My body hair is a flower
Case study of MaYHAIR initiative and personal relationships with one’s hairy body

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Master’s Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change

Master’s thesis 15 ECTS credits

ISRN:
ABSTRACT

I analyzed the hairy experience of seven women participating or linked to MaYHAIR initiative, through the ex/in-corporation framework (Zeiler, 2013). MaYHAIR is a movement inviting to question the double standards on body hair by challenging people to keep their body hair for the whole month of May. Although previous studies mainly focus on hairlessness and body hair removal, I concentrate in this study case on the - feminine – experience of body hair and the excorporation feeling that realization of the hairless norm may create. I address the acceptance of one’s body hair leading to the acceptance of one’s body; the politization associated with hairiness; the importance of intersectional concern leading to challenging choice rhetoric; as well as the necessity for support and diversity of representations.

KEY WORDS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The cover picture is my own work, created with the words given by the informants when asked to described their hairy bodies. Many thanks to them for participating in my project, giving me time and sharing their body hair journey.

I appreciated the inputs and fruitful comments of Ericka Johnson. Thank you for your dynamic supervision.

Many thanks to Pamela Dumont and MaYHAIR people for welcoming me to their team and sharing a nice and energetic brunch.

Thanks to the gender studies master’s team – students and professors alike! It is really encouraging to learn along with you great people. Your interest in my subject helped me continue and believe in it: it is not a useless subject!

Thank you, Marie, I came up with the idea of this thesis with our passionate discussions! You really helped me proof-read it as well, and it is a very valuable help! Thank you, Rozenn for being such a great friend. For giving me food-for-thought and for encouraging me. We will believe in ourselves! Thank you papa et maman, for your support and for giving me the means and power to do this master’s and thesis. Lots of lots of thanks to Ophélie, for trusting me, motivating me, encouraging me and helping me when it appeared to be an incommensurable task. Love you all.
# TABLE OF CONTENT

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2  
Key words ......................................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 3  
Table of content ............................................................................................................................... 4  
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 5  
Body hair background studies .......................................................................................................... 6  
Explanation of such practices ........................................................................................................... 8  
MaYHAIR case study .......................................................................................................................... 11  
Situated knowledge ............................................................................................................................ 12  
Theoretical framework ....................................................................................................................... 13  
  Phenomenology of the body ............................................................................................................ 13  
Material and method ......................................................................................................................... 15  
  Focus groups / interview ................................................................................................................ 15  
Limitations ....................................................................................................................................... 16  
Content analysis ............................................................................................................................... 16  
Analysis ........................................................................................................................................... 17  
  Body hair journey .......................................................................................................................... 17  
    Habituation phase - incorporation ................................................................................................. 17  
    Change - excorporation................................................................................................................ 19  
    Accepting one’s body (hair) .......................................................................................................... 22  
    Here comes the change phase – re-incorporation ...................................................................... 24  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 29  
APPENDICES ................................................................................................................................... 32  
  Recruitment text: (translated) ...................................................................................................... 32  
  Recruitment text: (original) .......................................................................................................... 32  
  Questions asked during interviews – in no specific order .......................................................... 32  
References ...................................................................................................................................... 33
INTRODUCTION

Think about this tiny part of you, you may pay attention to it every day or not much, you may cohabit peacefully with it or with tension, but my guess is, you are aware of it. I am talking about your body hair, present everywhere on your body, except on your hand palms and under the soles of the feet. Body hair is such a common subject of our lives that we may forget or misjudge its importance. But body hair is not a neutral object: a big influence from the media and society in general lead us to think a certain way about it. Also, affects are related to it: it may be described as ugly or beautiful, unhygienic or useful, dirty or hydrating… And when we think about body hair, we easily think of its removal and the gendered pattern associated with such practice. I mean by that the double standard existing in westernized societies¹: hairlessness for women, hairiness for men. Body hair is either judged as a trivial subject – “we know it is gendered”- or as a ridiculous one – “what is the need to talk about it?”. But I believe many things can emerge from talking about it, and because there are so many incentives and affects related to it, I do not think it as that trivial of a subject.

To help rethink our relationships with body hair and take time to ask (ourselves) questions about our habits and feelings, a growing number of initiatives invite people to let their body hair grow for a given amount of time. Here, I want to assess the impact of one such initiative, named Maipoils² / MaYHAIR based in Canada and happening online. During the whole month of May, people are encouraged to let their body hair grow and investigate what it produces, on them as well as on others. MaYHAIR tends to be an inclusive initiative, therefore it is addressed to everyone – men, non-binary people/queer people, women. It is presented as a challenge, but not as a strict one, you do not have to force yourself to continue letting body hair grow if you are struggling, if you receive too many harsh comments, if you are endangered. MaYHAIR’s aim is to start a discussion, to let people think of themselves as hairy and to question beauty standards and body hair relationships. “Its interest lies in the glorification of difference, capable of existence through mass and mentality explosion (no less!)” (Dumont, 2017). They want to introduce new feminine and masculine ways of being. Indeed, being hairy, especially for cis-women in the West, may be a whole new experience. In this project, I want to deal with body hair – and specifically the experience of being hairy, on a

¹ This may even be true on a larger scale. However, statistics available concerned mainly westernized countries: US, UK, Australia, New-Zealand.
² Maipoils is the French name. “Mai” refers to the month of May, but is also the homonym of “mes” (mine). “Poils” mean body hair. Because it is based in Montréal (Canada) most of its communication is happening in French.
personal level as well as in relation with other, through the focus of MaYHAIR case study and the theoretical framework of ex/in-corporation. I will focus on the research questions:

1- What are the self and interpersonal relationships with body hair when confronted to the experience of not removing body hair?

2- How do initiatives such as MaYHAIR help -or not - changing one’s being-in-the-world regarding body hair removal?

I will first introduce past studies about body hair and its (non)-removal and gendered aspects associated with it. Then I will present MaYHAIR case study and the material I will use for the following analysis.

BODY HAIR BACKGROUND STUDIES

Body hair – here defined as hair growing anywhere on the body except on the scalp, is a common characteristic of human beings.\(^3\) However, the experience of one’s body hair and being-in-the-world regarding body hair are different depending on who you ask and notably, depending on gender. Indeed, expectations about one’s body hair and its (non)-removal are different based on one’s gender. Body hair removal is not a modern practice \(\textit{per se}\). It happened at various times and various places, in various gendered patterns (Ramsey \textit{et al.}, 2009). In Ancient Egypt, one beauty ideal was to have a smooth and white skin and therefore no body hair, it was also associated with social ranks: the higher, the whiter (Bouvier, 2009). Whiteness was also promoted in Ancient Greece where men are represented hairless, except for pubic hair. (Goldhill, 2009). In the Islamic tradition, it is common for men to have shaved armpits for prayers and common for men and women to remove their pubic hair during ablution (Moulin, 2011). In Byzantium (between 330 and 1453) men who epilated were considered as effeminate, as it was claimed that they mimicked women in order to have sex “with the two sexes” (Sidéris, 2011). In the Roman Empire it was the norm for women to remove all body hair, such as it was the norm for men in ancient Asia and Egypt. But in other times hairiness was the trend, notably with the beard for men, it was a noble mark in XXIV century in Mesopotamia (Joannès, 2011). Interestingly, mention of hairy norms are harder to find in historical books. Therefore, body hair and body hair removal are to be considered in a given context. In this thesis, I focus on the present time and the current gendered aspect of body hair (non-)removal in Western societies.

