Greg Dvorak

Sweatwashing Utopia

Amid the bathscapes of Japan, the sauna, once a grimy postwar afterthought, has been reimagined as a way for younger generations to reconnect with their bodies and one another. Now they're everywhere, packed with young people chasing a shared euphoria somewhere between communal detox and low-budget theater. As towel-waving performances, influencers and entrepreneurial spectacle take over, what began as an earnest rekindling of community starts to drift into something stranger, raising a slippery question: what exactly is being sweated out, and why?

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1. Boom

I wasn't always in love with saunas. For as long as I can remember, saunas in Japan were widely regarded as neglected urban backrooms, grimy spaces attached to capsule hotels that stank of cigarettes, frequented by yakuza gangsters selling drugs and businessmen who had missed their last train. Televisions mounted on the walls blared unsettling news or cheap slapstick. The heat was irritating and dry rather than enveloping and moist, and cooling options were meager. These were not places one sought out.

Then came the revolution. Most people who identify as "saunners," as they now call us, trace our conversion to around 2019, when a new generation of saunas started proliferating in this already bath-obsessed country. In Tokyo, a broader wellness wave tied to the hype that preceded the 2020 Summer Olympics, postponed and held without spectators in 2021, fueled the renovation of aging postwar *sentō* public bathhouses. Many facilities introduced state of the art Finnish-style saunas, featuring the hot waves of humid *löyly* vapor produced by pouring water on sauna stones, offering a bodily experience worlds apart from the stinky and bone-dry heat boxes that had defined Japanese sauna culture. Cartoonist Tanaka Katsuki's manga series *Sadō* (The Way of Sauna), and its subsequent television drama adaptation, was a massive media sensation that reframed daily sauna bathing as a worthwhile pursuit, fueled by the constant quest to *totonou*, or "reset" oneself by achieving euphoria through repeated cycles of baking one's body, plunging in frigid water and blissfully basking afterwards.[1]

The sauna boom was accelerated dramatically when COVID-19 restructured everyday life. Japan, which tightly closed its borders

1. Katsuki, Tanaka, *Sadō*, Kodansha, 2016-2025. The term totonou is originally attributed to a sauna influencer known as Nurezukin-chan.

but never instituted any official lockdowns, pressured restaurants to close early, discouraged public gathering and domestic travel and urged classrooms and companies to move online. Most people carefully observed social distancing, often refraining from visiting close friends and family until long after the worst of the pandemic had abated. Throughout all of this, however, public bathing facilities remained open, having been deemed "essential infrastructure" by the government. Sentō and saunas became some of the few sanctioned places where people could still comfortably gather in the city. Shared breath felt charged and uncertain, but the continued possibility of naked, unmasked proximity and shared warmth offered a measure of repair for the loneliness of prolonged separation from loved ones. For students and young workers, whose everyday life was lived remotely, glued to a screen, saunas offered a chance to put their phones and laptops away and congregate freely in the flesh without justification.

As newer, more design-conscious saunas and bathhouses multiplied in the 2020s, young people continued to show up in huge numbers, with increasing popularity among women, though men under thirty were among the sauna boom's most visible enthusiasts. In the original *Sadō* TV series, sauna-going had been depicted largely as a coping technique for lonely middle-aged men, portrayed as escapists who sweated away their stress before inevitably returning to the smoky misery of everyday patriarchal, heteronormative constraint. This younger generation, however, sought liberation, not a continuation of the status quo. For them, the "Way of Sauna" promised not only the natural high of totonou but an easing of inherited social formality, permission to be vulnerable together with friends without the pressures of social roles or algorithmic coercion. After the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disasters had already settled the country into a long unease and pushed youth into a state of precarity, which the pandemic only intensified. For these young saunners, sweating and bathing together offered a way to build resilience in this unpredictable world, and a rehearsal for something gentler and more collective.

2. Broth

Bathing in Japan has long sat at the intersection of domestic life and public welfare. Soaking in hot baths or sweating in steam rooms are ancient practices that emphasized healing and social cohesion more than simply getting clean. Today these practices are situated at the very core of community, partly as hygiene infrastructure but more socially in terms of human dignity. In the aftermath of wars or natural disasters, communities start their recovery almost immediately by building temporary communal bathtubs before tending to other forms of comfort. Just as collective bathing affirms that a town has not been reduced to rubble after a quake or landslide, access to a soak in

warm public baths throughout the country is also guaranteed and subsidized for those without income or housing. These are not frills; here, they are the architecture of human rights.

