

Book Review

The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair Edited by Karín Lesnik-Obertsein

Catrin Mair Edwards
University of Reading, UK

In a society where the majority of women (and, increasingly, men) participate in processes to eliminate body hair - whether shaving, depilating, waxing, bleaching, electrolysis - *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair* asks *why*, in contrast, there is an absence of critical work in this area; speaking of or about women and body hair seems to be invisible. This collection of essays, engaging with literary and critical theory, art history, anthropology and psychology, is concerned with the relationship between the making invisible of body hair and a culture of silence about women's body hair it diagnoses as a "taboo". In referring to this silence as a "taboo" the contributors suggest a cultural anxiety around speaking about, and the visibility of, women's body hair. The "taboo" is, then, a silence - critical and otherwise - Karín Lesnik-Obertsein, editor and lead contributor to the volume, claims serves to ward off a threat the visibility of body hair on women poses to traditional binary gender categories. The claim is that patriarchal capitalist values have served to oppress the visibility of, and speech about, body hair as a means of promoting restrictive definitions of "woman" and the "feminine" which the hegemonic order relies upon to sustain its power.

This is, then, a collection concerned with the important political implications opened up for feminist discourse through speaking about women and body hair. Lesnik-Oberstein's leading chapter demonstrates the way in which discussion of body hair has, up until this collection, been branded trivial or insignificant, unworthy of academic attention and distanced from a form of criticism that markets itself as a site for potential significant political reform. In contrast, this volume claims that speaking about women and body hair is indeed significant. However, the significance *The Last Taboo* attributes to the visibility and speaking of body hair is not a significance formulated in opposition to the kind

of insignificance previous references to body hair, though few, have attributed to it. It is a significance borne out of the impossible position these earlier references have unwittingly attributed to body hair through producing it, inadvertently, as significant in the process of attesting its insignificance. That is, the significance of women and body hair as an issue is produced for the contributors of *The Last Taboo* through the way in which it can be read as significant and insignificant *at the same time* for previous discussions. This “significance” has, then, a different meaning from the notion of significance-versus-insignificance it takes as its departure.

The “significance” *The Last Taboo* argues for is about the possible meanings attributable to body hair that have so far been silenced and about the potential body hair has to communicate meanings about women’s bodies and of femininity. Lesnik-Oberstein succinctly states this as “body hair as possibility”. This situates the collection amongst discourses that produce bodies, including gender, as meanings, in line with the work of feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. In fact, I would argue, a discussion of “meaning” *per se* is what this collection rests on. But, crucially, this volume does not locate its discussion of meaning as simply an “academic” exercise “just for the sake of it” in an uncharted area of discussion. Rather, it is the important political and social implications opened up through enabling body hair to be read *as* meaning, rather than meaningless, that is at stake in this volume. Indeed, in line with Lesnik-Oberstein’s position, Louise Tondeur’s chapter, “A history of pubic hair, or reviewers’ responses to Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*” addresses this production of “significance” and “meaning”, demonstrating how a discussion of body hair can be used to transcend the seeming opposition between important, meaningful topics of discussion and the irrelevant, trivial or meaningless. That is, this is a collection that strives to promote the reading of body hair, gender and the body *as* meaning.

In fact, the collection as a whole is similarly concerned with the possibilities of a meaning produced in and through transcending the binary oppositions and dichotomies upon which patriarchal, hegemonic discourse is founded and which requires and necessitates the taboo on women’s body hair to perpetuate its foundation. These include the opposition of gender as masculinity/femininity as well as the opposition

presence/lack that is so often used to sustain the distinction of gender. Similarly, it includes the opposition of nature/culture (or art) that contributes to the production of femininity as that which lacks and must produce itself through the addition of presence through artifice. Indeed, as I am suggesting in this section, *The Last Taboo* points to the way in which these oppositions impossibly supplement one another, each revealing the other's insufficiency in their attempt to secure meaning.

As such, this collection is not one that merely advocates a return to the "natural" body through the prohibition of women's hair removal in contrast to the artifice of shaving. Sue Walsh's chapter, "Bikini fur and fur bikinis" critiques this position through demonstrating the way in which the ideal of the unshaven body is reliant upon understanding body hair's presence as "natural" through being a vestige of an earlier "fur", which is primitive, prior to culture. Walsh disrupts and violates this seemingly *natural* connection between fur and body hair, which produces body hair as the "natural", by exposing the "natural" as meaning and, therefore, as culturally determined, undermining the opposition between nature and culture and demonstrating the impossibility of a return to the natural. Likewise this is not, as Daniela Caselli argues in her chapter "Body hair, genius and modernity", a collection that claims to chart the historical progression of narratives about women and body hair but, in line with the "history" of Michel Foucault, always interprets the past as a meaning in which the present is implicated. Yet this position, whilst not claiming to be able to move beyond body hair as meaning to a "truth" prior to it (which is impossible in these terms) does not render the collection politically impotent. Indeed, as Lesnik-Oberstein and Tondeur argue, this notion of history and meaning is what enables the collection's power to mobilise discourses about, and discussion of, femininity and gender - *why* body hair is a legitimate site of contestation for feminism - through its interpretation of women's body hair as an area in which meaning has been silenced and made invisible but which can, therefore, be opened up in a way that allows discussion by recognising women's body hair as a site of meaning and contestation.