\(^3\) Body hair may disappear or fall off due to some pathological situation (alopecia).
Nowadays, in westernized societies, women are depicted as hairless and men as hairy (and mainstream representations are too dichotomous to say what the main standard(s) for non-binary/genderqueer people is/are). The ideal of hairless feminine bodies emerged after the 1st world war due to razor advertising claiming hair removal as ‘sexy’ (Hope, 1982) and new fashion trends (Pavillard, Julien and Dubois, 2015). Skirts became shorter revealing legs in public spaces and the need for them to be hairless. Consumer capitalism created beauty norms and body ideals – by essence impossible to achieve (Frost, 2005, p. 82) and therefore profitable for the industries. These depilating trends developed so much that it is now a taken-for-granted norm for women. Surveys - mostly from the 1990s and 2000s but we could expect them to still be representative⁴ - show that in westernized countries, the frequency of women removing hair is around 90 % (96% in Australia (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008); 99% in the UK (Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi, 2005); 96% in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Terry and Braun, 2013)). The main method used is shaving – presumably the cheapest one and relatively the fastest, even if you have to do it more often as the regrowth is quicker than with waxing for instance- and it is mainly undertaken on legs and underarms. Furthermore, more and more women remove their pubic hair, arguably influenced by the pornographic industry, where most pubes are represented without any hair (Ramsey et al., 2009).

Regarding men, approximatively two-third or more of them remove body hair (in USA, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Boroughs, Cafri and Thompson, 2005; Martins, Tiggemann and Churchett, 2008; Terry and Braun, 2013)). Figures vary a lot depending on the consideration or not of facial hair depilation for men. Advertisements and popular culture depict more and more hairless men. So, is this gendered trend beginning to change? Is depilation becoming uniformized between men and women? Indeed some scholars suggest that “the gender gap in body hair removal… is narrower than you might think” (Cristen Conger, 2011, cited by Braun, Tricklebank & Clarke 2013). However, expectations regarding men are still different from those regarding women, it is required for women to be hairless whereas it is a possibility for men (Jennings, Braun & Clarke 2019). Indeed, hairy men are still seen as acceptable or even attractive (Terry and Braun, 2013) whereas strong negative adjectives are associated with hairy women. Terms such as “disgusting”, “unhygienic” are used to depict women’s body hair whereas hairy women themselves are characterized as less attractive, intelligent, friendly, happy, but more assertive, strong, aggressive, dominant, independent than

⁴ A survey was just released at the time of publishing this thesis, about women and body hair habits in France. Only 0.23% of the participants never removed body hair. (Collectif Liberté Pilosité Sororité, 2019)
hairless women (Basow and Willis, 2001; Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004). There is a strong double standard regarding depilating expectations, going with a strong social regulation against hairy women.

For men, facial hair is filled with social meaning. Hence Oldstone-Moore says that “facial hair is political. Because ideas of proper manliness are bound up with social and political authority, any symbol of masculinity carries political and moral significance.” (Oldstone-Moore, 2015, p. 2). He also separates in four, motives for growing beards: gender bending, social nonconformity, religious identification and special quest (ibid, p. 260). It seems that of all body parts, facial hair is the one mostly associated with masculinity. Indeed, facial hair is a strong sex/gender characteristic, appearing during puberty, as highlighted by Dozier’s study (2005): interviewing female-to-male trans people Dozier observed that depending on congruency between sex characteristics and gender, behavior is more or less important in asserting gender. People rely more on behavior to assess one’s gender if there is incongruency between sex characteristics and gender. Interviewees explain that facial hair is an important sex characteristic for social identity as male. Read as a male secondary sex characteristic, facial hair is a strong element for assessing gender.

**Explanation of such practices**

Depilation is usually costly, time-consuming and painful, so one can wonder how such a practice can be so anchored in habits. One key of understanding is the power relations associated with gendered depilation. Indeed, because they appeared in a capitalist as well as sexist and racist environment, women’s depilation is related to pleasing men. It is not only a question of personal preference from the woman as it is influenced by the surrounding patriarchal society and its (hairless) advertisements. In this (hetero)-sexist society, beauty norms lead to be beautiful in order to be sexually attractive -for men-. However, as outlined by Renard (2016), body hair indicates sexual maturity, at least for hair on the legs, armpits and pubis. Interestingly, depilation practices for women aim at pretending that women’s bodies are naturally hairless. These hairless feminine bodies – along with other beauty dictates such as thinness or smooth skin – do not only refer to youth but strikingly, to childhood. And childhood is associated with vulnerability and therefore, Renard states, this youth ideal is an ideal of weakness and vulnerability (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003; Renard, 2016). Müller-Delouis (2011) also claims that epilation results in women taking time to change their real body into an idealized body. This is, Müller-Delouis argues, a denial of the real body and thus a denial of
the person, resulting in shame and low self-esteem due to the unavoidable failure (ibid, p. 287). Indeed, hairlessness symbolizes proper femininity and powerlessness, whereas hairiness stands for virility and power (Fahs, 2011a). These heterosexist outcomes are also outlined by the fact that lesbian and bisexual women are less subject to body hair removal (Basow, 1991) than heterosexual women. Moreover -UK- heterosexual women find body hair more disgusting than lesbian and bisexual women do (Hayfield, Halliwell and Clarke, 2017). Concerning gay men, they are more concerned with body hair than heterosexual men. Thus, as Fahs highlights “having men as sexual partners – whether for men or women- led to more dissatisfaction with body hair and, theoretically, more interest in removing it” (Fahs, 2011a, p. 486). This is where hairlessness can be read as a problem – not the action of removing body hair, but the norm in itself. It represents the unequal relationship between men and women and the necessity for women to comply to beauty norms to be judged as attractive by men.

Besides creating unequal power relations, beauty dictates and (unachievable) perfection ideals also have psychological and social impacts due to social pressure to fulfill the standards (Frost, 2005). As highlighted by Frost, “the experience of the individual who cannot produce the ‘normal’ social identity required /…/ is that of being discredited” (Frost, 2005, p. 80). Thus it results in a “constant driving for the impossible” (Frost, 2005, p. 82): to be thinner, to have no body hair remaining, to look as young as possible… And harmful feelings result from it. In her book *The beauty Myth* (1991), Wolf lays out that “there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control.” (Wolf, 1991, p. 10). In this book, she presents the thesis that beauty standards aim at consolidating patriarchal oppression, backed-up by consumerism, notably after second wave feminism. The beauty myth is the construction of objectively defined “beauty”, to which women aspire and “men must want to possess women who embody it” (Wolf, 1991, p. 12). But none of this is true, Wolf argues, ‘beauty’ is a means to assign value to women and thus is an expression of power relationships. Furthermore, she outlines that beauty is not a given, universal quality, it varies through time and place, being very much dependent on the given society. Interestingly, nowadays, ‘beauty’ is defined as an ideal, that is something unachievable, a Sisyphus’ rock. The most striking example of the beauty myth’s damages are all the eating disorders related to thin ideal. But hairlessness is not out of the question.

However, awareness exists around such constraints and power inequalities. As a result, initiatives – individual or on community level – arise, to make concerns available, raise
questions, develop understanding and propose new ways of being-in-the-world. It is the case of Maipoils / MaYHAIR. Created in 2017 by Paméla Dumont, a Canadian comedian, MaYHAIR invites people to let their body hair grow during the month of May to engage reflection and discussion about it. As poetically explained on their website: “The beauty of this project is that no one pretends to have the right answer; the main goal is to use our thinking heads and loving bodies to help society develop more diversified and therefore more fulfilling frameworks” (Dumont, 2017). Therefore, this project engages with the rhetoric of choice, saying that one does with hir own body hair as one decides. Though, this liberty of choice is to be considered in a given context, as what one decides is framed in a cultural setting full of expectations and therefore may have social consequences (Terry and Braun, 2013). This politic of choice itself is challenged and choice cannot be viewed as solely personal and empowered practice (Budgeon, 2015). Indeed, socio-cultural conditions continue to limit choices available to many people, (ibid, p. 308) and we (and even more, I) need to be aware that “the expectation that women are to think of themselves as liberated individual regardless of their immediate social position or material situation is a central normalizing effect of discourse of choice” (Budgeon 2015, p. 314, my emphasis). Therefore, I acknowledge that this question of body hair and its (non)-removal may not be of first concern for many people, and that I am privileged enough to have time, security and means to think about such issues and make my own choice about body hair. I consider that being hairy may be harder for some, not -only- because of one own’s perception, but because of one’s socio-cultural context, for instance one’s skin color. Indeed, asking female students to let their body hair grow, Fahs and Delgado (2011) got to the conclusion that “women of color and working-class women were most negatively affected by the process of not shaving, because not shaving added a layer of bodily oppression to the stigma they already experienced” (p.24). I will come back to this dimension in my analysis. Thus, considering social context is important and I will not generalize my findings to everyone.