For young people, the renewed attention to public baths, onsen and saunas during the pandemic became an assertion of this basic humanity amid crisis and isolation. The sauna boom functioned as an urgent reclamation of physicality in the face of accelerating digital disembodiment. But this was not a flight from the city or a quest for "wellness." Unlike the global sauna craze elsewhere, where hype around body optimization and elite retreats promised new horizons of self-mastery and longevity, Japan's resurgence unfolded through habits already embedded in everyday life. Here, the sauna boom grew through public, communal bathing more than private retreat. It piggybacked on sentō and onsen, on routines of shared undressing and shared water that have long structured social existence.

The appeal of these spaces is bluntly practical. They make it possible to share the largest, best-maintained forms of heat and cold together, instead of sweating or soaking alone in cramped private boxes and tubs. Across the archipelago, on any given evening, thousands upon thousands of people of all ages gather in these waters: children with their parents, exhausted workers, the elderly easing stiff joints, all sustained by spaces that remain strikingly affordable, accessible and ordinary.

In this sense, what originally drove the sauna boom in Japan was never "detox" or self-improvement, but the restoration and reclamation of something elemental within ordinary life: a way of *rewilding* the body and community at the scale of the commons. Like how conservationists rewild an ecosystem through replanting and repopulating original flora and fauna that replace invasive species, rewilding humanity does not entail sanitizing or disinfecting away that which is undesirable. The gut biome, for instance, is better healed not by antibiotics but by introducing beneficial organisms that thrive and outnumber harmful bacteria. Certainly, Japan's most austere onsens are, like rustic countryside saunas of Nordic regions, located in serene natural settings, but rewilding is not nostalgia for a literally untouched and pristine wilderness. Much of it takes place in the concrete jungles of Tokyo, Osaka, Sapporo or Fukuoka rather than at the edge of some Great Outdoors. It involves acknowledging and composting the past, repairing damaged systems and dysbiosis by restoring the ideal balance for life to flourish. It is a regeneration of the wilderness that preceded human logic and language and today's large-language models of AI—wet and primordial. As with a coral reef, assembled through accretion and diversity, rewilding is also about nurturing interdependence, allowing life in many forms to gather and grow over time.

Saunas and baths can function in much the same way, rewilding by facilitating both social and biological nourishment. While,

admittedly, they can also be problematic sites of discrimination or surveillance, they are often romanticized as harmonious sites where people learn to appreciate difference and closeness without conflict. It is no wonder that Finns often describe the sauna as a space of frankness conducive even to international diplomacy, or that Japan's sentō have long been framed as cultivating community cohesion. Here, aside from just being a place to wash oneself, the bath is seen as a space that fosters *hadaka no tsukiai*, or "naked relations," the unvarnished, platonic intimacy and transparency achievable when together with friends, literally unfettered by the pretense and inequality of clothing. Similarly, postwar Japanese psychologists have long urged parents to bathe with their children to foster "skinship," a word coined to emphasize the value of shared warmth and physical contact that builds trust and connection.

If there were a culinary analogy here, it would be broth. Collective bathing works less like a cleanse than like a slow simmer, where balance and resilience emerge through shared heat and contact with the elements. Our sweat mixes with the sweat of strangers. We return, however briefly, to the honest humility of being carbon-based lifeforms evolved on a water planet, steeping together until the self becomes soluble. Nothing is stripped away; everything mingles, merging into a subtle and complex human soup.

Gross as that might seem for many of us to contemplate in our overly sanitized world, my point here is not merely metaphorical but also material, because communal bathwater is a living fluid reminiscent of both womb and ocean: sweat, salts, nutrients, pheromones, skin oils, microbes, dissolved minerals and sloughed traces of flesh circulating through heat and time, slowly stewing bodies into relation. To think of bathwater as broth is to understand soaking as a cultural and biological practice that acknowledges permeability without confusing mixture for harmony and sameness. In mineral springs like onsen, this broth thickens geologically, carrying sulfur, iron, silicates, and traces of organic matter such as peat, binding human flesh to soil and deep strata. Modern public health infrastructure may regulate this bodily commingling through filtration and chlorine, but it cannot fully prevent the immersive and collective rewilding that we may unconsciously be seeking.

