Decluttering the Pandemic: Marie Kondo, Minimalism, and the “Joy” of Waste

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Abstract
Born largely from discourses on environmental sustainability, the contemporary minimalist movement has produced a new relationship to consumer objects. Where the accumulation of objects once conferred the status of wealth and prosperity under capitalism, minimalism aims to rethink the object as a spiritual extension of our inner lives. This is nowhere as evident than in the writing of Marie Kondo, whose teachings on “joyous” decluttering has enraptured a new class of consumers. Yet, for as much as contemporary thinking on minimalism figures in the image of eco-conscious neo-spirituality, this essay aims to demonstrate the relationship of minimalism to waste. For as much as the decluttering of our private spaces signals to the values of self-control and discipline, it also inadvertently intensifies a relationship to objects in which things that fail to “spark joy” become consigned to the garbage dumps and landfills that today swell with the abject accumulation of consumer society. For as much as the fashion of minimalism gestures to the aspirations of anti-consumerism, it is concomitantly the positive condition upon which the overflowing possessions of a Western consumer class are fated to become trash.

Keywords
consumption, decluttering, pandemic, minimalism, abject, waste, joy, object relations, object ontology, new materialism, Anthropocene, Capitalocene

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, minimalism was having yet another cultural moment, as evidenced by the growing popularity of blogs, podcasts, books, magazines, and documentaries focused on tiny houses, decluttering, simplicity, “vanlife,” the digital nomad lifestyle, and the like. A 2018 survey found that although most Americans (65%) have no desire to be or become minimalists, 10% stated they already think of themselves as minimalists, and the remaining 25% strive to become minimalist, meaning that one in four U.S. adults are or hope to become minimalists (Augustine, 2018). What minimalism actually means to the people surveyed, or more generally as the idea circulates through media and is taken up in practice, is difficult to discern, as the idea is ripe for commodification, and even a cursory glance at many of the current “minimalist” trends—many of which are for sale through books, magazines, or speaking tours—indicates the extent to which, as New York Times’s Columnist David Pogue (2006) declared, “Simplicity Sells!” While seemingly counter-intuitive, the fashions of minimalism and the philosophies of such champions as Marie Kondo have only buttressed consumer practices of waste and abjection. For endemic to the disposition of the contemporary minimalism movement is a commitment to decluttering that today intensifies the ecological burden of landfills and dumps across the world. Corollary to the ecological consequences of decluttering, contemporary minimalism forges a renewed relationship to consumer objects that postulates the value of “things” according to their interest “for-us.” While this orientation ostensibly aligns with eco-conscious calls for the reduction of consumption, we seek in this essay to show how it nevertheless remits the world of objects to “popular taste” and intensifies the consumption of boutique products of the minimalist lifestyle.

Decluttering in the Pandemic
For at least some portion of the population, this minimalist trend has continued and even expanded during the pandemic. As Jura Koncius (2020) stated in a recent Washington Post article, “Not since the January 2019 purging tsunami inspired by Marie Kondo’s tidying Netflix series have Americans been so inspired to edit the junk out of their

