

The Microbial Appropriation

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“Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

These famous words from Florence Nightingale have successfully echoed throughout history to the point where humanity now capitalises upon the desire for such divinity. We live in a world where most of us — no matter the country, race or social standing — find it impossible to escape from aisle upon aisle of cleaning products in our local stores reminding us to consistently achieve this godly ideal.



However, after a decades-long obsession with staying untainted by nature’s ills and being rid of 99.9% of germs as advertised, a vocal group now ironically demonises it as toxic, removed from nature and simply put, inhuman.

Hygiene and Racial Purity

The dirty secret about cleanliness is that it is inextricable from its disgusting history of racism and prejudice. To understand cleanliness’ role in racism we have to look at what it isn’t; namely, dirt and disease. As anthropologist Mary Douglas puts it, “dirt is relative” [1]. Different societies hold different views on what is dirty and deemed unfit to associate with.

However, as a result of colonialism, the European's narrative on what and who is dirty dominated history. Germ theory and its applications on sanitation by Joseph Lister gained traction in the 1870s, within the very heart of colonialism. Though it was a major breakthrough for mankind, the impact it had on the colonised world was far from positive because of how the Europeans applied it. Many Europeans judged other cultures according to their European standard of hygiene — without grasping the irony that they were resorting to toxic products to maintain such sanitation standards in their homes. Cultures often did not meet such standards(which was unsurprising as these standards and the lengths to which Europeans would go to in maintaining them must have been out of step with their own ways of life). Such cultures were then treated by colonists as producers of dirt and disease. By this logic, the peoples from cultures foreign to Europe were “scientifically proven” to be diseased and dirty in the eyes of European colonists.

For example, during cholera outbreaks in Britain, the Asian continent was accused of being the origin of miasma. But as germ theory became widely accepted, the inhabitants and the culture of the ‘backward Orient’ were now identified with the disease itself; needing the sanitary liberation of the West both physically and spiritually. In this way germ theory was warped, so Europeans could give themselves the green light to deem non-european cultures as contagious as the cholera itself. This was rapidly accompanied by many discriminatory and inflammatory illustrations and literary works, such as a depiction of cholera being fended off by Britannia, through preventing the entry of migrants and medical intervention on the Indian subcontinent [2]. However these transgressions did not stop at mere cartoons. History reveals a more sinister reality.



“BACK!”

Britannia holding back cholera at her ports by John Tenniels, 1892



Two men in suits prepare to inoculate a child, surrounded by a crowd of parents and children, 1800s

History cannot be 99.9% washed away

“All the little man on the witness stand had that made him any better than his nearest neighbours was, that if scrubbed with lye soap in very hot water, his skin was white.”

- To kill a Mockingbird



Ivory soap advertisement from Proctor & Gamble 1883

In 1876, the Indian Act was passed upon the indigenous people of Canada; whose opinions were so disregarded that no one cared that they were in fact, not Indian [3]. A major policy that was part of this act was the creation of residential schools that took children away from their parents. Its aim was to strip away what was considered filthy to the federal government and its churches: indigenous culture, language and identity. These children were subjected to a multitude of horrific abuses. To this very day, bodies as young as that of infants are still being uncovered from more than 751 unmarked graves. Those that survived were not any better off, as many were traumatised and left at a disadvantage from the violation of their childhood [3]. The Canadian state and church's obsession with "killing the Indian in the child" for the idealised concept of western purity, killed the children too.

One may think that long after colonialism, such prejudice would be a thing of the past. However, the concept of disease and cleanliness remains stuck as a clear identity marker for what is civilised and European from the savagery and wilderness of the Orient. As a Burmese, I have never felt any hesitation or reservations about walking barefoot if needed, especially in sacred places such as temples, monasteries and Buddhist historical sites. Shoes were a sign of filth, like in many Asian culture, wearing it indoors would get me a stern warning from my elders.



Me in 2011 with my family, barefoot while visiting the ancient Shan stupas because mom didn't raise a weakling



HRH Prince Charles and Princess Diana were allowed to wear shoes in a sacred Buddhist Temple by the King of Thailand

Therefore, I cannot help but feel unsettled when I watched a historical clip of Prince Charles and Princess Diana given permission from King Bhumibol to enter Thailand's most sacred site (with perfectly good flooring!) with shoes on. The Western need to have footwear at all times due to the perceived danger and filth of walking barefoot [4] had priority over the spiritual significance of Thailand's Buddhist culture and the Thai people's cultural associations of filth with footwear.

Whiteness has been cemented as what is clean and, by extension, white cultural norms have become what is universally standard or tolerated. Conversely, other cultures are to be regarded as inferior, and irrelevant. A prevailing example is the portrayal of China in the media due to the influence of Orientalism.



