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TIDY WHITENESS

A GENEALOGY OF RACE, PURITY, AND HYGIENE

DANA BERTHOLD

While ideals of racial purity may be out of fashion, other sorts of purity ideals are increasingly popular in the United States today. The theme of purity is noticeable everywhere, but it is especially prominent in our contemporary fixation on health and hygiene. This may seem totally unrelated to issues of racism and classism, but in fact, the purveyors of purity draw upon the same themes of physical and moral purity that have helped produce white identity and dominance in the US. Historically, this is where the purity rhetoric gets its power. To invoke purity ideals in the US is to mobilize this genealogy of racialized associations. Today's zealous preoccupation with hygiene is part of our living heritage in a racist culture.

Just as ideas of race and racial purity were debunked by biologists long before the public would begin to question them, ideals of extreme hygienic purity linger with us, even flourish, despite scientific evidence of their futility and harm. Why are we still so enamored with purity? Because, to some extent, our very self-conceptions are at stake. Other scholars have described how our process of self individuation is based upon exclusion. The unique contribution of a genealogical approach to this issue is that, instead of merely locating the problem in ideologies held by others, it can evoke self-recognition and self-transformation. We will tend to assume the problem lies elsewhere until we learn to recog-

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nize ourselves in practices that reproduce cultural ideals. As inheritors of this racist culture, we are all lovers of purity, and we are all responsible for rethinking this value.

Critical race theorists have done much in recent years to show that contrived and repressive notions of racial purity have been central to the social identity of whiteness in the US. Similarly, feminists know that contrived and repressive notions of sexual purity (that is, chastity) have been central to the social construction of femininity, especially white femininity. While it may be clear that these abstract purity ideals have privileged certain subjects over others, what is even more interesting, and less documented, are the ways in which everyday purity ideals bite their own tails, that is, they undermine their professed purpose in concrete ways. Thus, even the “privileged” subjects suffer. Looking around, we can see that Americans¹ today are still preoccupied with purity ideals in various forms—notably, physical hygiene. Purity ideals, ostensibly so healthy and clean, pervade many contemporary American practices, wherein they betray themselves by making us sick.

One way that purity ideals can make us sick is in a physical sense. Our most common and seemingly prudent of purity ideals, extreme hygiene, is ultimately unhealthy. We are encouraged to be overly anxious about germs and other contaminants, and marketers present us with products deemed “pure” for our consumption. Today, we are sold purity by way of bottled water and antibacterial soap. Judging by the overwhelming success of such products, we are all lovers of purity. But many of these products are actually making us *less* healthy, in some cases by weakening our immune systems, in others by adding toxins to the environment. Then why do we still hold on to exaggerated ideals of hygienic purity?

Motivations for such purity ideals may be more obvious to us when we look into our past. In the early US, cleanliness was associated explicitly with civility, high class, and whiteness. Whiteness, as it has come down to us, is conceived in part as a sort of physical hygiene—the lack of a mark of pollution. The lack of a mark physically has symbolized the lack of a mark morally, and this, in turn, has helped bolster a dominant identity. When we look at purity ideals as having not only physical but also moral aspects, we can see how easily slippage takes place between the exclusion of “dirt” and the exclusion of “dirty people.” The function of purity ideals is rarely just about physical dirt—it is about wielding power over “im-

pure” others. The slippage is not to be unexpected, nor can it be avoided entirely. As we will see, usage of the word “pure” in the normative sense (i.e. conferring value) actually preceded, and remains embedded within, usage of the word “pure” in a descriptive sense. But because purity ideals are usually presented as merely descriptive, the slippage, and the ethical “sickness” of hierarchical exclusion gets concealed.

There are vast bodies of literature criticizing historical notions of racial purity (e.g. the one-drop rule²) and feminine sexual purity. That work has been the inspiration and foundation of the present inquiry. My project advances the discussion by addressing the connection to purity ideals that are more common today. One purpose of this article is to demonstrate that our culture’s association between whiteness and purity is alive and well. More significantly, however, this article aims to show that the reason those ideals still manage to flourish—despite ample evidence that purity ideals are unhealthy for our bodies and our environment—is because they reinforce our still-racialized socio-economic hierarchy. Even those of us who readily admit a strong *historical* link between hygiene and racism find ourselves resistant to the idea that *our own* preoccupation with hygiene has some racist roots. The widespread popularity of purity ideals in the US means that all of us, not just elites, routinely reproduce our culture’s love of purity. Purity ideals flourish because of their exceptional ability to masquerade as the most healthy and innocent of ideals, even while they conjure up and revitalize our racist heritage.

Other scholars have examined purity ideals as organizing principles behind both social order and self-conception. While this approach gives us valuable insight into the tenacity of purity ideals, in doing so it has often relied upon an abstract analysis of the logic of purity. My intention here is to show that another approach, a genealogical approach, can provide a critique that is more radical by virtue of its practicality. Genealogy can have a profound influence on purity ideals precisely because of its concreteness. It helps us use our own practical experience to ask ourselves, what are our values up to? Are they causing insidious side effects, morally and physically? My examples will show how, because of their genealogical tie to purity discourses in our white supremacist history, today’s purity ideals can function subtly to reproduce the status quo when it comes to race, class, and the environment.

LUGONES AND "THE LOVER OF PURITY"

Mary Douglas (1970) and María Lugones (1994) have both written important accounts of how purity ideals facilitate the ordering of social life in ways that benefit dominant groups. Douglas, from an anthropological perspective, recounts (but does not so much criticize) the functioning of specific purity rituals in various cultures. Lugones, in "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," sets her own analysis apart: "it is not [Douglas's] purpose to distinguish between oppressive and non-oppressive structuring. My purpose here is precisely to understand the particular oppressive character of the modern construction of social life, and the power of impurity in resisting and threatening this oppressive structuring" (1994, 285). Lugones then goes on to demystify that oppressive structuring via an abstract analysis of logic of purity. If Douglas's approach is concrete without criticism, Lugones's approach achieves criticism, but primarily at a conceptual level. My approach offers a missing piece of this discussion by providing criticism of purity ideals at a concrete level.