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homes” (para. 3). Since the start of the pandemic, news and social media have published and circulated articles extolling the benefits of minimalism amid the stress of the pandemic, praising the move toward buying less and starting “pandemic gardens,” and documenting the “great declutter” of 2020. In the May 2020 BuzzFeed article titled, “I Don’t Feel Like Buying Stuff Anymore,” Anne Helen Peterson (Peterson, 2020), writing during an early pandemic lockdown, states that pre-pandemic, Americans had been taught “to buy often, buy cheap, and buy a lot” (para. 4). She traces this consumptive pedagogy and explores how buying has been synonymous with “patriotism” in the United States for decades; Americans have learned this lesson well, as they have bought and overspent their ways into startling personal debt, which further exacerbates and increases income inequality. She argues that the pandemic, however, has revealed just how flawed this arrangement has always been. She states that the economic collapse accompanying the pandemic “is so vast, so all-encompassing, that no amount of presidential rhetoric, no calls for patriotic mass consumption, can conceal it. The illusion has been shattered” (para. 38). Peterson claims that Americans are now changing their consumptive practices “because we’re scared for the economic future and concerned for the workers who make buying things possible, but we’re also buying less because the actual act of purchasing—at least in person—is a risk” (para. 38). Although shopping during the pandemic did not end, it definitely shifted toward things that offered people “an experience: a way to create something or otherwise distract themselves” (para. 40). People (and, to be clear, she is talking about middle class people) bought “cooking and bartending implements, craft supplies, mini trampolines, gardening tools, Pelotons” (para. 40). Although purchasing such lifestyle products does not equate to “minimalism” (and in fact one could argue that this is just another form of overconsumption or materialism), the thrust behind so much of this kind of pandemic spending certainly echoes the kind of sentiments minimalist lifestyle gurus call for, as they encourage us to be less materialistic and less concerned about buying something, but, instead, to be more invested in “making something, growing something, mastering something, or weeding something” (para. 40). In addition to documenting the increase in this kind of “hobbies” purchasing, Peterson also tracks the growth in the use of “Buy Nothing Groups” during the pandemic, and the growing sentiment among people to simply find

a deep appreciation for all that they do have—the marvelous comfort of a bed or a fuzzy blanket, a small and sunny corner with houseplants you check on every day, a pile of books arranged just so—that just feel right and yours. But the things you chose, instead of just accumulated, become all the more cherished. (para. 45)

Thousands of other popular press and news articles have been published in the last 18 months exploring how the pandemic has fostered a move toward minimalism, including articles with titles such as “The Great Decluttering of 2020: The Pandemic Has Inspired a Cleanout of American Homes” (Koncius, 2020); “How Lockdown Sparked a Shift in Minimalist Values” (Canvas8, 2020); “More, or Less? Minimalism as Avenue to Bliss for Many Amid Pandemic” (Woods, 2021); and “COVID-19 Killed Maximalism” (Segran, 2021). And in April 2021, the 2021 Academy Awards captured this zeitgeist as it awarded Best Picture to the film Nomadland, which, while sidestepping the critique of capitalism and precarious labor that is so strongly highlighted in journalist Jessica Bruder’s original book, instead provides a romantic vision of nomadic life and extols the virtues and pleasures of a free, wandering, minimalist lifestyle. The film “lyrically portrays Fern [the main character] letting go of the past and conventional burdens with wordless reveries, wild panoramas, floating naked in a river and gazing at towering redwoods” (Gupta & Fawcett, 2021, para. 7). In February 2021, the film’s director, Chloe Zhao, explicitly tied the film to the “minimalist movement, or decluttering and getting rid of possessions,” and stated that those values, plus the value of “being by yourself in solitude and in nature” drive both her personal life and the making of the film. She further stated in an interview that “the pandemic has put a bit of a restart for many of us and has made us ask these questions,” explaining that

I think people are already starting to feel the weight of stuff and the weight of all those noises around us... and so it was already on its way and I think the pandemic really accentuated it. (Associated Press, 2021)

