

I would give
you my hair

if I could

I WOULD
GIVE YOU
MY HAIR
IF I COULD

stories on women's
hair & lives

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PREFACE

When my hair started falling out, my mother told me:

I would give you my hair if I could.

It was a sentiment that has stayed with me ever since, just like my mother stayed by my side when all of my hair was gone. Her red hair falls over her shoulders on soft curls that I have always envied and admired. The red curls, that were so distinctive to my mother, were not inherited by me.

As a child, my hair was silky, straight and white as snow, which later shifted into a darker shade of blond. I thought my hair was dull and ordinary. Whereas my mother's hair, thicker and curlier than most, was something special.

With my mother, we have always looked almost the opposite. But when you look closer, you can notice the similarly shaped sharp nose, observing gaze and the way we laugh, which we inherited from my grandmother.

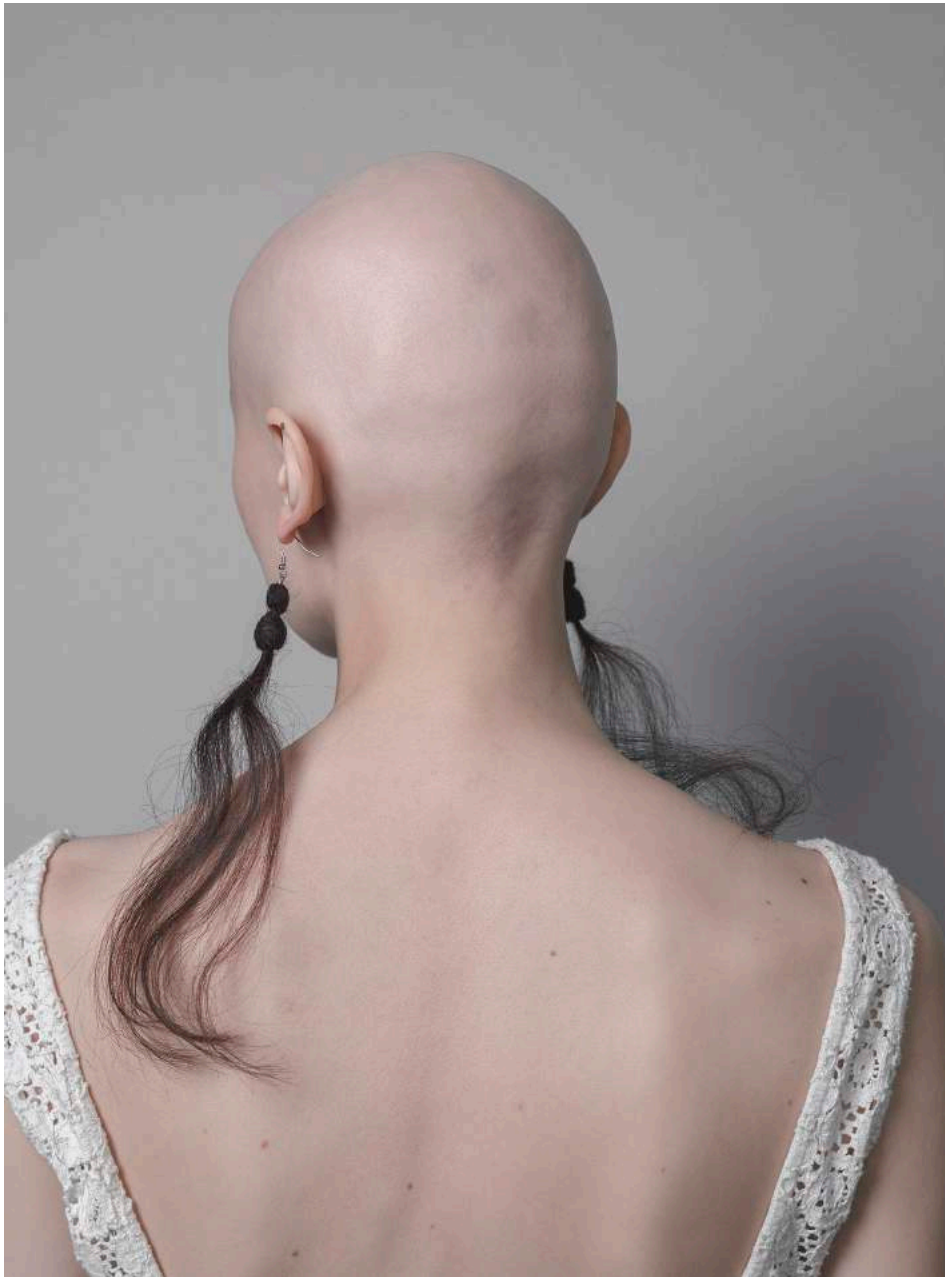
My mother's brown eyes, with sparkles of green, reflect the earth and everything that grows. To me, she is the epitome of nature, womanhood and motherhood. The earth in her eyes grows out of her warm-toned skin and is captured in her flaming hair.

My cyan blue eyes, hold inside them the distant coldness of winter, carefully covering everything in frost. The coldness in my eyes reflects from my pale skin, which not a single hair covers. I feel the coldness of being bare, unmade, not enough. Like an unfinished doll, waiting to be completed.

Once, I asked if my mother would gift me a strand of her hair so that I could treasure her always. She gave me a lock of her hair instead.

I made the lock of hair into an earring, to be worn on my head and to spiral onto my shoulders, where my own hair used to fall, just like my mother's hair spirals on hers.

And I started to understand that perhaps, my femininity is not tied to my hair.



Lumi Tuomi, *I would give you my hair if I could*, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

The possibility of losing my hair never crossed my mind before I lost it. I was 14 years old when I noticed a coin-sized bald spot at the back of my head and in the next couple months, I lost most of my long blonde hair, which was tied tightly to my Finnish identity. Like the well-known proverb goes, you'll only miss it when it's gone.

I was then diagnosed with alopecia areata, an autoimmune disease that causes hair loss in varying degrees on your body. As a result, I lost all hair on my body, including my eyebrows and eyelashes. Through my alopecia, I was introduced to the world of women's hair loss and baldness, and I started questioning the importance of women's hair in society. After almost ten years of living with alopecia, I feel ready to examine the relationship women have with their hair and delve deeper into the roles we inhabit through our hair.

As a woman with hair that comes and goes, occasionally growing back in patches and then falling off again, I have never felt feminine enough. Not only did alopecia change the way I look, but it also caused me to question my gender identity, as without hair, I lacked the most crucial thing that 'crowns' me as a woman. Yet as all women have experienced in patriarchal societies, we are all bound to fail at embodying the 'ideal woman' to some degree. Our hair is too masculine, too sexy, too attention-seeking or too boring; we are never enough. Hair is something that we all have a relationship with and is simultaneously personal and public. Therefore, it is an essential factor in the construction of our social and cultural identity, connecting us to certain groups whilst separating from others.

For my thesis, I interviewed three important women in my life: my friend Alexandra, my alopecian friend Ellen and my mother Ritva. My interview with Alexandra touches on our friendship which hair has strengthened. Alexandra tells about her relationship with hair loss through her mother and me, as we both have alopecia, and how it affects her relationship with her own hair. I interviewed Ellen, who is the first alopecian woman with whom I have talked openly about my alopecia.

Meeting her has been a turning point in my journey towards accepting myself, and our relationship is an example of the unique and intimate bonds women can build around our hair and hairlessness. I interviewed my mother about her relationship to her hair as a woman, who in her youth adopted red hair to resist hegemonic gender norms, and still keeps her hair long and red, as a resisting act against getting older.

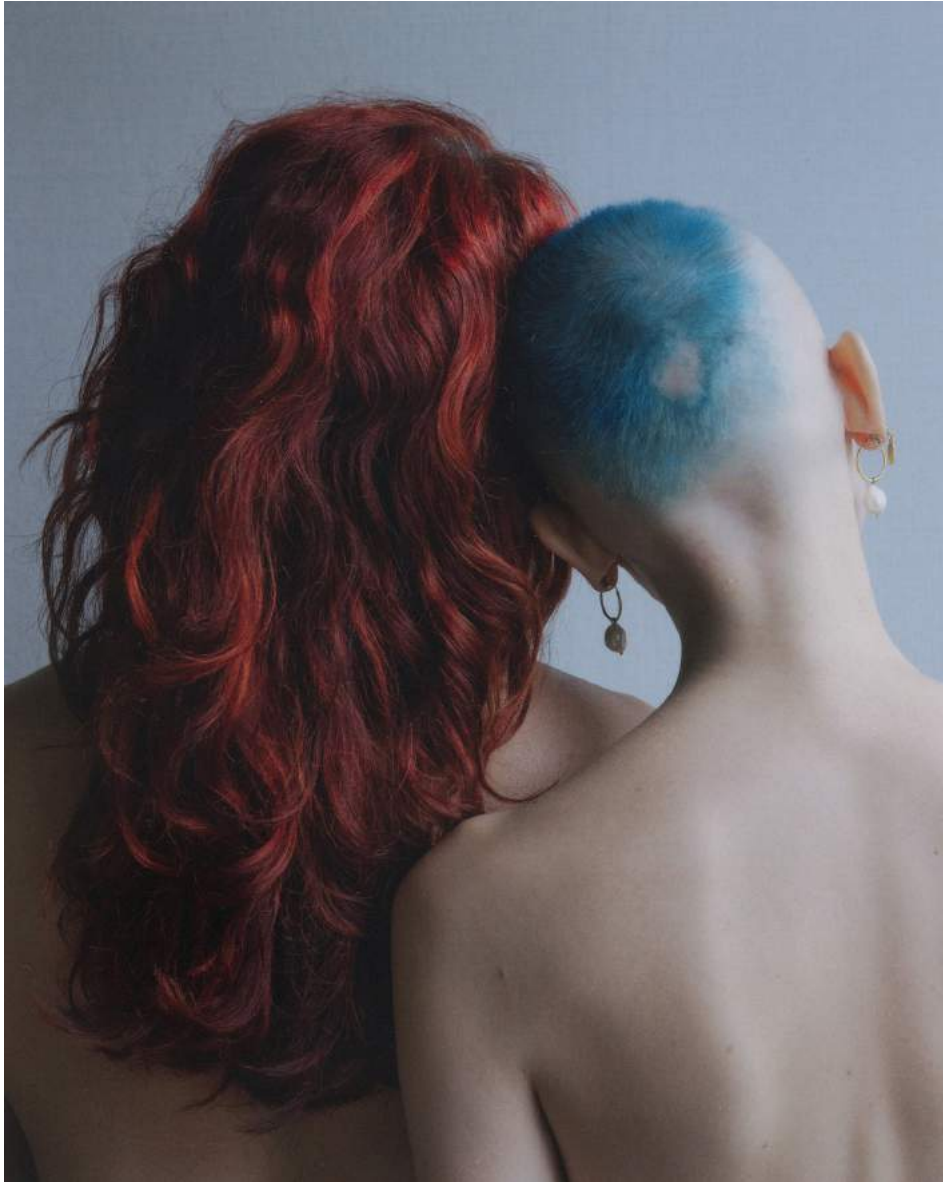
My thesis consists of two parts where I delve deeper into how we, as women, perform femininity through our hair and what those performances tell about our lives. In the first part, I explore sub-questions, such as what is femininity? And how is hair (or the absence of it) related to femininity? I analyse these questions using theoretical research, personal experiences, and examples from media, history, and art. In the first part, I also introduce women's hair loss by going deeper into my own story with alopecia. Defining alopecia and its effects is important, as throughout this thesis, I will be coming back to my experiences with it in order to analyse how the absence of hair affects femininity.

