As the theme and title of the 2001 meeting of the AAAS aptly illustrates, the body has become the focus of considerable attention in the last few decades, both within the academy and in popular culture at large. As Linda McDowell argues,

as we move towards the end of the twentieth century, the body has become a major theoretical preoccupation across the social sciences, as well as an object for scrutiny and regulation by society as a whole (36).

The centrality of the body is understood in part as the consequence of profound changes that have taken place in late 20th-century industrialized nations, including the United States. Rapid economic development and resulting changes in work and leisure have placed the body at the centre of concern for both the individual and society. Because we live our lives as embodied subjects, our understandings and experiences of our bodies are extremely personal and intimate. At the same time, our bodies have important cultural meaning, signifying social and political concerns. Accordingly,

questions about the body, its form, meaning and its practices are associated with complicated issues about subjectivity and identity and with social practices often defined both as deeply personal and as subjects of public comment (McDowell 36).

My research, on body hair norms and practices, is situated within the context of this ongoing academic dialogue about the body. Despite the considerable focus on the body in recent scholarship, there is little evidence of substantial interest in body hair. Although little ethnographic or statistical data exists, various industry estimates suggest that between 80 and 90% of American women and girls practice regular body hair removal (see Hope 93). The removal of body hair is thus extremely widespread, yet largely unexamined. In this sense it provides an ideal subject matter: as Christine Hope argues, "those behaviours
which are most taken-for-granted in a culture may well be the most important ones for revealing an understanding of that culture” (93). The subject is also particularly timely: as I argue below, there is growing evidence that the hairless imperative is increasingly a concern of men as well as women.²

Body hair norms and practices have considerable implications for our understandings of gender and sexuality. Because body hair is a sexually dimorphic trait, the removal of body hair by women is often seen as exaggerating this difference, and thus the absence or removal of body hair has come to signify femininity. However, the growing practice of body hair removal by men complicates this understanding, and is perhaps best examined in the context of the “crisis of masculinity” and gender relations after Second Wave feminism. Despite these important differences in cultural meaning between the body hair practices of women and men, the focus below will be on a theme common to the hair removal practices of both genders: the relationships between body hair removal, the public display, objectification and scrutiny of the body, and Foucauldian understandings of power and the docile body.

“Public” and “Private:” A History of Female Body Hair Removal

In order to explore the relationships between body hair norms and concepts of “public” and “private,” it is first necessary to examine the intersections between fashion, the display of the body, and body hair removal. While relatively little research has been done on the history of body hair norms (see Cooper), an important study by Christine Hope provides an indispensable history of the development of female body hair norms in the United States. In her article “Caucasian Female Body Hair” (1982), Hope examines print advertisements in American magazines from 1915-1945 for clues to the evolution of body hair norms.³ She concludes that prior to 1915 few (if any) women in the United States removed their leg or underarm hair. However, from 1915-1919 Hope identifies a veritable “assault on underarm hair” in advertisements. Ads relating to hair removal increased continually throughout this period, with the majority (72%) referring specifically to underarms. Significantly, these advertisements were largely instructional in nature,⁴ informing women that “new styles of dress featuring sleeveless or very sheer-sleeved evening gowns made the removal of hair from the underarms an important consideration” (Hope
The removal of underarm hair was thus linked to new fashions that revealed a previously hidden part of the body.

Between 1920 and the early 1940’s, Hope found that advertisements for hair removal products began to refer for the first time to the “lower limbs,” or legs. These ads again focused on the relationship between hair removal and fashion, emphasizing shorter hemlines, relatively sheer stockings, and barelegged styles of swimwear. However, it was not until the war years of 1941-1945 that advertisements began to focus directly on legs, and the instructional nature of these ads indicates that the removal of leg hair was not an established norm prior to that time. Hair removal continued to be linked with fashion: difficulty attaining silk stockings due to the war and the introduction of sheer nylons made it increasingly difficult to “disguise” newly visible, hairy legs.