The Marie Kondo Phenomenon

(Re)enter Marie Kondo. The buzz around her KonMari decluttering method and lifestyle movement has been described as “nothing short of a cultural moment” (Du et al., 2019, para. 3). Although she does not call herself a minimalist, she has been swept into the larger cultural trends described above and has become a lifestyle celebrity in North America and across the globe. Her first book, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up, published in 2014, spent more than 150 weeks on the New York Times’s best seller list (Du et al., 2019) and has sold more than 2 million copies worldwide (Mae, 2019). That and her second book, Spark Joy, have been published in 42 countries. In 2015, she was named one of Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People (Pasarow, 2019) and grew even more popular after the January 2019 launch of her Netflix series, Tidying Up With Marie Kondo. She has parlayed this popularity into a booming lifestyle business, which includes a blog, a training program for tidying consultants (at US$2,700 per training,
Kondo has been busy during the pandemic not only with filming her Netflix show but also with facilitating and cashing in on the pandemic decluttering craze because, as Emma Jacobs (2020), writing for the Financial Times, asks, “Who better to help us find order in the chaos of the pandemic than the supreme tidier herself?” (para. 1). In September 2020, Kondo launched a 10-episode online video course—costing US$39.99—focusing on the fundamentals of decluttering and tidying (Harrison, 2020). She marketed this course as a perfect pandemic pastime, stating that because “people are spending more time than ever at home,” the course is “an opportunity to help them tidy up and rediscover their joy” (Marie Kondo, quoted in Harrison, 2020, para. 3). She further explains that rather than dreading the task of decluttering, she urges people to view it as a “celebration” (para. 3). She explains that “Home is now your office, your school, your gym, your sanctuary. Keeping it tidy and joyful is more urgent than ever!” (para. 3). In January 2021, she also launched a new collaboration with the Container Store to sell 100 organizing objects, including baskets, boxes, and more, which, according to New York Times’s reporter Penelope Green (2021), are perfect for “a nation in quarantine fetishizing its pantries . . . and faced on a daily basis with the fallout of material culture” (para. 7).

Kondo’s Object Re-Enchantment

It is difficult to understand the appeal of Kondo without understanding the broad role of consumption in the Western intellectual capitalist world. Slater (1997) argues that consumer culture is inextricably bound up with the rise of modernity, which carried with it the “idea” of “modern social subjects” who were free to craft their own self-identities (p. 9). Individuals now had to become who they were or wanted to be (Bauman, 2000) and did so increasingly through consumption. Lifestyle choices and consumption patterns thus help create people’s senses of identity rather than their work or family roles (Usher et al., 1997). Consumption is also a social and cultural activity that helps assimilate individuals “into a specific social system and commits them to a particular social vision” (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 522), as well as political, as it “represents a site where power, ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another” (Denzin, 2001, p. 325). In our next analysis, we focus on how participating in the KonMari phenomenon helps individuals orient themselves to particular affective and aesthetic investments in some objects and consumptive practices while helping them ignore their own complicity and participation in the ecological harm that results from generating and discarding mounds of no-longer-wanted goods. The investments and abjections facilitated via the KonMari method, and many “minimalist” practices more generally, constitute social and cultural practices with profound political and ecological consequences.

The popularity of Marie Kondo’s method is ostensibly symptomatic of a new consumer relation to objects of consumption. In his germinal Symbolic Exchange and Death, French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1976/1993) develops the object’s transformation from its status as a sacred metaphysical referent in premodern society to the evacuation of such significance via its forced equivalence to money in late capitalism. In the wake of this transformation and the disposable culture it catalyzed, Marie Kondo’s method dramatizes a seemingly compelling reversal, one that reinfuses objects with meaning. The KonMari method is not just a how-to guide to decluttering one’s home. Embedded in the method is a philosophy that veers more toward self-help genres focusing on mindfulness; she states in The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up that the method “is not a mere set of rules on how to sort, organize, and put things away. It is a guide to acquiring the right mindset for creating order and becoming a tidy person” (Kondo, 2014, p. 5). She encourages her audiences and practitioners to carefully consider what objects to keep, focusing on those that “spark joy” and gently thanking and saying goodbye to those that do not. In Kondo’s world, objects ostensibly once again hold and give meaning. This focus on objects sparking joy has become even more important in the midst of the pandemic as people are spending more time at home, often with partners and children; home during the pandemic has become a place where work, family, play, leisure, and rest all blend into one. Given this situation, Kondo argues that it is even more important to declutter and bring peace into a...
home, and to weed out objects that do not bring joy. She states that decluttering is “an act of gratitude for the items that support you every day—and the first step to living the life you’ve always wanted” (Marie Kondo, quoted in Harrison, 2020, para. 3). She also ties the act of tidying up to the creation of “a bright and joyful future—especially during these uncertain times” (para. 3).