The second part will examine the complex relationship between resisting and accommodating hegemonic gender norms by delving deeper into historical, political and societal meanings of hair. I will conclude the second part by examining the relationships women build around hair through trivial acts of performing femininity. I will finally conclude my thesis with a summary in which, I hope, we can understand better what hair, or the absence of it, tells us about women's lives in our current society.

I will back up my writing with Judith Butler's theory from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990 where she defines gender as performative and consisting of performative acts associated with one's gender. I relate female hair loss patient's experiences with performing femininity through wigs, accessories or their choice to go bald, to women who have hair, and their experiences with performing femininity through different hairstyles.

For deeper research into femininity and hair, I will use Rose Weitz's essay *Women and their Hair: Seeking power through resistance and accommodation*, 2001 as well as her book *Rapunzel's Daughters: What Women's Hair Tells Us About Women's Lives*, 2014. I analysed performances of femininity in art, by introducing pioneers of performing and questioning gender roles, through artists Claude Cahun, Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman. I also considered how hair and relationships are presented in photography as I introduce Carlota Guerrero and Carrie Mae Weems. As a photographer, who first picked up a camera to capture myself with hair loss, I analyse how I deal with the topic of hair and femininity in my photography and especially in my own graduation project.

With my thesis, I aim to portray the complex and diverse relationship women have with their hair and performing gender norms. By analysing how women perform femininity through hair, we can learn how social structures and cultural expectations affect our lives and how we build intimate relationships around our hair. My thesis examines how hair defines our femininity and how we perform culturally mandated appearance norms through our hair. What will these daily performances of femininity, through hair, tell about women's lives?



Lumi Tuomi, *Mother and me*, 2020.



PART I

PERFORMING
FEMININITY
THROUGH
HAIR



GENDER,
FEMININITY
& HAIR

I never realised how closely my hair was tied to femininity and gender until I lost it due to alopecia. Before that, I didn't question how I was taught to value my attractiveness through hair or how I viewed long hair as the ultimate aim, in order to be attractive. As I struggled as a woman with hair loss, I was forced to redefine what gender and femininity meant to me. My story with hair is personal, yet it represents a broader and more universal truth of women's hair loss and how it is perceived. As we all have some a relationship with hair, we can identify with the concerns and joys others have related to their hair.

To start examining hair and its relation to gender and femininity deeper, I try to formulate answers to the following questions. What is femininity? And how women perform femininity through hair? First, I aim to define gender and femininity by using literature written by feminist scholars Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. Then I will further examine the relationship between performances of femininity and hair, through a short case study of Cindy Sherman, a photographer who pioneers in performing different female identities through self-portraiture.

To dive further into femininity, I will aim to define gender by looking at other theories. Judith Butler, an American feminist theorist, describes in her theory *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990 gender as a performative repetition of acts, associated with one's gender. Therefore in her theory, gender is a construction that we collectively agree to perform and sustain through accommodating gender norms.¹ So, as women, we perform gender norms associated with our gender. In other words, we perform femininity.

We are constantly evaluated by societies around us and expected to fit into hegemonic Western notions of gender roles. As we are aiming to fit into these roles, we are becoming the Western society's definition of a woman. French feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir states:

¹ Butler, Judith, Preface (1999), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1999 pg. 15

*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*²

Beauvoir is known for reinventing women's liberation through her early feminist theories of gender, which were published in her novel *The Second Sex*, 1949. Beauvoir thought that women often felt like failures as they couldn't live up to the myths of femininity – they couldn't be what others wanted them to be. The goal of Beauvoir's novel was for women to cultivate their own vision of the world. To ask themselves,

What do I want?

I understand Butler's theory of gender and femininity, as culturally formed and continually changing. Through my experience with alopecia, I also relate to this theory. I coped with my illness by performing gender roles in alternative ways, ultimately with an aim to redefine femininity. I also think, that in a sense, we do 'become' women and in this sense, I would interpret Beauvoir's theory in a way that anyone can become a woman, or perform femininity. According to Wikipedia femininity is a set of attributes, behaviours and roles associated with women and girls.

In a way, attributes, behaviours and roles all point towards hair and its relationship with femininity. What our hair looks like, how we should take care of our hair and what roles we inhabit and perform through it. Hair, in general, is something that we all have a relationship with. It is simultaneously personal, as it grows directly out of our bodies, yet public as it is visible for everyone to see. Hair is an important factor in the construction of our social and cultural identity, and for women, it is seen as the 'crown' that completes our womanhood.

The social and cultural meaning of hair changes and varies throughout time, just like how the definitions of gender and femininity are constantly redefined and reproduced. The one rule that most societies and cul-

tures still follow is that women's hair must differ from men's hair.³ Women's hair is expected to look beautiful, be well managed and look like an effort was devoted to taking care of it. Even though the idea of the ideal hair changes throughout time, Western standards of female beauty dominate the beauty ideals in our society, where attractiveness is based on white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied representation of femininity.⁴ It is a narrow beauty ideal to fit in which is narrated by a patriarchal system where, as Beauvoir suggested, all women are bound to fail at embodying these roles in some degree.

When I first moved to The Hague, I visited the Mauritshuis to see Johannes Vermeer's notorious painting, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665. Seeing the painting with my own eyes, allowed me to focus on details I didn't pay attention to before. As the girl in the painting gazed back at me from the wall, I saw a beautiful girl with delicate facial features almost blending in with her skin. Her hair hidden by a scarf and her eyebrows and eyelashes disappearing into her skin, she looked familiar. How was I only noticing this now, that the girl looked almost like I do, with my bald head protected with a scarf and my fallen out eyebrows and eyelashes?

The girl in the painting changed my perspective on femininity. It helped me to view myself as feminine without wigs, which I couldn't even imagine before because of my alopecia. This painting, which is still considered as one of the most beautiful paintings in the world, portrays a woman who looks like me. A woman with alopecia! This new perspective on beauty, femininity and alopecia inspired me to recreate the painting as a self-portrait. My self-portrait *Girl with Alopecia*, 2017 reinterprets Vermeer's painting from the perspective of an alopecian woman. I saw Vermeer's painting as a celebration of me, as she, the girl in the painting, has features that I considered as my weaknesses.

² Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, 1949 pg. 267

³ Weitz, Rose, *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004 (Introduction) pg. 15

⁴ Holmes, Kasie, *Her-Storicing Baldness: Situating Women's Experiences with Baldness from Skin and Hair Disorders*, 2014 pg. 1



Lumi Tuomi, *Girl with Alopecia*, 2020.

I have noticed patterns through discussing hair and interviewing women around me. Women's relationships with hair are so trivial that they are often easy to talk about but at the same time unconscious, so that it can be hard to discover what meaning these trivial acts actually hold in our lives. What is your hair routine like? How much time do you spend on your hair? What do you not like about your hair? Asking these simple questions, at first seemed to also result in simple answers. As I went deeper into the answers, larger phenomena and concerns eventually came out -- discussions about identity, body image, relationships, time management, pleasure and pressure amongst others. When I started to research women's relationship with hair and to engage in these conversations, I was surprised about the variety of discussions that arose.

According to American sociologist Rose Weitz, hair reflects ideas about women's nature and their lives. In her book *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004, Weitz writes about the daily concerns women face with their hair:

Far from being trivial, these concerns reflect deeper truths about women's lives, truths so embedded in our culture that they can be as difficult for us to see as for fish to see water.⁵

Throughout writing this thesis, Weitz's theory has become more important for me, as I have started to understand how much hair determines in our lives. As hair is publicly judged, evaluated and analysed in social and cultural contexts, hair determines much in our lives without our intention to do so. Just like our clothing, our hair signals to others about our gender, age, politics, social class and more.⁶ Therefore, we communicate constantly through our hair, and the public assesses and receives the messages we send out.

⁵ Weitz, Rose, *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004 (Introduction) pg. 12

⁶ Weitz, Rose, *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004 pg. 13

I have been attracted to Cindy Sherman's (b.1954) work for quite some time, and I recall the illustrated catalogue of Cindy Sherman and her 1990 exhibition in Milan being one of the first photographic works I held in my hands voluntarily. Both of my parents are photographers, and so I grew up in a house filled with different books from photographers; however, it took 16 years for me to develop a deeper interest in photography itself. Sherman's self-portraits started captivating me after I began to use wigs in order to hide my alopecia, a few years after my diagnosis. I was curious how she transformed herself into different female characters with the use of makeup, clothing and most importantly, wigs.

In her self-portrait *Untitled Film Still #81*, 1980 Sherman poses as a young woman gazing at her face and hair in the mirror. I'm captivated by the softness in the photograph, in her clothing and hair but also in the moment itself. Somehow it seems like a fragile and intimate moment of performing femininity with herself. To me, the way Sherman portrays herself reflects strong feminine energy.

Somehow, wearing my wig, felt like I was participating in the same act as her, changing and playing with my identity through experimenting with portrayals of femininity. Sherman's playful self-portraits, inspired in me a more light approach to wearing wigs. However, Sherman's works are also a critical comment on gender and identity as she aims to challenge the typical idea of beauty by showing provocative, distasteful and disturbing imagery of female identities. I too, enjoyed the double standard of portraying myself as a traditionally beautiful young woman in my wigs, whereas underneath the wig, was another kind of non-conforming womanhood. I relished at the aspect of performing various identities through different length, colour and style wigs, forgetting my rapidly falling hair. With the help of wigs, I could be whoever I wanted to.

As my hair kept falling, I didn't feel feminine. But when I put on my long blonde wig, I felt like Sherman in her work *Untitled Film Still #81*. I felt soft and feminine, and more importantly, normal. I used Sherman's

working method as a way for myself to analyse who I was and who I wanted to be and picked up a camera, just like she did. Since then, I haven't put down my camera nor stopped analysing and searching for my identity and femininity. I guess it is a never-ending search which doesn't have a finish line, as our identity's always in motion.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #81*, 1980.



hair story:
ALEXANDRA

After I graduated from high school, I met Alexandra in a year-long art course where we quickly became friends. Alexandra is one of those rare people with whom it just 'clicked'. When starting our studies, my own hair had grown back but was falling off again at a fast pace. I wore berets to hide my bald spots, but I had decided that I didn't want to start this friendship without being completely open about my alopecia. So, one night in Alexandra's house, I gathered up my courage and told her I had alopecia. She answered me by telling her mother also has alopecia, and through her mother's experience, she could understand me. Before that, I hadn't heard of anyone else having alopecia, and the fact that my friend's mother shared my condition made me feel less alone. The feeling that there was someone like me, my friend's mother, was incredible.

