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Geographies of toxic wellness, requiem for a sandstorm

During the summer
of 2021, the world still crippled
by the pandemic, a considerable number of well-off
Swedes lined the beaches of vacation regions in the South West, such
as Halland. Travel bans and fear of contracting the virus in commercial airline transit precipitated an unprecedented amount of holidaymakers to domestic shores. On Tylösand, a beach immortalised in the international pop consciousness by Roxette, some 50000 visitors a day were counted at the height of the vacation period. It was difficult to walk along the finely combed golden sand without stepping on someone's towel.

Tylösand's shores have historically enjoyed a particularly clean water flow in the municipality compared to the beaches neighbouring the mouth of the River Nissan. Its waters were laden with Chromium, Zinc and Cadmium from the late 19th century textile manufacturing industry which had long since rendered the salmon migration, and consequently the fishing industry, extinct. Despite the industrial revolution's calamitous effect on the Nissan, the nearby Östra and Västra stranden were the most well-trodden by locals. It also has come to represent an important class division in the municipality, where, somewhat predictably, the darker sand of Östra stranden, tainted by the industry channelled through the nearby docks, is dubbed the "worker's beach".

Östra stranden today is an expansive horizon of sand which many Halmstaders use to take long walks. It is a social space, where a passer-by is commonly greeted, whether stranger or not.

It is not often used
for swimming, and occasionally
signs warn against it because of temporary
water pollution levels.

And so, it is relevant that, after a particularly hot streak of weather in late June, beaches packed, the heat wave subsided in unison with the dissolution of the Swedish parliament.

Perhaps it was the hot muggy climate crisis foreboding weather which catalysed the party ‘humours’ on the days preceding June 21st. The atmospheric pressure had seemingly exacerbated the dispute to an unrec- oncilable end. The dissolution was mainly due to a disagreement about rent control, echoing the unresolved demands of the riots of 2009 and 2013: housing policy reform which recognises the right to decent housing for all. However lesser widely mediatised, is that an important subset of the dissolution was a dispute about the enclosure of the very coastlines that were brimming with visitors at that time.

The country’s *Allemansrätten* (“the right of public access”, or every per-son’s right to roam and pick), and the related protection of the coastline has allowed common access to these spaces. This was officially enshrined into Swedish law in 1994, and that the term *Allemansrätt* was coined in the early 1940s, when a “fritidsutredning” [public inquiry concerning leisure] was initiated. However, *Allemansrätten* is based on a customary law that has been practiced since the middle ages. The right of public ac-cess bears some exceptions, namely, it does not apply within the vicinity of a privately owned abode. The recent proposal that involved much con-trariety of opinion involved additional zones of inaccessibility, a reform to allow further privatisation and development of protected coastal areas.

Enclosure inches its way forward, a regular discomfoting tug.

The coveting of the coastline is a fairly recent frenzy. Halland, a state which boasts a significant portion of coast in comparison to its size, enjoys the *nouveau-riche* benefits of its rapidly increasing land value. According to SCB (Statistics Sweden), Halland now has the highest life expectancy in Sweden, a quantification which is proudly echoed in local tourist pam-phlets, along with the slogan, *Halland bästa livsplatsen* (best living place). Less than two centuries ago, it was the poorest state in the country, and the very sand that now inflates property value was the culprit of its former discontent.

Dirty, *dirty* sand.

Sand: soft or gritty, is a witness of the passage of time, and a purveyor of both life and death. Marine life, fossilised in the Sahara sand, blows across the ocean to feed the Amazon forest, testifying to global depend-encies beyond the limited circumscriptions of capital. The same sand is also impregnated by French atomic bomb testing in the region. The resulting colonial collateral damage in the form of uranium dust blows across the continents. Despite Europe’s perceived exceptionalism, the radioactive sand nonetheless reaches its shores. Sweden does not escape the radioactive wind’s caress.

As a material, sand affords the rapid dissipation of heat, and insulates against sound, if used in a wall. But in the desert, across dunes, it amplifies even the quietest utterance.

Sand has agency. It would be an anthropomorphic projection to think of sand as distributing retribution to former imperial violators while feeding the global south and carrying the Berber’s song over the ridges. It would also be a gross simplification of the geographical entanglements that capital modulates. Nonetheless, sand has the seemingly magical capacity to operate as a crucible for memory, conflict and healing.