In Japanese homes, family members share nightly bathwater, thought to become more mellow and hospitable as it is "seasoned" through the successive soaking done by grandparents, houseguests, parents and siblings. Rewilding thus begins in the domestic sphere, reaffirming nature and building resilience by marinating in the same broth, surrendering to something beyond one's own body.

In gender-segregated public bathing spaces, however, it is in the men's bath where the impact of the sauna boom upon these

watery commons is most apparent. On a typical winter weeknight on the male-only side of a massive suburban super sentō I often visit outside Tokyo, the six baths and three saunas are packed with no fewer than 250 men, nearly all of them under thirty. In a setting where same-sex nudity is generally treated as unremarkable, groups of four or five university-age boys routinely squeeze themselves into hot spring tubs designed for one person, chatting and laughing with shoulders pressed together and knees overlapping, seemingly drawn toward the pleasure of occupying the same small pocket of heat. Bodies that spent the pandemic buffered from one another by screens, masks and distance now gather almost extravagantly close, accumulating into a dense, fleshy social mass. It is a scene that suggests a collective appetite for proximity, a small act of rewilding in which boundaries between bodies matter, for a while, a little less.

3. Bravado

It wasn't long after the sauna boom had already been absorbed into everyday public bathing culture here that an exotic new word entered my awareness: *aufu-guusu*. This, I would learn, was a Japanese pronunciation of the German-inspired sauna ritual of *Aufguss*, meaning "infusion"—an elaboration on the Finnish culture of pouring water onto heated stones to generate löyly (steam) into a structured performance by a sauna master who circulates heat and scented vapor through expert towel-waving techniques. Under the name *neppa* (literally "heat waving"), a similar practice had already existed for decades on the margins of the Japanese sauna industry, albeit an unglamorous task typically handled rather begrudgingly by older men wielding oversized cardboard fans to coax extra steam from a mediocre sauna. But young saunners began elevating this background duty into a named role, imbued with technique and authority. Calling themselves *aufugīsā*, after the German *Aufgießer*, they recast an incidental maneuver as an art form demanding mastery and distinction.

In the early years of the pandemic, aufguss sessions still functioned as little more than the manual adjustment of steam and humidity, often set to soothing music and guided by intuition. They were unscripted, driven less by flourish than by a few well-placed towel movements and a palpable sense of obligation to the room. Those who gathered were usually just bathers who wandered into the sauna without any expectations. There were also those depressed or lonesome customers who began to see aufguss as a form of group communion and cathartic release. As one aufugīsā explained to me, quite earnestly, "Customers entrust their lives to me," likening their role to that of a therapist and describing how often people broke into tears as sweat dislodged grief that had nowhere else to go.

This was also a period of playful and creative experimentation, when practitioners tried hybridizing or Japanizing their rituals in unique, rather DIY ways. One practitioner, for instance, fused Baltic and Germanic healing practices with Japanese heritage, producing something calming and faintly uncanny. Wearing a "traditional" Bavarian-Alpine kilt that looked conspicuously out of place in Tokyo, he moved with restraint, drizzling water onto the stones with the careful posture of a tea ceremony master—right forearm braced by the left, ladle turned slowly between thumb and forefinger. Steam rose as he worked towels and birch or red oak whisks through the air, employing classic gestures that echoed a ritual *kagura* dance performed with sacred branches. The emphasis seemed not on entertainment but on rewilding the room.



That attentiveness, however, proved difficult to sustain once the global health emergency receded. As the pandemic waned, the small, improvised culture of care that had formed around aufguss during those anxious years was increasingly absorbed into a different logic. Sauna entrepreneurship was recast as a speculative opportunity, promoted as the next guaranteed startup trend. New sauna facilities sprang up almost overnight, some of them exquisitely designed and executed, others shoddily built and barely meeting the minimum licensing requirements, run by profit-obsessed charlatans with no grounding in the

basics of the public bathing business. What had emerged through care, improvisation and necessity now found itself thrust into a Wild West of rapid expansion, visibility and quick returns.