We have been close friends ever since, as we both understand each other in a way that many can't. We often meet with her mother too, and she and I end up showing each other our bald heads in case regrowth has happened and catch up on our lives with alopecia. During our studies, Alexandra and I looked like sisters with our blonde hair; my hair had just grown back and was shoulder length with bangs, whereas Alexandra had longer blonde hair without bangs. I recall some people even thinking that we were indeed sisters. Sisterhood is definitely something that describes our friendship well. A friendship that seems to be tied together with hair, and which the presence and absence of hair deepen.

Now Alexandra wears her hair blonde, around shoulder length with a bang. I have always admired her hair, especially after I lost mine because hers reminds me of my own hair. Alexandra tells me that's why also her mother loves her hair, it's exactly what hers was like before she lost it. Alexandra's thick and wavy hair texture is rare in Finland, and even her hairdresser tells her she has a head of hair worth of three people's hair. Even though Alexandra enjoys that her hair is strong and thick, at the same time, it needs high maintenance.

I notice that my negative relationship with my hair results from my hair texture not being common in Finland. In my youth, I wished for them to look similar with my friend's hair, straight and not so thick, which is why I straightened my hair every day to school.

We all can catch ourselves with this way of thinking; wishing for something that we don't have. Like Alexandra dreamed of silky and straight hair, I dreamed of thick and curly hair. Alexandra's mother admired her daughter's thick hair, as something that she has lost.

Alexandra explains that she feels powerful when her hair feels healthy. As the quality of hair and hair loss is often connected with illness, having healthy hair can sign a healthy body. However, with multiple experiences of hair loss around her, Alexandra is afraid of losing hers. Alopecia and hair loss has affected her relationship with hair in many ways, as Alexandra has seen how it can restrict one's life, like quitting certain activities, having to conceal hair loss and having problems with mental health. Even though Alexandra acknowledges the possibility of losing her hair due to the nature of autoimmunity caused alopecia, which can be inherited, she is afraid of it.

My mother lost her hair during a difficult and stressful period of her life. I'm easily stressed as a person, so losing my hair is often present in my mind.

Understanding how hard hair loss can be, caused Alexandra to appreciate her hair, but it also causes her to feel guilty when she's not happy with her hair. Therefore she takes notice on when to talk about her hair negatively, as she feels pressure to appreciate it, as her close ones have lost theirs.

(Alexandra, you can always talk about your hair to me without pressure, I promise.)

Through talking and thinking about hair more closely, Alexandra started to think more about how it is connected to her femininity. At first, it was hard to recognise their connection, but then Alexandra noticed how strongly they are intertwined, and how she views her hair as one of the most feminine parts of herself. Through her hair, Alexandra also performs different roles like wearing her hair on a ponytail in a job interview, in order to look professional and avoid attention on her hair, as well as using hair to emphasise her femininity when dressing up in masculine clothing. The presence of hair loss in Alexandra's life has given her a better understanding of the lives of her close ones who suffer from it. Through talking openly about the presence of hair loss around us, Alexandra and I have discovered new parts of each other. New daily struggles and concerns, which open up our behaviours and strengthen our relationship, but also joys, understanding and support in one another. We may not look like sisters anymore, but I couldn't feel more like so.



Lumi Tuomi, *Self-portrait with Alexandra*, 2017.

HAIR STORY: ALEXANDRA

To Alexandra,

In our last call, we were talking for almost two hours about hair and hair loss and everything related. I love talking with you, and still, I'm amazed how natural it is for us to talk critically and in a detailed way about alopecia and through it, larger phenomenons in our lives. Every time I learn something new or gain a new perspective from you, like last time when we were talking about male hair loss and how it can also affect men strongly. I'm so thankful for that. We both keep on growing through our discussions and vulnerability. I was surprised how much interviewing you, discussing hair in general and your relationship with hair would deepen our relationship as I learned so many new things about you and your life. Missing your tight hug. Please send love to your mom too.

*See you soon,
Lumi*

HAIR LOSS, BUZZ CUTS & FEMININITY

Most of our society sees women's hair loss as nonexistent and distant. It is a condition mostly concealed from the public sphere. Why do women hide their hair loss? Because of the lack of knowledge and visibility of women's hair loss, patients are forced to hide their condition as they can't fit into hegemonic notions of beauty. In general, hair loss is connected with negative connotations like disease and ugliness. But especially for women, whose hair is strongly associated with femininity and attractiveness, losing hair can have negative consequences.

In this second chapter of the first part, I'll focus on how hair loss and the shaved head disables women from fitting into culturally mandated norms. I'll also consider how, we hairless women, perform femininity in alternative ways. In order to gain a more detailed contemporary picture of how women with nonconforming hair are viewed, I'll examine how women's shaved heads and hair loss, are represented in history, media and art.

In historical context, it is assumed that to be a 'woman' one must have hair.¹ Even in the Bible, the importance of women's hair is often discussed, and hair is stated to be a 'woman's glory'.² The discourse that would challenge this assumption is lacking, and unchallenged³ as hair loss is viewed for a woman as a loss of one's most important part of femininity: her 'crown'. It is often forgotten that not all women have the ability to have or grow hair.

After finding a coin-sized bald spot at the back of my head, I was diagnosed with alopecia areata. From alopecia areata, my condition developed into alopecia universalis (the rarer form of alopecia which causes hair loss all over your body), and I lost all of my hair, including body hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Ever since I have attempted to accept myself as a bald woman, with hair that comes and goes. As a result, I started questioning, how does the absence of hair affect femininity? And how are bald women viewed in this society we live in?

1 Holmes, Kasie, *Her-Storicizing Baldness: Situating Women's Experiences with Baldness from Skin and Hair Disorders*, 2014 pg. 2

2 *The Bible*, 1 Corinthians 11:15

3 Holmes, *Her-Storicizing Baldness*, 2014 pg. 2

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S HAIR LOSS IN HISTORY & PRESENT DAY

As the length of women's hair is associated with positive values; hair loss and shaving the head are seen as negative and deviant.⁴ Women's decisions to shave their heads have been historically used as political, personal and fashion statements. Female baldness and the shaved head, have been adopted as statements throughout history in political, social and religious movements. For instance: in youth subcultures like punk and goth, religious groups like nuns and Monks, lesbianism and most importantly, in the feminist movement.

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminists in the United States of America shaved their heads in order to resist traditional gender roles and definitions of attractiveness. The feminist movement was the first popular movement to promote a belief that women shouldn't be judged by their appearance,⁵ and by shaving their heads, they could defy the norms that define woman's attractiveness. Because of historical notions and symbolism associated with the length of women's hair, women's buzz cuts and baldness redefine gender norms by challenging hegemonic notions of femininity by merely existing.

Still, in today's society shaving your head is seen as an act of defiance against societal expectations of femininity. For many women, the buzz cut is a way to redefine how we have been taught to look at gender and experiment with gender expression. Going back to Judith Butler's theory of gender as performed stylised repetitions of acts, I understand that gender attributes are

not expressive of a true gender identity but of the performance itself. Therefore, we can see hair as a gender attribute, that does not belong to true gender identity. Bald women, hence, are disrupting the stylised repetition of acts, associated with hegemonic notions of femininity. However, there are consequences for not performing gender in a way that is constructed.

As a woman with a bald head, more specifically a bald head that has small patches of hair growing occasionally, I drastically experience the difference between a shaved head (a buzz cut) and a completely bald head. Unwillingly losing one's hair and the decision to shave one's head, are entirely different. A head which is bald also looks very different from a head that has hair growing in it. A bald head reveals all of your insecurities you never knew you had, as they were hidden under your hair growth. (In my case, an awkward mole in the middle of my head and a red birthmark on my nape.) Even for a bald head, there are expectations and norms. A bald head should be smooth, shiny and hairless; something alike to an egg. However, the truth is hair loss has various appearances, and it constantly evolves as is its unexpected nature.

We see notions about bald women appearing in media, for instance in the movie *Witches*, 1990 (based on Roald Dahl's novel from 1983), which portrays middle-aged women as witches with bald heads covered with rashes. Rashes that are caused by their bad quality wigs that scratch their heads. A remake of the 1990 version was released during 2020, with the witches even more 'horrifying' than twenty years ago with abnormally large mouths and missing fingers and toes, transforming Dahl's novel into an even more ableist and problematic version.

This image of bald women with rashes and marks on their heads is hurtful because I, and many bald women, have marks on our heads. Just like all humans have moles, stretch marks and scars on our bodies. I continuously feel insecure about my imperfect bald head, with occasional patches of hair growing in. It's also hurtful, because no one, but a woman who has lost their hair

4 Ibid, pg. 12

5 Weitz, Rose, *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004 pg. 27

could understand how an uncomfortable wig can affect the quality of one's life. I'm amazed how long I wore uncomfortable wigs or scarves, which caused intense ear and head pain frequently, in order not to look 'funny' and have my ears poke outside.

The written and visual representation of female baldness and hair loss, have been associated with negative traits throughout history, and still are. Women's hair loss has negative connotations; for instance, it is seen as indecent, creepy, and even as a lack of sanity. In the media, the visualisation of aliens has adopted baldness as a signifier of their inhumanness. This notion causes female baldness, and baldness in general, to be often portrayed in surreal and creepy contexts which are especially visible in photography and media.

Shaving women's heads has also been historically used as the ultimate humiliation and punishment for women, cutting their identities away. We can consider even more examples from popular media. Think about Eleven in *Stranger Things*, 2016 as she is freed from being locked in an institution for her mental powers, with a shaved head. Or about Every's hair in *V for Vendetta*, 2005 as her head is shaved during captivity. Or how in the first edition of *Rapunzel*, 1812 the sorceress cuts off Rapunzel's hair as a punishment and uses the severed hair to haul the prince up herself. Going back to Roald Dahl, in his children's novel *The Witches*, 1983 he describes witches accordingly:

"Just take it all in. The second thing to remember is that a real witch is always bald." "Bald?" I said.

"Bald as a boiled egg," my grandmother said.

I was shocked. There was something indecent about a bald woman. "Why are they bald, Grandmamma?"

"Don't ask me why," she snapped.

"But you can take it from me that not a single hair grows on a witch's head."

