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# HEALTH AND THE AESTHETICS OF HEALTH— AN HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

*Desmond Manderson\* †*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. *Aesthetics As An Analytical Tool*

Belief and meaning derive from many sources, from the logic of our brains to the ethics of our communities. Many philosophers have emphasized that what a society takes to be unarguable may be fundamentally irrational.<sup>1</sup> However, it is inadequate merely to concede the role of the “irrational” in the construction of the self. The word “irrational” covers a multitude of sins. Ritually intoned, it suggests that we need look no further to understand why people behave as they do, and that there is in truth nothing to understand. Such an approach may be taken to imply that people just *happen* to think and feel as they do, having imbibed their

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† At the request of the author, the citations in this article conform to the Canadian system of citation.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche was an influential flower of this tradition, but by no means the seed. See, e.g., NIETZSCHE, *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*, trans. R. Hollingdale (1990); NIETZSCHE, *ON THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS AND ECCE HOMO*, trans. W. Kaufmann (1989); HEIDEGGER, *BEING AND TIME*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (1962); FOUCAULT, *MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION: A HISTORY OF INSANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON*, trans. R. Howard (1988); FOUCAULT, *THE ORDER OF THINGS* (1973); DERRIDA, *OF GRAMMATOLOGY* (1976); Kamuf, ed., *A DERRIDA READER: BETWEEN THE BLINDS* (1991); LYOTARD, *THE POSTMODERN CONDITION* (1984); DELEUZE AND GUATTARI, *A THOUSAND PLATEAUS* (1988).

beliefs as they do their water—uncritically and without hope of change. There is a shrug of the shoulders here, dismissive of the reformative potential of discourse, and perhaps even a counsel of despair. Thus, Lyotard remarks that “in each instance, I have a feeling, that is all. . . . But if I am asked by what criteria do I judge, I will have no answer to give.”<sup>2</sup> It is for this insouciance that postmodern theorists have been subject to a sustained barrage of criticism.

We need to look deeper than this to try to understand the complex inter-relationship of those contingent and cultural forces which *do* go to make up the substance of our beliefs. One formative aspect, in particular, which merits a great deal more attention is the question of aesthetics. We are sensory beings. We interpret the world in and through our bodies.<sup>3</sup> As Terry Eagleton writes, “aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body,” taking its origin from the Greek *aisthesis*, “the whole region of human perception and sensation.”<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the senses are a powerful source of pre-rational meaning.

From the point of view of a philosophical tradition steeped in rationalism, aesthetics has always been seen as a problem—a beast to be tamed or an atavism to be subdued. Plato epitomizes this approach; fearing the power of poetry and the passions, he banished them both from his Republic.<sup>5</sup> Behind such an attitude lies a powerful desire to find a language in which the meaning of truth and the determinants of right actions can be ascertained objectively and with universal applicability. This search for a discourse which could provide the “right answers” to moral questions has formed the framework in which the relationship of the rational and the non-rational—the faculty of reason and the realm of the aesthetic—has traditionally been explored.

The desire for a means of access to an objective truth has underpinned the philosophy of aesthetics through the ages. Yet, surely any attempt to reduce the aesthetic to the status of a dependent variable—a singer in the song of God or reason or nature—must now seem contrived. But once we abandon the desire for an objective truth, with what are we left? A sensory reaction to an object or situation certainly remains, but the aesthetic is more than simply an instinct for beauty or a reaction to a “work of art.” It is a mode of apprehending the world, which colours our deal-

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2. Quoted in EAGLETON, *THE IDEOLOGY OF THE AESTHETIC*, 397 (1990).

3. See, e.g., LYOTARD, *LIBIDINAL ECONOMY*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (1993); MERLEAU-PONTY, *THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION* (1962).

4. EAGLETON, *supra* note 2, at 13.

5. PLATO, *THE REPUBLIC*, trans. D. Lee, 154-56, 434-36 (1974).

ings with everything about us. As Hans-Georg Gadamer and John Dewey emphasized, and before them St. Thomas Aquinas, the aesthetic at its heart involves an *experience* or process of sensory perception. This is true whether the subject of this experience is an artist or an audience, and whether its object is a sunset or a pot.<sup>6</sup>

The aesthetic is a mode of perception by which we approach and interact with any object of contemplation. Such a perception is not limited to those things which we choose to classify as “works of art” because we happen to put them on a wall or listen to them in a hall. Rather, we are dealing with a way of experiencing the world which always has something in common with how we approach “art,” but which is, nonetheless, present to some degree at every moment of our lives. In fact, John Dewey insists that if we wish to understand art, we must begin with it in the raw: “the aesthetic aspect is central to every experience of our lives in which we become involved, through sensory enjoyment, with the communicative power of rituals and objects.”<sup>7</sup> It is part of what it means to be a human being, part of our relationship to the world, part of our inner temperament.

Our aesthetic reaction—the feelings of beauty and ugliness, attraction and repulsion, that speak to us in ghostly whispers or with overwhelming power throughout our daily lives—are not, of course, given and unmediated. They derive from our personal experience and from the habits and patterns of our culture. There are intimations of the power of this particular source of the self in a number of writers. Pierre Bourdieu, in particular, writes of the “bodily hexis” as a kind of corporeal sense or collection of habits of the body, which predisposes our thinking and reproduces power. Our sensory experience of the world, our way of physically being and perceiving, “embodies” social relations, which are expressed and reproduced in how we carry ourselves in the world, in our posture and our different ways of walking and speaking. “The body is the site of incorporated history.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, it is important to recognize that aesthetic meaning is semiotic as well as corporeal. We make an aesthetic judgment in re-

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6. See GADAMER, *THE RELEVANCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND OTHER ESSAYS*, trans. N. Walker (1986); DEWEY, *ART AS EXPERIENCE* (1934); See also SANTAYANA, *THE SENSE OF BEAUTY* (1955); HEIDEGGER, *POETRY, LANGUAGE, THOUGHT*, trans. A. Hofstadter (1971).

7. DEWEY, *supra* note 6. *ART AS EXPERIENCE*, John Dewey’s book, sums up the pervasive and quotidian nature of the aesthetic.

8. BOURDIEU, *LANGUAGE & SYMBOLIC POWER*, 13 (1991); See also KESTENBAUM, *THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL SENSE OF JOHN DEWEY: HABIT AND MEANING* (1977).

sponse to a sensory stimulus. But where do these aesthetic valuations come from? To explore adequately the ways in which aesthetics govern perception, it is necessary to consider the images and icons which, portraying cultural values in symbolic form, *ground* our judgments of beauty and ugliness. Aesthetic reactions undoubtedly gain force and meaning, in other words, from their connotations and metaphors, as part of a semiotic system buried deep within us. Aesthetics, then, is in part about the judgments we make in reaction to an image. But it is also about the other images, or symbols, which operate as the language or grammar of the aesthetic, as indeed such symbols operate as the language of dreams.