With this hype, aufguss sessions became increasingly performative and surreal, sometimes even annoying, as more props and costumes were introduced. I was terrified when a boy with runny face paint dressed up as the Joker burst into a relaxing sauna session unannounced, accompanied by red flashing lights and police siren sound effects, mischievously hurling ice cubes into the crowd. In a subsequent session elsewhere, I suffered abuse at the hands of a tiger-masked dominatrix who took orders for how many blasts of hot air people wanted and then delivered torture via an industrial leaf blower as if wielding an AK-47.

Concerned by these potentially dangerous practices, prominent figures in Japan's sauna world attempted to reign in these mediated heat sessions by advocating standardization, promoting training and small competitions judged on the basis of compliance with established safer practices. But this, in turn, also ushered in a new economy of certification and entrepreneurial opportunism. Around new saunas gathered a cast of consultants, influencers and credentialed experts. In this environment, aufguss proved especially easy to commodify: its gestures and affects could be mastered and sold, converting an improvised practice of collective caretaking into a legible, market-ready form.

A YouTube-savvy cohort followed, learning not only choreographed toweling from self-appointed global masters but also how to turn themselves into movable assets. This was perfected into a technique, evolving into a competitive circuit of so-called "show aufguss" shaped by the logic of platform labor. At some point, the modest act of pushing hot air around began to look like a budget run of *Disney on Ice*: a gig economy of stage names, fandoms and touring appearances. Young performers became mascots of their home saunas, dispatched to other bathhouses as guest stars, and troupes traveled like itinerant circus performers dragging behind them suitcases full of towels, oils, playlists and costumes. For some—failed pop idols, bit-part actors in search of a second act—aufguss offered a big break. This shift was neither imposed nor entirely unwelcome, as it drew crowds and revived struggling saunas, and in that sense it worked.

The formalization of this logic was laid out with striking bluntness in a 2021 handbook by blogger Saunner Yomogida.[2] Written as a manual, the book openly advocates the transformation of aufguss into a proper Japanese vocation structured by technique and profitability. The author frames this shift through cultural essentialism: Germans are competitive and sport-like, he says, while Japanese naturally love ceremony and codified form. Aufguss becomes a market-driven controlled service, with ritual

2. Yomogita, Saunner, *Neppashi no Shigoto no Ryugi (Rules for Heat Workers)*, Paru Shuppan, 2021

language used to legitimize competition and the monetization of human perspiration.

Competition dynamics truly took hold when Japan was inducted into the Aufguss World Championship in 2022, and a Japanese duo from Nagoya even won the following year. For many aspiring towel-wavers, this evolved into a serious and heroic battle to partake in the Olympiad of the sauna world—to be able to boast of worldwide recognition on behalf of the nation. This entailed regional qualifiers, national finals and then days of face-offs in large and blistering "sauna theaters" rigged up with lights and audio systems, scored mainly by international judges against competitors from seventeen aufguss nations. Finland is conspicuously absent from this forum. There, sauna traditionalists regard aufguss in any form as a grotesque distortion of sauna culture itself, one Finnish expert even describing it to me as "a cancer."

While it is not my intention here to echo Finnish purist critiques, it is hard to deny that these witty routines have grown steadily more outlandish, although they demand athletic skill and stamina, for sure. At the 2025 all-Japan national aufguss championship held in Yokohama, I sweated through a skit in which two competitors performed the story of the Wright brothers, decked out in suspenders as they literally constructed the plywood skeleton of a biplane directly over the sauna stove. Its twin wings hovered in the heat as their towel work intensified, snapping and circling in tight, propeller-like arcs that made the frame appear to spin and lift. Tree-resin-scented water was poured from fake oil canisters as if lubricating not just gears but the fragrant steam itself, briefly converting the sauna into an aircraft in motion.