Through my research and readings, I found that previous studies on body hair mainly focus on hairless bodies and removal of body hair. My aim here is to take their counterpoint and concentrate on hairy (feminine) bodies – feminine rather than just all bodies because that is where I think the struggle is stronger. This lack of focus on women’s lived experiences of body hair is outlined by Fahs (2013) who herself explored reactions and experiences of hairy women and hairless men (Fahs, 2011a, 2011b). She asked her female students to let their body hair grow and her male students to take it off during 10 weeks and to report their experiences through a weekly log. She analyzed the body norms and their breaking through sexism and heterosexism.
discourses, including the compulsory heterosexuality prism (Rich, 1980) – the idea that heterosexuality is the given sexuality for men and women and that it is supported by institutions. In Fahs’ experiment, non-normative – namely hairless men and hairy women - was read as an assault on heterosexuality and therefore rejected by family, friends, coworker… Fahs states that “these networks of social pressures ensure /…/ heterosexual femininity that always ensures men’s dominance over women’s decision-making power” (p. 467). Homosexuality was also linked to hairless men. Interestingly, Fahs also points out that when asked to imagine hairy women, another sample of women related being hairy to personal choice, not acknowledging social pressure, although the latter was prominent in the real hairy experiences.

Inspired by Fahs’ work and wanting to deal with hairiness taboo, such as declared by Lesnik-Oberstein & al (2007) in their book The last taboo: women and body hair, I want here to investigate hairy experiences through the case study of MaYHAIR initiative, questioning one’s own relationships with one’s hairy body as well as interpersonal relationships.

**MaYHAIR case study**

To conduct this case study, I contacted the founder of MaYHAIR, Paméla Dumont and met the organization team. Around 20 people voluntarily work to promote MaYHAIR and organize events. MaYHAIR is on Instagram (~1,7K followers) and Facebook (~3,5K likes) and has its own website. Events are organized in Montreal during the month and videos, photos, and different contents are posted on social media, to show diverse hairy bodies and engage discussion.

2019 marks the third iteration of MaYHAIR. Format and communication evolve each year. During May 2017 and May 2018, videos were released every day, with testimonies of people about their body hair relationship and reflections about body hair. These videos are a great material. They represented different ways of thinking, introducing diverse people and their relationship with body hair, people of different ages, identifying to different genders and of different skin colors. Different themes are outlined in them: most men figure that body hair is more masculine than feminine and that the choice to epilate is not the same for men as for women. The people interviewed also declare that body hair is not dirty, or it would be for men too. On the whole, different opinions are stated and it complements well MaYHAIR’s aim: to launch the conversation, to give people food-for-thought about body hair, without claiming a new norm or a new compulsory kind of body. The videos also produce a pool of body representations.
In 2019, a stress is put on intersectionality and thematic videos are released rather than testimonies. One of them outlines the cross-over between fat women and being hairy, others are yet to be released. The main media this year is photos with an exhibition organized in Montreal, especially created for MaYHAIR.

Compared to similar initiatives, MaYHAIR is a smaller one: JanuHairy, an initiative from the UK firstly launched in 2019 counts around 12.8K followers on Instagram and 2 K likes on Facebook whereas GetHairyFebruary, an Australian movement existing since 2016 cumulates around 5 K followers on Instagram and 1,2K of likes on Facebook; compared to ~1,7K followers and ~3,5K likes for MaYHAIR. One difference is that MaYHAIR occurs mainly in French, reducing the potential public of interest. Of all these movements, I firstly encountered MaYHAIR on Facebook. It is one of the reasons why I picked it as my case study, along with the fact that it is in French, my native tongue and that I would be able to meet the team given the fact that I am living in Montreal. The ‘human scale’ of the team made it an easier place to get quickly acquainted with. Furthermore, unlike JanuHairy and GetHairyFebruary, MaYHAIR does not aim at raising money for charity, it is focused on raising awareness and produces its own content for school teachers to speak about body hair and body image.

Situated knowledge

Connecting with Donna Haraway’s situated knowledge (Haraway, 2006) I want to introduce my personal relationship with body hair. MaYHAIR is not the starting point of my own journey but it helped me along the way. I am a white and thin hairy lesbian cis-woman and this thesis started with a friend asking me how I manage with my body hair at the swimming pool. Me stopping to depilate was more of a personal commitment -mainly due to laziness - than a feminist stance or something of the like. At the beginning, I was helped by well-minded friends and by being away from home and from people who knew me hairless. I am not sure if I now keep my body hair as a feminist act but feminist thinking and body positivity help me keeping my body hair and being happy about it. It is still sometimes a concern to be hairy, but I would say way less than removing my body hair. I am totally aware that my personal journey influences my thinking about this topic and I do not claim to be neutral about body hair (non)-removal, but I also believe it helps me connect with the subject from another point of view. Having this in mind, I am cautious about overinterpretation. However, I am also aware of dictates and pressure and I am not judgmental about one’s own choice regarding body hair. To
help me build a less biased analysis, I apply my research with a theoretical framework, mainly expanding from phenomenology of the body.

**Theoretical framework**

**Phenomenology of the body**

Phenomenology of the body and the fact that it examines how “the body as unique and different from other bodies, can form and inform our embodied selves and influence our ways of interacting with others and the world” (Zeiler, 2013, p. 69) relates to my research question. From this field I especially want to build upon the concept of ex/in-corporation as discussed in Zeiler’s overview (2013).

The concept of incorporation formulates that norms and beliefs that we encounter through our social surroundings during our childhood have an impact on our being-in-the-world, in our gender performativity and are incorporated (ibid). This incorporation happens thanks to bodily openness: We give to other people and receive from them, habits, gestures and postures when interacting with them (Diprose cited by Zeiler 2013, p. 73). This takes place rather on a pre-reflective level than as an active phenomenon. And this is true, Zeiler continues (ibid, p. 74), for gendered, classed or ethnicized patterns of behavior. Such culturally enhanced behaviors gradually become an incorporated part of one’s body. These incorporated patterns enable then to socially act and interact, as long as others share the same incorporated beliefs and norms. And by following the same path as others i.e. by acting and thinking the same, we reinforce these beliefs and norms. This is the paradox of footprint as outlined by Ahmed: “lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16).

Zeiler formulates that these incorporations of norms and cultural patterns are profound enough to result in taken-for-granted (gendered) behavior (Zeiler, 2013) and especially:

> “it is important to note that beliefs and norms that are likely candidates for being incorporated are beliefs /…/ and norms regarding the body i) that are primarily at work in the taken-for-granted, pre-reflective domain of bodily existence, “in the domain of the habitual,” and ii) that can be particularly deeply rooted in our embodied way of being-in-the-world because we enact and live them as embodied beings” (Malmqvist and Zeiler 2010 in Zeiler 2013, p. 73).