The aesthetic is a mode of communication—with all the inter-subjectivity, ambiguity, and limitations which that ironic word “communication” implies. But neither is it *purely* a species of semiotics. Aesthetics focuses on a particular object and on the experience or process of apprehending that object. It appeals not to our judgment of truth or logic, but to our senses. It finds expression in a feeling of attraction or repulsion rather than in a judgment of goodness or rightness. In short, our aesthetic understanding of the world about us is imparted uniquely, experienced uniquely, and expressed uniquely. Aesthetics provides us with a way of seeing and of speaking about the world, and at the same time it is a storehouse of symbols—aesthetics is at once a register and a registry.

#### *B. The Aesthetics of Health and Immigration: Establishing Parameters*

I explore the potential light which aesthetics, understood in this way, may throw on the discourse of our lives, through an exploration of one aspect of a field in which the aesthetic plays a central role—the field of “health,” a social good more intimately connected to ideologies of beauty, perhaps, than any other.

Keep young and beautiful, it's your dooty to be bootiful

Keep young and beautiful, if you want to be loved.<sup>9</sup>

crooned Eddie Cantor to a Roman bathhouse full of energetically exercising women. Although we may be skeptical as to whether the syllogism is as straightforward as Hollywood has chosen to present it, health has always been a powerful rhetorical weapon in the battle to legitimate social values, and beauty is its primary aesthetic symbol.<sup>10</sup> Health, as René Descartes put it, is “chief among goods” and, more, the *sine qua non* of

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9. Warren & Dubin, *Keep Young and Beautiful*, ROMAN SCANDALS (1933).

10. See FOUCAULT, THE USE OF PLEASURE, THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY VOL. 2, trans. R. Hurley (1986).

effective individual action.<sup>11</sup> But health is not simply a fact or an idea. It is also an aesthetic, a compound of images, ranging from contingent and socialized ideals of beauty about the human body,<sup>12</sup> to the ugly and unsettling images that help construct our approach to sickness and death.<sup>13</sup>

The serried ranks of women to whom Cantor addressed his advice were all, of course, virtually identical—the aesthetic they represented allowed little margin for individuality. Beauty, health, and normality have always been intimately connected. The dominant paradigm of beauty in our age often exhibits a certain sameness, just as health is largely defined as a question of normal functioning. Each ideal demands conformity to a standard. Plato applied the concept of “ideal form” to physiology as much as to ethics, metaphysics, and the natural sciences. From that time to this, a formula of “normal” or “healthy” proportion and homogeneity has underpinned our notion of beauty. In the Eighteenth Century, the “science” of physiognomy sought to categorize and define a vast array of deviations from norms of health and beauty, and to give those deviations moral significance. Later still, phrenologists believed that even the slightest “imperfections” of the skull corresponded to imperfections of the mind. Both health and beauty, then, are here understood in terms of a single ideal of the appearance of the “normal” human being.<sup>14</sup> We need only think of the particular “look” demanded of female models, or the assembly line of women accompanying not only the films of Eddie Cantor but also the videos of musician Robert Palmer. Palmer may find such women “simply irresistible,” but they are, more to the point, simply indistinguishable.

The aesthetic of conformity, which lies behind ideals of health and beauty, is thus frequently at odds with the experience of visible minorities, such as immigrant communities. This was most certainly true in countries such as the United States and Australia during the Nineteenth Century: one might recall the influence of the eugenics movement in which health and beauty were equated with conformity to a racially pure type. However, the *aesthetics* of race is still relevant, even now, to the problem of racism.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, racist attitudes to migrants stem from

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11. RÉNÉ DESCARTES, COLLECTED WORKS IV, C. Adams & P. Panney, eds., 264 (1897-1913).

12. WOLF, *THE BEAUTY MYTH* (1991).

13. See BECKER, *THE DENIAL OF DEATH* (1973); ARIES, *THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH*, trans. H. Weaver (1981).

14. Stafford et al., *One Face of Beauty, One Picture of Health: The Hidden Aesthetic of Medical Practice*, 14 *J. MEDICINE AND PHILOSOPHY* 213, at 215-22 (1989).

15. KOVEL, *WHITE RACISM—A PSYCHOHISTORY* (1984); Thomas, *Strange Fruit*, in

diverse cultural, emotional, and economic sources, including fear of change, employment insecurity, and the disturbance of a community's complacent approach towards its own traditions. These factors often generate an intense and violent resentment. But whatever its causes, feelings of hostility find sensory intensification and symbolic expression in an aesthetic element in which, especially in otherwise homogeneous societies, the different look and sound of newcomers seem to offend accepted parameters of beauty. Xenophobia employs aesthetic arguments as well as economic and social ones. It appeals to a certain norm of beauty and ugliness.

There is nothing inevitable or natural about this understanding of beauty and normality. The point is not to approve of a particular contingent norm of beauty. Rather, the point is to explore its explanatory force in the construction and legitimation of social values, in order to see how much a social conflict is really a conflict of aesthetic visions. We must examine how the language of aesthetics and the ideal of beauty it propounds interact in the context of specific social conflicts and with various other discourses.

The relationship of the aesthetic to other discourses is important. Aesthetic values are frequently concealed beneath ostensibly rational justifications. "Health," like "law," is such a justificatory discourse—apparently rational and socially authoritative—in which essentially aesthetic reactions are embedded. I propose, therefore, an exploration of the ways in which the rhetoric of health has been used to justify discriminatory treatment, revealing the aesthetic values which this powerful rhetoric masks and attempts to justify. As a case study, I have chosen the subject of racism experienced by the Chinese in late Nineteenth Century Australian society.

The New South Wales Premier Sir Henry Parkes, in his second reading speech on the Chinese Restriction Bill of 1888, urged members:

[T]o preserve to ourselves and our children, unaltered and unspotted, the rights and privileges which we have received from our forefathers . . . to preserve the soil of Australia that we may plant upon it the nucleus of a future nation stamped with a pure British type . . . .<sup>16</sup>

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MORRISON, *RACE-ING JUSTICE, EN-GENDERING POWER*, 364 (1992); GOLDBERG, *ANATOMY OF RACISM* (1990); GILMAN, *DIFFERENCE AND PATHOLOGY* (1985). And for a particular discussion of health and immigration see KRAUT, *SILENT TRAVELERS: GERMS, GENES AND THE "IMMIGRANT MENACE"* (1994).

16. *NEW SOUTH WALES PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES*, 4789, 4793 (1887-88).

Australia's most important magazine at that time, the *Bulletin*—whose masthead declared “Australia for the White Man” likewise expressed its disgust at the thought of a “piebald race.”<sup>17</sup> Such language, which suggests an ideal of “purity” as perfection, and “spottedness” as pollution, is not reasoned. While we may call it simply, “emotional,” this is a specific use of emotion where a particular imagery—that of purity—bears the brunt of the rhetorical appeal. We are observing, in fact, the power of aesthetic discourse to influence social policy.

