

George Mason University

## In the Desert

A personal essay

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I stood on my tiptoes to get a better view of myself in the bathroom mirror. Leaning forward over the sink, palms flat on the counter, I stared intensely at myself. My parent's bathroom afforded a little more privacy than the upstairs bathroom shared with some of my sisters – with three pre-teenagers, the bathroom tended to be crowded – and I had locked the door for just a few extra minutes without inquisitive family members. Next to my right hand was a can of shaving cream, to my left, a pack of purple disposable razors – both had been bought at my insistence by my amused mother earlier that afternoon. Staring at myself for a little longer, I finally decided I was brave enough and opened the package, took out a razor, turned on the shower, and stepped in.

The three largest deserts in the world are the Arctic, the Antarctic, and the Sahara, covering approximately 14.5 million square miles combined. Despite the Sahara Desert being the smallest of the three, its 3.6 million square miles are roughly the same size as China. Although these three deserts have vastly different temperature extremes, all three require intense preparation and planning to traverse. Without proper gear and provisions, life expectancy is from first nightfall to three days.

And what a miserable three days that would be.

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Jacques Lacan believes that the mirror stage is the part of infantile development when a child finally looks in a mirror and recognizes themselves – recognizing their indistinguishability of internal and physical 'I'. This identification melds the two together, creating the person that inhabits a body. He then goes on to say that this is the beginning of the end of freedom. Once you see and know your body, you are trapped there forever.

Fourth period is gym class – ever dreaded, today we were playing dodgeball and I anxiously changed into shorts and a t-shirt. Sitting down to put on my tennis shoes, I marveled at how smoothly my legs reflected the light from the harshly luminescent ceiling. I had shaved twice over the weekend – my first public debut of my smooth legs would have an assemblage of band-aids to accompany them. Despite the adhesive, I hoped this would mean no one would comment on my fuzzy cat legs again. Why were 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys so mean? And what is it about women that seems to incite degradation through animalization? Praying that my ability to dodge words was infinitely better than my ability to avoid red, rubber projectiles, I stepped into the gym.

In 2013, CNN reported about a man traveling through the Sahara Desert to study those who do it regularly. Armed with water, a headdress, a camel, and a guide, he still balked at the thought of thousands of miles of harsh aridity. Attempting to comfort him, his guide threw him a date and said, “With three of these, you could live for nine days in the desert... You eat just date skin on each of the first 3 days, and for the next 3 days you eat meat. Then you suck one date stone until day nine. Unless you get water on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, you’re going to die though”.

If you could make it to day ten with only a bag of dates, would you really want to?

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Lacan speculates that without the presence of a physical mirror, the infant still learns its place in society through others. This social mirroring creates the same effect as mirroring the self - trapping the mental ‘I’ in the physical. Embodiment is inevitable and depressing. I wonder if you can go through the mirror stage preemptively, becoming trapped in a physical image that you once inhabited, but that no longer exists. Or does the mental change to match the physical encasement?

Standing next to my dwindling number of classmates, I hoped that I wouldn't be chosen last. But I knew that in a minute I would be the unfortunate add-on to an otherwise cohesive dodgeball team. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the rest of my classmates had been together since kindergarten, and I craved that inclusion. I hoped that today would not be another silent, ignored day; but, I was still last to be chosen. Unsurprisingly, or perhaps ironically, I was placed on the team with the most vocal teenage boys unafraid of embarrassing someone for their differences – the same boys who laughed at my unshaved legs the week before. Feeling about 40 inches shorter, I braced myself for the oral onslaught, ready for some comments about my physical appearance, but I was met with nothing.

From then on, silence equaled safety.

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Historians generally agree that shaving has always been a women's concern dating back to the Greco-Roman empires, but that the 1920's United States is when and where shaving become socially required. The catalyst? Rising hemlines and receding sleeves. With the advent of sleeveless dresses, advertisers began targeting leg and underarm hair as being unclean and unattractive. Another instance of women being told how to feel about their bodies – not new, simply a new iteration. As fashion evolved at an intensified rate, so too did the desire to achieve complete hairlessness. Soon, this desire manifested in women feeling ashamed of their body hair. Foucault would call this *panopticism*. Based on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon – the prison system where captives are kept in a perpetual state of not knowing if they are being watched or not – Michael Foucault's *panopticism* is the movement of discipline from an *external* force to the *internal* realm. Because the prisoners never know if they are being monitored, they always behave as if they were, creating their own internal punishment and management system.

Although the Sahara Desert typically receives less than five inches of rain a year, olive, cypress, and mastic trees still manage to grow, despite these harsh conditions. *“If you’re falling in a forest, and nobody’s around, did you ever really crash, or even make a sound?”* A tree falling in the forest would still create vibrations, but it’s the human ear drum that creates sound from that input. Since sand dunes constantly shift, a tree falling in the desert would first make those waves, but then be covered by sand – potentially forever. Who knows how long it would stay there, un-discovered and petrified? Without humanity, there is no sound.

In this way, society and otherness create reality. In this way, one alone is not enough.