I find Lugones's account valuable in describing how we come to inhabit different sorts of subjectivity based on differential positions of power and identity. I think she is right that an "urge for control" and an "assumption of unity" are behind the self-conception of the dominant subject, who she says is a "lover of purity" (1994, 280). But privileged individuals of the dominant culture do not, of course, literally begin with anything they would consciously call an urge for control or an assumption of unity. This being the case, then, my question becomes: what specific discursive practices, what kinds of values do we *actually* espouse that help constitute such self-conceptions? Are there *concrete* ways (for example, by over-using disinfectants), in which this privileged subject *literally* loves purity? How can these practices be explained? And do only elite individuals love purity, or are we all lovers of purity?

Lugones does encourage us, in active resistance to the logic of purity, to be more concrete. In closing her article, Lugones offers suggestions of concrete ways that readers might resist the dominant logic of purity through intentional acts of impurity. But I don't think that the only way to resist the logic of purity is by privileging its opposite. A genealogical analysis reveals that these purity ideals ultimately betray their own logic in tangible ways. Such an analysis shows that a preoccupation with purity

is unhealthy, both physically and morally. It makes our bodies and our self conceptions sick. We can see this through our concrete experience.

GENEALOGY

A genealogical approach can advance this discussion by showing how purity ideals, such as extreme hygiene, are reproduced through popular discursive practices. Genealogy does not proclaim in advance that certain values, such as purity, are always or necessarily bad. Instead, it gives us the tools to inquire about the functioning of those values through concrete examples. Examples are more than just illustrations of a concept. They are the life of the concept. And as such, they are also the means of its undoing. For instance, I will be considering things that our culture has deemed pure, such as bottled water and antibacterial soap. If these things are not indeed “pure,” then what function is served by our belief that they are? Genealogy is more than anthropology, and more than a history of ideas, because of its critical force. By inquiring into the values and practices that help produce our self-conceptions, genealogy seeks historicized self-understanding and transformation as part of the critical process. It cultivates a critical orientation that aids us in the continual “work of freedom” (Foucault 1984, 46). As Nietzsche emphasized, we should be willing continually to reevaluate our values (1989 [1887], 20). To the extent that we unreflectively uphold dubious values, we are less free, and we lock ourselves into a status quo social order.

As we take a closer look at purity ideals, we will find that most often they depend upon a dubious metaphysical purity. In other words, physical and moral purity ideals both presuppose (and aim at a “return” to) foundational, prepolitical and metaphysically distinct categories³ that turn out, upon investigation, to be nothing of the sort. In the next section, our genealogy will reveal that “dirt” is a relative concept. Bodies are not pure, identities are not pure, and moral circumstances are not pure. A genealogist is then led to inquire what *function* a belief in purity *actually* serves. Historical examples will demonstrate that purity ideals function to create and reinforce social identities and socio-economic hierarchies, by rationalizing exclusion. In other words, when we explore the genealogy of ideas of “dirt” and corollary purity ideals, we most often find their beginnings in political and economic power dynamics, and the “dirty” task of keeping power for the elite. Why seek these “origins”? A genealogist supposes

that when we are more reflective about the functions of our cultural practices, we are more free to change those patterns. If we can identify purity ideals in many of our common interactions, we will be better prepared to challenge the conceptual patterns and values that perpetuate hierarchical divisions.

To say that purity ideals are important aspects of white identity is not to say that they are embraced consciously or explicitly by all (or only) white people. I will be making the case, rather, that physical and moral purity ideals form popular discursive practices that help reproduce white identity, which is formulated to reinforce white dominance. I use “discourse” in the larger sense employed by Foucault (1972) and Butler (1993), without implying a strict separation of linguistic and material realms. The term “discursive practices” highlights the fact that all practices have a discursive life, just as discourse has a practical life. Understanding purity ideals as discursive practices helps us recognize ourselves within them. We consume and reproduce this ideal. In a culture preoccupied with purity, we are all conditioned to some extent to be “lovers of purity”—we are shaped by purity ideals, but also we are the agents responsible for analyzing and redeploying or undoing them.

CLEANLINESS AND SELF-CONCEPTIONS

Since purity is primarily a negative concept, that is, defined by what it is *not*, it is instructive to examine ideas of what constitutes *impurity*, that is, pollution, or dirt. After researching various cultures on this point, Douglas finds that “there is no such thing as absolute dirt” (1970, 12). Dirt is relative. In other words, peoples of different cultures have produced different definitions of what is to be avoided, or what constitutes “a matter out of place”—whether that means clutter, germs, or some other form of contamination. This supports the insight that a concern for hygiene does not always, as it purports, truly serve physical health. If this were the case, we would probably find the same set of unhealthy things to be avoided by all humans alike, since presumably health relates to our universally shared physiology. Instead, we find considerable variability between cultures.

In America today, the “dirt” with which we seem most concerned is microscopic, and there is a popular obsession over hygienic purity. Americans are excessively, needlessly, even recklessly clean. Our stores carry whole aisles full of brightly-packaged cleaning and hygiene products. We

are offered antibacterial writing utensils, toothbrush holders, and shopping-cart wipes. We bathe more often and consume more detergents, disinfectants, and deodorants than any other identifiable group on the planet. People who do not shower at least once a day can be considered dirty—this is outlandish by just about any other historical or cultural standard.

It may seem contradictory to claim both that dirt is relative and that Americans are excessively clean. However, I am not judging the impropriety of cleanliness based on arbitrary standards, but based on Americans' own sense of what we desire out of our cleanliness—namely, most often, good health. Our hygienic preoccupation is not making us healthier, and yet, we are forever trying to make ourselves cleaner. This should tell us there may be something else at work.