The inter-relationship of these three variables of aesthetics, health and immigration is complex. Let us adopt for a moment the metaphor of a triangle. Three separate axes, each of which has two poles: for example, health can be understood as a discourse ranging between the poles of health at one end and sickness at the other, and aesthetics as a discourse which ranges between the extremes of beauty and ugliness. We have two alternative discourses, then, the former visible and apparently rational, the latter invisible and irrational. Finally, the baseline of the triangle—the subject matter of our particular study—represents the experience of Chinese immigrants in the last century.

The three planes of the triangle, however, do not exist in isolation. Instead, each has a point of confluence with the other two and these points of intersection form the angles of the triangle. The nature of this interactive dynamic will be refined and explored in the process of argument. My purpose is to explore the extent to which the plane of aesthetics can be used to understand a particular social conflict, and to problematize the dominant justificatory discourse. Above all, the argument attempts to explicate the distinction between health and the aesthetics of health, and to demonstrate ways in which the language of health, legitimate and authoritative, may be used to justify and to conceal aesthetic fears and values. Although we are using the medium of historical case study, it is a point of most contemporary relevance.

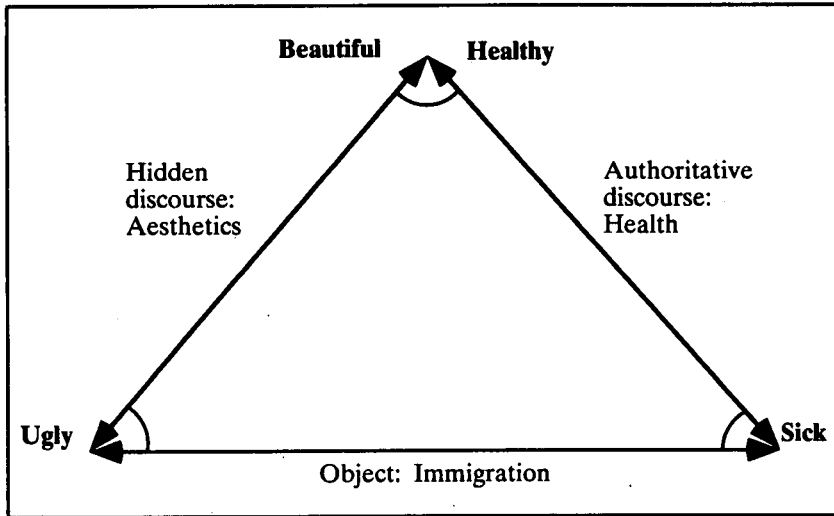
My argument develops through two distinct phases. The first phase focuses on the axis of health, and the second is directed to defining the nature and role of the aesthetic axis. In the first place, the underlying aesthetics of the rhetoric of health served as a means of stigmatization. The apparent scientific rationalism of “health”-based arguments may—now as then—be simply a device that legitimizes oppression. For example, by accusing the Chinese of being dirty or diseased, aesthetic hostility to them was given a patina of scientific legitimacy. At the same time, the

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17. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1881, at 14.



Figure 1



imagery of dirt and disease itself provoked an *aesthetic* reaction of fear and horror.

The idea of aesthetics as an underlying, invisible, discourse might suggest that images of beauty and ugliness are merely ways of manipulating the subconscious to achieve other ends. This is certainly how we would understand the use of emotive imagery in the arsenal of the modern advertising industry. On such an interpretation, aesthetics plays on our emotions as a calculated means to an end—in order to part us from our money, for example, or to teach us to fear other races. However, such an approach ignores the ways in which our aesthetic reactions are a genuine way of understanding the world. Aesthetics is not just an emotive reaction to raw sense-data, but a medium for the communication of meaningful symbols.

The second phase of the argument takes up this point and argues that aesthetic reactions stimulated by a complex of cultural symbols are misidentified, at times, as being about questions of “health.” In particular, the passionate objection to Chinese opium use, which radically changed

drug legislation in Australia as around the world,<sup>18</sup> was, at heart, an aesthetic reaction to an alien habit perceived as disturbing because of the symbolic meaning attached to the drug. In that case, the language of health masked, as it still so often does, a feeling of *revulsion* stimulated by the complex of symbolic, non-scientific, and non-rational meanings attached to the drug.

## II. THE CHINESE IN AUSTRALIA: AN HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

### A. *Disease and Defilement: The Symbolism of Dirt*

In White Australia's long history of racism, the treatment of the Chinese community has a special place of ignominy.<sup>19</sup> Fear of being overrun by the "yellow peril" dated back to the early gold-rush years, when sizeable Chinese immigration to Australia began. From the 1860s through the 1880s, the colonial legislatures passed a variety of laws devised to limit or outlaw Chinese immigration, sometimes over the objections of the British government. This reflected a legislative policy which, in one of the first Acts passed by the government of the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, came to be known as the "White Australia" policy. In practice, though not in form, this policy effectively prevented Asian immigration until the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, until the turn of the century, there were several large Chinese communities in Australia, first on the goldfields and then in the major cities.<sup>21</sup>

For some protagonists, the racism directed against the Chinese stemmed from an economic imperative. The Chinese, it was said, worked long hours, seven days a week, while Australian unions were fighting to reduce the hours of work. Further, most of the Chinese men who came to Australia did so to escape the poverty of China and to make money for their families. They had no intention of staying permanently and often left their wives and children behind in China. Consequently, they were able to live on less than an Australian labourer with a family to support.

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18. See esp. MANDERSON, FROM MR. SIN TO MR. BIG: A HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN DRUG LAWS, 17-58 (1993).

19. See esp. YARWOOD & KNOWLING, RACE RELATIONS IN AUSTRALIA: A HISTORY (1982); McLAREN, THE CHINESE IN VICTORIA: OFFICIAL REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS (1985); ROLLS, SOJOURNERS (1992).

20. E.g., N.S.W., CHINESE RESTRICTION AND REGULATION ACT (1888); CMWLTH., IMMIGRATION ACT (1901).

21. In 1877 the Palmer River goldfields in north Queensland, e.g., had 17,000 Chinese and only 1,400 Europeans; 7,000 Chinese and only 1,000 Europeans lived in the Northern Territory in 1887, and Darwin has been a Eurasian city ever since. YARWOOD & KNOWLING, *supra* note 19, at 176, 185.

