at the dinner table) because they do not like your armpits, a thing they often shout is, “THIS IS NOT IMPORTANT AND YOU SHOULDN’T CARE ABOUT IT.” *Unshaved* makes the case that body hair scholarship and activism is not trivial, that, rather, body hair, “is the perfect site for exposing readers to the allure of social norms, the invisible workings of power, and the possibilities of resistance” (26). Hair, Fahs’ research shows, is a material and philosophical tool for getting fish to understand they’re wet. As Fahs asks, “What (*the fuck*) is going on when writing about body hair provokes responses like death threats and calls for my firing?” (24) She explains that the tension between body hair’s seeming inconsequentiality and its intense, emotional social regulation animates every chapter in the book (25).

Unshaved does not lead, as you might expect it to, with a list of arguments or facts to elevate body hair to the status of Serious Political Concern™, but, rather, with a demonstration of the lacuna between how most people explain compulsory female hairlessness (i.e., personal choice) and what happens when they stop shaving. Fah’s point that “something isn’t really a choice if people can’t choose to abstain from it” (21), is proven not rhetorically, but empathetically. When women were asked to imagine what it would be like to stop shaving, they sort of figured, NBD (no big deal). But the journals of those who undertook the assignment refute the idea of a neutral social space in which women freely choose what to do with their bodies. The students deal with shock, anger, disgust, discrimination, stigma, conflict, and, particularly for those in relationships with men, a host of extremely troubling intimate behaviours. Perhaps even more profound and difficult than these external factors, the women experience the extent of their own internalized shame, shame that prevents them from dressing as they like, moving as they like, interacting with others confidently, exercising, and experiencing sexual pleasure. Trivial stuff, clearly.

Drawing on body hair historian Rebecca Herzig, Fahs shows that disgust of female hair was deliberately manufactured by the razor company Gillette and fashion magazines in the 1920s for the profit of men. By the 1930s, female hair removal was a cultural norm in the USA and parts of Western Europe. We’ve

naturalized it to the point where women who choose not to shave are considered freaks, but the Western norm of female hairlessness isn't even a century old. In a chapter on Chinese body hair activism—one of the most compulsively readable parts of the book—this history is given added significance. Fahs introduces us to the contemporary Chinese feminist movement through the story of five activists arrested for giving out stickers about sexual harassment on public transport. In 2014, just months after their release, three of the five women took part in an online armpit hair contest. They came up against many of the same body hair stigmas we've been discussing so far: shaming, disgust, trivialization. But what makes their action particularly interesting is that shaving has only been a social norm in China for one generation. Most of the competitors' mothers probably didn't shave. And, just like with Gillette in the '20s, the new norm was the result of an intentionally orchestrated, economically motivated campaign of stigmatizing women's bodies for profit. As Fahs explains, circa 2005, the Reckitt Benckiser Group aggressively promoted their product Veet in China through bathroom and subway ads, celebrity endorsements, social media campaigns, video games, and free samples on campuses. A company spokesperson told reporters, "It's not how much hair you have, it's how much you think you have. If your concern level is high enough, even one hair is too much" (*Unshaved* 166). (You know, I'm always kind of grateful when the bad guy says the quiet part out loud.) Reckitt Benckiser set out to instill shame and self-hatred in Chinese women, and it succeeded. When this continues to be the capitalist and neoliberal game-plan, Fahs' thesis that body hair is a powerful mode of resistance is granted increased urgency.

Men loom large in *Unshaved*. The accounts of the men who undertook Fahs' body hair assignment reveal that it's mainly the opinion of their male peers that matters to them. Conversely, in the female students' journals, as well as the interviews with body hair rebels that inform the third section of the book, men's approval, permission, reputation, and desire are inescapable, particularly for heterosexual women. The Irish writer Louise O'Neill once said, "the hardest place to maintain my feminism is in a relationship with a straight man" (Mullally 2019), and one of the things I appreciate about *Unshaved* is how it drives into this skid. It can be embarrassing for us, as feminists, to talk about the ways we capitulate to the men in our lives, the ways in which many of us sideline our politics and sacrifice our principles to accommodate men we care about. Sometimes I think that if the other feminists could see me folding laundry at 10pm while my Frenchman plays FIFA, they'd kick me out of the movement.