Hope’s study demonstrates that by the end of the Second World War, the major components of American body hair norms – the removal of leg and underarm hair by women – were securely in place. In other words, these practices had become normative. Significantly, her study reveals a distinct and important relationship between fashion, the display of the body, and body hair removal. As this history illustrates, the more clothes women were “allowed” (or expected) to remove, the more hair they were also expected to remove (see Chapkis 130; Greer 28). Prior to 1915, clothing styles did not reveal much of the female body. Because legs and underarms were not visible in contemporary clothing, hair in these areas was not yet significantly problematized. However, as changing clothing styles exposed more and more of the female body throughout the past century, visible hair was problematized, and consequently removed.

Unfortunately, Hope’s study ends in 1945 and does not address another significant aspect of the body hair practices of American women and girls: “bikini line” hair removal. The term “bikini line” is generally understood to describe any pubic hair that is visible beyond the boundaries of a typical swimsuit. Like the legs and underarms, removal of hair from the bikini line is now normative. The history of fashion and body hair removal suggests that it can be safely assumed that women began removing this hair when bathing suit styles became so abbreviated that this area of the body was no longer covered. Indeed, the term “bikini line” itself suggests that the removal of this hair is related to the introduction of the bikini to the United States in 1946.
While the removal of hair from the legs, underarms, and "bikini line" has thus been normative for American women for some fifty years, the female body today is increasingly expected to be virtually hairless, as the new trend of the Brazilian wax illustrates. Described in the popular press as "the hottest new craze" (Keyishian 158) and "the latest bikini-wax phenomenon sweeping the United States" (Ellen), the term "Brazilian wax" refers to the removal (using wax) of the vast majority of the pubic hair, usually leaving behind only a small strip or triangle of hair. Except for this strip, all hair is removed from the pubic area, including the labia and anus. While statistics are unavailable regarding the extent of this practice, popular media sources (especially women's magazines) present the practice as increasingly widespread, relying largely on reports and estimates from aestheticians, salons, and "beauty experts."7

Significantly, body hair removal is again associated with changing fashion. As the name for the practice indicates, the Brazilian wax finds its origins in Brazil, where it is linked to the thong bathing suit popular in that country (see Keyishian 158). Because the thong is particularly revealing, a Brazilian wax may be required in order for the wearer to avoid displaying any pubic hair — the standard bikini line wax is no longer adequate. While the bikini created the "need" for the removal of hair from the bikini line, this more abbreviated swimsuit style requires more extensive hair removal.

Emerging hair removal practices such as the Brazilian wax thus fit the pattern that emerges from Hope's study of body hair norms in the first half of the century: clearly, there is a consistent and important relationship between hairlessness and the exposure of the body through changing fashion. What this relationship implies is that when a previously hidden area of the body is publicly exposed through changing clothing styles, the hair on that part of the body is problematized, and must be removed. In other words, the only flesh suitable for public view is cultivated flesh. Until recently, the only area of the female body where any body hair remained "acceptable" was the pubic area — one of the few areas of the body that remains private or unexposed, even in the skimpiest bikini. Thus, it is the public display of the body that requires hairlessness. Body hair thus comes to signify the "private" body, while its absence signifies the "public."

The emergence of the Brazilian wax takes this analysis to another level. While the practice does correlate with the popularity of the thong
bikini, the possibility that the Brazilian wax is related to the wearing of thong panties (as opposed to the publicly worn thong swimsuit) is particularly interesting, considering that panties are ordinarily private and seen (generally) only by intimates. In this way, the growing practice of the Brazilian wax may represent the first time that a private, hidden part of the body is problematized in this way. The removal of hair from the pubic area suggests that standards for public display are now becoming part of even the private realm. This has significant implications regarding the management and scrutiny of the body, as discussed below.