The *Bulletin* insisted that “the badness of the Chinaman, socially and morally, is the outcome of his low wages”; the Chinese were, apparently, “jaundice-coloured apostles of unlimited competition.”<sup>22</sup>

This was not just a debate about economic protectionism, however. The Chinese, in language striking for its visceral hatred and excess, were portrayed as animals and as devils. A pamphlet written by the pseudonymous, and ironically named, “Humanity” was by no means uncharacteristic in this regard:

The Chinese amidst their evil surroundings, and their filthy and sinful abodes of sin and swinish devilry [will be] entered into by the servants of the Most High God! . . . It would never be believed that our Saxon and Norman girls could have sunk so low in crime as to consort with such a herd of Gorilla Devils . . .<sup>23</sup>

Observe that the notion of filth was essential to the characterization of the Chinese. The Chinese were not only portrayed as evil, but as “filthy” and “swinish.” Indeed, the imagery of the “dirty Chinese” was a constant refrain in the hate literature that abounded. Here is some typically purple prose from an infamous 1886 special edition of the *Bulletin*, entitled “The Chinese in Australia”:

Disease, defilement, depravity, misery and crime—these are the indispensable adjuncts which make the Chinese camps and quarters loathsome to the senses and faculties of civilized nations. Whatever neighbourhood the Chinese choose for the curse of their presence forthwith begins to reek with the abominations which are forever associated with their vile habitations.<sup>24</sup>

This appears to be an argument about health, but it is evident that what concerns the *Bulletin* is not the health of the community, let alone the Chinese, but the ugliness of this image of dirt. The “dirtiness” of the Chinese is presented by the *Bulletin* as something revolting. This is the essence of health as an *aesthetic* discourse. The well-being of the subject does not matter; what matters is how they appear to the observer. “Disease and defilement” sums up the difference between health as a genuine social concern and as an aesthetic value: you may be diseased, but *I* am defiled by it.

There is no reason or argument in the *Bulletin*’s writing, only conclusory statements and an evocation to make our senses reel. The rheto-

22. *Bulletin*, 12 January 1889, at 6; 10 March 1888, at 5.

23. “HUMANITY,” SKETCHES OF CHINESE CHARACTER, 3-4 (1878).

24. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1886, at 11-14.

ric of health—of “disease and defilement”—seemed to justify the *Bulletin*’s invective. However, on closer inspection that language was really about an aesthetic of disgust levelled at quarters which are not merely unsanitary, but “reek” and are “loathsome to the senses.” It is not the health of the *Chinese* about which the *Bulletin* is concerned, but its impact on *our* senses.

Why is it that the Chinese were seen as “dirty”? Why did “disease” and “defilement” congeal in this manner?<sup>25</sup> Surely it was the difference of the Chinese, in appearance and manner, their customs, and their sequestration in separate communities, which provoked such a powerful need to label and condemn. It is not surprising that this aesthetic horror of difference should find typical expression in the authoritative language of health. For Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, dirt is “matter out of place.”<sup>26</sup> It is culturally defined in terms of a breach of boundaries. Dirt is the outside world brought inside—mud trampled on the carpet or dust on the mantelpiece—or our own insides made visible to the outside world—human waste not flushed away<sup>27</sup> or garbage loose on the streets. It represents a crucial breach in the ramparts we have erected, both biologically and socially, between public and private spheres of life.<sup>28</sup>

But in a homogeneous and introverted society, immigration is already perceived as a threat to the boundary between self and other. Immigration exposes the rock pool of a culture to the oceans of humankind. That is why the use of terms like “cultural pollution” or invasion are so endemic. The result is perhaps a feeling of being swamped, under the influence of which the migrant community *itself* is perceived as “matter out of place.” Hence, the suitability of the rhetoric of dirt and disease in which the literal sense is substituted for the metaphorical one. Or to put it another way, the symbolic (in which A is taken to represent B) is treated as if it were a sign (in which the existence of A points to the actual presence of B). From a feeling that the Chinese (A) are a kind of metaphorical or symbolic “pollution” (B), we move quickly to a situation in which they

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25. For a narrative history of dirt and immigration in the American context, see KRAUT, *supra* note 15.

26. DOUGLAS, *PURITY AND DANGER* (1966).

27. See also BECKER, *supra* note 13.

28. DOUGLAS, *supra* note 26; see also the discussion of the connections between “dirt” and race in Thomas, *supra* note 15; KOVEL, *supra* note 15. For further on the psychological power of the idea of contagion in all human societies, see Rozin & Nemeroff, *The laws of sympathetic magic*, in STIGLER ET AL., *CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY*, 205, 207-224 (1990).

are treated as if they really were dirty and polluted.<sup>29</sup> A two-fold transformation has therefore taken place: "dirt" has been taken literally, and defilement treated as if it were a synonym for disease.

Furthermore, it is with the image of dirt that beauty and health, or rather ugliness and sickness, coalesce in a term through the use of which an apparently legitimate concern with questions of health and hygiene often masks an aesthetic reaction to violation. The result is a complex conjunction. "Dirt" marks the interaction between the three sides of the triangle: the experience of immigration, the legitimized discourse of health, and the emotional power of aesthetics. Therefore, migrants have readily been characterized as diseased, the Chinese in Australia merely one group amongst many. It is a characterization which needs to be understood as stemming from aesthetics and not from a rational concern with "health." A metaphorical or symbolic disturbance, experienced aesthetically, was translated into a rational and literal sign of ill-health.

### *B. Visible and Invisible Discourses*

The prevalence of the language of health was itself an instrument of oppression, for it appeared to give legitimate reasons for anti-Chinese sentiment. Various commissions of inquiry reinforced the idea that the Chinese were especially unhygienic. For example, in preparing the 1876 Report of the Sydney City and Suburban Sewage and Health Board, the five-member board, touring at all hours of the day and night for fifty-one consecutive days, inspected the living conditions of some of the poorest parts of Sydney, including Chinatown.<sup>30</sup> It was undoubtedly a difficult task, and their aesthetic reaction to the filth they encountered was both intense and predictable. The inspectors did not particularly concentrate on the Chinese. Indeed, the Report quoted with approval the Chief Medical Officer of the colony of New South Wales, Dr. J. Ashburton Thompson, who said of the Chinese that "they are . . . seldom quite so dirty, so indifferent to comfort and decency, or so squalid as some of our own poor often are."<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the Board treated this squalor as a trait of the Chinese community in general, and not a function of poverty. "If these people ever wash themselves, they do it by stealth," reported Alderman Chapman and Dr. Read.<sup>32</sup> "For the next forty-eight hours, and

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29. For further on the literalization of metaphor, see MILLER, *VERSIONS OF PYGMALION*, 1-3 (1990).

30. *NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY*, 535-661 (1875-6).

31. *Id.* at 660.

32. *Id.* at 569.

that of the previous night, the horrible sickly smell of opium smoking which pervades all the Chinese quarters seemed to adhere to us, to say nothing of the fear of infection, which is not a pleasant sensation."<sup>33</sup>

The critique of "the Chinese quarters," was of a "horrible . . . smell." The assault on the senses of the observers was of prime concern here and not the health of the inhabitants: the smell adhered "to us." Furthermore, it was not the *experience* of infection that concerned the Board, nor was there any attempt to discern the extent to which infection constituted a real risk for the residents of Chinatown. Rather it was the *fear* of infection about which the Board expressed great anxiety. This fear affected them, not the Chinese. At heart, the perception of the observers appears to be at stake—their fears and sensations—and not the well-being of the observed. Again, underneath the rhetoric of health, we are in the realm of the aesthetic, external in outlook and sensory in apprehension.