"How horrid!" "Disgusting," my grandmother said.⁶

Dahl's choice to portray reinforces the stereotype of how female baldness, and older women, are still viewed in this misogynist society. I can't imagine a children's book calling any other group of human beings 'disgusting'. How is it okay to call bald women such? Dahl's children's novel lays the base for stereotypes we carry with us the rest of our lives. His writing is an example of the link that villainy has with disability, disfigurement and bodily deformation, which has been historically used in literature and is now used in media and film as an embodiment of villainy.⁷ In villains, witches, in this case, baldness and marks on their heads are used as bodily deformations to show, or justify, that the witches are evil.

Dahl's portrayal of witches traces back to the witch-hunts throughout the 1450s to 1750s. Already from ancient times, cunning women and girls were thought to be capable of witchcraft, and it was also commonly believed that the maleficent powers of witches resided in their hair.⁸ At the height of the witchcraft trials in England and Europe, accused women's heads and bodies were shaven before interrogations. Witches were thought to conceal amulets, or even the devil himself (!), in their hair. But most commonly their heads were shaved in order to expose concealed devil's marks such as moles and birthmarks.⁹

It was thought that without their hair, witches would be powerless, which is not so far from the way beauty norms around women's hair and femininity are constructed in the 21st century. Powerful and liberated women with maleficent powers which reside in their hair must have been equally as scary to patriarchal societies throughout history, as are women now, who are owning their bodies, shaving their heads and just loving themselves without the need to be validated by anyone else but themselves.

As I reflect on history and this day, I realise how hair has and continues to be connected to women's subordination in society, as through hair and constructed

6 Dahl, Roald, *The Witches*, 1983 pg. 26-27

7 Campbell, Jen, *Let's Talk / Villains & Disfigurement*, 2017.

8 Maitland, Karen, *The History Girls, 'Accused of witchcraft and murder in 1518 and 2018'*, 2018

9 Machlus, Shaina Joy, *Sorry I'm a Mammal - Witchcraft and Body Hair: A Long History of Interconnectedness*, 2018

norms related to it, we could and would be controlled. Through shaving women's heads women have been shamed and excluded from society throughout history, as by doing so, our femininity could be taken away, and we could be marked as outcasts. This portrayal of women who lack hair as villains, or bad people, strongly exists outside of fiction, like explained through the witch-hunts.

Another example of casting women aside from societies through lack of hair took place in France, but also elsewhere in Europe. During the Second World War women who were assumed of having any relations with Nazis, had their hair shaven in public, in order to shame them in the worst possible way which would be visible to everyone. In this case, as well, the lack of hair is used as public humiliation and punishment for women, which labels them as criminals, outcasts and villains.



Lumi Tuomi, *Portrait of Alopecia*, 2017.

ALOPECIA & FEMININITY

Negative associations towards women's hairlessness make having alopecia so much harder. In patients, women's hair loss has been proved to cause mental health conditions like anxiety and depression, which arise from the drastic changes in one's self-image and identity. Losing one's hair causes low self-confidence and negative body image because as hair is publicly viewable, hair loss can be hard to conceal. Whilst hair loss is connoted with a bald head; the reality is often different. Hair loss can look like bald patches, varying amounts of hair on a head or a bald head with patches of hair.

Also, the management techniques vary as some women wear wigs, other accessories, and others shave their head. Some women conceal their hair loss; some don't. The experiences are as varied as all women who have hair loss, and everyone has their unique way of coping with it and alternating between management techniques. Generally, women who suffer from alopecia decide to conceal their hair loss by using wigs, because existing as a woman with visible hair loss in public is often to be whispered about, pointed at and speculated on. It can be emotionally exhausting, as we are not represented in public nor accepted to the hegemonic definitions of femininity. As a teenager, I was also offered help about how I could conceal my condition with wigs. Back then, I wasn't given an alternative, and my wigs did indeed support me in looking 'normal' publicly. I also enjoyed the easy nature of wearing wigs and not having to do or wash my hair daily. But for me, wearing a wig mostly felt like putting a band-aid on top of a large wound – the wig did make me appear normal to others, but the wound inside me wasn't being treated.

Hair loss is often a traumatic event for women. Still, it is made worse as it's not uncommon for doctors to suggest that individuals lose their hair because of stress or psychological problems, which puts the blame of hair

loss on the woman and stigmatises the patient as neurotic. My alopecia was always suggested to be caused by stress, which made me blame myself and constantly wonder what I was doing wrong. The exact cause of alopecia is unknown; however, doctors these days believe alopecia occurs from genetic predisposition, which can be triggered by environment. For hair loss patients, many treatments and ointments are available, but none of them are guaranteed to work. In the first year after my diagnosis of alopecia, I tried incredible amounts of treatments. From massaging garlic on my head, eating antibiotics, using different lotions to receiving allergic reaction treatment on my scalp.

In the first months, after half of my hair had fallen out at my doctor visit, I ended up sitting alone at an auditorium filled with medical students who were poking, peering and studying my head. For an insecure teenager with most of their half fallen out, it was a traumatic event as I felt like my incapability to be a woman was being evaluated. I remember how the students and doctors in that room made me feel like I was terminally ill when I was not. They made me feel like my life was over because I could never grow up to be a woman as I lacked hair. I remember being worried about what the young male students in the room saw when they looked at me. I thought I could never be attractive to anyone.

What I was missing from those early years after diagnosis, was to be given the option not to treat my alopecia. I wish I would have been treated not as an ill person and be offered to try all available treatments, but to be told that I could still be a woman without hair. However, at the same time, I understand and recognise the need for more profound medical research into alopecia and the availability for better treatments. If I met my younger self now, I would show myself images of bald women and tell myself that I don't need to be treated. That I can be valuable and beautiful with alopecia. I would tell myself that your identity, femininity and attractiveness are not tied to your hair. That I would not need to fit into the gender roles and ideals I was taught; instead, I could redefine them or reject them altogether.

POSITIVE REPRESENTATION OF BALDNESS AND HAIR LOSS

Because of the negative historical associations surrounding the length of women's hair, positive representation and visibility are needed to redefine new ways of femininity. The positive representation of women's buzz cuts, baldness and hair loss was almost invisible before the age of social media. Now, for instance, the alopecia community is thriving all around social media. In Instagram, I see alopecians sharing their stories with hair loss publicly, whereas Facebook's private groups for alopecians offer support in a safe space. The visibility of alopecia in media has increased in the last couple of years, where model agencies and TV series have started casting alopecians. The positive representation of alopecia is helping our condition to be known worldwide and helps normalise female baldness. However, the representation of the perfect bald head and young women only shows a very limited vision of hair loss. For the hair loss community, but also to the public, it is important to show how varied hair loss can look like and how women from different backgrounds and ages experience it.

Hair loss and baldness has historically been associated with illness and is generally seen as something that should be cured. Because hair loss is often caused by autoimmunity conditions, like alopecia in my case, it means it is not curable. Hair loss, indeed, is mostly caused by conditions in our body, but it doesn't need to be associated with looking ill. A bald head or a head with hair and bald patches can be just that, a head with hair or not – it doesn't need to be a visual for illness. Is it so difficult to accept and redefine new ways to wear hair? *Tank Girl* has been leading the patches-of-hair revolution since 1988, whilst Rick Owens also borrowed the half-

bald look, before worn by alopecians, in his SS20 show. I see more and more nonconforming hairstyles in the art and fashion scene, and it makes me believe that someday I will be bold enough to show my bald head with patches of hair to the world.

For me, an important representation of non-conforming femininity has been Claude Cahun's photographic work. Cahun's self-portrait *Untitled*, 1921-1922 was one of the first photographic works I remember seeing of another kind of baldness, than male. The self-portrait is cropped from their bust upwards in the form of a classic portrait. Cahun is looking behind the camera with an intense gaze, their head is shaven, and they seem to be wearing a man's suit. I saw this photograph after I developed alopecia and since then I have been drawn to Cahun's work, in which they comment upon notions of sexuality, gender and identity through self-portraiture.

Claude Cahun, born in 1894 into a Jewish family, was a surrealist photographer, writer and nazi-fighting genderqueer. Cahun fell in love with their stepsister, Suzanne Malherbe, and they shared a life together until death. Cahun was a part of the Lesbian community in Paris but adamantly rejected gender as in their autobiography *Disavowals*, 1930 they write,

Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine?

It depends on the situation.

Neuter is the only gender that always suits me.

Cahun's photographs proved their revolutionary way of thinking and creating, whilst commenting on social boundaries by the different roles they inhabited. Joining the men-dominated Parisian Surrealist movement also proved Cahun's exceptionalism and how from inside the Surrealist movement, they could start changing the misogynist movement itself and offer it a new perspective.

Where male surrealists were portraying women as objects of their eroticism, Cahun was embodying and portraying a diverse gender identity and femininity. In

her essay *Explorations, Simulations: Claude Cahun and Self-Identity*, 2016 Viviana Gravano analyses Cahun's work through their aesthetics and the 'normality' and 'deviance' in their works, taking a new perspective aside from gender studies. Gravano believes it is essential, in order to understand Cahun's relationship with 'abnormality', to take into account how "her life had been disrupted by a traumatic event she herself reshaped by translating and conceptualising it several times throughout her work."¹⁰ As a child, Cahun's mother was committed to a lunatic asylum from which she would never return, disappearing entirely from Cahun's life.

Gravano analyses Cahun's first self-portraits as the iconography of alienation, where the foreshadowing 'sick' future can be seen present. In *Self-Portrait* from surrealist *Bifur Magazine*, 1920 Cahun presents themselves set against a black background with a shaved head that is deformed and lengthened out of proportion. In the black and white photograph, Cahun is wearing a black shirt that exposes their shoulders, whilst separating their nude skin from the background dramatically – as if they would be a bust sculpture of themselves.

Gravano describes how Cahun presents themselves "as an ostensibly 'embarrassing' figure to be looked at, through a declared deconstruction of her physical features."¹¹ In the self-portrait Cahun's feminine and petite body contrasts with their deformed shaved head and an empty gaze. In her essay, Gravano compares Cahun's portraiture style to scientific identification photographs which emphasise Cahun's reflection on their mother's sickness and their own embodiment of 'lunatic women' through self-portraiture.

When I first saw Cahun's self-portraits, I was drawn by their androgynous nature and by the fact that Cahun presented themselves with a shaved head, whilst putting on different 'masks' in order to experiment with their identity. Not knowing more of their history, and the reason for their interest with abnormality, I saw their



Claude Cahun, *Untitled*, 1921-1922.

10 Gravano, Viviana, *Explorations, Simulations: Claude Cahun and Self-Identity*, 2009 pg. 358

11 Ibid, pg. 358

work as an exploration of the non-binary and attempt at redefining femininity through performing and inhabiting different roles. I saw Cahun's work as an ode to femininity which didn't need to be deemed beautiful, with their shaved head and ambiguous features and clothing.

