

S(h)aving face: An autoethnography of female facial hair

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Abstract

Culture determines and enforces norms for behavior and appearance based on the many different qualities and identities claimed by each individual. Gender is no exception. There are rigorous standards for how gendered bodies should appear and what qualities they should exhibit in order to receive cultural acceptance as their presented gender. Women are limited in the areas in which they are permitted to allow hair to grow while still being accepted as feminine. The Western norm is that of sleek, slim, and hairless—aside from perfectly manicured eyebrows and flowing locks set above beautiful faces—and is demonstrated by media portrayals, advertisements, and conversations about womanhood from a very young age. The pressure to live up to these ideals is increased whenever the hair in question is grown in a way that is deemed both traditionally and medically to be masculine, such as on the face and neck. Through the personal narrative framed in gender theory and the conversation about female body hair in scholarship, I address the problematic norm that is female hairlessness through the lens of female facial hair. By addressing my experiences in the frame of Western culture's obsession with hairlessness, I will explore what we have to learn from the performance of non-feminine hair in relation to femininity, how culture informs decisions about appropriate gender and beauty, and the significance of facial hair performance in the expression of identity—particularly addressing the understanding that one's body doesn't perform either its gendered or sexed identity correctly, what forms punishment for such non-conforming performance takes, and how those whose bodies break the rules of gendered performance contribute to the perpetuation of the very norms they violate.

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