However, at some point, something that has been incorporated can become excorporated. Zeiler defines excorporation as a concept that helps examine “painful experiences of how one’s lived body breaks in the encounter with others and how this makes one unable not to attend to certain
beliefs and norms about one’s own lived body” (Zeiler 2013, p. 70, emphasis in original). Excorporation results from a certain event, where something that we were familiar with, suddenly becomes striking and object of our attention. One characteristic is that at first it is unwanted and painful (Zeiler, 2013, p. 75). It can happen when one realizes that hir body does not fit with a given gendered norm, specificity which then is subject of one’s attention. Whereas the given norm or behavior was previously invisible, performed on a pre-reflective level, excorporation makes it all the more salient and object of one’s reflection. It affects one’s being-in-the-world, questioning it and interfering with hir relation with others. The previous behaviors or norms lived as being-in-the-world, become through excorporation an object for the subject (ibid, p. 76). Excorporation lays out the fact the one’s body is inscribed in history and influenced by other’s ways of acting and expectations about one’s behavior.

Once excorporation has occurred it can be a repetitive and disruptive movement, lasting in time. This would then result in bodily alienation. Resulting from bodily alienation is the consideration of one’s body as an object, especially due to others’ gaze, interactions and to the feeling of body break apart. This results in hard being-in-the-world.

But excorporation can also lead to more positive outcome, naming re-incorporation, which is not a return to the initial stage but an embodied resistance, an incorporation of new norms or behaviors, a new being-in-the-world. And this new being-in-the-world implies a questioning mode of existence, notably of taken-for-granted norms and behaviors (Zeiler, 2013).

I see the potentiality to link ex/in-corporation theory to the body hair and depilation subjects. Scholars on body hair removal outline that depilation and the hairless feminine body is a “taken-for-granted” norm (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003). These norms act on a prereflective level, that is they are given and learned through others. Therefore, I wonder if women incorporate their bodies as hairless. Then, what does it produce to stop removing it, does it relate to excorporation? Indeed, hairy women are qualified as ‘disgusting’, then what does it result to have a hairy body as it does not correspond to the social norm anymore? This connection is also suggested by Caselli in an analysis of The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, where Caselli outlined that the “short, thick stubble of black hair” of The Bell Jar’s protagonist results in a “wish for excorporation” (Caselli, 2013, p. 35) due to disgust. Thus, I will analyze the possible connection of this theoretical framework with experiences of hairy women.
MATERIAL AND METHOD

For this case study, and to explore my research question, I wanted to interview people participating in MaYHAIR to harvest hairy stories. For this, I did focus groups and I analyzed them with the method of content analysis.

Focus groups / interview

Taking a feminist stance, I wanted to use focus group method because it “shifts the balance of power away from the researcher toward the research participants” (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 221). Focus groups enable people to speak by themselves more than to answer pre-given questions. The idea of a focus group is to gather a small group of people to discuss a given topic, here body hair through MaYHAIR initiative. Because a focus group is a conversation between people, it would allow me to have interpersonal reactions and reasoning. Another aspect of a focus group is that the discussion remains quite natural and to emphasize this aspect, I decided to make the interviews in Cafés to have a friendly atmosphere. I then got people started with a few questions and I let them speak – in what could be described as semi-conducted interviews. I specifically decided not to confront hairy and hairless people which could have gained more inter-personal reactions, but which I feared would be confronting for most.

I recruited people through MaYHAIR’s Facebook community. First within the organizational team – that is volunteers implicated in the organization of the events – and then on the public page (recruitment text in appendices). I offered different dates and organized the meetings when most people would be available. Due to cancelling, I did not always get several people coming. I interviewed 7 people: 4 in duo and 3 by themselves. These three were then not focus group but interviews. All seven people identified as cis-women, and one as a woman of color, the others as white. Age mean was 27 years old, the youngest was 21 and the oldest 34. They identified as multi-sexual (1), lesbian (1), bisexual (1), without label (1) and three did not specify.

I had the informants sign an informed consent form acknowledging that the interview was recorded only for analysis and that it will be anonymized. Therefore, all names have been changed. By asking rather broad questions, I tried to give the informants as much control as possible in the process, so they can avoid sensitive topics if they wanted to.
Limitations

My recruitment message was in French and I intended to not restrict it by using inclusive writing to make pronouns and adjectives applicable to any gender (see APPENDICE). However, it is interesting to note that I only got cis-women who responded to my request for interviews. I cannot easily know the distribution of genders on the MaYHAIR community, but I am guessing that on the almost 4,000 people ‘liking’ the page, there is a mix of genders. Was this underrepresentation due to the fact that men did not feel concerned? It may also be true for the non-representation of non-binary/queer-gendered people, as well as because of their lower frequency in the population (Richards et al., 2016). This remark applies also to the “whiteness” of my sample – was my message not inclusive enough, is the question not as relevant for people of color or is MaYHAIR movement not diverse enough? It would be interesting to explore deeper the people relating to this initiative.

The intimacy induced by focus group worked. The relationship between me and the informants was – to my point of view – even. They were talking more than me and they easily lead the conversation. Many of them acknowledged that they got something out of the conversation, Tounsia told me that “it was enriching” and they were all really willing to participate and eager to speak. Furthermore, I noticed that these interviews quickly led to what could be assessed as a private or intimate matter, because, I guess, body hair relates to the body. The subject eventually leads to talk about sexual encounter, body hang-ups and related topics. On the other hand, I did not get as many group interviews as expected, therefore interrelationships were harder to analyze. I mainly concentrated my analysis on the main themes appearing and their relation to the ex-in/corporation theory.

Content analysis

I used a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the interview transcripts. This method is based on the good knowledge of the data so as to get patterns from it. I transcribed the recordings of the interviews to code them and look for recurring themes in the different interviews. I then analyzed them through the prism of ex-in/corporation theory to relate the given themes to the theory.
ANALYSIS

I will now present the different themes outlined during the interviews. First, I will present the ‘body journey’ divided into three stages related to incorporation, excorporation and re-incorporation and MaYHAIR’s inputs. I outlined themes related to expectation versus reality; questioning of norms leading to questioning rhetoric of choice and intersectional considerations; accepting one’s body (hair); the need for support; the specificity of facial hair and the politicization of body hair. Let me bring you on this journey: Body hair and hairy being-in-the-world.

Body hair journey

Some characteristics differentiate the women interviewed: age, sexuality, country of origin or background. However, I found similar patterns in their body hair stories. This “body hair journey” happens in three main steps: habituation, questioning and change; related to ex-in/corporation feelings.

Habituation phase - incorporation

During childhood, there is an incorporation of surrounding behaviors and norms. That is, learning that women are hairless, but men can be hairy. It is the case of Sheryl, who “at 8, had understood that to seduce, obviously for older people, women should not have body hair.”, Florine, outlines that “[she] could not help it but [she] integrated that it was important for a woman to depilate. Not only important but necessary and compulsory.”. This incorporation occurs through social representations, where “on TV commercials, the legs that are being shaved are already hairless” (Nina) as well as in movies (Macdonald, 2013). These norms and dictates are usually mediated by mothers, a recurring figure in the different stories: “[I shaved] with my mother’s approval. There never has been any talk about why I wanted to do that. It was not why I wanted to remove my body hair; it was rather how I wanted to” (Sheryl). For some, their mother made them aware of the necessity of hairlessness and lead them to a negative thinking of their own body. Zoé points out that “[her mother] imposed a vision on her body for years, unconsciously and it was through body hair”. On the contrary, Amy recalls feeling misunderstood by her mother who wanted “[her] to accept [herself] as [she] was” rather than removing her body hair, which Amy felt better without. Importantly, the awareness of this incorporation does not appear during childhood, it is postulated after, when recalling this period.
through an analytical prism. From the understanding that women are hairless and the norms incorporation, emerged a pain during childhood and beginning of puberty due to (starting) to be hairy and not fitting in the main representation. Edwidge explained that “[she] got [her] puberty /./ and started to have a lot of body hair. /./ Very dark and thick body hair, like visible. You cannot miss it. So [she] wanted to take it all off. [She] was in 5th year of primary school, so around 12 years old. [She] had tantrums with [her] mother to get epilation”. When relating to this time, informants use a vocabulary related to fight: for Sheryl “it was a war, a struggle with all this body hair, for a long, long time”, Zoé remarks that “It was a fight, you see. And it is a fight. For me, it is an affectual fight, but it is no more a physical fight as it was before”. As for her, Tounsia explains that “when [she] started puberty, [she] was really hairier than other people, and [she] was traumatized”. Thus, the gendered norm of hairlessness and the need to fit in it are incorporated: one has to remove one’s body hair and until this happens one suffers from not fitting with the standards.