I reflected my own experiences with unwomanliness and feeling 'ugly' and 'deformed' as a woman with no hair, into Cahun's work. In many ways, it was like looking into a mirror – yet like I deemed myself 'ugly' and 'embarrassing' – I never saw Cahun as such. Without knowing, as in their photographs, Cahun embodied their fears of their mother's sickness, Cahun's work was closer to my experiences as a woman with alopecia than I thought.

From my perspective, Cahun's work indeed portrayed how female hair loss is viewed by society and how it is connected to an image of sickness. Yet Cahun turned their negative experience around. As through self-portraiture, they took control of their fears, created art and revealed them to the public. Even though I fell in love with Cahun's work because of their shaved head, from them, I learned about the strength in self-portraiture and taking control of your own life and identity through photography. What I learned from Cahun has been necessary for me in coping with alopecia, as inspired by Cahun, I started practising self-portraiture by ditching wigs, which worked as a form of therapy and self-investigation. Just like before I had experimented with my identity using wigs, inspired by Cindy Sherman.

IMPORTANCE OF PEER SUPPORT

Even with all the negative experiences, I can thank alopecia for finding my own path in life: photography. Ten years ago, the visual representation of female hair loss was nonexistent, besides medical records. Lack of representation caused my relationship with alopecia to be negative, whereas now I see baldness and hair loss as a source of strength and beauty. The lack of visibility of women like me directed me to start taking self-portraits with my camera in order to find something beautiful in hair loss. I spent most of my teenage years with low self-esteem and depression, but self-portraits offered me a tool to develop my artistic skills and relationship with myself.

Later, many years onwards and after the rise of Instagram, I gained the courage to share my self-portraits where my alopecia was visible online and write about my condition openly. The support I gained was overwhelming, and since then, my relationship with alopecia has changed drastically to positive. 'Coming out' as we sometimes call it in the alopecia community (meaning coming out open about alopecia publicly) is something many alopecian women participate in social media. Talking about hair loss publicly not only helps us mentally in handling alopecia but lets other alopecians know they're not alone. Peer support, meaning people in similar life situations who share their experiences with each other and relieve shared hardships, is important for all women with alopecia at some point of their diagnosis.

A few years ago I was leaving a cafe when a middle-aged woman stopped me and asked if I have alopecia. Back then, I was feeling confident with my condition and answered yes. The woman flashed me a big smile, pulled her wig halfway her head and showed her bald head which was underneath, loudly acclaiming:

Me too!

I was so amazed at her approach to me, and so inspired, that I forgot to show her my own bald head. (To all the alopecians, can we start greeting each other like this?) We then chatted for a moment, whilst her teenage daughter waited for her mother and seemed a bit embarrassed.

I have always been hesitant with talking to alopecians that I notice on the streets because of the sensitive nature of the condition. But this encounter made me feel so strongly a part of a community, that I realised, often we are more than happy to meet others like us. Now when I see other women with hair loss in the public or media, Claude Cahun using themselves to investigate their deepest fears or Eleven shedding her wig in *Stranger Things*, I feel inspired, warm and strong.



Lumi Tuomi, *Portrait of Alopecia*, 2019.

2.1
hair story:
ELLEN

I met Ellen in 2017 for a school assignment, where we had to photograph someone we didn't know. Ellen volunteered to participate in my shoot after I shared about it in Facebook's Alopecia Areata-group, and invited me to her home. Before our meeting, I hadn't opened up about my story with alopecia to another alopecian woman. Back then, I had no idea how this meeting would shape my relationship with alopecia and photography drastically. I remember how we were sitting on Ellen's couch and talking about alopecia for two hours, whilst I captured photos of her. It was the first time I could talk about my story with someone who could understand me completely. And I could also take comfort in hearing her story.

Before losing her hair, Ellen had thick, dark and curly hair which hardly needed maintenance. She viewed her hair, as just hair, and did not pay a lot of attention into it nor could she understand other's envy of her curls. In July 2013 a tumour was discovered next to Ellen's kidney, which was successfully removed weeks later. Only two months after the operation, Ellen's hair started falling off and already in December she had no hair left on her head. Her body appeared to be reacting to the stress of the long surgery.

I was devastated and desperate. Doctors had no cure.

Yet now Ellen has accepted that alopecia is part of her life and that there is no cure available. She believes her body protected her, and developed alopecia instead of letting cancer grow in her body.

I am proud of my body for protecting me.

When Ellen broke her ankle in 2017, during her recovery wigs were in the way, and she decided not to put a wig on when her colleagues came to visit her.

*I didn't bother to cover.
They took me as I am.
No judgements or remarks.
I told them it was alopecia and that was it.*

Since then Ellen hasn't worn many wigs and mostly goes out bald or with a hat. Because of her acceptance of alopecia, she feels like alopecia hasn't affected her relationships. However, when she wasn't used to being bald, she often felt like people felt sorry for her.

*Once in a restaurant in Greece,
the owner gave me a relic when leaving.
She gave me a shell with a picture of Jesus
and tapped me on my back.
First I thought it was strange,
and on our way back to the apartment,
I realised that she felt sorry and wanted to tell me
that I got the support of Jesus.*

The first time Ellen met another woman with alopecia in the changing room of a gym. It was during a period of her life when she was covering her condition with hats and caps. A colleague asked her in the gym about alopecia.

*I was really surprised and confirmed.
I also asked her how did she know about alopecia,
as a few years back hardly anyone had ever heard of it!*

It turned out that Ellen's colleague was completely bald herself, but had been hiding her condition with a wig. During the first years, when Ellen had lost her hair, it was important for her to meet and talk to other women with alopecia to hear tips and tricks. After embracing her alopecia, she doesn't feel the need to meet others strongly but enjoys being present in the Facebook groups for alopecia.

*Alopecia hasn't affected my understanding of femininity,
and for me, femininity isn't tied to hair.*

Even without hair, Ellen feels feminine; however, not when she sees herself from the back.

*Then I think I look like an old bald man,
and therefore I pick my seat at the restaurant
with my back to the wall.*



Lumi Tuomi, *Ellen*, 2019.

For Ellen, the worst thing about alopecia is feeling cold as her head is so sensitive. The best thing about alopecia is that she stands out from the crowd.

*I like being apart.
I feel confident,
and I am proud to be different!*

To Ellen,

I don't know how to explain how much meeting you changed my relationship with alopecia, and through that, my life. I couldn't grasp it back then, how much your positive energy and pride in who you are, inspired me to aim for the same. In a way, I have always looked up to you and admired how you wear your baldness in public. With you, I gathered up my courage sometimes to be bald too, and it felt so natural. Also thank you for always being willing to participate in my artistic endeavours and offering help when needed. I'm thankful for having a life-long friend in Amsterdam, whom I can visit in future too and together we can show our beautiful bald heads to the world.

*Hope to see you soon,
Lumi*

CONCLUSION

Searching for the definition of femininity has been an ongoing search for me ever since I developed alopecia, so a search of around ten years. I think now I have for the first time managed to define femininity for me and through that began to feel freer in my self-expression.

My understanding of femininity is based on Judith Butler's theory, where gender is constructed of performative repetition of acts associated with one's gender. It suggests that as women, we perform femininity in order to fit into social structures related to our gender. The social structures, norms and roles are presented to us by a patriarchal system, which limits our self-expression in many ways and expects us to behave, look and act in a socially acceptable way. We are supposed to perform the roles appointed to us, such as have hair on our heads. In Simone de Beauvoir's words:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

Butler's theory thus describes femininity as something that is produced and reproduced constantly, like our gender. As our definition of femininity evolves, so does the norms related to women's hair. Looking back on history, we can see the 'norms' changing. The way we style our hair and what it means is continuously on the move, as beauty norms and trends come and go. Like Rose Weitz sensibly stated:

Women's daily concerns about hair reflect deeper truths about women's lives.

Society's reactions on the length of women's hair reflects deeply on women's subordinate position throughout history. How rooted the controlling of women through hair is in our history is upsetting, but more worrisome is how those same ideas of women's subordination are still reflected in most societies we live in.

From sharing my deeply personal story as a young woman with hair loss, I could reflect on larger phenomena, that women with hair loss or a shaved heads fight

against by not fitting into socially constructed norms of femininity. I felt like sharing this story with its both negative and positive sides was needed, to understand how hair and the absence of it can affect women's lives enormously.

By presenting and examining the negative representation of women's hair loss and baldness, I could reflect on where these associations arise and historically analyse women's subordinate position through hair. Most importantly, how women have been controlled through their hair throughout history by shaving their heads, which stripped away women's worth and attractiveness and excluded them from societies. Whereas, through the positive examples of representation, that inspired me, I could portray how we can start healing and liberating ourselves from the norms that control us. Like Tank Girl, who has been a huge inspiration for me currently, as my bald head has started growing irregular patches of hair.

The negative associations with the absence of hair on women, have made us, with non-socially-conforming hair, feel at odds with our womanhood. But through a positive representation of women with shaved heads and hair loss, the definition of feminine hair is widening. Women with hair that is not socially acceptable, pave more freedom for expressing one's femininity, as their visibility in public in itself can ignite social change. I'm thankful for those women, who wear their bald or hair loss with pride in public too, as I dare not.

My conclusion is that women perform femininity through hair in various ways and in various contexts, spaces and times. Whether we have hair or not, we find our own way to exist in societies or liberate ourselves from them – or something in between. Femininity and hair are tied together tightly, yet we find new strands to follow in order to search for our own identities. I see now that I have many possibilities, many roads to take and alternate between. There is no right way to style, enjoy, or suffer for hair, and there is no right way to be feminine through hair.



PART II

THE POWER OF
STANDING OUT
& BLENDING IN

We tend to be under the impression that we don't think about our hair that often, but the deeper truth is that we do. Even though women's relationship with hair might be unconscious, we make conscious decisions regarding how we present ourselves through hair.

*Should I wear my hair open or in a ponytail?
Should I wash my hair today so that tomorrow it will be clean? Should I go to the salon before the party?
Should I wear a wig or go out bald?*

Every day we decide how we perform femininity through hair, whether we wish to reject, redefine or accommodate traditional feminine roles.

Writing this thesis, I have wondered how complicated our relationship with hair is and how much hair affects our lives. How do we resist and accommodate feminine norms through hair? Why does hair determine so much in our lives? In this first chapter of the second part, I try to answer these questions with the help of literature by Rose Weitz and John Berger, whilst examining stories of resistance and accommodation in popular culture, art history and my own surroundings.

