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WGS367: The Politics of Gender and Health

13 June 2021

Critical Reflection Two: The Commodification of Wellness - But At What Cost?

The longer I live in and learn about the capitalist world of today, the more I realize how much everything is motivated by money. Health and wellness may seem like basic human rights that should escape the claws of cost and profit, but in reality, it is not only another way for us to make money, but also a tool used to extend racist and colonialist narratives. I observe that profit and racism are interdependent on each other, and even use science and western medicine as a tool to further solidify health and wellness myths created solely for financial interests.

A simple example to see how capitalism and racism uphold each other is through the growing popularity of mindfulness-based wellness culture, such as practices of yoga and the so-called corporate mindfulness. Companies encourage employees to practice mindfulness to maintain a “healthy” work-life balance (Starling 10), when in reality this does not provide a long-term solution to the constant burn-out that workers are subject to - it seems that corporate mindfulness is promoted only to maintain a bare minimum level of wellness, and hence functionality, in their employees, such that the corporate can make more profit. Racism comes into play in yoga communities through the erasure of cultural backgrounds and active ostracization of people who practice it. In Canada, I perceive yoga as a stereotypically middle-aged middle- and upper-class white woman activity, because that is who the advertisements seem to target, and who I observe practicing it in white-dominated yoga studios. However, as someone who has practiced yoga with a Tibetan Buddhist master who guided his

students under the religious and cultural contexts, I can clearly see how mainstream North American yoga is not sufficiently culturally informed, and strips yoga of its original contexts to fit the skeletal model of corporate self-care and mindfulness in order to more cheaply and efficiently benefit the system of capitalism. Even in China, however, I know I am a cultural outsider who is not entitled to appropriate Hindu culture, and thus must come to practice with respect.

While corporations charge their employees with personal responsibilities to be well, another branch of the “Wellness Hustle” (Alexopoulos, slide 16) is the commodified practice of traditional medicine of non-Western cultures, which includes the appropriation of non-“scientific” medicine as mystical, and the dismissal of them as invalid. Even though Ayahuasca is a traditional medicine that has kept Indigenous communities well for centuries, mainstream Western culture ignores the significance of cultural context, mystifies it as an “ancient” knowledge, and commodifies the usage of the medicine as a means of getting high. This is not only disrespectful, but also unsustainable. Making the medicine a popular commercial drug significantly increases the price, making it less accessible to local communities who rely on the medicine, which is clearly another form of erasure and colonialism that still continues today. Moreover, this type of appropriation not only upholds white supremacy locally on colonized lands, but also extends globally. A recent trend in skincare is Gua Sha Facials, an apparently centuries-old ancient Chinese skin care method during which one massages their face with a smooth jade stone. The method is scientifically explained by the relief of muscular tension, which actually entirely removes the original context and explanation through the lens of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and replaces it with a marketable narrative based on Western science in the cosmetic industry. By putting Gua Sha “through the woo-woo wellness spin cycle”

(Jin), mainstream Western culture endorses this specific - seemingly legitimized for a white audience - narrative and usage of the Gua Sha technique as a desirable wellness practice, and further validates the inherently white supremacist ideals in Asia for fairer and lighter coloured skin through various skin care routines. Clearly, the capitalist participation of commercializing traditional medical practices, whether Indigenous or abroad, is a colonialist practice which sustains Western medicine's superiority while profiting off a false tale of the Other, less legitimate types of medicine.

On the other extreme of this fixation on rigorous science is an obsession with a perceived "wild" and "natural" medicine, which often is still fake acknowledgements and poor representation of Indigenous knowledge. For example, in their article on "Traditional Mexican Midwifery" as a form of wellness tourism, Vega explains how this upper class ideal of natural births presents a romanticized pre-colonial fantasy which fetishizes indigenous practices and excludes the indigenous communities themselves: in their pursuit of natural birth, some tourists even criticize indigenous midwives for their adaptation of modern medicine and belief in Germ Theory (7). As well, through charging an extreme amount of money (Alexopoulos, slide 41) for their modified and non-contextualized knowledge of natural births, these white women sustain the mythicity of what they are promoting as noble, precious knowledge untouched by modernity (Vega 16). I question the validity behind these natural birthers' claims of aiming to empower women and I challenge the pretense of it. As an active member of a gender-minorities-empowering student group, I believe that if one wants to pursue a better form of care and genuinely believes it to benefit the community, they would be involved in activism, policy advocacy, and other change-making actions, instead of selling products and generating and advertising inaccessible knowledge and expertise which builds on the practices of

indigenous people without respecting the origins of these practices. These women are only appropriating indigenous knowledge as an aesthetic and as a marketing tool for their own profit, instead of authentically seeking higher levels of health and wellness.

“Only under late capitalism is wellness considered a luxury” (Amor). I wonder how many more inherently basic human needs will be turned into a mechanism of profit, and if it is possible at all that we separate the harm caused by capitalism from its accomplices such as racism and white supremacy. As it seems that appropriation is omnipresent in our culture of today, I look forward to the growing and continuous challenges against the commodification of everything at the cost of dismissing lifestyles, customs, and traditions. Will we ever defeat white supremacy and its biggest supporter, capitalism?

Works Cited

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