A problem with such hyper-cleanliness is illustrated through the recent craze over antibacterial soaps. Since the 1990s, antibacterial soaps have become the most widely available liquid soaps on American grocery and drug store shelves. While public concern about germs has been a familiar part of our culture at least since germ theory developed in the late 19th century, increasing after World War II with new developments in immunology,⁴ only recently has it reached a level where the public is willing to believe it needs *antibiotics* in its *handsoap*. This is truly unwarranted—while hand-washing is a good idea, regular soap is perfectly effective. Doctors and health officials themselves often use regular soap, because they know that antibacterial soap can have harmful effects, akin to the harmful effects of swallowing antibiotics for any small illness. The main *bacterial* threats to our health are *E. coli* and *salmonella*, and threatening quantities are almost always inside food, not on our hands. So, bacteria-killing agents in handsoap are not really helping us. “Doctors *do* worry about two strains of bacteria that are spread by touching surfaces...but they are only found in hospitals. And anyway, most winter illnesses are viral, not bacterial” (Kolata 2001). While doctors and scientists know better than to think antibiotics will serve every ailment, or that it is important for handsoap kill bacteria, the public still enthusiastically demands these products. “‘A lot of it is not based on science,’ says Dr. Jeffrey S. Duchin, chief of the Communicable Disease Control, Epidemiology and Immunization Section of the public health department of Seattle. ‘It is based on our national psyche and what we value — purity and cleanliness’” (Kolata

2001). This value, then, pits us against our microscopic surroundings in general. Despite our hostility, most of the “germs” and “dirt” that we co-exist with are harmless (indeed, often beneficial) components of our ecological system. Regardless, we go on generating and consuming all kinds of toxic germ-killers, ultimately harming ourselves. The ingredients that go into pesticides, and disinfectants, and single-use packaging are causing cancer and ecological degradation. The byproducts of chlorine bleach, for example, are retained in fatty tissue and have been linked to cancers in humans and other animals. Further, our lack of exposure to germs can actually inhibit robust development of our immune systems. For example, recent studies show that children are more likely to develop asthma if they have been generally kept from the outdoors and live inside very clean, disinfected homes (Rowlands 2002). Finally, over-use of germ-killers can create unhealthy environments by killing beneficial bacteria while breeding resistant strains of disease-causing ones—“super-germs.”

I do not mean to minimize the fact that basic sanitation cuts down on the communication of certain diseases—at times we have needed measures like the Pure Foods Act of 1906 to counter real public health threats that resulted from lack of sanitation. Nonetheless, today we have met that basic sanitation mark and, in many regards, gone far beyond. The hyperbolic excess to which Americans have taken the need for hygiene is medically unjustified, even counterproductive. Certainly, some degree of concern about germs derives from a reasonable fear of disease. However, it is difficult to make sense of all the unhealthy, excessive germ-phobia without an understanding of the residue of associations with cleanliness in our racist past.

On a deeper level, all this excess anxiety tells us something about our “national psyche,” our popular model of self-conception. This self-conception relies upon certain distinctions, which, because they are fallible, produce certain anxieties. In particular, we are anxious about our discreteness as individual selves, about the not-self (or “other”), and about “dirt.” These three concepts and the anxieties about maintaining them are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. But generally speaking, “dirt” is the derivative concept, substituting for, and thereby rationalizing, the sometimes distasteful but necessary aspect of rejecting the other. I will return to this in the next section. For now, we must understand the dominant self-conception of the contemporary American. In this conception, the proper and healthy state of the human body is a physical unmixedness,

or purity. This entails the idea that the boundaries of our bodies are naturally discrete and hostile like fortress walls. There is an important sense in which, however, the “self” *does not exist as such* prior to the abjection of elements that get designated as non-self. Julia Kristeva (1982) describes this process as both corporeal and symbolic, erecting boundaries of both one’s body and one’s subjectivity. In order to maintain the boundary, the “non-self” must be abjected continually. This means it remains a continual threat. And strictly speaking, it can never go away completely, because, like the pollution without which purity is incomprehensible, the abjected elements actually *constitute* the clean and proper self. Judith Butler has called this function the “constitutive outside,” because of the productive role it continually plays in drawing the contours of the self (1993, 3). In the early history of the US, this “outside” was certain people deemed “other.” Now, germs and other kinds of “dirt” have become ritualized as a constitutive outside for the contemporary American.

It is important to historicize and locate the subject we are describing here. The subject whose sense of self is constituted in this way could be, as many have suggested, the subject of the modern western era. This would be the abstract individual, purified of any “dirt,” any mark of specificity, and this often turns out to mean (as Lugones points out) any marker of a marginalized identity. Others would locate the beginning of purity-based self-conceptions much earlier, for example, in the Judaic tradition as exemplified in Leviticus. The dominant subject of America’s mainstream culture does of course have roots in these traditions. However, the particular form that our self-understandings take in America today is unique in ways that can only be understood in relation to our own history—particularly, I will be arguing, the history of American race relations. This is not to say that America is more concerned with purity than *all* other cultures, but that when we evoke purity ideals here, we conjure up (and sometimes reproduce, sometimes redeploy) a particular set of relations and exclusions. This genealogy aims to demonstrate how these relations are harming us, even those of us who are ostensibly privileged by the current arrangement.

PHYSICAL AND MORAL PURITY: DIRT AND DIRTY PEOPLE

Generally speaking, the concern for hygienic discipline makes sense within a tradition that has valued mind (or spirit) over body, and culture (or civilization) over material nature. As Freud reminds us, “control over

the forces of nature” is the how civilization understands itself (1961, 47). In the US, with our particular history of hierarchical relations, this has produced representations of whiteness as mind/spirit and civilization, and non-whiteness as primitive embodiment, closer to nature.