In her essay *Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation*, 2001 Rose Weitz argues that accommodation and resistance are buried in women's everyday lives and activities.¹ Weitz emphasises that the relationship between accommodation and resistance is as complex as our relationship with hair. In her theory, accommodation and resistance are best viewed as coexisting variables, rather than as polar opposites, as women combine both strategies whilst grappling with cultural expectations and social structures.²

As a woman with alopecia, my bald existence in public is directly connected with resistance, through rejecting hegemonic norms of female attractiveness regarding hair. However, I may accommodate these norms

¹ Weitz, Rose, *Women and their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation*, 2001 pg. 667

² Ibid, pg. 669

3 RESISTING & ACCOMMO- DATING

by deciding to wear my wig or hat when going into an environment where I don't feel comfortable with baldness. Through my own experiences with resistance and accommodation, I understand Weitz's argument and realise how I combine both strategies depending on the context, space and time. Every day I decide whether I want to portray myself as a bald woman, with a scarf, hat or a wig. Some days I might feel ready to face the public with a bald head; usually I don't. Just like some days, I might want to embrace the masculine side of me, other days feminine, or combine both of them.

Weitz also presents the idea that open political resistance is far rarer than hidden forms of resistance, which are embedded in our daily lives. According to Weitz, Judith Butler too seems to suggest that covert forms of resistance play a more important role in social change, than does open resistance.³ Can my bald head be a form of political resistance against gender norms? As I rethink back to when I started sharing self-portraits in social media, I remember the surprised and positive reactions I received about my alopecia. Most of my peers were hearing about alopecia for the first time, and some alopecians we're seeing another alopecian woman for the first time. Representation deals with body-positivity and self-acceptance, and in the case of women's hair loss, representation is important in changing the stereotypes related to it as it is often not visible nor talked about.

Therefore, sharing my self-portraits with hair loss on social media can work as a so-called 'covert form of resistance'. Alopecia community having more visibility and alopecia being a more known condition can create social change, and I believe that they do. Women with hair loss constantly challenge, widen and redefine hegemonic norms of femininity. Through vulnerability, openness and representation, people's minds and stereotypes are changing, and through them, the society.

In *Women and their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation*, 2001 Weitz explains the pitfall of being a woman in this society:

*No matter what a woman does or doesn't do with her hair – dyeing or not dyeing, curling or not curling, covering with bandana or leaving uncovered – her hair will affect how others respond to her, and her power will increase and decrease accordingly.*⁴

As we resist one form of normative femininity, we might and often do, accommodate another. We are very well aware of the cultural and societal expectations and meanings regarding hair, and we consciously seek power through accommodating and resisting them – or combining both strategies. However, our possibilities to use those strategies are already limited and constrained by social structures, which causes our increased power in some realms to decrease in others.

We use and resist hegemonic norms consciously to make statements, like shaving our hair in order to avoid attention or dyeing our hair non-natural colour to gain attention. We use our hair for personal gains, and it can make us feel powerful in different ways. However, we are forced to use our hair and perform femininity, or redefine alternative femininity, because women generally do not have the option to ignore the norms set by societies.

It seems like we can't be free regarding our hair or beauty, for we are always looked at, perceived and judged accordingly. And in the end, we will always be looked at. In *Ways of Seeing*, 1972 John Berger presents the idea of the male gaze in Western society, simplifying it to:

*Men look at women.
Women watch themselves being looked at.*⁵

In Berger's opinion, women are presented as objects which are surveyed by men and in this positioning, where men are the surveyors, they exert power over women who are being watched. Like girls are taught from childhood to value attractiveness and embody a passive inferior, boys are encouraged to value independence and embody an active role. Stereotypically it is

3 Ibid, pg. 668

4 Ibid, pg. 683

5 Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972 pg. 47

assumed and taught to us that a woman's attractiveness is for men. We are taught to flip our hair in order to catch a man's eye so that they might approach us. The male gaze surveys us everywhere, affecting our decisions regarding hair drastically.

In 2007, Britney Spears shocked everyone and shaved her head. Most millennials probably remember this incident from our youth. I remember how I wondered why anyone would want to cut their beautiful long hair away? In the documentary *Britney Spears: Breaking Point*, 2019 it is claimed that Britney told a witness:

*I don't want anyone touching my hair.
I'm sick of people touching my hair.*

Now I understand that Britney, as a worldwide known star with her beauty strongly connected to her image, must have lacked the options to take her life into her own control. Shaving her head, was one of the only acts of resistance she could do herself and for herself. It freed her from being viewed as a beauty and sex icon and being admirable to men. I admire and understand Britney's act, which also broadened the definitions of femininity and beauty, so much now as I have grown older.

Shaving one's head and rejecting hegemonic norms of attractiveness can indeed be a way for a woman to attract less unwanted male attention. Another instance from the music industry is singer Sinéad O'Connor, who shaved her head as she entered the music business because she did not want to sell her songs with her sexuality. In an interview at *Oprah: Where Are They Now?* (2014) O'Connor states another reason for shaving her head, which was that in the '80s, it was dangerous to be a woman and attract attention through hair.

Therefore, rejecting traditional attractiveness through not having hair was a way for O'Connor to protect herself. Her baldness, however, became her signature look and a source of admiration from many. When I see her perform, I'm captivated by her talent and stage

presence, but also with her bald head and a leather jacket worn with a bra, leggings and bare feet. I couldn't imagine myself rocking an outfit like that with a bald head, as I'm often afraid of looking funny, but O'Connor does it so naturally that I'm in awe.

As the male gaze surveys us, the male gaze also presents us and has been portraying women as muses, objects of admiration in art throughout history. Like women have claimed our own bodies and hair back, for instance through shaving our heads, we have also turned our backs to the male gaze and predominantly male art world, by developing our own way to investigate and portray ourselves – through self-portraiture. The term 'female gaze' embodies women's desire to make art by themselves and for themselves, yet it does not only refer to its 'male' counterpart but aims to recognise the vast female experience.

I have been intrigued by *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*, 2016 by Frances Borzello, ever since I got my hands on it. When I first received the book from my mother in 2017, I was deeply in love with portraying myself through self-portraits. As I mentioned in the first part, I started taking self-portraits sometime after I was diagnosed with alopecia in an attempt to understand my identity, as I struggled to recognise myself in the mirror when my hair was falling off. Self-portraits made me fall in love with photography, as a medium where I could capture something hidden and unseen from society, like my condition, and make it visible.

Capturing myself with bald spots or a bald head, felt rebellious. Like I was redefining my identity and stereotypes of femininity and hair in general. I was wielding my hair, or rather hairlessness, and the portrayal of it through self-portraits, as a weapon against the norms that would shame me for my lack of hair. As I shared my works on social media, I understood the nuanced activism in what I was doing and how self-portraits could work as a radical act of self-love, acceptance and self-investigation for women.



Ritva Tuomi, *family album*, 1983.

In *Self-Portrait at the Dressing Table*, 1909, also included in the book *Seeing Ourselves*, Zinaida Serebriakova depicts herself brushing her unbound hair in undergarments, whilst one of her shoulders is seductively bared. The self-portrait was painted one year after her marriage, and her apparel, unbound hair, washbowl and bed at the background hint at intimacies that took place before.⁶ I admire Serebriakova's self-portrait which has an energy of freedom, confidence and women's pleasure – revolutionary ideas in the early 1900s, through which she appears to own her own femininity.

Historically women's self-portraiture has been made for a variety of reasons; autobiographically, self-promotion, breaking taboos or for practice.⁷ Frida Kahlo (b.1907) was a Mexican artist known for her vast collection of self-portraits in which she explores, questions and stages herself and her identity. In her work *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940 Kahlo depicts herself sitting in an empty space, holding scissors and surrounded by locks of her hair that she has cut. Kahlo painted this self-portrait after divorcing her husband, Diego Rivera. In the top of the painting, are lyrics of a popular Mexican song which reads:

*See, if I loved you, it was for your hair,
now you're bald, I don't love you any more.*

In this work, after the separation, Kahlo seems to choose to abandon her feminine image – as she often depicted herself wearing colourful Tehuana dresses. Instead, Kahlo presents an androgynous image of herself in a man's suit. The lyrics indicate that the act of changing her dress, but most importantly, shaving her head, is an act towards self-liberation after her marriage by rejecting attractive norms. By cutting her hair and letting it grow again, Kahlo is destroying the part that her husband loved, and regrowing her hair anew, liberating herself from her past marriage.



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940.

⁶ Borzello, Frances, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*, 2016 pg. 154

3.1
hair story:
RITVA

When I was a child, I wondered why my hair was so different than my mother's. My mother's, Ritva's, hair was red, curly and thick, whereas mine was blonde, silky and straight. Even my brother seemed to inherit my mother's hair, as his blonde hair spirals in beautiful tight curls. Ritva's red hair fit her so well that for long I thought that it was her natural colour and felt sad as my hair wasn't as extraordinary as hers. As a child, one of the best things about her red hair was that it made it easy to relocate her in the supermarket, as I had (classically) lost my mom between the aisles. To this day, my mother's red hair is her signature, which in my eyes reflects her independent, warm and strong personality.

In the '80s, Ritva was in her twenties and working at an insurance office. However, her strongly goth-punk influenced style was the opposite of what you would expect from someone in her field. During the awakening of the goth-punk scene in Finland, she dyed blonde highlights into her light brown hair, inspired by a famous Finnish rock star, Michael Monroe. The change of her hairstyle, however, wasn't enough, and Ritva dyed her hair red, and since then, her hair colour has stayed within different shades of red. My mother's love of red hair traces back to her childhood, where she adored Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren's children's book character, Pippi Longstocking – whose orangey, red braids pointed outwards horizontally on both sides of her head. Pippi is now known worldwide, but back then her TV show was one of the only shows for children. Ritva was in awe of Pippi's mischievous, independent and artistic nature. Pippi is also known for defying traditional gender roles aimed at girls, and I dare to say that she has inspired many rebellious young girls, including my mother and me.

With her hair flaming red and teased, in the '80s Ritva started to make her hair more dramatic to resist hegemonic norms of beauty and attract attention and acceptance within the goth subculture which had slowly made its way to Finland. After the cold and dark winters, and Finland's tense relationship with the Soviet Union, the '80s was a vital time for freedom and forming of youth cultures in Finland. The youth were bored and depressed and started to use style in order to separate



themselves from the mass in creative ways. First, it was important to stand out aesthetically, but eventually the way the youth dressed and did their hair, became political and personal statements. When Ritva and her friends joined the goth-punk scene, as goth subculture had merged in with post-punk, they became a part of bigger political movements worldwide. They got creative not only in their hairstyles but began to experiment with artistic practises, and soon Ritva picked up a camera and started documenting her surroundings in the '80s. Since then, she hasn't put her camera down, which became her profession, nor changed her signature red hair colour.

Ritva's goth-punk hair was an act of resistance against hegemonic norms of femininity. It separated her from the mainstream groups and connected her to another group, where she felt belonging to. As if performing a rite of passage, Ritva spent time and energy in maintaining her hair teased, red and shaven on both sides. Her style wasn't just a performance when going out, but an identity she adopted and didn't part with when returning home. When defying hegemonic norms, Ritva was performing an alternative femininity, so in a way redefining her own. Ritva's mother never commented much on her hair; however, there was an unspoken wish for the career of a banker and adoption of a 'normal' lifestyle apart from the artistic one. My mother's neighbours still to this day, 40 years later, remember Ritva's hair.