At times, health arguments against the Chinese were more specific. The "*Afghan*" arrived in Australia in early 1888 along with three other ships containing a total of nearly 600 Chinese passengers. Those on board tried to disembark in Melbourne, but were denied permission to do so. They sailed on to Sydney, and again they were denied. In Sydney, the immigrants waited, trapped in their floating world off Circular Quay for several weeks, while angry crowds lined the shore and demonstrated against their presence. Meanwhile, the New South Wales parliament debated a new bill to ensure their exclusion. Finally, defeated, the "*Afghan*" set sail once more, and eventually returned in failure to Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup>

The actions taken by the governments of Victoria and New South Wales were clearly illegal. Although the Influx of Chinese Restriction Act (N.S.W.) of 1881—notice the provocative use of that word "influx"—set a quota on the number of Chinese immigrants per vessel, a quota which the "*Afghan*" certainly exceeded, the Collector of Customs refused *any* Chinese permission to land, including those who were British subjects, such as passengers from Hong Kong.<sup>35</sup> The question of smallpox was a crucial argument in defense of these actions. The government declared the "*Afghan*" to be infected, and mandated that the ship fly the flag of quarantine. The refusal to land its passengers seemed then in the

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33. *Id.* at 568-9.

34. See, further, ROLLS, *supra* note 19, at 464-504; MANDERSON, *supra* note 18, at 17-18; see also KRAUT, *supra* note 15.

35. Archive Office of N.S.W., *Colonial Secretary Special Bundle: Chinese 1888, 4/884.1*; N.S.W., INFLUX OF CHINESE RESTRICTION ACT (1881).

best interests of public health. However, the justification given was a mere sleight of hand, giving illusory logic to hostility and reaction. The "Afghan" had not traveled to an infected port and was not at risk. Furthermore, non-Chinese and, following an order of the Supreme Court of Victoria, fifty others, were eventually allowed to land.<sup>36</sup> What a strange virus. It carefully discriminated whom it infected, and was apparently attuned to the finer points of the Influx of Chinese Restriction Act!

This was but one of many cases in which the fear of smallpox acted as a rationalization and not a reason for action. Smallpox was a disease strongly associated with the Chinese<sup>37</sup>—Phil May's famous illustration in the *Bulletin*, "The Mongolian-Octopus Grip on Australia," caricatured the Chinese as a giant octopus, "every one of [whose] arms, each of [whose] sensile suckers has its own class of victims or special mission of iniquity."<sup>38</sup> In this cartoon, alongside gambling, opium, and immorality among others, the arm of "smallpox" and typhoid is to be seen squeezing the life out of two white children. The fear was undoubtedly real, but it was a fear of the Chinese, not of disease.

At the same time, it is no coincidence that a disease like smallpox served the rhetorical and justificatory purposes it did. The effects of smallpox are immediate and visible. The pustules which form on the skin are disturbing, and the scars it leaves are permanent. Not all diseases are so unpleasant to behold. Contrast a sickness like consumption, whose wounds are purely internal, whose pallor seemed to accord with a particular ideal of feminine fragility, and which even acquired a certain glamour in the Nineteenth Century.<sup>39</sup> Smallpox is exactly the opposite, and the revulsion associated with it and used to such effect against the Chinese was to some extent a consequence of its ugliness. Moreover, smallpox is extremely contagious and therefore a perfect metaphor for the pollution and violation which Chinese immigration itself represented. The ugliness, the virulence, and the contagion of smallpox all made it a perfect symbol to affix to the Chinese. The question of disease, then, was used in a powerful way. Its aesthetic aspects, concealed beneath the apparent validity of health, and its symbolic aspects, converted into the literal, intensified and justified the racism of White Australia.

Another argument only superficially about health cropped up frequently in the pages of the *Bulletin* and elsewhere. The Chinese were

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36. *Id.* See also ROLLS, *supra* note 19, at 464-504.

37. See *esp.* ROLLS, *supra* note 19.

38. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1886, at 11, 12-13.

39. SONTAG, *ILLNESS AS METAPHOR/AIDS AND ITS METAPHORS* (1990).

skillful and industrious market gardeners in and around Sydney. It was said, however, that the Chinese used human waste to fertilize their gardens and that this accounted for their success in growing vegetables. So horrifying was this allegation that it received considerable attention during the hearings of the New South Wales Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality. There it was vociferously denied.<sup>40</sup> Again, the image of dirt, which that attack employed, suggested that there was a genuine health risk. A patina of scientific rationality shrouded the issue. But what was this concern really about? The practice of putting manure in and on the soil was, and is today, standard and necessary. Even if the suggestions were true, why should human waste be treated differently from that of a cow or pig? As far as the vegetables themselves are concerned, night soil is simply a nutrient like any other. Of course, if vegetables have been doused with liquid manure, rather than merely being mixed with the soil, then they must be well-washed before use. This is true whatever the species of waste used. It is only our discomfort with the processes of our own bodies and our inability to abstract it using some neutral term such as "manure" (a French word for dung and therefore tailor-made for euphemism, much as we call a dead cow beef and a dead sheep mutton) which makes the difference. This is a difference of perception and not of reality.

The Report of the Royal Commission was clear in accepting the evidence of its medical witnesses that "the objections often urged against the practice" had nothing but "a sentimental basis."<sup>41</sup> Yet for those who saw this as further proof of the dirtiness of the Chinese, no such reassurances sufficed. Some of the Commissioners, for example, stuck doggedly to a story about a cabbage they had seen grown by "a Chinaman at Forbes." The manure had somehow, miraculously, been absorbed in its raw form right up into the stem and head of the plant.<sup>42</sup> While scientific witnesses attested to the fact that such an event was botanically impossible, nothing would shake the Commissioners in their belief. In fact, the question of smell was of recurring importance to the Commission. The smell of the mythical cabbage, the differing smells of different types of manure—even the smell of the water used to cook a "Chinese-grown cabbage" were all alleged to be noxious.<sup>43</sup> And clearly the Chinese themselves knew the

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40. NEW SOUTH WALES ROYAL COMMISSION ON ALLEGED CHINESE GAMBLING AND IMMORALITY, 28 (1892); *see also* the Commission's MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

41. MINUTES OF EVIDENCE at 377-81.

42. *Id.* at 378, 421.

43. *Id.* at 381.



indomitability of these myths and the ability of disgust to detrimentally affect their business. All of those interviewed by the Commission denied ever having used human waste in their gardens.<sup>44</sup>

Once again when the idea of dirt was used against the Chinese, an ostensible question of health turned out to be about the *imagery* of cleanliness and the stench of pollution. The disgust this imagery engendered became part of a whole folklore centered on the aesthetic dimensions of health. The Chinese were envisioned as squalid, as fecal, as fetid, as infected. These images, through the reactions of distaste they provoked, served to alienate the Chinese further and to entrench the hostility which their intrusion into white Australia had aroused.