Control of the forces of nature has also meant control over those who are closer to nature. Similarly, control of dirt slips from the physical to the moral realm. As Douglas points out, dirt is relative, but this should not imply that dirt is random. Rather, she claims, “dirt is always part of a system” (1970, 48). Dirt, contamination, or pollution are labels likely to be associated with behaviors that fall outside of, and thereby threaten, our most carefully guarded categories of social classification, including races, classes, genders, and sexualities. This is why “dirtiness” has not only physical but moral implications. In the US, then, it should come as no surprise that white people, the group with social and economic dominance, have conceived of themselves as pure, both physically and morally. Dyer notes the irony in this. “White people are neither literally nor symbolically white. We are not the colour of snow or bleached linen, nor are we uniquely virtuous and pure” (1997, 42). But because dirt is relative, we should keep in mind that there is no distinction (as Dyer implies there is) between literal and symbolic dirt—it *is all symbolic*. This is exactly why the slippage so easily occurs between what gets represented as physical dirt and what gets represented as moral dirt. Strictly speaking, it is not really slippage at all, if by that we mean accidental transference to a different concept. It is only slippage in the sense of ostensibly ignoring (and yet often exploiting) connotations that are embedded within the concept as its foundation.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *purity* has two main denotations: first, it is the “state of being unmixed; freedom from admixture of any foreign substance...*esp.* freedom from matter that contaminates, defiles, corrupts, or debases.” Notice that this definition conjoins the idea of *foreignness* with the idea of *defilement*. The second denotation listed under purity in the OED is said of *persons*: “Freedom from moral corruption, from ceremonial or sexual uncleanness, or pollution; stainless condition or character; innocence, chastity” (1989). Purity, then, has two major strands of definition: purity in the sense of unmixedness and purity in the sense of virtue. The former, descriptive sense (unmixedness) is today usually understood as the concept’s value-free origin. In other words, we

tend to believe that first we identified an unmixed class of things, and second, we judged that class to be valuable. However, the etymology of the word indicates that the latter, normative sense (moral virtue) actually came *first* in usage. This implies that the descriptive sense of purity as unmixed was made to appear as a natural category only *after* the fact of social relations. This assumption of a value-free conceptual origin can serve to cover over the value-laden, politically motivated basis of much purity rhetoric. While we should be wary of the slippage between moral and physical senses of the word, I do not believe they can be held distinct entirely, because “purity,” like “dirt” is a symbolic concept that exists to morally reinforce our self-conceptions and the exclusions they entail.

The linguistic genealogy of the link between *whiteness* and moral purity reaches back before the founding of the US. The OED’s seventh meaning of “white” is morally and spiritually pure (esp. when compared to something black). The word “fair” means both light and right.⁵ A white lie is an innocent lie. Whiteness is cleanliness, purity, the absence of a stain or mark. Franz Fanon reminds us, “In Europe... Satan is black, one talks of the shadow, when one is dirty one is black—whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or moral dirtiness...blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, and the labyrinths of the earths, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light” (Fanon 1967, 188–89). While references to people of a white “race” did not first occur in English until the 17th century, pale skin was already a symbol of innocence and virtue. In Renaissance paintings of Christ and the Virgin Mary, they are regularly depicted as paler than others, and even sometimes appear to emit light (Dyer 1997, 66–67). In the US these symbolic associations became explicitly tied to “race,” helping whites to justify it as a caste system.

This strong association between whiteness, cleanliness, and moral virtue in America comes out in an appalling ad for Ivory soap that circulated around the end of the 19th century (figure 1). Depicted in the ad are three Native Americans dressed in Euro-American clothing, sparkling clean and civilized thanks to Ivory soap. The script ends with these lines: “And now we’re civil, kind and good; And keep the laws as people should; We wear our linen, lawn and lace; As well as folks with paler face; And now I take, where’er we go; This cake of IVORY SOAP to show; What civilized my squaw and me; And made us clean and fair to see” (Procter and Gamble



Figure 1. Excerpt from advertising pamphlet for Ivory Soap. (Proctor and Gamble 1883)

1883). This ad communicates that the non-white bodies of Natives are unclean, both morally and physically. They are impure. They are a savage threat to the boundaries of American civilization. They must be purified,

or civilization must purify itself of *them*. The racism in this ad is couched in the simultaneous oppositions of purity and pollution, cleanliness and dirt, civilization and savagery, white and dark.⁶ Of course, today we rarely see such oppositions spelled out so blatantly. But Ivory (among a proliferation of other cleaning products) still markets itself as “pure.” Can the ideal of purity be cleansed of all these nastier associations? Or is there something about the organization of the concept of purity that tends to retain the exclusionary function even after the most blatant content is removed?

An ad on the Ivory soap website calls it “Pure clean. Pure IVORY” (Procter and Gamble 1998b). This refers to the slogan that still, since 1879, sells Ivory soap: “99-44/100% PURE ®.” Pure *what*? The ads never seem to say explicitly—it doesn’t seem to matter—purity is an unquestionable virtue. The emphasis upon the product’s physical attributes, such as its whiteness and its ability to float (lightness), suggest a link between these qualities and the consumer’s virtue. It turns out that Ivory is 99% pure *soap*, that is, alkali and lipids. The other fraction of a percent is a preservative intended, as the website says, “to keep the bar as white as its name” (Procter and Gamble 1998a). It is interesting to note that Ivory’s whiteness does not come naturally—it must be maintained by an artificial preservative. Purity never seems to come naturally, even though it gets presented as foundational. In the contemporary ad, the connections between whiteness and physical and moral cleanliness are less direct, but still present. The ideal of purity still functions here to secure identity through an implied gesture of exclusion.