*I spoke with my neighbour this summer,
and she still remembered how incredibly 'ugly'
and 'horrible' my hair was in the '80s.
I really had made an impression on her!*



Ritva Tuomi, *family album*, 1984.

To Ritva,

I always wished I had red hair so I could look like you. I wanted to look more like your daughter because I admired you so much. My straight blonde hair was nothing compared to your red and strong curly hair. I still love looking at old photos of you and see how you found your own identity through hair. But somehow, now with my bald head, I couldn't feel more like your daughter. Your strength, bravery and independency that flame from your hair are reflected from my shiny bald head. The way you found your own way and identity, perhaps I'm finding mine now, one step at a time.

I'll braid your hair again when I come home at Christmas.

*Miss you,
Lumi*



Ritva Tuomi, *family album*, 1988.



THE STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY

With my mother, we often visit my memory ill grandmother in her nursing home. Together the three of us sit on my grandmother's bed, on each of her sides. My mother combs gently through her own mother's thin snow-white hair, whilst I sit there quietly. After a few minutes, my grandmother rests her eyes and drifts off. This is how we spend time together, with no words spoken.

We, women, create intimate and unique relationships with each other through our hair. As we perform feminine acts through hair like brushing, braiding or washing, we are also building and strengthening our relationships. Through trivial acts of femininity, we show that we care and give our time to each other. However, as most societies teach girls to value attractiveness and beautiful hair, so do the women around us. Relationships with our mothers, sisters and friends can also be a source of pressure regarding hair.

Hair is incredibly personal, and touching one's hair is an act that demands trust, yet our hair is often discussed by women around us which can cause pressure and separate us from one another. In what way does hair connect and separate us? For our relationships, how is hair a source of pleasure, pressure and connection? I will explore these questions in this final chapter of the second part, after which I will conclude the second part and finally, the thesis itself. I will conclude this chapter by portraying how women can build intimate and strong bonds through hair, and the absence of it, through my graduation project and hair loss community.

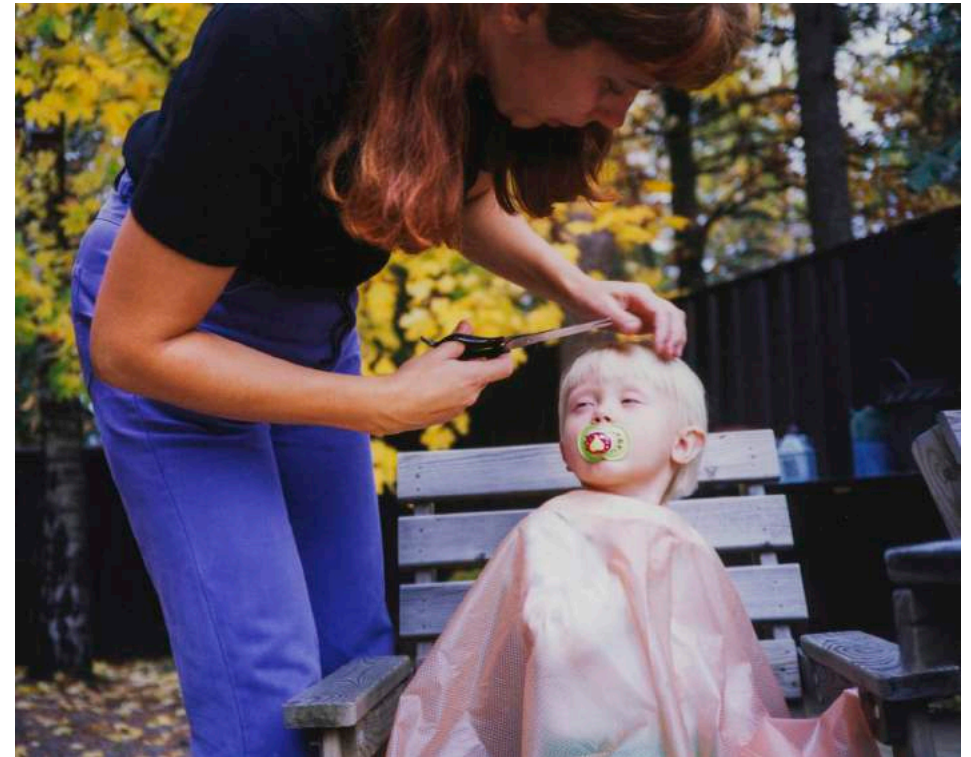
From the relationships we build around hair, we also pass on pressure regarding how our hair should look like. Not only the media but also our families, neighbours and peers teach us to value attractive hair. Grandmother praising their granddaughter for having beautiful long hair or a mother spending vast amounts of time in the morning to style their daughter's hair. These acts can be meant as acts of love, but in some cases can reinforce stereotypes of femininity. How and what we are taught about valuing attractive hair differs from community to community, and evolves constantly.¹

As a child, my mother cut my almost white hair into a 'bowl cut' which was very popular for Finnish children in the early 2000s. I adopted this hairstyle for most of my childhood because my hair was impossible to maintain for its silky texture. Therefore, my haircut aimed to keep it from tangling, large tangles from being cut off and out of my face. The hairstyle also made it easier for me, as I was running after my older brother aiming to be able to do everything he could do, whilst admiring his bouncy curls. Also by keeping my hair short, my mother could spend less time on taking care of my hair (which I didn't enjoy nor approve of as a child) and she could focus on other matters, whereas I also gained free time.

Time has always seemed to be short for women traditionally because of homework and children. The time women spend on their hair is away from other activities, and for instance, by abandoning difficult hairstyles, we gain time and physical freedom. Like my mother says about our messy (she thinks it's messy, not me) house that if she kept the house always clean, she couldn't have done anything else in her life as a woman, mother and artist. Ever since I have remembered my mother's wisdom, which I now apply to hair. The less time we spend on pressuring ourselves and each other about perfecting our hair, the more time we have for other activities.

Even though hair sometimes causes conflicts due to pressure and expectations in our relationships with other women, it is an important source of pleasure and connection. The time we spend with our grandmother's, mother's and sisters tending to each other's hair can be a meaningful bonding activity in itself, through which we strengthen our relationships, often unconsciously.

Tending to hair can also be a joyful way to spend time, to get creative with different styles, for instance through play which is an integral part of our lives as children. I remember especially enjoying cutting my Bratz dolls hair short and playing hairdresser, perhaps already being bored with the idea of attractive long hair.



My mother and me, *family album*, 1999.

Touching, massaging or brushing each other's hair and head is an intimate act and a source of relaxation. Like my mother combs her own mother's hair, I also braid my mother's hair before she goes out and she helps me with shaving my head. These small trivial moments, when we perform acts of femininity together, mean more than we realise. They are acts of love and care.

Hair connects us to certain groups intentionally or unintentionally. For instance, my mother, who through her hairstyle signalled that she was part of the '80s goth-punk movement in Finland, gained independence from mainstream gender roles and joined a group of likeminded youth. Like my mother, I feel strongly connected to the hair loss community with whom I can feel sameness. From these examples, we can notice that a shared experience, like resisting gender norms through hair or losing your hair connects women more deeply together.

1 Weitz, Rose, *Rapunzel's hair: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, 2004 pg. 29

The Dora Milaje, a group of women warriors who are among the most skilled fighters in *Marvel Universe*, in *Black Panther*, 2018, must be the largest representation of bald women in the film industry. For the first time seeing bald, black and strong women warriors in a large group, in only one film (!), the Dora Milaje left quite a strong impression on me.

Their strength lies within their solidarity, pride in what they do and who they are, their trust in each other and their tattooed bald heads. In *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, 2018 Danai Gurira, playing the character Okoye, tells that she was one of the first of the female cast to have her head shaven.

*Day by day, all my wonderful women in the army,
started to come in with long hair one day
and like me the next. We just started to have
some solidarity, you don't see a lot of
bald women walk around all the time.²*

Like in the film, in real life also, the warriors of Dora Milaje came together in solidarity with their shared experience of shaving the head and bonded through their new experience, for instance, realising how coldness feels utterly different on a bald head than on a head with hair.

My favourite scene in *Black Panther* is when Okoye is forced to wear a wig during an undercover mission, but as soon as the fighting starts, she uses her wig as a weapon, slamming it in the face of an enemy. Tired of accommodating gender norms with a wig, she continues to be a complete badass in just the way she is, with her bald head. I don't know how to quite explain it, as it is an extraordinary visual in our society but seeing this group of strong and bald women warriors on-screen, felt natural to me. Like this is what I am supposed to see. I could feel their sisterhood shine through from the screen, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Like Gurira stated, we don't see many bald women walk around in public, but we definitely should.

Tending to each other's hair is a day-to-day activity that most of us learn to take for granted. Performing acts of femininity together through hair, are activities that are only partly conscious as we are so used to engaging in them. We rarely stop and think how valuable these moments with women around us are, how they make us feel connected and cared for.

In 1989 Carrie Mae Weems (b.1953) started photographing herself every single day at her kitchen table. Her devotion led to *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 in which Weems examines the dynamic and complex lives of women. Weems uses herself as the main subject in her works whilst constructing scenes from women's daily life around the characters she embodies, also inviting her neighbours to join her kitchen table to perform various roles. In an interview with the *W Magazine* Weems explains how she uses her body as a landscape to explore the complex realities of the lives of women. As Weems carefully constructs her works by embodying different tropes of women, she performs various realities of femininity. And whilst doing so, tells truths about women's daily lives.

The Kitchen Table Series has taken on historical significance and paved the way for women artists to create their own representation which was often lacking in the art field. Weems also points out how the series could have been made 30 years ago or 30 days ago, making the work exceptionally contemporary. With her series, Weems aimed to point out how women were, and still are, discounted and undervalued in the world but particularly within the art world. Weems could fill in the lacking representational images of black women in art, with her self-portraiture. However, she says that her series is valuable to many women, and not just black women, as it portrays women in the domain of popular culture.³

² Danai Gurira on *Black Panther*, 2018
4:10-4:25.

³ Eckardt, Stephanie, *Carrie Mae Weems
Reflects on Her Seminal, Enduring Kitchen
Table Series*, 2016.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled from the Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

In *Untitled*, from *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 Weems sits at the head of the table with a cigarette and a glass of wine in her hand. She closes her eyes and rests her head on the hands of another woman standing behind her, who tends to her hair with a brush. I first assumed the two women to be a mother and a daughter, but at a closer look, I view them as close friends as they appear to be of similar age. I'm surprised by the warmth that a black and white image can emit in my body as I watch the two women calmly and comfortably be present in each other's company.