In Lesnik-Oberstein's terms, body hair is an important site for feminism in which gender as meaning can be negotiated because, she argues, the visibility of female body hair can be interpreted as transcending the

polarity of masculinity and femininity: “the [female] moustache [is interpreted] as a revelation of the ‘masculine’ hidden in femininity”. That is, this collection offers the discussion of female body hair as a potential site of discussion to feminist critics because of the way in which female body hair reveals and makes visible gender (and sex, with the distribution of body hair categorised as a “secondary sexual characteristic”) as a construction or meaning rather than “natural” or “real”. But, crucially, Lesnik-Oberstein refers to the way in which the revelation of body hair on women is not simply about the making visible of body hair *in opposition* to its invisibility. In line with the disruption of the opposition femininity/masculinity is the formulation of a new “visibility”, like “significance”, that does not derive its meaning in contrast to invisibility or silence but is produced through being visible and invisible, spoken and silent, meaningful and meaningless *at the same time*.

This impossible situation is referred to as a form of “madness”. Appropriating the term “madness” from those who have called the discussion of body hair “mad” - insignificant or monstrous (two extremes) - in order to silence, make invisible and oppress discussion of the relation between women, body hair and the feminine, Lesnik-Oberstein uses the term “madness” to formulate new possibilities for discourse in this area. The “madness” of body hair is concerned with the continuing assertion of its presence despite the patriarchal order’s attempt to make it absent. This is about the way in which body hair, as an issue, always already asserts its right to speak and to be visible because the feminine always already contains the masculine within itself. It is, then, the persistent and troubling inability to silence “body hair” as an issue - its insistence on being read or interpreted as meaning - that Lesnik-Oberstein refers to as “madness”, which can be compared to Shoshana Felman’s consideration of “madness” and psychoanalytic meaning in *Writing and Madness*. The “visibility” of body hair that Lesnik-Oberstein and the contributors to *The Last Taboo* wish to promote is not simply the advocating of increased talk about exposure of body hair on women but is about a more radical visibility borne from the impossible relation between its simultaneous invisibility and visibility. This “visibility” is about the way in which body hair, oppressed by and repressed from the patriarchal order, is significant because it opens up the possibility of new meanings - such as the new meanings I read *The Last Taboo* formulating

for “significance”, “visibility” and “madness” - through and as the eruption of the oppressed or the return of the repressed. This formulation of the visibility of women’s body hair and the potential it holds for the deconstructive turn to open up a new area for critique is what renders *The Last Taboo* so politically powerful and important for feminist critique; *The Last Taboo* it makes visible femininity as that which already contains the masculine within itself and which cannot be silenced.

As a collection, then, *The Last Taboo* is concerned with this politically important formulation of “visibility”. There are, nevertheless, some instances of the less radical visibility of women’s body hair in this collection. The charting of oppression - the charting of instances in which women’s body hair has been rendered invisible - is of course important for making the issue “visible” in one sense of the visibility Lesnik-Oberstein wishes to encourage. However, this form does not make the issue “visible” as the “return of the repressed” or as the “eruption of the oppressed”. Whilst this form *is* indeed about the silencing of discourse on women’s body hair - evidence of the taboo - and important in this respect, it does not break the silence in the more radical way since it talks of the silence in terms the silence sanctions.

Of course, speaking in any other way is impossible: the more radical visibility also requires the terms of the silence in order to speak its questioning. Diagnosing the invisibility of body hair is, therefore, necessary as a first step. However, *The Last Taboo’s* most effective manoeuvre, for example in Laura Scuriatti’s analysis of art criticism in her chapter “Designers’ bodies”, is its demonstration of the difference in these two forms of visibility. Moreover, *The Last Taboo’s* brilliance lies in its reflection of how this deconstructive enterprise requires the hegemonic order’s terms in order to retrieve “body hair” as the repressed, and therefore potentially meaningful, in this system. Neil Cocks’ chapter, “On Frida Kahlo’s moustache”, engages productively with its implication in this problem but notes, like Lesnik-Oberstein’s interpretation of “meaning” in relation to the feminist analysis of body weight, that this does not render an analysis of body hair as politically futile. In contrast, *The Last Taboo* does indeed provide a convincing call to feminist critics to take note of body hair’s significance and visibility in order to negotiate the meanings of women’s bodies both politically and personally.

Biographical Note: **Catrin Mair Edwards** recently completed her Ph. D. in Critical Theory at the University of Reading. She is an active member of the Centre for International Research into Childhood: Literature, Media, Culture (CIRCL) and her research interests include psychoanalysis, childhood and sexuality. She can be reached at C.M.Edwards@pgr.reading.ac.uk.