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## **Anthropology and Smoke**

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**Abstract:** In this introductory paper, we contemplate both a variety of anthropological approaches to smoke and how analyses of smoke—as object, material, phenomenon, practice, or political fact—might contribute to anthropological knowledge. We consider these questions in and through the themes cross-cutting this collection, including: the sensuous aspects of smoke (especially in the olfactory, visual and haptic relations it occasions, entails and denies); the politics of smoke (in particular regard to climate change, public health, and Indigenous knowledge); smoke's temporal dimensions (from the human mastery of fire via industrial chimneys to vaping e-cigarettes); and its ritual functions (encapsulating transition par excellence, curing ills, placating spirits, and marking time). We conclude by pondering smoke's inherent capacity to escape the bounds we might set for it, including the imposition of highly politicised spatial, temporal, and intellectual constraints.

**Keywords:** smoke, air, politics, senses, time, space.

The contributors to this volume made it their collective task to explore smoke's capacity to waft across physical, conceptual and disciplinary boundaries. From various anthropological vantage points, they deal with a broad diversity of smoky entailments; the materiality of smoke, its poetic dimensions, smoke as indicator of hearth, home and belonging, its metaphoric properties, the politics of cigarette smoke and of smoke's noxious carbon dioxide contents in the age of climate change. This special issue arises out of a panel (adroitly called 'The Smoke Panel') held at the Australian Anthropological Society's 2017 annual conference, which set out to investigate smoke's capacity to reveal big concepts and how they might be illuminated by intimate lived experiences of health and illness, materiality, politics, otherness and the constitution and boundedness of bodies. We posit that smoke is extraordinarily productive, and this abundant fecundity attracted the authors to examinations of smoke itself, and to the conceptual and theoretical speculations it so readily provokes. These themes attune us to the conceptual enormity of time and space, and to the minutiae of lived experience—a fine example of how these concerns and domains are drawn together is to be found in how the air's inability to vaporise our smoky wastes in the late eighteenth century fundamentally changed the infinity once accorded the air, and gave it a history, one read in and through pollution, itself understood in the immediacy of breathing difficulties. But smoke is not always polluting, and other kinds of experiences with smoke alert us to its ability to drift through all of human life in its various guises. Cold smoke on cloth that remembers to those present when the fire was hot the sociality of the cooking fire, the fecund smell of newly burned country that promises abundance in hunting, the nostalgia felt by a smoker for a soothing cigarette when she catches a whiff of smoke drifting by—all these experiences bind memory and olfaction together with the sensory experiences had around that fire, on that country, with that cigarette, in a synesthetic knot with time and space.

While we recommend reading the volume in its entirety to acquire a sense of the productivity of smoke as an object of anthropological investigation, in this introduction we provide an overview of the themes that emerged during the panel and that waft across and through this volume. We begin by considering smoke's entanglements with time and history, and in particular, smoke's tempestuous and multi-temporal relationship to the air. While devoted to time, space inevitably snakes into these sections. From there we move to considerations of smoke and the body; in particular, body techniques (breathing), the senses (the olfactory, the visual, and the haptic relations enabled and limited by smoke), and, naturally, smoke and health. We recognise relations of ill health and wellness in our deployment of the word 'health'; this is certainly a contentious statement in the era of (tobacco) 'smokefree', but we mean to deal with smoke not only as dangerous emission here. Indeed, we encourage a reading of smoke that acknowledges its sometimes notorious duality, as well as its capacity to trouble binaries: something which invites, yet equally troubles, structuralist modes of thought. As smokefree legislation has aptly demonstrated in respect of tobacco emissions, smoke penetrates the boundaries created for it, making it difficult and dangerous matter out of place. But its capacity to connect opposing categories (smokefree/smoking permitted, wood/air, solid/aeriform, earth/sky) as well as its proclivity to rise above (or, waft through) physical and categorical boundaries, accords it a especial role in, for example, ritual — where it might confer benefit. We conclude by pondering the results of smoke's inherent capacity to escape the bounds we might set for it, including the imposition of highly politicised spatial, temporal, and intellectual constraints.

## Smoke and Time

Human settlements have always been smoky. We could evidence human activity in historical terms through smoke to arrive at the Anthropocene as we now call it—smoke is something that was always there, right from the beginning of us. This of course would lend a linearity that might not accurately be reflective of either smoke or history, or indeed our dealings with smoke, or at least how we think we deal with it—but in any case it might be worth a rehearsal.

We might begin with the smudges of smoke rising from cooking and warmth fires after humans gained mastery of fire, or with what Goudsblom (1992, 4) calls ‘the first great ecological transformation brought about by humans.’ Temporally, this kind of smoke is often relegated to the pre-industrial, and indeed the pre-historical, past, even though this kind of smoke continues to scent the air on the margins of the industrialised West (as evinced by Musharbash, Curran, and Tan, this volume). Such smoke then signals, amongst other things, spatial-temporal displacement and is as much an ancestor of, as well as a contemporary opposite to, another kind of smoke—one which requires us to fast forward to 1661, the year that John Evelyn published a pamphlet entitled *Fumifugium: The Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated*.