Jiang Yimou's Internationally acclaimed film Raise the Red Lantern for its portrayal of feudal China, 1991



Scenes from the Last emperor by Director Bertolucci, 1987

One can easily notice harsh and desolate lighting that seemed to be a recurring aesthetic of films set in China that have won the attention of the international film community; mainly made up of European audiences. This inhospitality and hypersexual portrayal of China gives a sense that something must be morally awry about this culture. Often these stories are tragedies that result from the implied moral deficiency of the characters. Such films were also made during a time when China itself was still in the midst of recovering from a famine and improving its economy[5]. Therefore, it did not have the means to counter these centuries old stereotypes in film. Unfortunately, Chinese filmmakers and the Chinese government have also succumbed to the pressure to conform to these stereotypes from the West. To garner western attention, the opera Turandot and its wildly inaccurate and uncanny depiction of China was also performed in the Forbidden city with the permission of the Chinese government. The opera, with the eminent Zhang Yimou as director, featured western performers in wildly stylised traditional costumes singing in Italian while the largely Chinese audience watched in confusion[6]. The names Turandot and ministers Ping, Pang and Pong were also nowhere near how Chinese names are like. Apart from the earworm that is 'Nessun Dorma' the bulk of the opera is a jumble of insensitivity. However, with changing times, the portrayal of China has undergone some metamorphosis as well.



A popular Chinese court series, Ruyi, Love in the Palace, 2018. It catered for the aesthetic preferences of it's majority Chinese audience

In contrast, one can observe from the imagery above that the series made for and loved by Chinese audiences is devoid of such harshness and almost unreserved in the showcase of splendour and grandeur to the point it almost got in trouble with Chinese censors for being too extravagant [7]. One can see from a steady stream of high production dramas such as Ruyi and Yanxi Palace that no expense was spared to glamorise one's heritage when China finally obtained the economic means to do so. Even then, the damage from earlier portrayals of what Chinese culture is like since the era of Orientalism is hard to undo especially in eurocentric parts of the world.



Marilyn Monroe in the Prince and the Showgirl, 1957



Pride and Prejudice 1995

One might argue that those films are simply a product of their time and technology. But a quick look at western films of nobility would tell us that this was not the case. In fact, white often accents each scene to emphasise the purity of characters, untouched by dirt. This phenomenon is often termed the “yellow filter” as it deliberately alters a piece of visual art to fit the perceived notion of the eastern subjects the piece portrays [8].

Like how yellowing defiles the expectation of clean, whitened teeth, this yellow filter emphasises that no matter the status of the subject presented on screen, the atmosphere itself must defile the expectation of western morality. No amount of antibacterial soap would be able to sterilise this implied prejudice as the Covid-19 pandemic easily brought Asian hate back from its latency.

The West wants to be dirty now

Despite decades of pushing for extreme hygiene as the standard for civilization, the western world had gone to war upon it, citing it as unnatural and toxic.

The shower conundrum

Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis say they don't believe in bathing their kids or themselves too much



By Lisa Respers France, CNN

Updated 5:01 PM ET, Tue July 27, 2021



“To shower or not to shower?” Shakespeare may not have written this phrase in his world-renowned novel, but that is besides the actual point of contention that has taken the internet to storm. Celebrities like Jake Gyllenhaal and online influencers swear by not washing themselves and their children regularly for the health of microbes on their skin [9]. All of them have the common saying, “The body naturally cleanses itself” as they smugly insult the usual daily shower routine that their colonial ancestors forced upon the world. Although there is truth to the claim of less showers having health benefits, it does not lessen the annoyance the rest of the non-Western world must feel from having it shoved down our throats as a revolutionary concept — when cultures around the world already and always had different concepts of showering. My grandparents’ norm as villagers was to bathe in the nearest stream while wearing an old cloth for privacy. Just 3 generations later, city folk like myself have been taught to be ashamed of bathing out in the open and be wary of the water.



The beauty of bathing from the perspective of rural Burma may not be noticeable to most

Levi's debate



The CEO of Levi's jeans had recently advocated for jeans to never be washed [10], though it is for the preservation of the colour and the feel of the material and not for the reasons of enhancing one's microbiome. Regardless, I can see how mind boggling advice such as not washing jeans for the first 6 months can really mess with one's hygiene.

The cash grab debacle



What.

In addition to radical alternative lifestyles are the plethora of overpriced junk that are advertised for their natural, microbial wonders. They range from Gwyneth Paltrow's useless Microbiome superpowder to dangerously misinformed raw, untreated water [11]. John Snow's efforts to keep cholera at bay through demonstrating the importance of water and sanitation services have now been largely forgotten as the privilege of clean running tap water and bottled water is now taken for granted. The white that used to judge the world as the victor over germs now seems to glorify the idea of covering himself in it.