One Man’s Trash Is the Whole World’s Trash

To apprehend this re-enchantment of the material necessitates recognizing how we today live in an era of cheapened objects. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up arrived to U.S. markets in 2014, at a moment in which “many people seemed to have reached a tipping point of clutter in their lives” (Maloney & Fujikawa, 2015, para. 4). The book also coincided with—or, some say, further bolstered—an increase in donations to thrift stores, a trend that has continued throughout the pandemic (Sanchez, 2021). The vast majority of these donations cannot be resold, and much of it is actually trash or junk; some estimate that 85% of what is donated ends up landfills (Semuels, 2018). At the same time, Americans, just before the pandemic, were shopping more than ever, having spent twice as much in 2017 (US$240 billion!) as in 2002 on consumer goods and personal care products. They also spent 20% more in 2017 as they did in 2000 on clothes. The latest economic reports show that despite a brief dip in 2020, consumer spending is rising and the economy is recovering from the pandemic recession (Crutsinger, 2021). During the past decades, houses have been getting larger while at the same time the number of self-storage units continues to grow.

And despite the nod to pandemic minimalism and the brief respite from vehicular pollution due to lockdown, all of the pandemic decluttering and new reliance on personal protective equipment (PPE), masking, plastic bags (as reusable bags were banned for fear of contamination), and other pandemic practices have led to vast amounts of waste. Prepandemic, Americans generated vast amounts of environmental waste—in 2015, Americans tossed 16 million tons of textiles and 34.5 million tons of plastics (Semuels, 2018). Now, 18 months into the pandemic, as David Biderman, executive director and CEO of the Solid Waste Association of North America so elegantly puts it, “There is garbage freaking everywhere” (quoted in Semuels, 2021, para. 4). Cities across the United States are picking up more garbage than they ever have before. In Portland, Oregon, the city picked up 3,000 tons of trash, which is more than any other year on record and 50% more than 2019 (Semuels, 2021). More broadly across the globe, Adyel (2020), writing in Science, argues that the use of PPE during the pandemic has driven a marked increase in plastic pollution, including but not limited to single-use face masks. Extrapolating from data collected from Wuhan, China, the author concludes that the United States could generate a year’s worth of medical waste in just 2 months. Reuters’s news reporter Joe Brock (2020) argues that the pandemic has “sparked a rush for plastic” (para. 1)—in form of face masks, face shields, takeout food containers, plastic shopping bags, plastic packaging for online shopping deliveries, and more. And during the pandemic, the weak price of oil has made it even more expensive to create recyclable plastics, so new plastics are much cheaper to buy—sometimes half the price—than recycled plastics. The pandemic hit just as countries around the world—including China, the European Union, and the United States—were seeking or planning to ban one-use plastics. However, the pandemic upended those plans and has brought about an increase rather than a decrease in the creation of plastic trash, most of which is not recyclable and ends up landfills (Brock, 2020).

This kind of rampant shopping and discarding, landfills overflowing with the detritus of civilizational overconsumption, and such contemporary phenomena as the great pacific garbage patch (The Ocean Cleanup, 2021) symptomize the contemporary socioecological impacts of capitalism’s twofold cheapening of nature (Moore, 2017b). As Moore (2017a) articulates, objects are cheapened not only through their equivalencies to money, but via the disappearance of their ethicopolitical significance by which they are remitted to the conceit that we can do anything we would like with them. Herein, the relational significance of the object is eroded through its forced equivalence to capital, but further, for its emplacement within the circuits of consumer circulation where the fate of all objects is to become garbage.