A year prior, the Steam Twins—Shakeyama Minami and Goto Netsuko, winners of the 2024 all-Japan championship—had emerged as early standard-bearers of Japan's international aufguss circuit by pushing sauna sentimentality to its breaking point at that year's global competition in the Netherlands, where they placed fourth. Their sauna-scale reenactment of *The Miracle Worker* unfolded in full costume under punishing heat before an undressed audience, with Shakeyama playing Helen Keller and never breaking character as she stumbled around the stove, Goto at her side as Anne Sullivan. Their tandem towel work was executed with flawless precision, dispensing heat in scripted waves of pulls, tosses and releases. The most memorable moment arrived when lemon and petitgrain-infused water was poured onto the hot rocks from a teddy bear beneath a swelling soundtrack, unleashing a hot blast of citrus scent timed to climax with the maudlin tune "You Raise Me Up." Their technique was masterful, though the overall effect was more than a little unsettling.

It matters that little of this contemporary aufguss culture is

uniquely Japanese. European "Zeremonie" and various competitive campy skits inside saunas can be just as peculiar: Orientalist incense and gongs, live violinists and light shows, and, once in Berlin, a stern and insistent command by one gruff sauna Meister to smear honey all over my naked body between blasts of heat timed to techno music, a fellow enthusiast urgently whispering to me, "Careful! It stings if it gets in your eyes!"

In places like Munich, Bolzano, Zurich, Copenhagen, Oslo and Brooklyn, however, sauna entertainment is confined to expensive day spas, alpine wellness resorts or boutique facilities. Contrast this with Japan, where one can spend pocket change and stumble into these amateur vaudeville acts by accident at a roadside public bathhouse while simply trying to warm up in the dead of winter. Even unaccompanied children often stop by these baths and saunas on their way home from school after sports practice. That accessibility is part of the scene's peculiar charm, but its sheer ubiquity also makes it difficult to ignore.

4. Baggage

Utopian projects often surface when the world feels hardest to live in, and people begin seeking hope and shelter in places that do not depend on politics or institutions. Again and again, when social systems buckle, attention turns toward the body. It becomes one of the few places where change still feels possible and a person can recover some sense of agency.

In the late Roman Empire, ritualized bathing and purification flourished alongside political instability and plague. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, naturist and nudist reform movements emerged in response to industrial alienation, mechanization and authoritarian nationalism. Between the wars, utopian body-culture projects spread in Germany, Scandinavia and parts of Japan, shaped by anxieties about bodily "degeneration," modernity and fragile notions of national strength. These movements were deeply woven into how societies imagined health, morality and survival during periods of crisis.

In our present moment, economic instability, climate catastrophe, resurgent authoritarianism, the erosion of social trust and the rapid incursion of artificial intelligence into labor and intimacy have converged into a pervasive sense of uncertainty. This is one reason the sauna boom in Japan has mattered so deeply for many younger people. It offered an embodied way back into shared humanity, touch, presence and a sense of wild freedom that keeps feeling increasingly out of reach.

Yet this promise quickly begins to fold back on itself as sauna culture is increasingly repackaged as an attraction and investment opportunity. The sauna boom feeds big business

trends: big money for sauna investors and showrunners, branded experiences and real estate developers building "nature" as an amenity. Wellness culture is increasingly delivered through the very destructive forms of capitalism that made us crave it and helped make the world feel uninhabitable to begin with. On a global scale, too, the cruel irony of climate colonialism is that while the North burns more fossil fuels to indulge its love of saunas, the South is subjected to an unwanted planetary sauna not of its own making.

Another visible expression of this new body-centered utopianism can be seen in how the sauna boom has unfolded alongside weightlifting culture and the rapid normalization of hair removal services among young men. In these spaces, the sauna increasingly functions as a site of comparison and calibration, where bodies are observed, measured and aligned with emerging ideals, rather than a space where all coexist without scrutiny. A slogan I recently encountered in a public bath promotion by a men's hair removal company—"the sauna high feels better when you're smooth"—is revealing. Hairlessness is framed not simply as an aesthetic preference, but as a form of bodily enhancement, even moral refinement. The wild is smoothed away, along with age and animality. In their place emerges a boyish body that is nubile, pliant, disciplined and eternally young.