However, at some point, epilation is finally possible, usually with the endorsement of the mother. As Macdonald (2013) outlines “many rituals involving depilation of body and/or head hair are part of female initiation rites which mark the girl child’s passage into womanhood” (p. 69). For some interviewees removing body hair was a relief, Amy cried – with satisfaction – and was “really happy”, Nina “shaved [her] thighs and felt really good, as [she had] hung-ups for a long time”. But for others or after the first relief, the previous psychological pain of not fitting becomes a physical pain due to epilation: “I went to the beauty shop and I.. it traumatized me. I was there, it is horrible you know, I suffered, it was hot, I was too young for that. From that time on, I shaved” (Zoé). Furthermore, for most of them, the struggle did not stop there, because one characteristic of body hair is that it grows back. Therefore, there is a constant attention given to being “hairless enough”, in reaching the unachievable ideal of a smooth and cleared body. There is an introduction of habits and rituals in order to deal with body hair as outlined by Zoé: “I am going to a party, I will be warm [mimic taking her sweater off], I may want to come back home with someone, to meet someone, but for that I must go through this stage [to depilate]”, inducing that to please and flirt at a party, hairlessness is required. Edwidge explains: “I needed to tell myself ‘Ok, I must find two and a half hours to depilate in the next 24 hours’ ” [before going to a place near a lake the day after], and “[thinking of body hair] was part of my routine: when I needed to wake up, if I had to wake up earlier the day after [to remove body hair]”. Time and money are spent, harm is done, but because removing body hair is incorporated as it is a “taken-for-granted” gendered behavior (Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi,
2005), it is not questioned because it is done “on a practical and prereflective level” (Zeiler, 2013, p. 74). It becomes a habit and “what we ‘just do’” (ibid, p. 74) and even more what we must do.

Here, it is interesting to outline a paradox: One has incorporated the norm that women have to be hairless, and this norm is followed in order to mix with others, to “enable a smooth and seamless interaction with others” (Zeiler 2013, p. 74, my emphasis). However, this norm also leads one to feel at odds with one’s own body, to scan it for a possible remaining hair, to find it ugly when regrowth starts. Edwidge states that she “needed to have not a single hair remaining”, “[her] body was something [she] fought against, to hide it or make it as attractive as possible.”, Florine outlines that “[she was] epilating when [she] knew that [she was] going to have intimacy with someone.”, for Sheryl it was so important that although “at university [she had] a small budget, not much money, [she] paid for electrolysis once a month to shut off [her body hair]”. By that time, to have body hair is a fight: You try to get rid of it in any way you can. “I did all kinds of stuff [i.e. tried different epilating methods], but it was never permanent. And when it was permanent, like I tried laser, I was not feeling really better. So, the best way is acceptance, but it takes time” (Amy). Therefore, to deal with the incorporated social norm, one has to manage one’s own body usually – or at least here – leading to negative outcomes. But as Amy says, it can change.

Questioning - excorporation

Zeiler outlines that:

“[gendered patterns of behavior] become that through which we engage with and see the world, and they can recede from our reflective awareness (even though they will be semi-transparent in the sense that while I may be implicitly aware of them as beliefs and norms that I enact, I do not become explicitly aware of them except when asked to explain or justify my behavior).” (Zeiler 2013, p. 74, my emphasis).

And when this awareness occurs, a questioning phase starts, or in Zeiler’s terms, an excorporation. Due to different events – for some just one– there is a turning point. Questions are asked, considerations and ‘real reasons’ are investigated. A realization is made. Maybe taking body hair off is not actually necessary. For Sheryl, the trigger was her daughter asking “why do you take your body hair off?” to what she did not want to answer “because I find it ugly” and thus started wondering about the actual reasons. Florine reflected about it thanks to “stuff on the internet” and MaYHAIR was “the bridge between thinking and doing”, for Amy
it was due to her “feminist awakening” and thanks to MaYHAIR, Zoé met a man who told her to “never apologize for [being hairy]. [As] it is [her] body” which led her to consider to stop removing hey body hair. There is then a whole process going on, step by step, of breaking the previous habits, stopping removal of certain parts of one’s body hair, showing hairy legs in summer… Hairlessness is excorporated and “becomes a thematic object of one’s attention” (Zeiler 2013, p. 75), in a scheme relating to Zeiler’s description, it “is often abruptly and unexpectedly initiated even if it also can continue for longer periods of time and be “aggravated” over time” (ibid, p. 75).

One painful aspect of the experience of excorporation is to get acquainted with one’s own hairy body and even more to show it to others. Indeed, social backlash is one main fear from one’s hairy experience. But there seems to be a discrepancy between what is expected and what is actually lived. It appears that the main negative reactions come from close surroundings rather than strangers. Edwidge had a hard time with her father and explained that « [their] relationship was over after that trip [where she met him], because he did not accept that [she] was not shaving [her] legs, in fact he was not accepting that [she] was feminist”. However, she outlines that “it was the only negative comment [she] encountered”. Nina also had negative comments from her mother who said she needed “to get used to it” and her brother, who told her that she did not have a partner because of her body hair. Nonetheless, for others, social encounters are easier. Sheryl’s family told her “that it was good if [she] felt better this way”. However, concerning strangers’ reactions, although there is a fear of showing one’s body hair due to social judgment, when one finally dares do it, there are not that many negative impacts. Indeed, most informants did not encounter any social backlash due to being hairy. Furthermore, there is a paradox between what one thinks one will encounter while being hairy and how one oneself reacts when seeing someone feminine being hairy. The informants usually think great of these hairy encounters: depicting them as courageous, wanting to say hi, to acknowledge being ‘on the same team’. Amy met a woman in a café who “has a beautiful mustache, really self-assured and [Amy] was moved”. Nina and Edwidge confessed that in summer they were checking other hairy women’s legs on the subway. Edwidge said “when I was still epilating, and I saw women, on the subway let’s say, who were hairy, my look was surely insulting, because I was double checking, but in my head, I was ‘Oh my god, this is awesome’”. On the other hand, a realization is made about people who give negative comments or think badly of hairiness, as Amy states

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7 I do not want here to assess the gender of the person encountered; their characteristics was that they had a feminine appearance which the informants related to.
“people who remark on [her body hair] with disgust or such, [she] does not want them in [her] life anyway. [She] does not need to be friends with them or please those people”. Just as being hairy conveys meaning, judging hairy people also declares a difference of position and thinking. That may be why, the harshest comments sometimes come from family members: you cannot choose your family and they taught you the hairless habit, so they are more likely to comment on it.