Rituals of Disposal and Happy Affects

In an era of cheapened objects and disposable culture, Marie Kondo’s self-help philosophy aims to ceremoniously rehabilitate the object’s significance. Such rehabilitation is performed through the re-enchantment of the object’s relationship to the consumer. Drawn from its cheapened and disposable status, Kondo’s method recasts the object as worthy of our respect and care. Kondo’s Netflix reality television series, Tidying Up With Marie Kondo, for instance, repeats across its episodes the ritual of giving thanks to objects destined for disposal. Ostensibly repairing the degraded relationship between consumers and objects symptomatic of late capitalism, the object is rehabilitated into dignified relation to the consumer, creating the surface impression of an ethics of care and responsibility. Thanking the object is meant to dramatize reverence and dignity, returning to the often dispassionate scene of consumption and disposal a sense of respect, honor, and decorum. No longer of any use, the object is given dignified passage unto the trash heap.
The re-enchantment of the object in Kondo’s method is enacted through the projection of anthropomorphic sentiment wherein the object is made to assume significance for us. As Kondo (2014) explains in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, “There is a reason why each one of your belongings came to you . . . Everything you own wants to be of use to you” (p. 192). Such anthropomorphism is aptly demonstrated through the importance Kondo’s method ascribes to “joy,” where “joy” refers to those “happy affects” that the object evokes in the consumer. Kondo’s method aims here to re-enchant the object and hence liberate it from unthinking, mindless modes of consumerism. Such re-enchantment, however, symptomaticizes a more contemporary attitude toward the object, which is simply submitted to the attention of our affection. Objects that fail to “spark joy” or otherwise bring a sense of interest to the consumer are fated to become detritus. Kondo’s anthropomorphic conceptualization of human–object relations squarely reifies the object in relation to its meaning and significance for us. The fate of the object to reflect in our interests assumed renewed prominence during the COVID lockdown, when our living spaces assumed new prominence as a measure of our psychical well-being in the face of an uncertain future. The shift to online interactions during the pandemic revealed the privative space of the subject to an unprecedented degree. Under such scrutiny, subjective space became a signal of psychological well-being in which minimalism has come to figure as a signifier of cleanliness, intentionality, and an ordered inner state. As a reflection of our inner being then, the object undergoes a new mode of scrutiny in which it is subjected to an intensified level of control and discipline. Here, the contemporary fashion of minimalism tarries with the abjections of disordered and disarranged objects, which, for their failure to reflect in an image of psychological precision, are fated to the garbage heap.

Under the contemporary attitude of minimalism espoused by its guru, Marie Kondo, the object is consigned to waste but wills a supplemental guise of care. For in the KonMari method, the object is inserted into a sentimental performance, where our having once cared for objects becomes a sufficient ground for their disposal. No longer relevant for us, the object is disposed of but with the added aura of symbolic gratitude. Such symbolic gratitude evinced in both the “joyous” arrangement of human–object relations and the quasi-religious thankfulness intimates a reversal of the object’s cheapened status in late capitalism. Following the anthropomorphic impulse of the KonMari method, however, the sentimentality and aura of “specialness” attributed to the object do little to alter the fate of objects that fail to be special “for us.” The ritual thanksgiving of the KonMari method is squarely for us. It is a vehicle that mediates the transformation of the object from its joyous relation to the consumer into abject.

The Abject Fate of the Object

What this disposal process obfuscates, however, is a two-fold perpetuation of consumerism in late capitalism. On one hand, the KonMari method functions as a contemporary fulcrum for the “happy” disposal of objects. In an era where waste, pollution, and pollutants are ecologically ubiquitous, there are both a growing awareness and concern around the production of waste. In North America, the production of waste tethers to new anxieties around climatological impact and change, and in this context, the KonMari method’s “caring” relinquishment of objects operates as an antidote via its simulation of relationship and symbolic enchainment. The dispensation of objects is hence no longer that of dispassionate abjection but neo-spiritual relinquishment. The KonMari method herein constitutes a feel-good postconsumption practice replete with “happy affect”—Kondo (2014) writes,

> My clients always sound so happy, and the results show that tidying has changed their way of thinking and their approach to life. In fact, it has changed their future. Why? . . . Basically, when you put your house in order, you put your affairs and your past in order too. As a result, you can see quite clearly what you need in life and what you don’t, and what you should and shouldn’t do. (p. 3)

This happy affect displaces the kinds of worry and anxiety that are entirely warranted in this moment of profound ecological disruption.