While I do not believe that it is only whites today who participate in the concern for cleanliness, I do believe that that concern reflects the formation of a dominant subjectivity, which, because of our history, is coded white. No subjectivity can emerge outside the context of a historically located group identity. With whiteness, we begin by shutting out nature. The cultural and historical situatedness of the ways that we learn to define the self is illustrated in the following observation made by Native American philosopher Viola Cordova. Cordova’s daughter and her friend, a white woman, take their new infants outside. The white mother lays down a clean blanket to act as a barrier between the baby and the ground. She puts her baby in the center of the blanket, and then surrounds him with plastic toys, in the hope that he will stay occupied and not crawl

off the blanket. If the baby does break the boundary and start touching (and tasting) the rocks and grass, he is told “No—that is dirty.”⁷ The Native mother, on the other hand, encourages her baby to crawl around, to touch, to taste the grass, to observe the sky and feel the breeze (Cordova 1997, 33–34).

Besides the fact that these two children may develop very different levels of basic immunity to natural pathogens, these children are being taught very different lessons about what is the self, and what is the proper interaction between self and non-self (or world). Cordova remarks, “This is it. This is why we are different. This is how it is done.” The white child learns to identify with this isolated, abstract, artificial environment, and that whatever is “out there” is alien and potentially dangerous. Cordova’s grandson, on the other hand, is encouraged to interact with his surroundings in peaceful curiosity. She concludes, therefore, that his self/world boundaries are less acute, and he feels at home, more *a part of* (rather than *apart from*) his environment (Cordova 1997, 33–34).

If asked, I imagine that the white mother would explain the precautions she takes with her infant as merely hygienic. But as we have seen, such overzealous protection against germs often backfires, and does not really promote health. Rather, this excess anxiety about cleanliness engenders a certain conception of what the self is, a conception linked to white privilege in our particular time. On one level, this is a self that is alienated from the physical world and therefore aims to subdue the indicators of its own physical embodiment. In this regard, the self is anxious about bodily boundaries because it defines itself *through* what it excludes or washes away. On another level, cleanliness is more abstract and has to do with belief in one group’s moral superiority over another group considered less civilized and “closer to nature.” On both levels, the alienated other is what makes this self a self. The theme of absence or exclusion converges whites’ abstract subjectivity with the physical and moral purity ideals of white identity. While this may grant the white self a certain experience of unity, it is in fact alienated—it has fractured itself, declared itself cut off from the interrelations and dependencies that created it, that sustain it. Those damaged relationships are not only environmental, but also socio-economic and interracial. Our anxieties about our conceptions of self, other, and dirt end up damaging the self they are meant to bolster.

Cordova’s story about the white mother and her baby illustrates that

whiteness is not just an identity that gets ascribed to particular bodies. It is a practice, and as such, it must be reproduced in little ways every day—like through our practices of extreme hygiene.

IS EXTREME HYGIENE (ALWAYS) RACIST?

It will be objected that there are many hygienic concerns in America today that are quite reasonable and totally unrelated to our white supremacist history. As I pointed out in the beginning, genealogy does not begin with an assumption that a certain value is always or necessarily bad. The point is to examine our ideals more carefully, to ask how they are functioning in each particular context. There are, of course, times when we may seek out purity for very practical and unproblematic reasons. And then there are times when the concern for purity extends beyond its practical bounds, and the question is, what function does it then serve? Consider this example of the purity ideals regarding water.

It is a practical concern to know that pure, distilled H₂O will prevent my electric iron from being ruined by mineral deposits. However, of course, chemically pure H₂O does not appear in nature, nor would water be good for us to drink without naturally-occurring minerals. So, when we demand pure water for drinking, we mean something else—that it should be free from disease-causing germs and toxins. This too appears to be a practical concern, and yet the concern has far exceeded any beneficial effect on consumer health. Recently, the market for bottled water has exploded, and purity is by far the biggest theme in its advertisement. The main reasons that US consumers cite for drinking bottled water are health and safety (the taste of the water was only cited as a concern by 7% of American bottled-water consumers, as opposed to 45% in France) (Ferrier 2001, 16). And yet the very low levels (usually harmless) of impurities in average American tap water are about the same as the levels in average bottled water. In fact, tap water is even subject to stricter regulation than bottled water in most places. In her 2002 book, *Water Wars*, Vandana Shiva discusses a study of 103 brands of bottled water which were found to be, overall, no safer than tap water. “A third of the brands contained arsenic and E.coli and a fourth merely bottled tap water” (Shiva 2002, 100). For American consumers, the bottle itself seems to create the reassuring illusion of a boundary. Susan Willis has put it well: “in the First World, the package is the fetishized sign of the desire for purity” (1991, 3). Yet

the plastic bottle introduces its own formidable set of environmental and health problems, especially in terms of plastics manufacture and disposal. It may seem that purity is a useful criterion for water. However, it appears that in the context of contemporary American consumerism, fixation on water purity gets us bottled water (for those who can afford it) rather than clean streams. While environmental protection standards remain lax, we are sold bottled water with the rhetoric of purity printed all over it, and a tamper-resistant seal.

Still, it will be objected that the worry over water purity is about the real threat of environmental toxins, therefore unrelated to the history of concern over racial purity. While it is true that pollution is increasingly a problem in general, it is also clear that bottled water is not a solution to that problem in the ways people tend to assume (in fact, it is probably making things worse). And while it is true that advertisers have merely capitalized upon consumers' recent fear of environmental toxins, the fact remains that that fear of what is "out there" was already there to be manipulated—Americans already had a history of being excessively concerned about hygiene as a symbol of identity and status. This arises, as I explained above, from anxieties about dirt that must accompany a self-conception founded on exclusion. And our self-conceptions could not be otherwise, given our violent, racist past. These anxieties are what the advertisers cash in on when they call things "pure."⁸

Where no longer truly useful for health, purity ideals serve to exaggerate symbolic boundaries—what is here and what is out there, what is higher and what is lower. Most often this is for someone's gain—in this case the corporate purveyors of purity (for example Coke and Pepsi, via Dasani and Aquafina). If we believe that we value purity for health reasons, we ought to inquire whether our health is actually being served by what is called pure. This is what is meant by a revaluation of values.