This change phase also comes with a questioning of the rhetoric of choice. Zoé figured out that “when [she] sees some of her friends still in [removing body hair] habits, [she] instinctively judges their practice, but [she] knows that [she] cannot really do it from the bottom of [her] heart.”. She considers that it is a “non-choice” to find oneself beautiful while hairless, that it is hard to assert that you have decided to remove your body hair, as long as it is so difficult to depict oneself as hairy. Sheryl declares that “[You cannot say] I do it for myself to remove my body hair. No, I do not do it for me, I do it because I have never seen women with body hair, I do not have other references.”. Because hairy women have made the journey through epilation and changing habits, they have come to a turning point, realizing that one does not only do as one wants, as one is influenced by what is around, what others think, what one has learned and so on. Interestingly, one highlighted that an asset of MaYHAIR is that it is allowing the space for choose. Tounsia explains that “what [she] loves about MaYHAIR is that they don’t force anything on you, it is really free choice. They accept all kinds of bodies. It is not because you shave that they will be ‘oh my god’. And if you decide to let your body hair grow and, in the middle, you shave, there is no judgement”. MaYHAIR’s aims for more diverse representations and therefore new norms hit a cord. As Zoé outlines “when there are a lot of norms, it is great. [Her] objective is not to completely destroy them, but to make all of them a normality and that we get all along with our own realities.”. But, questioning the rhetoric of choice and challenging the real possibility of shaving ‘for oneself’ is not indivisible from living in a coded society where choices have (social) consequences. Relating to this idea, I want to highlight Lesnik-Oberstein’s citation (2007):

“The whole idea of make-up and clothing, or other ritual decorative practices, as constituting in any simple way ‘celebrations’ of ‘femininity’, serves to close down important questions around the coercive practices of social ridicule and social exclusion for those not willing or able to participate in this ‘celebration’, never mind around the more general question of how women (or anyone) come to believe that they have freely ‘chosen’ to engage in certain practices.” (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2007, p. 6).
She refers here notably to (popular) feminists discrediting ‘fun feminism and victim feminism’.

Expanding from this point comes also an intersectional concern. As a matter of fact, it appears that the possibility to choose is different depending on one’s position in intersectional discriminations. Tounsia, as a woman of color, agrees that it is harder for women of color to declare themselves as hairy. For instance, she recalls that a hairy black woman was insulted as a savage or animal – stronger comments than a hairy white woman may receive. She claims that “the darker your skin, the dirtier you’re perceived”. Because comments and reactions are harsher, it may be harder for women of color to be hairy. This is a theme found back in Fahs & Delgado’s analysis (2011), where they highlight that women of color and working-class women received more comments from their family and from social surroundings than white women or higher-class women. White informants were aware of this state of fact and acknowledged their privilege. Sheryl figures that being white and in a heterosexual couple makes it easier and protects her, “[she] does not know how [she] would be in another context, if [she] would be okay with as much of [her body hair]”. Intersectionality also comes with being a woman and being fat. MaYHAIR released a video on this subject, featuring three women identifying as fat (Maipoils et al., 2019). They discussed the fact that when you are fat and hairy you need to justify yourself even more, as it can be perceived as laziness, as not ‘taking care of one’s body’ – stereotypes fat people already have to respond to in their everyday life. They also point out that to “compensate” for their fatness, fat women need to apply to hyper-feminization, which being hairy does not correspond to. This question of feminization and body hair is also a concern for male-to-female (MTF) trans people. In their study, Ginsberg et al. (2016) found that the priority for transitioning for women was face procedures, most commonly laser hair removal. Indeed, facial hair is so gendered that in order to transition and “pass” as a woman, one may feel the necessity to be hairless.

Accepting one’s body (hair)

Linking the questioning phase and the changing phase is a process of accepting one’s body hair. Time seems to be a key in deconstructing learned behavior – or unlearning it – and in (re)appropriating one’s body. Notably there is a difference of management of body hair depending on the time of the year. Winter is a privileged time to let one’s body hair grow as one’s body is mostly hidden under layers of clothes. Zoé associates herself with a “savage yet, as [she] is going out of 6 months of winter”, Edwidge explains that “when autumn comes, I just stop all this [epilating], as all women hibernating in winter and I just let it grow”. The hardest
work then comes when summer arrives, it is one of the reasons why MaYHAIR happens in May, that is at the beginning of spring (in Canada) when temperatures rise and more and more parts of the body are visible. Edwidge says that “the summer after MaYHAIR [in 2017] was the first summer [she] did not care [about epilating]. And it was the best summer of [her] life. Except that at the beginning it was really confronting because there were glances. Because yourself [is confronting]. [She] was wearing a dress and finding it not beautiful and [she] though it would never change.” But it did.

In most of the interviews, finally accepting one’s body hair also leads to accepting other aspects of the body which were difficult to deal with. Sheryl says that “by accepting [her] body hair, [she] accepted the rest [of her body]. /…/ All [her (previously-seen-as) defaults] are [now] part of [her]”. In parallel of loving one’s body hair, comes a love for oneself. Because body hair is such an anchored part of our body, taking a different glance at it results in looking at one’s body in a different manner, as highlighted by Edwidge: “If you learned to hate your body hair, you can learn to love it”. Amy says that her body hair acceptance makes it easier to accept other parts of her body, such as stretch marks due to pregnancy, because accepting her body hair “was the big deal”, the main concern. Once this difficult part is addressed, other worries about one’s body are easier to win. Sometimes, it happens the other way around that through a body-positive stance one comes to terms with one’s body hair. Accepting one’s body hair results in a (re)appropriation of one’s sexiness. Tounsia asserts that “now, beyond accepting [her body hair], [she finds] it beautiful, and [looking at herself] [is] like ‘wow, this is you!’”, Edwidge finds herself “more sexy and beautiful” and “sees [her] body as what it really is /…/ and what it brings [her]: it is attracting for people [she has] close relationships with.”. Accepting their body hair, makes them more tolerant toward their body, more confident as well, and this notably results in different intimate relations, strengthened with new sensitivity. Edwidge recalls that

“the first summer [of not removing body hair], [she] was saying to her boyfriend all the time ‘how do you do it? It is really sensitive with hairy legs’, [she] was feeling all the winds blowing in her legs. It was disruptive. It is over now but yeah. And [she] got nice experiences with, hum in sexuality, with other partners also”.

Another striking example is the great pleasure Sheryl got when feeling the wind in her legs’ hair, “it was really sweet, really good, really pleasant”. There are depictions of the nice feeling of wind in leg hair, the impression of being naked without body hair, the frictions between
pubic hair and underpants or between leg hair and socks where the body hair calls for attention, all new sensations discovered through embracing hairiness.

The link between body hair and the body is created during youth, resulting from the focus on body hair and the necessity to take it off which concentrates on one’s body and its flaws. This point is outlined by Caselli, referring to Sylvia Plath’s novel:

“In The Bell Jar, disgust is incorporated at the price of excorporating the body from the self: if the hairy parts of the body are disgusting and initially unrecognisable as mine, and yet I am the body, then the whole self is disgusting and somehow also the me” (Caselli, 2013, p. 49).

My interviewee Sheryl noted that “it was as if the other complexes about [her] body had begun with complexes about body hair [when she was young]. Because it was a part of [her] body she found ugly and did not want and was taking off. /…/ You look at your legs, you look at your body, you look at your height, you look at your hair, it is as if your body is never OK”. Accepting one’s body hair, thus seems to be part of a larger process: to accept one’s body completely, to question other habits, to deconstruct learned behavior and ways of thinking. For example, Sheryl explained that considerations about depilation came at a time when she was questioning her dietary habits as well, she became vegan at the same period, “a lot of barriers were falling down in the constructions [she] made, including the one of body hair”. Others pointed out that becoming hairy helped them deconstruct gender norms. Nina said that “when [she] started [keeping] her body hair, [she] started at the same time to question bras and [she] does not wear a bra anymore”.

Here comes the change phase – re-incorporation

Considering one’s body with a fresh sight, one either continues living with the excorporation feeling or enters a changing phase. In the first case, it concludes in body alienation. It emerges when “the subject continuously lives the disruptive movement that breaks the lived body apart, it means that she or he cannot but attend continuously to her or his body as an object.” (Zeiler, 2013, p. 80). However, if one takes the stance to change due to excorporation, it leads then to re-incorporation of different behaviors and/or norms. Concerning the hairiness experience – and in particular the one of the people I interviewed, it rather seems to be the second option, that is re-incorporation. They did let their body hair grow and incorporated new patterns of behavior. Not everywhere and not all the time, but each person creates one’s new being-in-the-world. As noticed by Edwidge “[to be hairy] made [her] look at [herself] less”. Zoé came to accept that “it was what [her] life was going to be, that [she] was going to be a hairy woman”.