This property has shaped the geopolitical history of the Swedish region of Halland. In the 17th century, when coastlines were still devoid of *kallbad-hus*, majestic oak forests lined the coast. These trees acted as a natural barrier, impeding the sand from blowing inland. Once those trees were felled to build the Swedish empire’s fleets, the massive deforestation allowed the sand the curiosity to venture away from the water. The newly established agricultural land was thus plagued with rapidly encroaching

dunes, and a dusty wind ruining the crops further afield. Land impoverishment led to great poverty and hardship.

Around 1890, during the mass Swedish emigration to the US, Halland had the highest emigration rates of all counties. This was a time when 80% of the population lived from agriculture and in rural areas.¹ Approximately 20% of Halland's population emigrated to the Americas, in search of better soil, and with it, the hope of livelihood and dignity.² This should not Romanticise the settler colonial history across the ocean, but rather remind us that ecological crisis has, and continues to cause massive displacements of people.

It is in this context that cooperatives emerged to collectively tackle *flygsandsfalten*, the phenomenon of flying sand. Halland's agricultural society, Hushållningssällskapet Halland, was put in place for this reason, and its members are acutely aware of the unwanted sand's binding history.³



Sand dune stabilisation efforts by Halland county. Hallands Konstmuseum, Stadsbibliotekets bildsamling.

At that time, beach shores were rather coveted for their rich deposits of seaweed, used as fertiliser for the crops. So much so, that specific coastal areas and times were allocated to farmers for its harvesting. Seaweed was a prized resource, which began to change with the medicalisation of the coast, the import of Guano, and eventually the production of phosphate based industrial fertiliser.

CIRCULATION AND INFECTION

In much of late 19th century Europe, once cholera was shown by Dr John Snow to be transmitted by water (from a public pump in Soho), and tuberculosis attributed to polluted air, the search for fresh air and water to cure ailments propelled populations with sufficient resources to venture to the disaffected coasts. In Sweden, and notably in Varberg, a coastal city of Halland, state run sanitoriums were introduced. The Varberg Kustsanatoriet namely welcomed children with tuberculosis (TBC) from across Sweden. The Halland Cultural Museum archive in Varberg bears witness to the multitude of ailments, and devastating properties of the disease. Some of the children were cured, and returned home, others lay in the nearby cemetery. The archive also hosts visual documentation of collective exercise treatments performed on the nearby beaches.



Barrier for sand dune stabilisation in Tylösand (Halland county). Stadsbibliotekets bildsamling, Halmstad.

Along with ideas of infection through air and water circulation, the medical discipline in Sweden was beginning to incorporate body movement and the importance of blood circulation through the teachings of Per Henrik Ling. Ling's son later dubbed it "the Movement cure", which became the title of the book published in 1852 by an ambassador of Ling's methods, August Georgii.

This concept has of course been present in numerous other medical traditions, and cosmogonies out-

side of Europe. Traditional Chinese Medicine and Hinduism being obvious examples. It was most likely also present within Europe before the Enlightenment disavowed traditional knowledge as witchcraft. However at that time, circulation was a notion used to describe “enlightened activity and enterprise” in Europe.⁴ This invigorating circulation of European Civilisation was posited in contradistinction with the Orient’s indolence where despotism reigned.

The benefits of circulation were therefore not Ling’s discovery. He is however credited to building on this tradition through a series of exercise movements. Allegedly, young Per was of fragile conjuncture, and discovered that fencing, or the movement of the body when practicing fencing, helped to restore his health. With his newfound strength, he began to create the choreography of movements that is now known as Ling exercise.

WESTERN MEDICAL MODERNITY

Ling’s son published his father’s teachings and is greatly responsible for disseminating the ‘Movement cure’ across parts of Europe, first through metropolises such as Paris and London.⁵ By the 1880s, French and British medical societies were brought to Stockholm on official tours to better understand Ling’s method and ensure its dissemination.⁶ A particularity of Ling’s ‘cure’, is that it combined massage and movement exercises. Both were understood as working together, which is now commonly known as physiotherapy. Often professional sport players receive massages to help release muscle pain for example. And though this has been accepted into the “Western” medical tradition, its introduction was fraught. Namely because it simultaneously destabilised and reified gender roles in the profession, while also affording women’s entry into the labour force.

The establishment of the practice across Europe led to the professionalisation of *masseurs/masseuses* through vocational training institutions (in France) and the establishment of official societies (in England).⁷ Nonetheless, the massage was considered as subjugate to the doctor’s knowledge and field of expertise. In France, this materialised as the division between orthopaedics, reserved for physicians, and massage for nurses. This is a hierarchy still present today, manifest in years of education and salary expectation difference between a physician and a physiotherapist. Physiotherapy is not considered a specialism, such as ophthalmology, but rather a paramedical profession. As the discipline emerged, the massage component was usually taught to nurses, who should perform the “woman’s work” of care. It wasn’t long before the woman’s work was associated with disguised prostitution, and the attempt to de-legitimise their expertise was widespread.