Written in response to the use of dirty Newcastle coal that had created ‘an impure and thick Mist accompanied with a fuliginous and filthy vapour’ that dominated the ‘otherwise wholesome and excellent Aer’ (1661, 5), Evelyn attempted to introduce a new understanding of the air, underwritten by evidence of ill health, in and through attentiveness to the presence of smoke (see also Goodwin-Hawkins, this volume). Evelyn worried that the people

breathe nothing but which renders them obnoxious to a thousand inconveniences, corrupting the Lungs, and disordering the entire habit of their Bodies; so that Catharrs, Phthisicks, Coughs and Consumptions rage more in this one City than in the whole Earth besides. (Evelyn 1661, 5)

Evelyn warned the principal addressee of his *Fumifugium*, the King, that disordered, smoky air would bring about similarly disordered politics:

The Aer it selfe is many times a potent and great disposer to Rebellion; and that ... people ... where this Medium is grosse and heavy, are extremely versatile ... to change both in Religious and Secular Affaires. (Evelyn 1661, 1)

As Connor (2008) reminds us, Evelyn’s insights were visionary in that he saw that the State and the state of the air might be inextricably intertwined, and smoke as inseparable from a sociopolitical agenda which had as its aim the control of the populace.

Now, one very good reason for not tracking and tracing history linearly is evident to us via the fact that centuries after *Fumifugium*, Tim Choy’s (2010) work on knowledge practices in environmental politics in Hong Kong emerged. That work alerts us to the ways in which smoky industrial and automobile pollution foregrounds the air in a manner that makes people think about themselves as uncared for by a state that has failed to secure for them the most basic of resources, breathable air. This isn’t an exclusively current problem, as Evelyn’s pamphlet makes clear. What is clear is that doing things—or not doing things—to the air

when it is sullied with smoke is often tied up with political agendas, in this case the acceleration of industrial activity and the advancement of capitalism at the expense of those who are left to breathe in its exhaust fumes. We arrive here at another interesting prospect: the notion that the air was, at one time, in the past, ‘clean’, and that it can become ‘dirty’—here dirt is a key marker of the much lamented Anthropocene. But it is more complicated than that.

The capacity of the air itself to do the work of dissipation is probably responsible for Luce Irigaray’s (1992) sense of it as endless, infinite and abundant. She put this view as against Heidegger’s forgetting of the air. One can think of it by way of the old joke about two fish who meet up in the Pacific. One fish enquires of the other, ‘How’s the water?’ The questioned fish replies, ‘What the hell is water?’ Just as the water falls beyond the puzzled fish’s attention because its very pervasiveness ensures that it will, scholars have tended to ignore the air and the presences it accommodates – and some of these we forget. Indeed, the same can hold true for the smell of wood smoke, which, which in its ever-pervasive presence tends to escape Warlpiri people’s notice (see Musharbash, this volume). Cigarette smoke is, by contrast, extremely present, even as the other pollutants in the air, like vehicular emissions, fall from highly politicised olfactory registration. Thinking with smoke permits us to attend to air itself, which might otherwise remain, in folly, backgrounded. We are fascinated with the capacity of smoke to reveal to us the politics of the air, and we pause to consider some of the main strands of this thinking that undergird many of the papers contained herein.

One strand concerns what happens when the air is proved incapable of doing its dissolving work—in our area of interest, of blowing away or dispersing smoke. What happens is that conceptions of the air tend to change. Indeed, the air’s inability to vaporise our smoky wastes in the late eighteenth century fundamentally changed the basis upon which it was understood. Air came to be explicated as a finitude when it failed to dissipate the smoke that hung over London in the 1800s. Urban emissions generated from domestic and industrial sources were visually inescapable, so acts were introduced to regulate outputs of smoke from 1821. The air also failed to de-olfactorate emissions, and so the Alkali Acts of the 1870s were introduced to regulate sulphurous and other less visible discharges. As Connor (2008) notes, so visibly and olfactorily present were the smoky emanations, the air could hardly be thought of in any other way but finite; the air was a container that had edges and limits, and a capacity that was, it seemed, near full. This point emerges vividly across this volume: in Tan’s chagrin about condemnations of Tibetan dung smoke as jeopardising the Third Pole; in Goodwin-Hawkins’s portrayal of industrial and post-industrial northern English cityscapes; in a flash of a moment potent of meaning when a schizophrenic patient feels the scorn of another pedestrian at his smoking sketched by Brown; and in the consideration Dennis makes of thirdhand smoke’s reluctance to leave objects and the air itself, despite its disappearance from our visual and olfactory sensory registers.