### C. *From Disease to Depravity: The Symbolism of Opium*

Let us move from aesthetic feelings to the meanings which instill these feelings. Nothing is inherently beautiful or ugly except in as much as it serves as a symbol. In this, the aesthetic realm is both quintessentially and invariably semiotic. It is the level on which cultural symbols are felt and not thought. A judgment of beauty or ugliness must always be evaluated in terms of what it points to or symbolizes.<sup>45</sup> The aesthetic reaction to a new community, for example, may be a kind of displacement or transference, an economic or social fear *experienced* as a feeling of ugliness in much the same way as an illness in an organ may come to our attention as a shooting pain elsewhere on the body. But this is too monolithic an approach. If culture informs the aesthetic sense, so too does aesthetics inform culture; aesthetics is a *force* in the construction of values as well as a *mode* of their expression. When confronted with the intensity of an aesthetic reaction, unpacked from the casing of health rhetoric which rationalizes it, we must give it credit for its own sake, and at the same time begin to explore the symbolic resonances that give it such meaning and strength.

Of all the indicia of difference that set the Chinese apart and served to label them as deviant, none was so horrifying to the sensibilities of white Australia as their use of opium. By 1890, a Chinese population of about 21,500 in New South Wales and Victoria imported over 37,000 pounds of opium. In 1902, although the Chinese population Australia-wide had declined to 29,627, New South Wales still imported 14,000 pounds of opium,

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44. *Id.* at 415 *et seq.*

45. For an analysis of the ideological meaning of aesthetic values, see EAGLETON, *supra* note 2.

Victoria 10,000 pounds, and Queensland, with a large Chinese population working on the cane fields, 18,000 pounds. Almost all the imported stock was sold to the Chinese community.<sup>46</sup> Evidence suggests that between fifty and ninety per cent of the Chinese population in Australia regularly smoked opium.<sup>47</sup>

White Australia was not a temperate society. Australians consumed, per capita, more patent medicines than any other country in the world. The active principle in these "remedies" was more often than not alcohol, opium, or a derivative thereof.<sup>48</sup> But the Chinese did not drink their opium, or take it in tablet form. It was their custom to smoke it in specially prepared pipes and frequently in "dens" fitted out for the purpose. Smoking was at once a private reverie, and a convivial activity. As with any recreational drug, there were occasional users, regular users, heavy users and addicts. There were places in which the smoking of an opium pipe was regarded as a social courtesy, and others in which it was a serious business. Opium smoking was a uniquely "Chinese vice," set apart from other drug use in Australia because of the race of those who smoked it.

Hostility to the Chinese use of opium masqueraded as a concern about the health risks of drug use. Having learned something about the difference between the aesthetic and the scientific in the rhetoric of health, one must be skeptical of such claims. The addictive qualities of opium had been well established by the 1870s, but beyond the *fact* of addiction, evidence of the harm or ill-health consequent upon opium smoking was slight and anecdotal, then as now.<sup>49</sup> It was, rather, the *ugliness* of opium smoking that generated fear. When the *Bulletin* described the "shambling gait, glistening eyes, and trembling muscles" of an opium smoker, its clear purpose was to provoke horror in the reader and not concern.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, consider this description of the dangers of opium, uttered in 1893 by the Victorian Minister for Health:

Who has not seen the slave of opium, a creature tottering down the street, with sunken yellow eyes, closely contracted pupils,

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46. See McCoy, *DRUG TRAFFIC*, at 72 (1980); NEW SOUTH WALES CENSUS (1891) and COLONIAL CENSUS (1901).

47. McLAREN, *supra* note 19, at 33-58.

48. See ROYAL COMMISSION ON SECRET DRUGS, CURES, AND FOODS (1907); PHILIPS, *KILL OR CURE* (1972); McCoy, *supra* note 46, at 52-70; MANDERSON, *supra* note 18, at 52-54.

49. Parsinnen and Kerner, *Development of the Disease Model of Drug Addiction in Britain*, 24 *MED. HIST.* 275, 283-84 (1980).

50. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1886, at 15.

and his skin hanging over his bones like dirty yellow paper.<sup>51</sup>

Here too, the offence given is aesthetic. The purpose of these comments is not to provoke sympathy, but rather pity (at best) or disgust (at worst). This slave of opium was not a man but a "creature," and a creature, moreover, who was "dirty" and "yellow." Just think about those three words for a moment. We have returned once more to the xenophobic image of the Chinese, different, dehumanized, and polluted. Once again, in a tell-tale aesthetic posture, we are *external* to the user. It is not what it feels like to be "sick," but rather what it looks like to us: not disease, but defilement is at issue.

The use of this type of language suggests that the virulent hostility to Chinese opium use, while often couched in terms of disease, was aesthetic in nature. Moreover, this language was intimately connected to racist images of the Chinese in general. But what was it about the smoking of opium in particular that made it such a powerful symbol of difference? What made opium smoking a referent to the violation of normality which the Chinese already threatened?—a referent of such overwhelming negativity that between 1891 and 1908 every colony and state of Australia outlawed the use and possession of "opium suitable for smoking" and the Commonwealth government, for its part, prohibited its import.<sup>52</sup> It is not enough simply to emphasize the empirical connection between opium smoking and the Chinese community. The particular aesthetics of the drug itself were vital in establishing potent symbolic connections which entrenched that revulsion.

In the first place, the very sensory novelty of opium smoking in the Australian context provoked an aesthetic reaction centered on the fear of difference. In the *Bulletin* article, "Disease, defilement, depravity," there is a suggestive description of an opium den.

Down from the fan-tan dens are stairs leading to lower and dirtier abodes: rooms darker and more greasy than anything on the ground floor: rooms where the legions of aggressive stinks peculiar to Chinamen seems ever to linger . . . Yet the rooms are not naturally repulsive, nor would they be so when occupied by other tenants; but the Chinaman has defiled their walls with his filthy touch; he has vitiated what was once a reasonably pure atmosphere with his presence, and he has polluted the premises with his disgusting habits . . . The very air of the alley is impreg-

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51. VICTORIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, 2640 (1893).

52. See the analysis in MANDERSON, *supra* note 18, at 20-58.

nated with the heavy odour of the drug.<sup>53</sup>

Although the *Bulletin* is ostensibly concerned about health and disease, it is apparent that we are again in the realm of aesthetic considerations. Strangeness is portrayed as ugliness, difference is aestheticized. In the alien environment of the opium den, dark and close, everything impinges upon the senses at once, disordered and riotous. Only an all-encompassing sensation of dirtiness and a scent of strangeness remain. The pollution of being Chinese and the odour of opium smoking interact and catalyze. The hostility to both is expressed and understood overwhelmingly in aesthetic terms.