Herein, the aspiration to “declutter” obscures a second fidelity to consumerism. That is, despite the re-enchantment of human–object relations dramatized in Kondo’s shows and writings, the object is nonetheless fated to become garbage. While Kondo’s method revels in the ideal of harmonious decluttering, it obfuscates the fate of the object to planetary landfills, garbage dumps, and an eternity of decay. While the very philosophy of Kondo’s method is meant to bring about harmony in one’s domestic space, its stealth cost pertains to the unseen burden such dispositions place on both local and global ecologies. This horrific aspect of the “minimalist” resurgence is today intimate to the sentimentality of bourgeois consumerism, which centers on the happy abjection of burdensome objects without confronting the significant ecological costs that accompany such lifestyle attitudes and practices nor having to resolve to buy less in the future.

Kondo’s method intersects with an obfuscated impulse of contemporary consumerism. While each focus on “happiness” and the “spark” one feels for objects, both the KonMari method and consumerism in general cover over the object’s predestination as garbage. As we learn via Kondo’s show, one ought to make room for only a paucity of objects. Yet, the obscuring of the object’s fate as trash runs afoul of the true symbolic enchainment Baudrillard...
(1993) attributed to the object. To paraphrase Baudrillard, we cannot do whatever we like with “things.” Such a state of affairs should be glaringly apparent today, when the true symbolic enchainment of people to objects is writ large in climate change research, which articulates how the object’s destiny is not simply to become trash, but to return via such horrific contemporary challenges as waterway contamination, chemical and mineral leachate, and the proliferation of garbage. This is to say that despite the ideals of minimalism and “decluttering,” there is no escaping the object. Where the KonMari method aims to re-enchant the object, such orientatations fail to apprehend how the object today returns as an ecological problem. The ethics of the object in the KonMari system seem again to extend only to the meaning objects have for us, reifying the consumer disposition of denying the object’s relation to other, broader ecologies.

The KonMari method of course focuses only on the organization of the domestic space, perpetuating the diminishing sense of care toward and ability to ignore or disavow ecologies that are not for us. Perhaps there is good reason for this, given that our living space is one of few that remain under our immediate aesthetic control. As a salve seeking to naively protect consumers against the complex imbrication of human life with objects that Donna Haraway (2016) dubs the Chthulucene, a renewed focus on the arrangement of objects within the domestic space is symptomatic of consumer narcissism and disavowal co-extensive with the vast ecological issues that humans today face. The refashioning of the domestic space is less a renewal of human–object ethics, but tantamount to a cynical disavowal of objects that fall outside our realm of concern or sense of satisfaction. Herein, the KonMari method becomes synonymous with a general disavowal of abjected objects emblematic of consumerism, where the fate of “cheapened” objects already destined for disposability is of only passing concern. The vast trash heaps of civilization are for the contemporary consumer sublimated by the more immediate reference to status, social mobility, and spiritual rectitude conferred by the domestic space, its ordering, and curation. To combat the lull of ecological denial and myopic circuit of consumption and disposal, Stacey Alaimo (2016), in her book Exposed, highlights a number of activists and artists who are revealing the ecological apocalypse we are currently living in, including Chris Jordan,1 who creates photographic evidence of the awful ecological effects of human consumption. Alaimo urges all of us toward these practices of exposure, that is, to reckon with rather than disavow both the ecological crises that are happening all around us and our own complicity in helping to (re)create them.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Note**

1. See his website at [http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/CF000313%2018x24](http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/CF000313%2018x24)

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