In the tales of shitty partners unable to see past body hair to the women they claim to love, or the stories of the men who fetishize the hair, I saw much of my own erstwhile experience as a hairy lady on the dating scene, managing expectations and egos. The extra credit assignment resulted in some break ups, and clearly helped some of Fahs' students to dodge a bullet. After my own rebellion, I also realized that body hair acts as a kind of asshole filter, syphoning off the men unable to do what I call "the work"—that is, to examine their internalized -isms, to pick apart the "common sense" prejudices of the world—from those whose hearts are supple and curious. The tales of boyfriends both

shitty and unshitty made me remember dragging my Frenchman home from the bar on our second date, pouring him a whiskey, and asking, in bad French, “what do you think about women with body hair?” “I do’ no. I never tried eet,” he replied. (Reader: he tried eet.) He has continued to not give a fuck either way ever since. Body hair helped me to see something important about him from the get go, and I’m grateful for that. Even if he thinks his contribution to the laundry ends when he presses *Démarrer* on the dryer.

I can’t do the scope of the book justice. The chapter on body hair zines is an unequivocal pleasure. And I loved learning about Pakistani American artist Ayqa Khan and her symbolically loaded cross-cultural pieces. I puzzled with Fahs over the politics of photographer Ben Hopper’s portraits of conventionally gorgeous models with body hair. And I became more than just intellectually aroused googling Marilyn Minter’s erotic photo series *Plush* to visually complement Fahs’ loving analysis. I admired the light, confident touch with which Fahs uses Sara Ahmed on affect, Julia Kristeva on abjection, or Michel Foucault on biopower to undergird the intellectual aims of the study without sacrificing the reader’s flow or her participants’ voices. And I lauded the care and attention she gives to the heightened stakes of body hair rebellion for women of colour.

Do I have quibbles? Sure. I wasn’t crazy about the repeated reference to a 2003 study linking shaving and deodorant use to breast cancer, as at least two subsequent meta-analyses have failed to bear out this finding. I wondered about the politics of leaving some of the more troubling testimony from study participants largely without critique, but then I get that we have to be careful with the trust of people who agree to take part in our research.

I can’t overstate how greatly I enjoyed *Unshaved*. Fahs writes that the actions of body hair rebels “serve as a reminder that the rules of the body are not really rules after all, that mandates for how women groom or look or behave can be undone and discarded, privately and publicly” (254). I’ve been a Fahsian body hair rebel for, God, 12 or 13 years now, and the political conviction and quest for personal freedom that inspired my original protest has faded into the background. My body hair, very gradually, with great effort at first, and then with no effort at all, became normal for me and those around me. This book reminded me that body hair continues to be “a sly indicator of—or litmus test of—feminist politics of the body” (44). I appreciate anew the freedom I’ve won and am proud of the permission my body—careening around a Brittany beach after two small boys—grants to other women. *Unshaved* reignited some of my feminist fire. May it kindle a similar spark in you.

Biography

Emer O’Toole is Associate Professor of Irish Performance Studies at Concordia University. She is author of the books *Contemporary Irish Theatre and Social Change* (Routledge 2023) and *Girls Will Be Girls* (Orion 2015), and co-editor of the book *Ethical Exchanges* (Rodopi 2017). Her scholarship has appeared in international peer-reviewed journals including *Éire-Ireland*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, *Sexualities*, and *Target*. She contributes to publications including *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*. Before her

children came along and imprisoned her in the house, she made theatre. Now, on the rare occasion her captors are simultaneously asleep, she tries to write fiction.

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