This turn toward polished, controllable bodies is not difficult to understand. For many young men, it offers a sense of coherence and mastery at a moment when social, economic and political structures provide little stability. Yet this pursuit carries risks. It slides easily into older ideologies, where bodily perfection becomes evidence of virtue, fitness stands in for worth and regulatory systems metastasize into rank and order—sometimes moral, sometimes national, potentially racial.

For all the potential that bathing cultures and saunas have to revitalize humanity, nourish peace and bring everyone together around the common good, there is also the seductive but dangerous symbolism of eradicating the unwanted that accompanies certain utopian ideas of detox, purification and cleaning. Sweatwashing away the inconvenient complexities of humanity is the opposite of what I mean by rewilding, whereby society is sanitized and amnesia displaces historical reckoning, making the present feel sufficient as the past recedes into steam. One need not look far to see how such logics of bodily and social purity have been mobilized before, and around sauna culture specifically.

Finnish sauna historian Tuomo Särkikoski has traced how Nazi leadership explicitly appropriated and theorized the sauna as a technology of eugenic hygiene, social exclusion and national renewal.[3] In Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Olympia*, Aryan athletes appear sweating, naked and slippery in a lengthy sauna

3. Särkikoski, Tuomo, *Kiukaan kutsu ja löylyn lumo: suomalaisen saunomisen vuosikymmeniä* (The Call of the Stove and the Spell of the Steam: Decades of Finnish Sauna Practices), Finnish Sauna Society, 2012, p. 133-142

scene, beating each other in the steam with birch whisks and leaping into a lake. The sauna, appropriated from Finland, becomes a stage for the sculpted body, stripped and honed for sport, offered as proof of vitality. Nakedness is framed as an ideology of perfection and superiority. The body becomes manifesto. These histories are easily overlooked as European forms of sauna circulate in Japan, where a long-standing admiration for German discipline and form absorbs these aesthetics as legitimacy, and Teutonic order arrives marked as "proper."

At the same time, Japan also has its own longstanding nationalist myths of purity and cleanliness. As Kawabata Miki has argued, the very idea of Japanese people soaking in a bath each night and being a population obsessed with cleanliness is in fact a narrative derived from Japan's Meiji period of modernization in the late 1800s, which itself drew heavily on European medical and moralistic notions of public hygiene in its formulation of equating disciplined bathing routines with patriotic duty.[4] This ideology was projected upon the populations Japan colonized in its decades of imperial expansion, eugenically branding Japanese as the purest and cleanest of all races to the exclusion of dirty, inferior Others. The prewar discourse of kokutai, defined as the "national polity," lent itself to imagining the nation itself as a body—in which fit, young, obedient, perfected bodies were cultivated as instruments of the empire.

4. Kawabata Miki, *Furo to Aikoku: "Seiketsu na Kokumin" wa Ikani Umaretaka (The Bath and Patriotism: How "Clean Citizens" Were Born)*, NHK Shuppan Shinsho, 2024.

Purifying and strengthening the body were never outside politics; they were practices, often tied to religious doctrine, through which young men were groomed for sacrifice in battle. Japanese soldiers bathed obsessively before and during their participation in World War II, often taking commemorative photographs that foregrounded naked camaraderie and innocence, preceding the fighting and death that followed. Archives of picture postcards show grinning nude army battalions, crews of sailors and pilots at the front. Bathing functioned at once as collective tenderness and as heroic submission to the state. How might today's youthful return to bathing, intimacy and rewilded masculinity be co-opted once more by systems that translate such vulnerability into readiness for the next war?

These histories are too easily sweatwashed into managed pleasure in the present. Japan's imperial projects were not only ideological but infrastructural, and bathing and sweating as cultivated pleasures were long woven directly into settler-colonial expansion, extractive systems and the remaking of land and bodies in the name of civilization. Onsen development and water management cast long colonial shadows: mining for water in Korea and Taiwan, displacement, resource extraction. Even within contemporary Japan, in places like Hokkaido, where sacred Ainu volcanic springs were reappropriated under settler governance and tourism, those who get to rename, possess and profit from nature are not the Indigenous custodians of that

land. The joys of bathing sometimes sit atop dark histories of dispossession.