In terms of the symbolic meaning of opium, it is not coincidental that it was the *smoking* of opium that elicited this revulsion. The peculiarity of the *smell* of opium to the European nose highlighted the difference of the Chinese, and stimulated disgust. The "pure" atmosphere of the room was polluted by the lingering "aggressive stink" of opium. There was a sickly and overpowering odour which seemed to impregnate "the very air." We are reminded here of the "horrible sickly smell of opium smoking" that clung to the inspectors of the Sydney City & Suburban Sewage and Health Board.<sup>54</sup>

Smoking is the type of drug consumption which most involves the observer. We experience others' smoke as we do not experience their taste or vision. Furthermore, in a more general sense, smells physically challenge our sense of boundary. Smells are shared—they wander, envelop, and cling. Odour is intimately connected to our experience of invasion and contagion. The liminal and communal nature of the sense of smell is therefore in itself a violation of autonomy. The olfactory system, moreover, is directly connected to our emotions and serves as a powerful trigger of feelings.<sup>55</sup> Because of the way the sense of smell operates, then, and because of what it signifies, it is unsurprising that drug smoking should in particular become characterized as pollution. An odour is already a boundary violation. An unfamiliar odour, even more so, violates the normal. A strange smell peculiarly associated with the Chinese was uniquely placed to become an important symbol of transgression, and to be experienced as revulsion.

On the question of opium as in many other areas, the aesthetic experience which underlay the language of health elided the distinction be-

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53. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1886, at 11-14.

54. NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, *supra* note 30, at 568-69.

55. Howes, *Odour in the Court*, *BORDER/LINES*, 28 (1989-90); Howes, *THE VARIETES OF SENSORY EXPERIENCE*, 128-47 (1991); Corbin, *THE FOUL AND THE FRAGRANT* (1986).

tween the sick and the ugly. But its emotional force accomplished yet another transformation. The Sewage and Health Board wrote of “the most revolting and immoral scenes” emanating from “similar foul dens of Chinese depravity.”<sup>56</sup> As “defilement” was translated into “disease,” so too did “disease” soon become “depravity”: from ugliness to dirtiness, and from dirtiness to immorality. That transformation also was achieved through the medium of aesthetics. The ugliness of opium use came to stand for immorality, just as we saw the ugliness of dirt come to stand for unhealthiness. In both cases, the metaphors prompted by an aesthetic reaction have been literalized. Ugliness, *symbolizing* the unhealthy or the immoral, is treated as if it truly was a sign of the presence of disease or depravity.

The power of aesthetics to accomplish this conflation, this boundary violation between the several realms of aesthetics, science, and ethics, is apparent if we consider the image of the opium trader contained in the *Bulletin's* fictional account of the life of “Mr. Sin Fat,” which appeared at the time of the “*Afghan*” crisis. In the story, Mr. Sin Fat grows wealthy by his ownership of dens “reeking with the nauseating odour of opium and pollution and Chinamen, and always clouded with smoke.”<sup>57</sup> Already the connections have been made between smell and the senses, invasion and pollution, and the Chinese; between, in other words, the three corners of our analytic triangle. Mr. Sin Fat’s particular pleasure is to entice innocent young girls into his lair, where he turns them into hopeless addicts and sexual slaves. The story ends when, to the surprise of Mr. Sin Fat, one of his victims turns out to be the daughter of his wife and, in a fit of fury, his wife stabs him to death with a pig sticker.<sup>58</sup>

Mr. Sin Fat is an image of evil, and his name says it all. “Fat” implies bodily unhealthiness, and “Sin” implies moral unhealthiness. The *Bulletin's* main purpose was to link the two conditions, the visible manifestation of unhealthiness with the moral sickness beneath. As Mr. Sin Fat prospers and becomes more and more sinful, so too he gets fatter, until at last:

He was fatter than fat, his obesity was phenomenal . . . Layers of blubber bulged about his eyes . . . and his mighty neck rolled almost on to his shoulders, and vibrated like jelly with every movement.<sup>59</sup>

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56. NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, *supra* note 30, at 546.

57. *Bulletin*, 14 April 1888, at 8.

58. *Id.* at 8-9.

59. *Id.* at 8.

Fatness is ugly, just as the scent of opium is ugly, and such ugliness was treated not merely a symbol of sin, but as an unmistakable sign or index of it. Together, obesity, sin, and opium formed a triangle by which the drug was portrayed as creating a life both unhealthy and immoral. These connections, above all, generated revulsion through the persuasive power of images, and made symbolic associations feel literally true. The ugliness of Mr. Sin Fat was relentlessly driven home, but that ugliness was taken to have genuine moral implications in addition to its genuine health implications. The consequences of defilement were taken to be both disease and depravity. In the pallid glow of the aesthetic, the ugly, the diseased, and the immoral thus coalesced. This symbolic interpretation of ugliness is not unique. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries the sciences of physiognomy and phrenology were influential in likewise equating moral or intellectual capacity with a visual deviation from the norm. There too, an imperfect body was regarded as indicative of both imbecility and deviance.<sup>60</sup>

The smoking of opium, like the question of "dirt," was never a question of health, no matter how much the rhetoric of health might have rationalized it. It was, instead, an aesthetic revulsion in response to symbols of metaphorical boundary violation. That revulsion was nowhere more apparent than in the moral objection made to opium use. The central tenet, as tenacious as it was untrue, was that women who consumed opium either lost all sexual control immediately or became so addicted that they were subsequently unable to resist seduction. As the *Bulletin* put it, the effect of opium was to enable "the criminal and sensual Chinese" to have their perverted way with white women.<sup>61</sup>

This mythology was repeatedly denied, not least by a dozen European women who cohabitated with the Chinese in Sydney's Chinatown, and who gave uncategorical evidence on the subject before the New South Wales Royal Commission into Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality.<sup>62</sup> However, the fanciful attribution of near-magical powers to a drug found in no less potent form in any number of commonly-available patent medicines continued to exercise a powerful hold over the minds and imagination of Australians. What fear did this mythology express, after all, but miscegenation? And what greater violation of the community's boundaries could there be? What more disturbing affront to the sensibili-

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60. Stafford et al., *supra* note 14, at 216-24; see also KRAUT, *supra* note 15, at 253-56.

61. *Bulletin*, 4 September 1886, at 4; see also MANDERSON, *supra* note 18, at 24-30.

62. NEW SOUTH WALES ROYAL COMMISSION, *supra* note 40, at 380-420.

ties of a homogeneous and prudish society? The Chinese and opium alike were constructed in terms of invasion, violation, and pollution. Miscegenation was the apotheosis of those very fears which the Chinese aroused in xenophobic white Australians, and which opium had come to symbolize. It was a marriage of convenience, between fear and the symbolic form that fear took, which could not be set asunder merely by evidence or argument.

The aesthetics and imagery of opium, therefore, made it particularly appropriate as a vehicle to express hostility against the Chinese and particularly vulnerable to legislative and social attack. Those aesthetics were a powerful force in the construction of values because of the feelings they provoked and the symbols they entrenched. At the same time, the sensory and symbolic nature of the attitude towards opium was legitimated through health and moral concerns which were more apparent than real. Beneath the surface discourses of science and morality lay questions of vile smells and the horror of dirt. These were *feelings* which the look and smell of opium dens provoked, feelings whose intensity, in turn, can be explained in terms of the semiotic system attached to those images. The treatment of Chinese opium use took place in the context of those inter-lacing symbols.