Accompanied by the warmth is an aura of tiredness, which is reflected from Weems' resting eyes and the darkness surrounding the corners of the room, where the lamp can't quite reach. Like in this photo-

graph, acts of femininity, like tending to each other's hair, often occur during the mornings or nights when we are getting ready to go out or to sleep. Despite the early or late hour and the busy lives we lead, women find the time to tend to each other's hair.

The triviality of the women's actions and the intimacy in Weems' photograph, makes me reminisce on my own life and times I have had my hair or head tended, or I have tended to my close one's hair. Her photograph visualises the moments I have never, for different reasons, captured with my camera - those moments, which were too intimate to document or too trivial for me to notice the importance in them. *Untitled*, from *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 portrays the core of what I have explored in this thesis:

What do acts of performing femininity through hair tell about women's lives?

When I see this photograph, I'm reminded of how at home, I braid my mother's hair and how she used to detangle my hair every morning as a child. I also start to wonder how we show our love and affection with each other through physical contact with hair, and how sometimes for me, braiding my mother's hair is an easier way of saying I love you instead of verbalising it.

Talking about and paying attention to each other's hair can be an equally important bonding experience as physically tending to hair. What I have learned during the process of writing and researching my thesis, is that talking about our worries and pleasures regarding hair, open up intimate and important topics about our lives. But so does photography. I believe that photographing someone is an act of paying ultimate attention to them and the moment of taking a photograph can involve much dialogue as well, whereas the photograph can also ignite conversations in itself.

Throughout the working process of my graduation project, which I will talk more about later on, I have admired Spanish artist Carlota Guerrero's (born 1989) work. She works closely with performance and

hair through photography and video whilst addressing feminist and diversity issues. Guerrero uses hair to emphasise solidarity and connection between women in her images. High-length hair with intricate hairstyles swing beautifully amongst women who are dancing together and long together-woven-braids connect women to each other as if their sisterhood is flowing throughout their braids.

Performance is an essential aspect of Guerrero's work, which brings her models together in a unique setting. Her works are not only portrayals of sisterhood, but through the way the shoots are organised, they are experiences of it. As Guerrero aims to create a diverse representation of women, she provides the space for a collaborated performance to take place, where women connect and interact with each other. Therefore I view her works as performances of redefining and reconstructing femininity through using traditional symbols of attractiveness, such as long hair, to portray the solidarity and sisterhood between women and to reclaim our hair as our own.

Since meeting Ellen in 2017, I have been viewing my photography as a connector of sorts. Like Guerrero's work brings women together to create art, I use my photography in order to connect myself with other women with hair loss as well as connect them with each other. In my graduation project, I aim to create representation for women's hair loss and portray the intimate bond that we, women with hair loss, have within our community. My photography started in the form of self-portraiture through which I could tell my story with alopecia and create my own representation of it, which I felt was lacking. I now find the urgency to work with other women with hair loss and to grow and explore our relationships within our community.

I remember how natural it felt to see the warriors of Dora Milaje shine with their sisterhood and pride, which I also see in Carlota Guerrero's work, where different women come together and perform as one. With hair loss, naturalness often feels distant as in our natural state, which may be baldness or spots of hair, we may

feel like strangers and outsiders. With wigs and scarves, we might not be able to relax or be natural as we can be afraid of them falling off. So when do I feel natural? It wasn't a hard question to answer, as one of the rare times when I have felt natural, I have spent alongside other women with hair loss.

Which is why, I emphasise the word 'natural' in my graduation project, where women with hair loss come together, shed their wigs and scarves and are in their natural state together. I explore and portray this beautiful notion and moment, that within this group, we can feel togetherness, solidarity and comfort. The relationships between us are understanding, intimate, gentle and open-minded. We, women with hair loss, are a varied and diverse group, with different kinds of hair loss; some are bald, some have bald spots, others have half of their hair, some shave their heads, some hide their spots. In my graduation project, we come together in groups, in which we can feel natural – as being ourselves in public often feels foreign and scary to us.

Photographing with a medium format film camera is an important part of my work which slows down every step of the process, giving space for feelings of comfort, awkwardness, relaxation and importance. The slow shooting rate provides participants and me with more time to get to know each other, to grow comfortable with our bodies within a shared space and in front of the camera. The sense of hurry disappears as more care is used to capture an image, and instead of viewing the taken photos, our collaborative performance is not ceased. As sometimes I might also visit the other side of the camera, the role and dynamics of the photographer and participant dissolve and collaboration comes into play.

As I shed my scarf alongside the women I photograph, we can all be equally ourselves and share feelings of relief, joy, nervousness but most importantly, naturalness. In those moments, we are all the same yet different.



Lumi Tuomi, *Graduation project*, 2021.

4.1 CONCLUSION

In this second part, I hope we got a better understanding of the reasons why and how hair determines so much in women's lives. Through various examples from women's daily life, literature and my personal experiences, we can notice how women combine strategies of accommodation and resistance in our everyday lives, whilst we struggle with cultural expectations and social structures. With the help of Rose Weitz's essay *Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation*, 2001 the line between accommodation and resistance became fluid, just like is their nature in women's lives where we decide every day how we perform femininity through hair.

When relating my own story to Weitz's theory, I became aware of how much I think about the messages I want to send out through my hair, or rather hairlessness, like resisting norms through my bald head or blending in with a blonde wig. It's fascinating how political our everyday decisions can be, just like Weitz and Judith Butler suggested when arguing that covert forms of resistance can be more common and effective than open political resistance.

Even though women's possibilities to resist and accommodate are limited and constrained in society, and there are always consequences to choosing either strategy, we can use the tools we are given for our own benefit. Like in social media, where body-positivity movement and alopecia community challenge the Western ideal of the 'perfect' woman.

And even if, as John Berger stated in *Ways of Seeing*, 1972 women are always surveyed by men, we can liberate ourselves from their gaze by rejecting it. Just like Britney Spears did, when she shaved her head to gain control over her own body.

Throughout history, women have been practising self-portraiture in art, to reclaim their own identities and bodies from the male gaze. Women developed the female gaze and used self-portraiture to portray and discuss topics that otherwise were forbidden in society. In their self-portraits, Frida Kahlo liberated herself from

her past marriage by cutting off her long hair, whereas Zinaida Serebriakova celebrated her sexual freedom and confidence with her unbound hair.

By sharing my own experiences and other artists, I illustrated how women build intimate relationships around hair by performing feminine acts like tending to hair. I now realise how much we show our love to each other through these small trivial moments. Our sisterhood and solidarity are strengthened by our shared experiences of concerns and joys regarding hair, and being a woman in this society.

Connecting myself more deeply to other women through hair has become important to me in my personal life but also in photography. In Carrie Mae Weems's work, the trivial yet tender act of brushing other's hair portrayed the time, and dedication women give to each other daily. Whereas in Carlota Guerrero's work women's connection to each other is emphasised with performances of femininity and long conjoined braids. Performance is present in both Guerrero's and Weems's work, where women are invited to space to perform together and portray their sisterhood. They are truly experiences of solidarity among women, through hair.

Performance has become essential to my work and graduation project, where I invite women with hair loss to come together and interact with each other whilst creating art. To be able to use hair and hair loss, in this way, meant becoming aware of what hair means to me and how it connects me to others. Now I consciously use hair (and photography) to connect me to other women and connect them to each other too. As hair ties us together, we are stronger.



Lumi Tuomi, *Graduation project*, 2021.

☞ recently watched *Little Women, 2020* directed by Greta Gerwig. There was a scene which I thought related so well to everything I have been writing in this thesis:

*"Well, who will be interested in a story of domestic struggles and joys? It doesn't have any real importance." says Jo.
"Maybe it doesn't seem important because people don't write about them." answers her sister Amy.*

5 FINAL CONCLUSION

Like we have understood during this thesis, the domestic struggles and joys in women's lives are so crucial in learning about women's lives! Our struggles and joys with hair reflect on deeper and larger phenomena in society and our lives. Talking about hair may be complex, as its presence is self-evident to us and its nature so trivial yet important for women, that talking about hair can be seen as vanity. But when we talk, we grow, and we learn.

I think many women struggle with contemplating on how society sees us and feeling like our hair and femininity are for male consumption. I certainly have done so. Yet the most important conclusion that I have made is that women's hair should be for women to enjoy and decide upon, just like our bodies. We can choose what we do with our hair and whether we want to accommodate, redefine or reject feminine norms. Femininity is as diverse as is our hair, and as are we. For me, it has been important to understand that I can reject the male gaze, and enjoy my femininity, hair and hairlessness for myself. My hair and my femininity, are not for male consumption, but for me.

Thinking accordingly feels liberating and allows me to enjoy my hair and the relationships it brings with other women. Even though sometimes it feels scary, I want to show my bald head, because I know there are alopecians out there who need representation and because I know being open about my alopecia connects me to others like me.

I couldn't imagine my life without alopecia. It has connected me so strongly to my family, friends and other women. It has made me question my identity and through that helped me to find it again. It woke me up to the importance of hair and helped me to understand women around me better.

We all have our own story with hair. It might have helped us grow, to be political, to enjoy our femininity, made us struggle, built our relationships and helped us show love to each other. All in all, hair plays an important role in our lives and when we realise that, I believe we can reclaim it and start taking control in what sort of a role hair embodies.

It was essential for this thesis to aim to fill in the gap of the lacking positive representation of women like me, which is why I lifted examples from popular culture that had made an impact on me, like Dora Milaje who were united by their baldness. At the same time, it was essential to illustrate where the negative connotations of women's hairlessness come from, to understand how deeply integrated and present they are in society. By presenting self-portraits of women reclaiming their identity or building relationships through hair, I wanted to show how liberating and important (!) self-portraits are for women.

Self-portraits have historically been one of the only ways women can decide how to portray themselves and their lives, and through that, make the hidden visible. It's hard to grasp, how important self-portraits have been for me in coping with my identity as a woman with alopecia. Without them, I surely wouldn't be writing and talking about my condition and hair this openly.

Throughout this thesis, I invited three women from my life to share their stories with hair, in order to portray a broader image of different kind of relationships with hair and how diverse they can be.

To Alexandra, Ellen and Ritva.

I felt like talking about hair, deepened all of our relationships, and I learned much about you. Thank you for sharing your stories with hair, and through that, your lives. You are the inspiration for this thesis and the reason I have written it. Let's talk more about our hair in future too, because talking, in the end, is what gives us comfort, joy and healing. Like you have given me.

To my mother, whose lock of hair ignited in me an idea, that we can break the boundaries of how hair is supposed to be worn and create our own understanding and vision of femininity, thank you for standing by my side.

I will keep wearing your spiralling locks of hair with pride.

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I WOULD GIVE YOU
MY HAIR IF I COULD
stories on women's hair & lives

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