**Men and the Emerging Hairless Ideal**

Because body hair removal has long played an important role in the construction of the ideal feminine body, it is generally associated with women and girls. However, there is growing evidence to suggest that hair removal is increasingly the domain of men as well as women. Visual imagery in print advertisements, reports from aestheticians, and other sources suggest that American men, in growing numbers, are removing the hair from their chests, backs, and stomachs. While the development of this apparent “trend” is overdetermined by a number of intersecting factors (such as a growing male beauty culture, consumer capitalism, and a youth-oriented culture), it is generally linked to the bodybuilding and fitness craze of the 1980’s and the emergence of “gay aesthetics” into the mainstream.

The practice of body hair removal by men has obvious differences from the practice by women: different areas of the body are targeted, and men’s body hair removal is nowhere near as pervasive as the same practice by women. It is also important to note that men’s body hair removal has cultural meaning that is significantly different from that of women, especially in relation to gender construction and the “crisis of masculinity.” However, for our purposes here, what is significant is that the history of men’s hair removal provides further evidence that hair removal is distinctly related to the public display of the body – female or male. While men’s body hair removal does not correlate to increased exposure of the male body through changing fashion, the practice does emerge in the context of the increased exhibition or display of the male body (see Smith 82). In the past two decades, in advertisements and in popular culture at large, the male body has increasingly been presented...
as the object of an appraising – and critical – gaze. Coinciding with this increased visibility has been a rapidly growing industry of products and services related to the “improvement” of the male body. The emerging practice of hair removal by men is thus one of a number of significant cultural changes regarding the treatment of the male body. Together, these changes reflect the growing problematization of the male body. Thus, as the male body is increasingly displayed, it is also increasingly scrutinized and problematized. For men as well as women, the only flesh suitable for display in this context is cultivated flesh – flesh cultivated through the removal of body hair.

**Discipline, Surveillance, and the Docile Body**

The practice of body hair removal by both women and men is thus clearly linked to the growing public nature and display of the body. If, as we have seen, the hairless body is the public body, then body hair norms can thus serve as an important index to the increasingly public nature of the body. For both genders, there is ample evidence of a trend toward both increased display of the body and increased hair removal. Significantly, the increased exposure of the body implies that it has become the target of greater problematization and scrutiny. This growing surveillance of the body has significant implications regarding the management of the self and the operation of power in a Foucauldian sense.

The ideas of French theorist Michel Foucault have had a wide-ranging influence on Cultural Studies, anthropology, philosophy, Women’s Studies, and other fields of study. In particular, his reconceptualization of power has inspired new ways of addressing gender relations and issues surrounding the female body. As Susan Bordo (1993) argues,

[to] the extent that feminist discourse has employed a framework of oppressors and oppressed, villains and victims (and this, of course, is not equally true of all writers), it requires reconstruction if it is to be able adequately to theorize the pathways of modern power (26).

In Foucault’s conception, modern power is not something that can be possessed by individuals or groups, but must be understood as a dynamic or network of forces. This conceptualization thus provides a
means of understanding how power and domination are forces that operate not (solely) as the function of the oppressor upon the oppressed, but rather as a dynamic operating not “from above,” but often “from below” (Bordo 27). Thus, Foucault’s understanding of power has a distinct relationship to the management of the self. This concept of power has allowed feminist theory to reconceptualize women’s participation in beauty culture (which includes body hair removal), a practice that may be viewed as “voluntary” participation in women’s own oppression.

An important implication of Foucault’s concept of power is that modern society has witnessed the emergence of increasingly invasive apparatuses of power: “Power now seeks to transform the minds of those individuals who might be tempted to resist it, not merely to punish or imprison their bodies” (Bartky 79). A primary example is the treatment and discipline of the body. In Discipline and Punish (1977), Foucault develops his idea of the docile body: “[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). Docility is achieved through various “disciplines,” which regulate the postures, movements, and gestures of the body (137-138). No direct application of force is necessary to enact social control: through the enactment and re-enactment of everyday bodily practices, the docile body serves the prevailing relations of dominance and subordination.