The aesthetic of class struggle



It is proven to be perfectly okay to not shower daily [12] and the developed world is simply changing their views on hygiene according to science. Our microbiome plays a defining role in our physical and

mental health; ranging from asthma to Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder[13]. So why would it be a problem of appropriation in the 21st century?

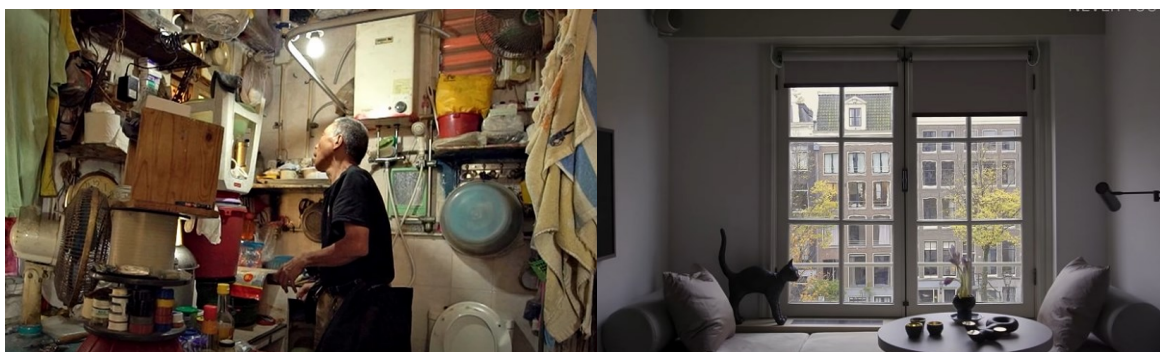
To put it bluntly, many living in the “developed world” are aware of the microbial benefits that people in “less-developed” communities enjoy. However, many are not in favour of doing away with the particular aesthetic that sets their lifestyle apart from the masses that already enjoy these microbial benefits. This aesthetic must scream to the world that they have achieved the ideal and exclusive form of cleanliness. And to do so is to demonise what the masses can afford.

As Gwyneth Paltrow, owner of an alternative lifestyle brand GOOP, says, “Our stuff is beautiful. The ingredients are beautiful. You can’t get it at a lower price point. You can’t make it mass market.” [14]

This means that the hype for wellness and natural living was actually scaremongering about the cleaning products, the water and food that regular people can afford and thus create exclusivity to capitalise upon. Silly catchphrases like “paraben-free”, “sulphate-free” and all “all-natural” have thoroughly toppled the reputation that mass-marketed brands used to have when hyper-cleanliness was forced upon the world as the norm.

The sad truth of the matter is, it works. GOOP remains popular to this day among upper middle class white women despite selling horribly white-washed products plucked straight from non-european traditions with little to no credit to their origin [15]. The aesthetic is that of class struggle and these overpriced natural products promise to help the consumer transcend it.

The ultimate problem lies in the glamorisation of poverty; the same poverty created by colonialism and the world wars; while flaunting the possession of choices that poor people would otherwise not be able to make. Trends such as tiny-living for the wealthy minimalist do not take into account real health hazards that poor people living in trailer parks or coffin homes have[16].



The claustrophobic space means the poor lack access to running water, natural light and other basic facilities for their general health and hygiene[16][17]. Meanwhile, tiny-living enthusiasts can simply buy their way out of inconveniences and customise their living space to their every whim. To further rub salt into the wound, the same wealthy influencers would use their platform to preach to the world that not living their way of life is the reason why people aren't at the peak of their health.

How Minimalism Healed Me

353,748 views • Sep 11, 2020

Would minimalism heal an underpaid amazon employee on food stamps?

Celebrities who are open about being unhygienic are rewarded with publicity for their revolutionary take on health and lifestyle. Afterall, they can afford to simply live a life with minimal dirt to preserve their “naturally cleaning” bodies and hide away in their little homes from the actual reality of public transport or working menial jobs. Meanwhile, poorer folks, usually people of colour, have historically suffered unemployment for not being able to fit eurocentric grooming standards [18].

All in all, it all boils down to an awful attempt to capitalise upon the idealised experiences of the poor while blatantly disregarding the realities or existence of people who are struggling day to day due to the historic colonial standards of cleanliness and purity. Therefore, this pandering towards an alternative and all-natural microbial path to wellness may have started out of a genuine concern for health but it just comes off tone-deaf and downright scummy appropriation.



A meme to represent shallow minimalism

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