Women ultimately remained in the medical field even if their role was defined as a support role to



Gymnastics with patients at the small beach of Apelviken. Photograph by Mathilda Ranch, 1920-29. Hallands kulturhistoriska museum, F2488.



Interior from Kustsanatoriet Apelviken in 1905. Hospital in the old wooden pavilion. A group and staff stand by the wall. Sunlight was important so the building had large windows, even in the gable. Unknown photographer. Hallands kulturhistoriska museum, F2517.



Depiction of Swedish home gymnastics according to P.H. Ling's system, portrayed here one of the movements. The directions read: "Raise and lower your arms with your fingers spread". Page from *Schwedische Haus-Gymnastik nach dem System P.H. Ling's*, Theodor Bergquist, Wörishofen, 1913.

the physician. It is these nurses which led children to the beach each day, to stretch, move, and breathe the salty seaweed infused air.

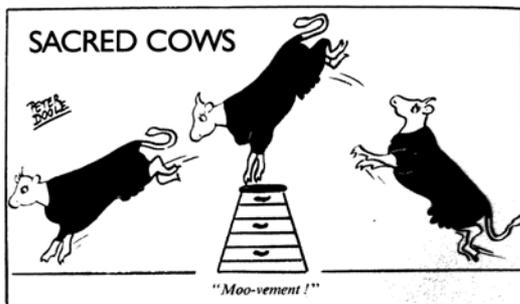
As the Swedish state was erecting sanatoriums for the sickly, a wider and more lucrative industry was also establishing itself. Earlier, the Swedish upper crust also vacationed in Varberg, and visited *varmbadhus* for special treatments, such as the infamous *tångbad* (seaweed treatment), and lavish socialite gatherings in the *Societetshuset*.⁸ It should be noted that the sanatorium was built slightly further south along the coast, maintaining a social distance between classes.

Medical modernity, with its impetus to universalise, was busy defining the modern healthy body. After Ling's exercises had been implemented in military and Olympic training, it was disseminated to the work force, and into the private home.

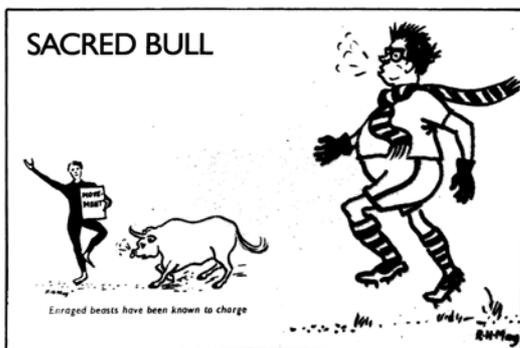
It was distinctly ableist and normative. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it became fodder for Germany's National Socialist party to develop its ideology of the perfect human, a subset of the superior race which would validate the extermination of others.

While reminiscent of Greek mythos, these bodies were violently reifying an ideal of the white supremacist. Its own impossibility, and what must be the failure and dismantling of this fascist ideology, permeates these bodies *and the sand upon which they stood*.

The Movement — Anti-Movement controversy



19. *The Leaflet*, December 1968



20. *The Leaflet*, January-February, 1969

After this appropriation, intensified by the uncomfortable gaze of the 1936 Olympics, the Ling tradition began to fall out of common parlance. Its principals had however by then been incorporated into medical science, military training and workplace routines. In parallel, as TBC was mostly eradicated from Sweden and Europe, sanatoriums, which had also been used to treat polio for a time after the war, were emptying, and with it a changing responsibility of care by the state.

WELLNESS

The medicalisation of the coast also ushered its commodification, offering the shoreline as a site of extraction, now operating under the umbrella of the wellness industry. In 1969, the institution's name was officially changed to the *Apelviken Hospital*, echoing a broader international shift from sanatoriums to hospitals. The state-run institution was ultimately closed in 1976. It remained closed until the late 80s when it was leased to the newly formed *Varbergs Kurort AB* which developed the area into a private wellness centre. The *Varberg Kusthotell*, now owned by the Danish hotel chain *Comwell*, repurposed the former sanatorium edifice. The spa hotel offers a number of packages, namely the seaweed treatment, performed in the "traditional way":

20th Century misogynist sentiment in England catalysed in a campaign called 'Anti-movement cure'. *The Leaflet*, [top] *Sacred Cows*, 1968 [bottom] *Sacred Bull*, 1969, reprinted in Sheila Fletcher, *Women first: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education 1880-1980*, London: Athlone, 1984.