Page 24 | 36
This is also highlighted by adjectives they used to describe their hairy bodies such as: beautiful, strong, soft, sensual, accepted, anchored, relaxed, magnificent, quirky...\(^8\)

Becoming hairy also leads to embodied resistance,

“subjects try to find new ways of expressing their bodily selves, new ways of living as bodily beings, even if this is done in ways that others implicitly or explicitly question” (Zeiler, 2013, p. 82).

To endorse these questions, belonging to a community helps re-incorporation. I noticed that informants put a great deal in sharing norms and beliefs with others and the need for representation, now that they do not correspond to the main and learned social norm. To this extent, MaYHAIR plays an important role, it helps move the reflection forward and shows that one is “not alone, not weird and not abnormal” (Tounsia). There is a feeling of community, of “sorority” (Sheryl), the “feeling of belonging is really central and there is a lot of love coming out of this community” (Edwidge). After the pain endured through excorporation, when one’s body becomes one’s subject of attention, to have support is crucial. It may be support from one’s partner; Amy outlined that “[she is] lucky to be with someone who is not just..., who do not talk about [body hair] at all, never, who talks about it when [she] wants to but who does not have any trouble with all this”, i.e. who does not comment on her hairiness. Here, sexuality plays a role as well. Indeed, Nina, defining herself as lesbian, points out that “The fact that [she] is with other women, [she] feels that they would understand [her] body hair more than if [she] was with men” as women would understand the concern ‘from the inside’. Furthermore, social representations are also important. Many outline the good that interviews from MaYHAIR has done for them. Amy was “religiously listening to the interviews when they were released”. Florine also pointed out that “to have more tolerance there is a need for more [diverse] representations.”. Zoé figures that “there are more and more women with body hair on the streets. /.../ It is nice not to feel alone, to have people around us”, she would not like to be the only hairy woman among her friends and “would feel inadequate”. Florine refers to the music video of Angèle (Balance Ton Quoi) which just came out at that time, related to the #MeToo movement, where the singer appears first with shaved armpits before getting body hair added.

Another advantage of participating in MaYHAIR is that it gives a ‘good excuse’. This theme is also found back in Fahs & Delgado (2011), where students had an easier time with their body

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\(^8\) I used the full list of adjectives for the front figure of this thesis.
hair if they explained to others that it was done for an assignment. The authors noticed that “seemingly, individuals perceived the subversion of social norms as a smaller offense if done for a reason other than subversion itself, particularly it if involved an authority figure” (Fahs and Delgado, 2011, p. 24). Tounsia outlines that “to go through all this [i.e. being hairy] alone, one needs to be strong”. Edwidge took pictures when she went hairy at her ball prom, to send them to MaYHAIR and did a testimony. She argues that it was a way to show people “the impact comments and attitudes had on [her]” and it was liberating.

Although a personal, embodied experiment, being hairy (and feminine) conveys a message of politization, even if you do not always want it to be so, just by being hairy and being a women (or looking like one), you are read as being a feminist, a lesbian, as conveying (politized) meaning. Or as Macdonald puts it

“From folklore and myth comes a tradition that links female body hair with evil and danger: with promiscuity and lust because hairiness is associated with the devil or an animal nature; with ugliness through its association with hirsute hags and witches; with deviant sexuality from the supposed lesbianism of witches; with insanity, with unkempt hair being a sign of mental instability; and with the threat of castration linked to the Medusa and the ‘vagina dentata’.” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 67)

All of these links may not still be accurate today, but their meaning is surely associated with body hair. Tounsia outlines that “[she] knows [her] body hair is politized [but] when [she] lets [her] body hair [grow], it is for [her]”. Edwidge is clear that “when people see [her], they think ‘she is a feminist’. You cannot get out of this /…/ it is imposed on you.”. Florine talks about a ‘revolution’, a ‘rebellion against the patriarchy’ to be hairy. She outlines that a “woman with a hairy body is clearly almost a political act” compared to a man’s hairy body. Lesnik-Oberstein (2007) points out that questioning body hair and especially body hair removal will make it become more visible, less of a taboo and create a “site of possible contestation” (p. 6).

Therefore, it is not something that is always easy to do, you sometimes just want to relax at the beach, but it may also inspire others. Some informants refer to the motivation of letting one’s body hair grow to show others that it can be possible. To prevent other young girls from suffering from their body hair, they want to empower other women (Jennings, Braun and Clarke, 2019), to use one’s privilege or easiness (relationships status, skin color…). Nina clearly states that “[she] speaks freely of having body hair. And if people want to see it, well” [she will show it]. There is a reflection about transferring one’s body hair journey to the next
generation. Mothers want their daughters to have an easier time than they had regarding body hair. Sheryl “sees an impact on the future generation, [she] finds it wonderful to see [her] daughter flatter [her] body hair and say ‘look mummy, my body hair is growing, it is so soft’”. This handover is also a stance taken by MaYHAIR who produces content for schools to explain the need of body hair and promotes body hair acceptance, so as to engage the discussion for young people as well and present them with diverse body types.

Politization of hairiness is also apparent in the desire to defy gender norms. Zoé claims that “[body hair] is not only a feminine issue. It is an issue of gender, of genders. /…/ It will bring us back to our human state and it is interesting for gender deconstruction”. Sheryl relates body hair’s removal also to capitalism and outlines that there is guilt put on women, first to take their body hair off, but also to do it with the right technique, for example “at one point, you epilate and then you get ingrown hair, so you say ‘ok, I will shave’. Then you shave and it seems that your body hair is thicker. /…/ And then you are blamed for having more body hair, supposedly because you shaved”. Lesnik-Oberstein also states that “it is clearly not in the interest of manufacturers of hair removal products to produce a once-and-for-all removal system” (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2007, p. 9).

Another point I want to lay out is the different values associated with different parts of the body. I noticed that facial hair was a strong exception of accepting one’s body hair. All but one of the interviewees told me about their facial hair. Although, they did not deal with the rest of their body hair anymore, facial hair was still being ‘taken care of’. For Sheryl it was the challenge of the coming MaYHAIR, to let her facial hair grow. Amy, who had a lot of trouble with her eyebrows growing up, explained that “[she] would rather accept her facial hair but it is displeasing [herself], [she] does not want to let her mustache grow to please others, [SHE] is [herself] not feeling OK when looking in the mirror”. I noticed it from myself as well. Although I have not removed my body hair anywhere else for almost two years, I keep on taking off the few body hairs on my chin or between my eyebrows without really noticing it, until a recent ‘realization’. Where does this difference come from? Contrary to leg or armpit hair, facial hair cannot be hidden. You cannot wear a mask when you do not feel like showing it. Also, facial hair is even more associated with masculinity than other body hair and thus harder for women to tolerate. Indeed, as Oldstone-Moore (2015) points out, beard and facial hair imply a strong masculine incentive. Dozier (2005) tells the story of a female-to-male trans person who was ‘read’ as a fat guy when pregnant with a beard. Facial hair gives a different meaning to one being-in-the-world, Edwidge explains that “if [she] shaves [her] face, it is not because [she]
wants to, but because [she] knows people would not listen to [her] the same way with hair on her face.”. Furthermore, Macdonald points out that

“it is probably in the area of facial hair, however, that the social need to establish sexual difference is most insistent, and although most Western men are clean-shaven, the hairless norms apply most severely here to women, for whom an untended growth of facial hair is seen as seriously transgressive. For, even more than hair elsewhere on the body, the symbolic meanings attached to female facial hair are all strongly negative.” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 69)