Consider one more example where contemporary advertising capitalizes upon our excessive concern for purity, this time actually employing an oblique reference to our racialized associations with purity and pollution. A popular light bulb made by GE, "Reveal," calls itself "the bulb that uncovers pure, true light" (General Electric 2002). The light is supposed to be whiter, brighter, and less dingy, thus revealing the pure, true colors of your world. How does the light bulb do this? The Reveal bulb has a powder-bluish tint that filters out yellow. The packaging says, "Specially

made to filter out yellow rays that hide life's true colors, GE Reveal light bulbs produce cleaner, whiter-looking light" (General Electric 2002).

Now, while it is true that standard incandescent bulbs emit light that falls largely within the yellow and red ranges, this does not make the light "untrue," "unclean," or "impure." Natural sunlight varies widely in color temperature depending on the time of day and the cloud cover. I am suspicious of this designation of light that is devoid of the yellow/red portion of the spectrum as pure and natural. In fact, it seems to produce an artificially contrived blue/whiteness, along with an increase in contrast between black and white. The suggestion that whiteness is pure while yellow is excessive, harsh, and dirty seems to have far-reaching implications. This becomes disturbingly evident when a Reveal commercial shows a white, blue-eyed baby illuminated under two different light bulbs (figure 2). Under the regular incandescent light (with yellow), the baby looks unremarkable. But under the "pure light," that baby's skin becomes an ethereal, angelic/ghostly white, and its eyes are a brighter, crisper blue. The ad directly states that the baby is more beautiful under the whiter light. The copy goes on to say that colors will be more true, "like the baby blue in your baby's eyes" (evidently, this bulb may not do much for



Figure 2. Ad from product website. Copy reads: "The amazing GE Reveal Light Bulb filters out dull, yellow rays. It leaves only clean, pure light. See for yourself how colors look vibrant and true. Especially the baby blue in your baby's eyes." (General Electric Company 2002)

brown-eyed, dark-skinned people). It is worth noting that a particular spectrum of light that enhances white skin and blue eyes gets called “pure light,” when there is nothing “pure” about it. The choice to represent it as pure and clean draws upon (and thereby reproduces) our culture’s love of purity and its historical association with a white aesthetic in general, and white skin in particular.

The bulb example shows how a dubious overextension of the purity ideal, masked as hygienic, is still linked to race in oblique ways, no longer unconcealed like it was in the old Ivory ad. Hygienic concerns are not always problematic in themselves. However, because dirt is relative and for Americans symbolizes our own orders of social classification, then in order to get beyond subtle racist conditioning we should be wary of the residue: ideas about exclusion of dirt still slide quickly into ideas about exclusion of racialized peoples.

Whether or not one is willing to call extreme hygiene “racist” will depend upon the breadth of one’s definition of racism. Some believe that we should only call “racist” those acts that are consciously performed in hatred. I believe it is more helpful to realize that we are all conditioned, in ways sometimes very subtle, to value the values that shore up the dominance of the ruling class. And as inheritors of our particular racist heritage, we are better off admitting that we have been conditioned, however unconsciously, to view one another in terms of white and nonwhite, and to value white over nonwhite. Therefore, we are all racist, whether we like it or not. By admitting this we can begin to ask ourselves how such conditioning is perpetuated, and how it might be thwarted. Extreme hygiene as a cultural trend, given this broad definition, is racist. At the very least, it is a foolish tendency that can only be understood in relation to the unique anxieties generated by a color caste system.

CLEANLINESS, CLASS, AND COLOR CASTE

The earliest etymological root of the word pure, from Sanskrit, has to do with cleansing. This has always meant not only physical but also moral cleanliness. We have all heard that cleanliness is next to godliness. *The Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* stated in 1844 that “Cleanliness...has moral as well as physical advantages...it is an emblem, if not a characteristic, of purity of thought and propriety of conduct” (Heneghan 2003, 133). Purity and propriety were linked together as classy ideals. In

its purposive distancing from the laborer who is conceived as dark and dirty, a dirt-free hygienic aesthetic confers higher status, partly because it is expensive. Some might argue that cleanliness is an aesthetic having much more to do with class than with race. But we can see from the history of these ideals that the two have been inseparable in America.

In the early US, not only was it the case that upper-class whites could *afford* an exaggerated aesthetic of cleanliness, but high-class purity (and moral propriety) became increasingly tied to the color white in general. We can see this symbolized through white houses, white china, white linens, and a range of other fine white *things* that populated the households of upper class whites (Heneghan 2003, xii). High class and whiteness are still so closely linked that poor whites are not considered simply or properly white—instead, they are called “white trash,” construed as polluting the white ideal. That term first came into usage around the time that the American eugenics movement was establishing policies aimed at keeping poor whites and people of color from reproducing. “From 1880–1920, ... the US Eugenics Records Office produced fifteen different ‘Eugenic Family Studies’ wherein the researchers sought to demonstrate scientifically that large numbers of rural poor whites” were “a dysgenic race unto themselves” (Newitz and Wray 1997, 2). If white trash were a race unto themselves, that would help explain why they exhibited the same “failures” as nonwhite races in achieving the American dream of prosperity.