Body hair removal can be understood as one of these everyday bodily practices that achieve the docile body. In this framework, then, the regular removal of body hair, the enactment and re-enactment of a daily bodily practice, is a way of disciplining and regulating the body, producing docility. It is important, therefore, to recognize the role that gender plays in this configuration. After all, it is primarily women who are expected to remove their body hair (and otherwise participate in “beauty culture”). This has been a major feminist criticism of Foucault: as Sandra Bartky argues, Foucault treats “the body” as if it were one – as if the experiences of women and men are the same. In doing so, Foucault ignores the disciplinary practices that engender the body, producing the specifically “feminine” or “masculine” body. In Bartky’s argument, women’s bodies are made more docile than the bodies of men, through the various disciplines that constitute “femininity.” As an integral part of the production of this feminine body, the removal of body hair thus produces a female body that is more docile and more disciplined. The more docile body of the American woman thus reflects
what Foucault describes as the prevailing relations of dominance and subordination, as the United States remains a basically patriarchal society.

As discussed above, in Foucault’s model, no direct force is necessary for the operation of modern power. How then is docility achieved? For Foucault, the essence of the disciplinary society is captured in Jeremy Bentham’s design for the model prison: the Panopticon (1843). Briefly, the Panopticon consists of a central guard tower surrounded by a circle of individual cells, housing prisoners, madmen, or patients. Each inmate is separated and invisible to the other, but visible at all times to the central tower and the guards within. The major effect of the Panopticon is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” The inmate cannot be sure that she or he is being observed at any given moment, but is acutely aware of that potential at all times. The effect is thus that the inmate behaves at all times as if she or he is being watched. As Foucault argues,

there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself (qtd. in Bordo 27).

The Panopticon thus encourages individual self-surveillance. Knowing that his or her behaviour could be observed at any given time, the inmate takes over the job of policing himself or herself.

Clearly, in Foucault’s model, it is the awareness of the inspecting gaze that creates the self-policing, self-managing, docile subject. How then does this inspecting, “panoptical” gaze operate in contemporary American society? While the answers to this question are multiple and complicated, one explanation is the representation and objectification of the body in mass media. As demonstrated above, body hair norms illustrate that the body has become increasingly public, and thus increasingly subject to a scrutinizing gaze. Significantly, this development has occurred in tandem with the growth of the mass media, consumer culture, and the growing power of the image.11 As Mike Featherstone argues, images “make individuals more conscious of external appearance, bodily presentations and ‘the look’” (179). In making individuals more conscious of the inspecting gaze, an image-
saturated media may thus play a significant role in constructing what Sandra Bartky describes as a "panoptical connoisseur" in the individual consciousness:

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other (72, emphasis mine).

Just as the inmate in the Panopticon behaves as if s/he is being watched at all times, in Bartky's argument, women experience their bodies as if they are constantly under the scrutiny of others — particularly men. Bartky also suggests that the mass media play a contributing role in this construction, "constructing as [they do] an image of the female body as spectacle." Mass media thus present the female body as the constant object of the inspecting gaze, creating self-policing subjects, selves committed to a relentless self-surveillance and discipline.

While women certainly face an unequal share of this scrutiny, the growing objectification of the male body (and the burgeoning male beauty industry, of which body hair removal is a part) suggests that the inspecting gaze is increasingly affecting men as well. As the growing hairlessness norm indicates, both genders are spending more and more time disciplining their bodies. As the male body is increasingly displayed as spectacle in mass media imagery, men are beginning to remove their body hair and otherwise groom their bodies in unprecedented ways. At the same time, standards for women's body hair removal suggest an unprecedented ideal of virtual hairlessness, as illustrated by the growing trend of the Brazilian wax. In other words, as Bordo argues, women "are spending more time on the management and discipline of our bodies than we have in a long, long time" (166). Body hair norms for both genders thus exemplify Foucault's concept of the operation of modern power through self-discipline and the management of the self.