### III. CONCLUSION: TRIANGULATING THE AESTHETIC

Using aesthetics as an analytic tool, I have explored some of the complex interactions between health and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Australia. Certain themes have emerged. Beauty and health alike are constructed around an ideal of conformity to a type and the strength of this ideal has frequently led to hostility directed against migrant communities. The "dirtiness" of the migrant has been and continues to be a significant expression of this hostility. It is a mistake to try to understand "dirt" as a question of health, for beneath the health rhetoric are strongly felt *aesthetic* reactions built on a semiotic system of "boundary violation." The effect of the rational language of health, however, is to cloak and legitimate these symbolic and aesthetic sources of ill-feeling.

The structure of the experience I have traced in one specific historical context can be extrapolated far beyond the Chinese. It involves a two-fold dislocation.<sup>63</sup> First, the aesthetics of health, a matter of images, of external perceptions, of *looking at* someone, are treated as if equivalent

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63. For a similar critique of philosophical dislocation, see SAMEK, *THE META-PHENOMENON* (1981).

to health itself, a matter of science, of community welfare, and of *concern about* someone. Second, the symbols which prompt that aesthetic reaction—the metaphors which fuel cultural connections and hidden meaning and which are the raw material or grammar on which the aesthetic language is built—are treated as if they are literal signs of an external reality. Defilement is construed as if it really were a symptom of disease, and disease as if it were the stigmata of depravity. At the same time, the process of these dislocations remains unacknowledged. The symbolic aspect of aesthetics and the aesthetic aspect of health are alike erased.

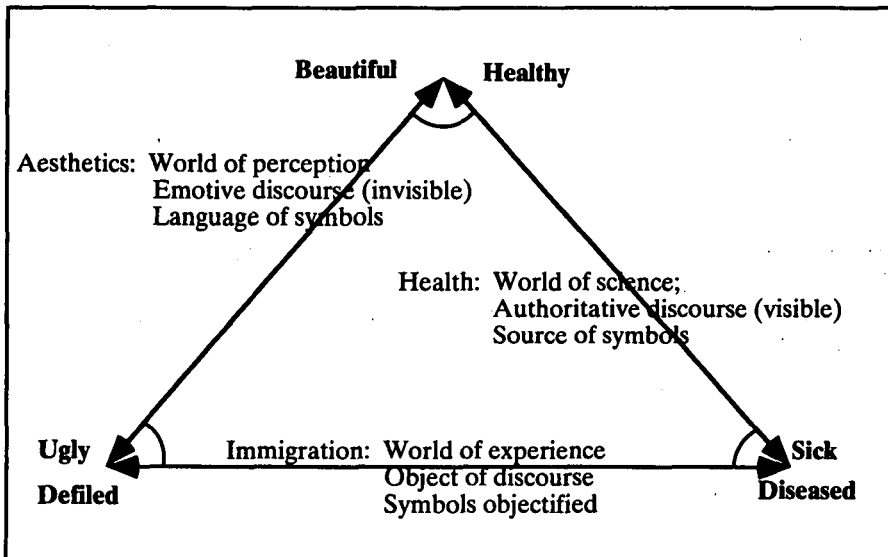
Trying to map this inter-relationship is a difficult task. Aesthetics is an important influence on our judgments and values, and it is a methodology through which we can explain the meaning of social conflict. Thus, aesthetics is both a mode of perception and the storehouse of symbols, on the basis of which it judges what it perceives. Aesthetics, in short, is the realm in which the symbolic world finds expression. In this paper I have used one particular aspect of the dynamics of health to begin to explore this realm. Health is but one of many authoritative discourses which are mediated, transmogrified, and utilized by the aesthetic. The Chinese were merely the subjects upon which, in this case, symbolic meaning and aesthetic valuation were imposed. The following diagram perhaps suggests some of these interwoven dynamics. Here we find three distinct axes or planes, each of which covers a variety of attitudes ranging between positive and negative poles. Each axis connects with each of the other two axes to produce three distinct angles of intersection. Were we to incorporate the question of “depravity” or moral value, our model would need four independent planes all of which touch upon the others. In that case, our model would look like a triangular prism.

The intersection of aesthetics and health leads to a particular kind of imagery and symbolism. At its negative poles, the imagery led to a certain characterization of the Chinese which I have tried to interpret. But the diagram suggests other fruitful lines of future aesthetic inquiry. On the one hand, aesthetics interacts with a *variety* of authoritative discourses. We could, for example, replace health with law (“healthy” with “ordered,” and “sick” with “chaotic”) along that axis. Then we could begin to explore how the aesthetics of law affects our understanding of and reaction to a wide variety of social and legal conflicts.

On the other hand, the discourses of aesthetics and health interact not only in immigration and race issues, but in many different fields. The danger of failing to distinguish between real health concerns and the mere aesthetics of health is evident, for example, in relation to how we



Figure 2



treat mental illness or AIDS. We could substitute these two discursive subjects along the baseline of our pyramid and develop a parallel analysis. We might begin by considering the extent to which imagery about the “mentally ill,” our disturbance at the way they look rather than how they feel, influences the social treatment they receive.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, as Susan Sontag has suggested, the *symbolic meaning* of AIDS in relation to disease and sexuality is a powerful determinant of the depth and nature of our fear about it.<sup>65</sup>

More generally, an aesthetic analysis may be useful in explaining our culture’s obsession with youth and the popularity of cosmetic surgery, as the socio-medical reflection of an ideal of beauty based upon an unattainable and homogeneous normality. This reflection is found, for example, in successful legal arguments of “wrongful life” which are based on the principle that it is better not to be born at all than to be born “imperfect.”<sup>66</sup> The rhetoric of health is a powerful enforcer of a monolithic

64. CAMPBELL AND HEGINBOTHAM, *MENTAL ILLNESS: PREJUDICE, DISCRIMINATION AND THE LAW* (1991).

65. See SONTAG, *supra* note 39; DAVENPORT-HINES, *SEX, DEATH, AND PUNISHMENT* (1990).

66. See the discussion in Stafford et al., *supra* note 14.

ideal of beauty.

It continues, therefore, to be vitally important to recognize the ways in which this society confuses difference and defilement, with disease and depravity. There is beauty in difference, though some do not see it; there is delight in change, though some may fear it. The monism of beauty can be replaced by an aesthetic pluralism, in which variety is beautiful and sameness a living death.<sup>67</sup> A greater awareness of the power of imagery and perception in the construction of social values does not imply that these aesthetic influences have no legitimate role to play in our lives, nor that they are inflexible and unchangeable. However, without this increased awareness, there can only be misidentification, literalization, and confusion.

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67. For legal parallels, see Galanter, *Justice in Many Rooms: Courts, Private Ordering, and Indigenous Law*, 19 *JOURNAL OF LEGAL PLURALISM* 1 (1981); Merry, *Legal Pluralism*, 1988, *L. & SOC. REV.* 869 (1987); WALZER, *SPHERES OF JUSTICE* (1983).