Sherman Alexie has spoken about growing up in extreme poverty on the Spokane Indian Reservation. For him, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of living under those conditions was the lack of good sanitation, or as he illustrates it, *being forced to smell unpleasant smells*. He tells stories of the filthy outhouse his family used. He reflects that, as a result, in his adult life he has become zealously fastidious in his housekeeping and personal hygiene habits. (Alexie tells this story after complaining that he had to sit next to a smelly hippie on the train—here is an explicit case where contempt for dirt extends to a distaste for “dirty people”) (2004). This story brings up two points I should clarify and reiterate. First, there *are* many virtues to basic sanitation, and being forced to live without it is a repugnant (if not life-threatening) condition imposed upon the poor. In this sense it is understandable that greater hygiene gets associated with higher class. However, as I have argued, there is a point at which concern for hygiene becomes excessive and counterproductive, and at that

point its valorization only enhances exclusive hierarchies. In this country, the extreme preoccupation with hygiene is not just a personal aesthetic, nor is it entirely explainable as an ahistorical desire to control one's living conditions. This country has a history of extreme preoccupation with hygiene because *racialized* "cleanliness" (for example the one-drop rule and segregation) has been utterly crucial to class status—high status being anxiously guarded by whites and truly unattainable for others *because* of the ways in which it was coded white. This leads to my second point of clarification: as I have mentioned, it is not only *whites* who participate in the exaggerated concern for hygiene. People of color (certain Natives, no less) sometimes manifest this concern, perhaps precisely because they have been systematically denied class mobility (while simultaneously being told to clean up their act and pull themselves up by their bootstraps). When we want to live in clean houses where we control our environs, we manifest a reasonable desire to live without poverty and disease. When we are zealous about hygiene beyond what is practical, we manifest those unique anxieties of color caste.

For whites, this anxiety is rooted in an actual historical concern to protect one's class position by guarding against racialized "taint." I think it also derives from an awareness (perhaps hazy) of the hypocrisy of enforcing a caste system within the bounds of America, where we are told that "all men are created equal." To form a legitimating discourse, it has been important for whites to believe a contradiction: that it was non-whites' own fault if they didn't "clean" themselves up (like in the old Ivory ad) *and* they were objectively unable to be clean, because they were irrevocably tainted. These contradictory beliefs have been facilitated by a discourse about hygiene that protects class status by slipping between ideas of physical and moral propriety.

The supposed racial taint was not just about blood content, but also about dirtiness in general, a dirtiness conceived as dangerous for whites to be *near*. Jane Stafford, a white Southern woman who was raised in an early 20th century household in which the black domestic servants ate with separate silverware had this to say in the mid-eighties: "To this day, I can't use the silver—it's not silver, but the silverware the [black] servants use. I think that's just terrible. I know it's just a habit that I have to eat out of silver, because I don't want to eat out of the servants'. Isn't that ridiculous? The separate silverware and bathroom—that was done because

they were a different race. I don't know when it was begun. I expect it was always like that. But, of course, a lot of them had syphilis and TB, so there was that, too, that people always mentioned as a reason. But I think it was really a racial attitude" (Tucker 1988, 177). In these comments, Stafford reveals that even while whites probably understood the separation of the races to be symbolic rather than literally about hygiene, they still carried out the physical separation of eating utensils and bathrooms under hygienic pretenses. So strong was the resulting association between physical "hygiene" and racial/class status that, even late in the 20th century, even after reflecting on her own illogical prejudices, she cannot bring herself to eat with the servants' silverware.

The link between Jane's story and the story of today's purity-preoccupied consumer is germs. Not only germs, but, as we have seen, the category of invisible pathogens today extends to encompass environmental toxins. Jane's sense of "dirt" was *explicitly* tied to the other, while our own sense of germs may ostensibly be less so. Still, these stories tap into anxiety over "dirt" that takes a violent self-other distinction as its lineage.

Race scholars have discussed the one-drop rule, segregation, and old Ivory ads over the last several years. By now, it seems uncontroversial that in the past, all this purity rhetoric served racist functions barely below (and often above) the surface. However, people are much more reluctant to recognize that this history has influenced our own values and our own self-conceptions. What remains difficult, but I think crucial to recognize, is that today's supposedly innocuous preoccupation with hygiene is rooted in that racist heritage. Today when we buy bottled water or disinfectants, attracted to the rhetoric of purity and unreflective about the actual effects of those practices, we ourselves are acting out and reproducing the anxieties of this racialized genealogy, and harming ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Both physical purity and moral purity ideals, in the past and today, employ a model of cleansing to promote a sense of the good that depends upon exclusion. Most often, when we explore the genealogy of such discursive practices, we find their beginnings in political and economic power structures, not in the pure origins they claim. In the cases of the segregationists and eugenicists, this meant overt discrimination against poor and non-white groups whom they deemed objectively tainted. Thus power

over these other groups was practiced as a sort of cleanliness of body, and it was practiced with a cleanliness of conscience. Today, the power that whites as a group continue to exercise over non-whites is facilitated through these discourses of purity. The American love of hygienic purity takes place via such everyday items as antibacterial soap, plastic packaging, and “pure light.” The explicitly racist version of the purity ideal is not accidentally but genealogically tied to these practices.

The harm comes when the concept and ideal of purity provides the guise of innocence that facilitates xenophobic and ecologically unsound identities and institutions. Purity tends to produce a particularly righteous, isolated self and a particularly hostile, hierarchical self-other relation. This means that white identity carries with it, from its inception, an alienating, alienated ethical and political orientation, while at the same time declaring itself neutral and innocent. The extreme idealization of purity, even when invoked in regard to ordinary things like hygiene, food, and water, is genealogically tied to repressive concepts such as racial purity. Hygiene is not always problematic in itself. But when it goes overboard and becomes counterproductive, we need to ask ourselves why we still cling to it. Our everyday valorization of purity reveals the extent to which, at bottom, we have not gotten beyond certain racist, sexist, and other exclusionary habits of thinking. This is an environmental issue because that preoccupation reflects an unhealthy self-understanding in relation to our surroundings. Purity ideals do not only make us sick physically, but also morally, because they reactivate the hierarchical subtexts of our American culture.