20-minute treatment: SEK 425
 30-minute treatment: SEK 525

Mise à part the welfare exception which offered long-term treatment for the less fortunate, a blip in coastal history, the treatments provided to children with TBC in the Apelviken Sanatorium have mostly been a luxury for the few.

The wellness culture that fuels this industry, and its desire to further enclose the coasts, has also been linked to the spreading of right wing and alt-right anti-vaxxer propaganda, an unholy alliance that has been termed *conspiritoriality*. Reminiscent of the eugenic discourse mobilised by the third Reich, the prevalent argument disseminated by the wellness figures that are supported by known alt-right hubs is that the healthy body, if one cares for one’s self, will not be vulnerable to the coronavirus. A sleight of hand placing the onus of care onto the individual, and the condition of vulnerability, or so-called “pre-existing conditions”, rationalised by genetic determinism.

Main accounts identified in the dissemination of conspiritoriality on social media belonging to wellness gurus such as:

1. David Wolfe (verified)
2. Zach Bush
3. Ben Lynch
4. Global Healing
5. Wellness Force
6. ANH International
7. Bruce H. Lipton, Ph.D. (verified)
8. Dr. Joseph Mercola (verified)
9. Erin Elizabeth
10. Organic Consumers Association (verified)⁹

In Sweden, Dr Sanna Ehdin has been a significant disseminator of anti-vaxxer rhetoric while promoting wellness in various forms. She is supported by the World Freedom Alliance, a well established international anti-vax hub linked to alt-right groups.

The sand blows.

Over time, the coast has wavered between the monstrous and the desirable, its geography as mutable as its alliances. As toxic wellness emerges, further enclosing the coastline, we can feel the low pressure system forming over the Kattegat. A sandstorm is gathering momentum.



Seaweed bath treatment at Varbergs kurort.
 Varbergs kurort, landets enda saltvattenkurort. Varberg: Kurortskontoret, 1971.

PRISLISTA

Varmbad med tånggnidning och dusch	10: —
Hyliko-salt-bad med tånggnidning	11: —
Gyttje- eller tvålmassagebad	15: —
Oljemassagebad	17: —
Tallbarrsbad	11: —
Slaminpackning med tångbad	14: —
Melassbad	13: —
Bastu- och simhallsbad	3: 50
Bastu- och simhallsbad (barn under 10 år)	2: —
Kvartslampa	2: —
För simhall och bastu tillkommer 1 kr. för linne.	
I övriga priser ingår linne.	
SJUKGYMNASTISKA BEHANDLINGAR:	
Rörelsebehandling och massage	18: —
Rörelsebehandling i varmvattenbassäng	5: —
Kortvåg och diatermi	8: —



Treatment price list in 1971.
 Varbergs kurort, landets enda saltvattenkurort. Varberg: Kurortskontoret, 1971.



Morning gymnastics with Bertil Uggla.
Morgongymnastik med Bertil Uggla, 1934. Image from the archives of SVT.



Office gymnastics.
Kontorsgymnastik, Sveriges Television, 1945. Image from the archives of SVT.

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- 1 Bidrag till Sveriges officiella statistik 1890, quoted in Eurenius, Anna-Maria. "A family affair: Evidence of chain migration during the mass emigration from the county of Halland in Sweden to the United States in the 1890s." *Population studies* 74, no. 1 (2020), 106.
- 2 Ljungmark, Lars. *Swedish Exodus*. Translated by Kermit B. Westerberg. Chicago: Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 2008 (1979), 47.
- 3 Hägge, Eric. *Fattiglänet blir bördig bygd: Hallands läns Hushållningssällskap 1812–1962*, Halmstad: Hushållningssällskapet, 1962, 177–181.
- 4 Rabinow, Paul. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 33.
- 5 *Kinésithérapie ou Traitement des Maladies par le Mouvement* was published in Paris in 1847, and *A Few Words on Kinesipathy, or Swedish Medical Gymnastics* was published in London in 1848.
- 6 Quin, Grégory. "The Rise of Massage and Medical Gymnastics in London and Paris before the First World War." *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 34, no. 1 (2017), 207.
- 7 The Society of Trained Masseuses (created in 1894-95). For a detailed discussion about the dissemination and reception of Ling's method in Paris and London see Quin, "The Rise of Massage".
- 8 The Societetshuset was built in 1883 (now named Societén), and the sanatorium (Kustsanatoriet Apelviken) was built in 1904.
- 9 Source: Malgorithm, Center for Countering Digital Hate.