It was in this imperial context that, during the American invasion of Japanese-held territory in the Marshall Islands, a Japanese soldier was once found alive in a bathtub amid the wreckage of his barracks. That bath itself had been carved out of Marshallese Native land, part of the infrastructure of colonial occupation that transformed atoll environments into militarized space. The soldier later explained to his captors that if he were to die, at least he might as well do so in the comfort of hot water.[5] The bath appears here as refuge, as last sanctuary, as the final private ritual available inside a fully militarized world. Bathing travels as comfort and as power, tenderness and discipline, solace and dispossession, all at once.

5. Dvorak, Greg, *Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2018, p. 163

The dangers of sweatwashing our current reality sharpen in the present moment as new forms of authoritarianism, nativism and furious militarist violence gather momentum. In Japan, a historical revisionist nationalist movement has emerged that borrows the language of purity without naming it explicitly. The rising right-wing populist party Sanseitō—openly xenophobic, deeply nativist and somewhat New Agey in its call for Japanese to return to "tradition" and become "naturally Japanese," separate from foreign contamination—frequently espouses the rhetoric of "the organic" as if casting a spell. Natural immunity. Pure soil. Self-reliance. These are no longer merely innocent lifestyle claims. They function as political instruments that, when rebranded into wellness culture, carry ominous historical and ideological baggage.

During the brutally hot summer of 2025, Sanseitō released a bizarre campaign video on X (since deleted) featuring a stoic aufguss ritual conducted outdoors by party supporters in broad daylight. In it, a masked, white-gloved man waves a large white towel through the familiar motions conducted normally in a sauna, moving methodically down two orderly rows of orange-clad politicians standing at attention like cadets reporting for duty. The towel, in this context, begins to look like a flag, rendering the entire choreography uncanny in its explicit fusion of nationalist benediction and perspiration. Hygiene is staged as ceremonial spectacle, racialized purification performed through discipline in service of today's version of the "national body."

5. Butterflies

My critique of sweatwashing is not meant to suggest, absurdly, that saunas and baths in Japan, much less elsewhere, are merely ideological machines or fascist contraptions. Quite the contrary, they are among the most egalitarian spaces anywhere. Many new saunas are fascinatingly innovative; others are strikingly beautiful; and excellent aufguss can be both deeply therapeutic

and delightfully entertaining.

What troubles me is not aufguss itself, but the ease with which ecosystems of care can be repurposed into something far less generous: nationalistic body projects, luxury wellness economies, churches of guru worship, biohacking fantasies of eternal youth and escapes from collective responsibility, all sold as opiates for the masses to bliss us out while the world burns.

While the naked neighborhood of bathing and collective sweating in Japan has long provided a commons free from hierarchy, ironically it would seem that aufguss has taken deep root in Japan precisely *because* it offers structure, hierarchy and visible mastery in an otherwise unstable world. Someone leads, knows, teaches, entertains. The promise of a "return to nature" is made tangible through external guided choreography and expertise rather than something intuitive and internal. In the raw sauna, people self-regulate, leaving when they need to and only returning when they are ready and willing. When aufguss becomes the main objective of sauna-going, time is measured and segmented, and endurance becomes a moral test, a leader deciding the arc. Even if, for safety reasons, participants are warned to leave as soon as they feel uncomfortable, that is more easily said than done in the middle of a show, seated in the back of the crowd.

The point, then, is not to abandon the sauna and bath to their most cynical uses, but to stay mindful of their potential to bring us back to fire, water, breath, skin—to restore the sensations that modern life dulls, returning us through sweating and soaking to our briny origins, in a time when rewilding is urgently needed more than ever. Human soup is not unlike what entomologists call "imaginal soup," the liminal state in which the caterpillar's body breaks down before reconstituting itself. Here, too, there is warmth, moisture and a loosening of form: identities and egos dissolving as bodies share space, individuality easing just enough for something else to begin.

Neither soaking in the communal bath nor gathering around the sauna hearth are about making us clean. They invite us into this soupy shared state of dissolution and what it makes possible, turning us back toward the larger systems we are part of. Soup offers no script to follow and no future to master—only the shared work of rewilding the reality of being human now, naked and imperfect, learning once more how to inhabit our bodies and this warming world with one another still in view. We emerge lighter, easier, gentler, freer—butterflies who embody a renewed sense of our shared planetary existence as we move back out into the world.



BIO

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