My purpose has not been to suggest that the entire history of whiteness and race in the US can be simply and neatly reduced to purity ideals. It is rather that the practical *life* of purity as a concept—its actual manifestation in our lives—demonstrates that purity is not the unquestionably healthy virtue it is still presented as today. Just as ideas of race and racial purity were debunked by biologists long before the public would begin to question them, ideals of extreme hygienic purity linger, even flourish, despite scientific evidence of their futility and harm. We are still enamored with purity because, to some extent, our very self-conceptions are at stake. But those self conceptions are sick. To the extent that we unreflectively uphold dubious values, we are less free, and we lock ourselves into a status quo social order. As inheritors of this racist, unhealthy culture, we are all lovers of purity, and we are all responsible for rethinking this value.

NOTES

1. By “Americans,” I am referring to the mainstream as reflected in US popular culture, politics, and media. As I will explain, I take the popular notion of “Americans” to be implicitly white, although I do not believe that it is *only whites* in the US who participate in the concern for purity—that is why I say “we” in general seem concerned with purity. Further, while I understand that this popular use of the term “Americans” obscures that people of many colors and cultures inhabit the two American continents, it is part of my project to analyze that culture that takes itself to *be* “American”—to analyze the ideological hegemony of white mainstream US American culture. Finally, while there are certainly other nations and other cultures with recognizable purity issues, this project analyzes what I take to be the uniquely American variety of the contemporary concern with purity.
2. “One drop” is the rule that, in traditional American legal and folk practice, has disqualified from white status anyone who was supposed to have one drop of non-white blood. Despite the fact that this rule makes no sense biologically speaking (like other notions of racial categories), historically, notions of racial purity had to be meticulously guarded when questions arose regarding where to draw racial lines. Plessy (of the landmark 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*), who became famous by daring to occupy a white rail car, was 7/8ths “white” and apparently “looked white” by many accounts. Around the turn of the century, what is known as the “one-drop rule” became established in US law to resolve such disputes. According to the one-drop rule, not only would Plessy count as black, but so did the woman who, as recently as 1982, was deemed black by a Louisiana court even though she was “31/32nds white” (Dominguez 1986, 1–5). The idea of “one drop,” then, referred to the presence in a person’s ancestral line of one person who was (identified as) black. One drop of “black blood,” construed as one drop of pollution, is all it takes to taint what is supposedly pure whiteness.
3. Such origins are assumed prepolitical in the sense that they are assumed to have preceded social structures and relationships of dominance and subordination. This gives them an air of objective permanence. These are what Foucault terms “pure origins.”
4. Biologist Lisa Weasel notes that a new paradigm of the immune system, self v. non-self, became predominant following World War II, a time period in which the US political climate was marked by increasing xenophobia and isolationism. The theory is roughly this: the body somehow learns to identify certain types of molecules as “self” and others as “non-self.” The former are tolerated and the latter are characterized as dangerous “foreign invaders” (2001, 29). Weasel notes that since that shift, war-like metaphors have been extremely common in the language (both popular and textbook) used to describe immune functions of the body in defense of its essential “self.” Consider this

example from a National Geographic article: “Besieged by a vast array of invisible enemies, the human body enlists a remarkably complex corps of internal bodyguards to battle the invaders” (quoted in Weasel 2001, 30). It seems that “foreign,” or even just “different,” in such a discourse comes to be the equated with something “hostile”—an element that should be expelled.

5. The etymological root of the word “fair” has to do with beauty. This came to mean “unblemished” in terms of freedom from moral stain, bias, or injustice, around 1340. The association with light-colored skin came along around 1550.
6. On the flip side, we sometimes encounter the idea that civilization can be “polluting,” even for those in power. The purity of domesticity is associated with the feminine, therefore too much civilization threatens to emasculate. In reaction to this sort of pollution we saw Teddy Roosevelt take up his gun and get back to nature in the sense of conquering the wilderness. We have seen this more recently with books like Robert Bly’s *Iron John*. In such a scenario, purity and pollution turn on a gender axis *within* the white upper classes, as opposed to turning on a class or race axis.

Sometimes the idea that civilized white culture is polluting *does* get extended along a racial axis. In Wendell Berry’s *The Hidden Wound* (1970), for example, whites are portrayed as disconnected, money-grubbing, violent polluters, while African-Americans and Native Americans are portrayed as pure in the sense that, like noble savages, they are more connected to the land (which is a good thing according to Berry’s particular brand of environmentalism). Along the same lines, it is common to see Natives portrayed as pure in the sense that untouched wilderness is supposedly pure. Consider the image of the crying Chief in the anti-pollution ad campaign, ‘Keep America Beautiful.’ Such a noble savage portrayal still relies on the dichotomy which separates groups along nature/culture lines, and does not challenge the status quo of white dominance. The ascription of “purity” to the non-white group in this case does not concede white power, perhaps because the “raped” landscape and the crying Chief are feminized. As Spivak puts it, “benevolent imperialism” wishes to make room for the pure, native, authenticity of the Other, but “authenticity” is a notion that “comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices” (1990, 61). It is constructed opposite a white subjectivity that is supposedly neutral and transparent. This white nostalgic lament misses that its self-erasure comes from a place of interest and privilege, and this fixing of the other’s identity secures that privilege.

7. This story also suggests a gender analysis related to the racial analysis that is subject of this paper: our culture expects women in particular to disinfect their homes and protect their families from dirt and germs. In this sense women are the keepers of hygienic purity ideals.
8. Indeed, it is the same love of purity in the American psyche that the popular environmental movement tapped with its focus on the word “pollution” to

describe ecological problems. Many ecologists themselves, on the other hand, have not found the discourse of “purity” and “pollution” to be particularly useful when it comes to our relationship with nature.

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