The notion of air as container was unprecedented and had the effect of imbuing the air with a history. Bearing the evidence of all that which had been put into it, the air revealed its past in its polluted state, and its new inability to bear pollution away from the source of its emission, and into the past. The capacity of the air to seemingly take pollution away is not just a spatial capacity, it is a temporal one, too. That which we did to the air yesterday does not remain in it today, having been borne away someplace in its infinity and to sometime in the past. The new incapacity of the air to do both in the 1800s revealed its spatial contours (as pollution stayed ‘here’) as well as its temporal edges (the pollution is still ‘here today’). The air has always

been thought of as ahistorical. Cyclic, certainly, but never with its own linear history. Thirdhand smoke, which stays put no matter how much air blows through, and smoky pollution, which hangs around because there is too much of it in the air for it to dissipate, reveals this history—a history of what has been done to the air, evidence that the air cannot erase, and which stays sited in place (here) and time (now) (see also Dennis, this volume and 2016). So here we arrive at a very good reason for rehearsing a sort of linearity of history – the air has one, and it becomes palpable through smoke.

But then again, smoke plays havoc with such ideas as well. The literary theorist Steven Connor (2008) speaks to the temporal disobedience of smoke, noting,

Smoke is not just matter out of place, invasive, insidious, miscegenating, it is also time out of joint. ... The great innovation of the modern city is not the increase in smoke as such, for we may assume that human settlements have often been smoky, but the institution of the chimney. The chimney connects, but in order precisely to keep at a distance, two regimes of space. At one end, there is the hearth. ... At the other end, there is open or centrifugal space, in which precisely, the centre flies out or away. But these two spaces are also different times. The hearth connotes the here-and-now, the at-hand present. The air is the prospective past, a kind of translucent temporal sink in which our effluents can be not only *à perte de vue*, but also *à perte de mémoire*, lost in and from memory. Smoke is the sign of the reluctant vanishing, of the clinging, malign persistence of the past. (2008, np)

This point is illustrated by Goodwin-Hawkins (this volume). Dennis (this volume), in turn, reminds us of this foul history of the air and the air's temporal and spatial edges, the clean air that is to be protected from (nicotine) smoke is thought of in infinite terms – this is clean air, fresh air, the air that all breathers deserve to inhale, no matter how much industrial (meaning, productive) pollution it bears. Smoke ain't smoke: some of it is more dirty than other kinds. It is this air that does not have tobacco smoke in it that must be protected, not the air in, say, downtown Sydney, Australia, which is routinely pumped with 'smoke' from industrial and vehicular sources. This smoke makes the world go round, and we are generally ok with keeping that air backgrounded, while foregrounding air sullied by tobacco smoke. Secondhand smoke-contaminated air is marked up sufficiently, for example, for Western Australia's Curtin University's campus to be called a 'Clean Air Campus' on the basis of secondhand smoke's absence, despite its proximity to a major road.

### **Smoke and the Body**

Smoke goes in and out, disrespecting the bounds of the body; the classic cigarette-bearing author on the dust jackets of novels was so popular because it suggested the reach of the writer, beyond hitherto recognised bounds (Katz 1999). The after-sex cigarette makes so much sense because it is phenomenologically congruous with the crossing of bodily bounds just conducted (Dennis 2016) and, more innocently, we find it in the fascination kids have with seeing their own 'smoky' breaths on a cold winter day. Smoke makes visible that which is backgrounded—the air itself. Its history, its spatiality, and its pollution are called out by smoke, and this issue's authors travel unbounded in the multiplicity of directions in which it bears our thinking.

Brown (this volume) attends to breathing, and in particular the inhaling of nicotine smoke and the exhaling of e-cigarette vapour, respectively, by schizophrenic patients. Their

observations of what matters (breathing out smoke, breathing in vapour) make for a tantalising foundation from which to consider what it actually is we do when we breathe. The minutiae of difference between smoke, vapour—and for that matter, air—when taken in and expelled out of bodies, open up vistas of meaning. This is echoed in Goodwin-Hawkins's contribution (this volume) which considers Clogger McGinty's trouble catching his breath, his phlegm, and his wheezing against a background of his northern English home, haunted by the spectre of inoperative industrial chimneys. And all of this is refracted in Sharrock's account of the clash of worldviews experienced by Westerners who have travelled to the Amazonian jungle to seek *ayahuasca* healing when they are confronted with Peruvian Shipobo shamans' ritual, spiritual and practical reliance on *mapacho* (a tobacco plant). Tobacco smoke, considered a threat to health by Western patients, is the chief protective tool shamans employ to guard themselves and their patients. Smoke, it becomes clear, not only comes in many guises, its relation to the body, consumption, its very meaning, is socio-culturally contingent.