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It has now been 10 years since I first picked up a razor, and when other women ask me if I can tell that they didn’t shave, I always say ‘no’. Regardless of my sincerity, regardless of my audience, they will disregard my ‘no’ either way. They won’t believe me if I say I can’t tell – every woman always believes that her legs are the hairiest, the ugliest, and the most obviously unshaved. I normally follow up with, “Why do you shave your legs, anyway? Who are you shaving them for? Do you really like shaving, or does it just make you feel desired and sexy?”

It all comes back to sex, doesn’t it?

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The Sahara Desert is so hot, dry, and windy that cloud formation is not only unlikely, it is downright miraculous. With no cloud coverage and less than five inches of average annual rainfall, the temperature rises to unbearably hot levels during the day, and then drops to frigidly unstable ones at night. When the ground isn’t covered with fifty-foot sand dunes, it cracks from the constant fluctuations in heat.

Based on an article from *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Lisa Miller – correspondent for the New York Magazine – wonders if we shave our body hair because of our desire to remove boundaries between us and sex. Being unable to find a modern-day evolutionary link between body hair and cleanliness, she posits that perhaps the main reason for body hair is to aid pheromones traveling between potential mates – if it wasn't about sex, then humans probably would have evolutionarily discarded body hair long ago. These traveling pheromones *encourage* sex, but body hair typically elicits feelings of disgust and aversion, which potentially *discourage* sex – a delicate “balance between attraction and disgust.”

So, with the growing prominence of the hook-up culture, shaving away those biological aversions potentially increases chances of sex – disgust is now a larger motivator than biology. Perhaps that disgust was supposed to limit undesirable sexual encounters – a lot of things can go wrong with procreation. Maybe disgust with a certain partner signals genetic incompatibility which could lead to miscarriages, birth defects, or genetic anomalies in progeny. The sexual revolution not only means less repercussions of reproduction but less chance of potentially being disgusted by the people you're sleeping with.

I'm not sure I buy it – men don't shave their arms or legs. Does that disgust me? I think I'm more opposed to a man without hairy arms and legs, to be honest. Are those my personal thoughts and inclinations, or have they been socially ingrained? I'm not sure. But, if I did buy it, I'm not sure I would like it. Though the theory might have some merit – disgust with my own body hair normally abates for a few hours after shaving, and it seems that society agrees with me.

Now three years into college, my middle-school gym memories start rushing back as I stand in front of the full-length mirror outside my room and stare at myself. T-shirt, shorts, tennis shoes, hairy legs. My heart beats fast – I can only avoid walking to campus for another few minutes before I will be late. My 7<sup>th</sup>-grade-self shudders and begs me to put on leggings, pants, to even skip class for the first time ever – ten years have done little to ease her fears and anxieties. Breathing deeply, I reassure the twelve-year-old still cowering in my heart that it will be okay, and I head up the stairs to leave. I can do this. One day down, four more to go.

Going to dance class for a week without shaving should feel empowering, but it also feels draining. At twenty-two, I'm still not sure what I'm accomplishing with my experiment of hairy legs for a week. Who am I trying to impress? What am I trying to prove? Am I truly doing this for myself? The first two days bring anxiety, the third ushers in elation, and the fourth brings peace. But on the fifth day, I only venture out again after a date with my razor. Is anyone really looking that closely? Am I limiting potential partners by not shaving? By accepting this social implementation, am I censoring and monitoring myself?

I refuse to answer Foucault's panoptic conundrum – I know what his answer would be.

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With humidity levels normally less than 30 percent and temperatures often below freezing, December in Colorado echoes two of the harshest and most demanding desert climates in the world. My first winter at a new middle-school, I shrugged off all my layers for class, and my only friend asked if I had lotion. Her cracked hands desperately needed the moisture, but she instead rolled her pants to the knee. "My legs feel like the Sahara Desert," she said, trying to laugh off the intense discomfort I knew she was feeling. I joined her, trying to soothe the dry, cracked skin, silently affirming our togetherness through suffering.

I wonder what Lacan would have to say about the body positivity movement. Would women working towards embracing themselves be celebrated? Or would it defy his theories of the mirror stage? After all, once you know your body, you're trapped in it. Your internal, fragmented 'I' can never escape from the orthopedic prison after you've acknowledged it. Can you change that, or is it a losing battle?

Clothing has become tighter, shorter, and lesser – bodies often displayed like a for-sale sign. The body positivity movement has simultaneously empowered and failed women by addressing their weight, shape, and color, but remaining silent about hair. Heaven forbid a woman be too large, too dark, *and* too adverse to razor burn. Women's freedom to dress has invited society's freedom to judge. Each time I answer 'no' to a women's query about leg hair, I know that she doesn't believe me; and, deep down, I'm not sure that I believe myself. The patriarchy we feminists seem to be fighting has shifted from external to internal; Foucault is laughing in his grave.

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These days I would probably tell Lacan to fuck off – even though my idea of me and my body can no longer be dissected, that doesn't mean I can't change the relationship between the two. The mirror stage doesn't have to last forever, right? I grimace as I force myself to *not* shave, to change my own relationship with my body, to convince myself it's okay.

The battle continues, and I am no nearer to figuring out which side I am on, let alone if there is a way to actually win. Maybe I should have brought some dates with me, even though ten years is a bit longer than the average survival time in the desert.

I sigh, turn on the shower, and pick up my razor instead.