Conclusions

The title of this article, "The Last Frontier," comes from two sources. The first, a 1972 article in Ms. magazine with the same title, argues that despite feminist resistance to what were generally seen as "oppressive" beauty norms, the beauty requirement of body hair removal went largely
unchallenged, making body hair "the last frontier" in the Second Wave feminist battle against an "oppressive" femininity. This idea of a "battle" is important. As Foucault came to understand, where there is power there is also resistance. If the body and its daily habits, routines, and practices can serve as a site of social control, then the body can also serve as an important site of resistance. And resistance seems more important than ever: if both women and men are spending more and more time on the maintenance and discipline of their bodies, as the growing hairless imperative suggests, then this struggle is particularly timely.

The second source of this title is Linda McDowell’s assertion that the growing focus on the exteriority of the body and its malleability has led some critics to identify the body as "the last frontier in postmodernity" (37, emphasis mine). This malleability, this postmodern plasticity, is reflected in the popularity of body modifications from cosmetic surgery and dieting to piercing, tattooing, and branding. While body hair removal has been a part of this cultivation, this malleability (and hair is the most malleable, renewable part of the body), the expansion of the hairless imperative to include previously unproblematicized parts of both the female and male bodies suggest that in this sense, body hair may truly be the last frontier.

Notes
1 Notable exceptions include Basow, Basow and Braman, Cooper, Hope, Synnott, and Tiggeman and Kenyon.
2 For the purposes of this study, "body hair" is defined as any and all hair that grows below the neck on the female or male body. For women, the focus is on hair that appears on the body with puberty (such as pubic and underarm hair), as well as that which darkens, thickens, or coarsens at this time (primarily leg hair). For men, the areas of body hair that are primarily addressed in this study are the chest, stomach, and back.
3 It is important to note that Hope’s study addresses only Caucasian body hair norms. Due to a lack of ethnographic data on actual body hair practices in the United States, this discussion excludes variables such as race/ethnicity, class, etc. The exclusion of these variables does not imply that they are insignificant – for example, there is some evidence to suggest that the practice of body hair removal may vary significantly by race. Just as different groups have different skin tones, etc., body hair distribution too differs by group. In a culture that idealizes hairlessness, body hair norms may thus have significant racial (or racist) implications that are unfortunately beyond the scope of the current study.
4 Hope categorizes the advertisements she encountered in her study as either primarily instructive (encouraging new or innovative behaviour), or product-based (simply
encouraging consumers to use a particular product). The instructive role played by the mass media is important: as Hope argues, “it seems to be the advertisers of hair removal products who first ‘educated’ American women about the importance of removing underarm hair” (95).

This would be a very useful addendum to Hope’s study.

While the actual numbers of women practicing the Brazilian wax are unknown, with the pornography industry at least, the removal of female pubic hair is widespread. While a discussion of body hair removal within a pornographic context is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that magazines such as Playboy reveal a steady trend toward increased hairlessness in female models. The Brazilian wax appears for the first time on Playboy centerfold models in the 1990’s.

Women’s fashion magazines (and other mass media forms) play an important role in normalizing bodily ideals and behaviours (cf. Bordo). One way that this normalization is achieved is through the creation of pictures of “reality.” Whether or not the practice truly is widespread, in describing the Brazilian wax as “the latest trend,” these magazines present the style as popular and normative.

While the practice of the Brazilian wax may relate to the increased exposure of the pubic area in “public” contexts such as the beach and even in pornography (cf. Betty Dodson in Castleman), the vulva remains a “private” part of the body in most contexts.

For example, in 1997 the men’s toiletries market was reported as growing at a rate of 7% per year (Kivlehan 42).

The difference between the literal exposure of the body through fashion and the “objectification” of the body in visual imagery is a matter that must be taken into consideration. It is not only the literal display of the body that results in its problematization, but a particular kind of display. As discussed below, the context of that display is important: consumer culture. For, as Heather Addison argues, “[if] consumers could be convinced to be continually critical of their bodies, manufacturers and advertisers would benefit” (9). In other words, the body provides an ideal arena for consumption, since each consumer has a body, and each body is constantly changing.

For a discussion of the influence of consumer culture on the cultural treatment of the body, see Addison and Featherstone.

As stated above, this is not the only factor that determines men’s body hair removal.

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