There, she introduces a fine nuance, exploring Douglas’s pollution theory, where she says that it is not facial hair itself that is characterized as dirty, but the deviance from gender norms it creates. Furthermore, feminine facial hair relates to politization of body hair. Letting one’s body hair grow and showing it, conveys meaning – intentionally or not – as stated previously. It is easily read as a statement of being feminist or lesbian (Basow, 1991; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2007, p. 2), something that may be seen negatively, depending on the context. Thus, while one can just wear pants or long-sleeves when one does not feel like being openly okay with such a statement, concerning facial hair, one does not have other choices than taking their facial hair off. Burgess (2005) figures this specificity of facial hair as well, even in possibly already-politized spaces. She is a bearded lesbian woman and receives comments about her beard, while in a lesbian bar – question such as “What are you?” The author outlines that “while it’s natural, in lesbian culture, to have hairy legs and armpits, this naturalness, in both queer and straight cultures does not extend to the face” (p. 233). Cited by Lesnik-Oberstein (2007, p. 7), Joan Ferrante declares that facial hair on women results in anxiety about sexual identity (based on Ross et al’s study (1965)), as facial hair is a strong gender characteristic; therefore hairy women transgress gender boundaries and this is read as a danger.

Another aspect of re-incorporation, may be the location, in the sense of being abroad. Two French informants outlined that they would not feel as confident with being hairy if they were in France. I wonder here if there is a relation with Montréal and the apparently safer atmosphere on the streets. There is a feeling of less street harassment and less judgment in Montréal than in French cities.9 Furthermore, re-incorporation is easier where norms are less strict, or different from one’s home (Zeiler, 2013). I believe it is an interesting theme to dig into, however here I

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9However, a survey by Le Centre d’éducation et d’action des femmes de Montréal (Montreal center for women education and action)(Centre d’éducation et d’action des femmes de Montréal, 2017), points out that 89% of respondents think there is a problem with street harassment in Montreal and 93% have experienced some. But they also affirm that it is less significant than in many other countries.
do not have sufficient material to draw conclusions. I am only wondering if such a feeling is due to the reality of the city, i.e. that Montréal is more secure or if it is due to the fact of being abroad. This is a question I pose, drawing on my own experiences and reflections on being in a foreign country, where no one knows you as hairless, as for me, this made it easier to go hairy.

CONCLUSION

Albeit being a personal embodied reality, feminine hairiness is a social subject. Being hairy profoundly relates to one’s being-in-the-world and to one’s relationship with one’s body. Extending on the stories of seven hairy women, I associated hairiness experiences with excorporation, often leading to re-incorporation. What is seen here as a journey is not body hair removal – a very common practice – but rather body hair (re)-appropriation. I suggested that hairlessness is incorporated during childhood through social surroundings and visual representation, notably from the media. Due to a given event, there may then be an excorporation feeling, resulting in wondering about the fundamental reasons for body hair removal and starting to let one’s body hair grow – often with some pain to accept it, as it shakes one’s previous being-in-the-world. However, through time and with the help of a community support, like the MaYHAIR initiative, body hair and one’s hairiness is (re)-incorporated.

Importantly, I want to suggest that if these stories sound all positive it may be due to a pool bias; people suffering from their hairiness may be less inclined to talk about it. Further investigations should be done with a larger and more diverse pool, nonetheless, the stories depicted here are real and representative of certain people.

In a parallel to the journey description, I have highlighted different themes present in the interviews. One encouraging conclusion is that there is an offset between expected reactions to one’s hairiness and reality. Indeed, although most informants fear other’s gaze and negative comments, they did not report many negative experiences. Interestingly, closer surroundings, especially family members, seemed to be a greater source of negative comments, compared to strangers. Here again, MaYHAIR plays an important role, by representing diverse bodies and enhancing positive thinking about hairiness. It helps one to feel at ease with one’s hairy body.

Another positive outcome is that by accepting one’s body hair, one finally comes to see one’s body more positively, or at least more functionally than only as a seductive tool (for men). This results from questioning body norms in general and therefore challenging choice rhetoric and beauty standards. Furthermore, hairiness conveys a strong sense of politization, as it is
associated to feminism. Aware of this, the women I interviewed express on the one hand, their feelings of fuzziness toward this imposed meaning, and on the other hand their claim for such meaning; they want to participate in this representation and in showing others – mainly young people – that femininity and hairy are not antinomic.

Although it is changing, the society around us evolves slowly – if it does – concerning hairiness. Therefore, it appears that breaking all the norms is not yet feasible, notably concerning facial hair, which is the hardest to keep.

Concluding on MaYHAIR study, it appears to be a very beneficial initiative. Indeed, it helps people along the way to (re)-appropriate their body hair, acknowledging difficulties and possible confrontations, mainly asking people to question double standards and talking about them. The thesis here is concerned only with this single initiative, but I argue that this study could be developed to similar initiatives happening online – or offline –, initiatives which are expanding and multiplying. Furthermore, I hope these stories will inspire others, including non-binary people or non-feminist people, as I believe, if norms are expanded, it benefits everyone.

Finally, other themes appear in the talks, such as the component of being in one’s native country or not. It would be interesting to further investigate the relationship between being abroad and being hairy, which I think is easier, and to clarify to what extent it is dependent on the given ‘abroad’ place. Also, I notice that as much as I did not want my thesis to focus only on women’s hairy bodies and to be binary, I did not succeed. The fact is that I only interviewed cis-women, because only cis-women answered my call. It may be because only they felt concerned, because posting my message on MaYHAIR community reduced the possible pool. Perhaps it would have been more efficient to be pro-active in the informants’ choice and directly approach men, trans*, non-binary/queer people, people of color or fat-identified people. Further studies should take this into consideration and attention should be paid on the selection of the informants. This is also true concerning other identity characteristics, notably skin color. Importantly, also, I apply generalization from this case study to westernized countries, indeed previous studies are all concerning these countries; therefore, I am not making assumptions regarding body hair removal practices in non-westernized countries.

Therefore, the hairy journey has not ended yet. Further aspects need to be explored, new representations defined and innovative beings-in-the-world imagined.
APPENDICES

Recruitment text: (translated)
For my master’s thesis, I am exploring the experiences of being hairy and I want to do it in group discussions. The idea is to meet with 4-5 people around a coffee and talk about body hair during one hour! If you participated in MaYHAIR, if you are or are not currently hairy, and are present in Montreal next week, let me know about your avaibilities here: LINK. Thanks!

Recruitment text: (original)
Bonjour ! Dans le cadre du mémoire de ma maîtrise, je veux explorer les expériences liées au fait d’être poilu·e et souhaite faire cela sous forme de discussions de groupes. L’idée est de se retrouver à 4-5 personnes autour d’un café et de parler de poil pendant environ 1h ! Si vous avez participé au mouvement Maipoils, que vous êtes ou non actuellement poilu·e et êtes présent·e sur Montréal la semaine prochaine, indiquez-moi vos disponibilités sur ce doodle :LINK
Merci !

Questions asked during interviews – in no specific order
- Can you introduce yourself, how do you identify?
- Can you tell me about your body hair journey?
- How did MaYHAIR impact on your journey?
- Did the community aspect of MaYHAIR help you?
- What are your feelings toward your hairy body?
- Do you take care of your body hair in a certain way or do you just let it be?
- Do you think your skin color interferes with your hairy experience?
- Do you remember the first time you encountered a hairy body and you noticed it?
- Can you give me 3 adjectives to describe your hairy body?
REFERENCES


Caselli, D. (2013) ‘“The wives of geniuses I have sat with”: Body hair, genius and modernity’, in *The last taboo*. Manchester, pp. 18–47.


partie 1.