This point is also made by Musharbash (this volume), who reflects about Indigenous and non-Indigenous responses to the smell of cold smoke: one of intimacy versus one verging on disgust. Smoke, or rather the smell of smoke, here 'stands for' different ways of being-in-the-world. Olfactory receptions of smoke are a theme that consistently wafts through this volume (see Musharbash, Curran, Tan, Sharrock, Goodwin-Hawkins, Brown, Dennis, this volume). Further, it is one generally divided: smoke is either perceived as noxious, odious, abject or a marker of familiarity, intimacy, and nostalgia (see also, amongst others, Classen 1993, Classen et al 1994, Corbin, 1986, and Drobnick 2016).

However, olfaction is not the only sensuous perception of smoke. Both Curran (this volume) and Tan (this volume) emphasise smoke's *visual* qualities. Curran does so in an investigation of the poetics of smoke and smoke-like phenomena in Warlpiri song language. She details how smoke's hazy, blurry, and veiling materiality serves to indicate sentiments of uncertainty and danger in Warlpiri songs, which stand in direct contrast to feelings of content and at-homeness engendered by smoke in prosaic contexts (where *seeing* smokes bespeaks sociality, and *smelling* smoke is part and parcel of being-at-home). Tan considers different types of Tibetan smoke (dung smoke, ritual smoke, cigarette smoke) and the ways in which smoke manifests as colour in Tibetan philosophy. In contrast, Dennis considers (thirdhand cigarette) smoke from a tactile perspective, investigating its sticky resilience and its refusal to disappear.

Many contributors also attend to smoke's ability to affect health, both positively and negatively. Musharbash and Curran (both this volume) consider smoke as an indicator of the health of country, as well as a vehicle to curing and strengthening Warlpiri bodies—for example, in the smoking of children or of sick people with the smoke from medicinal plants (see also, amongst others, Pearn 2005 and Pennacchio et al 2010). This is echoed in Tan and Sharrock (both this volume). Sharrock, Dennis, and Goodwin-Hawkins (all this volume) contemplate if not smoke's detrimental effects than its *accorded* harmfulness, while Brown (this volume) weighs up the perils of clozapine-treated schizophrenia patients *not* smoking versus their consumption of either nicotine cigarettes or vapour.

### **Smoke and ritual**

Considering smoke gives us pause to think deeply about time and space and the body. But a good deal more is available to us beyond the here now, then there. The wafting omnitude of smoke and its temporal and spatial disobedience lets us think beyond bounds—smoke is a

quintessential boundary crosser. This quality, depending upon context and viewpoint, allows smoke to be perceived both as polluting matter out of place in Douglas's terms, and as powerful conjoiner of opposites in (loosely constituted) Lévi-Straussian terms. Most papers in this volume pick up on these qualities in one way or another, some implicitly, others more centrally (see for example Brown, this volume).

It is smoke's capacity to both conjoin and divide that makes it so good for thinking and doing; this is particularly evident in the case of worship. Its ability to traverse the limits of time, space and bodies means it is frequently found travelling from us to the gods, thoughts and prayers attached; this is why smoke is so good for thinking and doing worship. This argument has also been made by Howes (1987) in regards to olfaction more generally in his examination of the link between olfaction and transition (riffing on Needham's 1967 piece on percussion and transition). Olfaction, Howes puts forward, is intricately linked to transition logically (as smells are most noticeable at thresholds), psychologically (based on the effects of odours to 'transport' us), and socially (as smells synchronise participants by creating a 'we-feeling'). All of this hinges on the fact that

Smell signs simply do not have the same logical/semantic structure as linguistic signs (Howes 1986; Schiffman 1974). This is because smells are 'traces which unlike words only partially detach themselves from the world of objects to which they refer'; i.e., they occupy a space somewhere 'in between the stimulus and the sign', the substance and the idea (Gell 1977, 26). (Howes 1987, 404)

Smoke, we submit, encapsulates transition in this sense par excellence—think only of the burning of incense: the transubstantiation of solid matter into smoke and scent, so noticeable at the entrance to a temple or church, its effect on the person as it transports us into another realm, and its effect on us as it brings all that breathe it in into community. Further, as Parkin (2007) reminds us, smoke ritually allows us to bridge two otherwise separate domains—solid and non-solid, or, this-worldly and other-worldly. Smoke metaphorically intertwines wind, air, breath and notions of soul; smoke links earth and sky, smoke corresponds with the gods. Through smoke the gods partake in sacrifice, and with smoke we placate spirits (see also Tan and Sharrock, this volume).

Add to this smoke's medicinal potency and post-partem smoke baths (for example, Manderson 1981), the smoking of bodies and houses after death (for example, Abusharaf, 2005, Musharbash this volume), smoke during healing ritual (see Sharrock this volume), and smoke as an indicator of the renewal of country (see Curran and Musharbash, this volume) make abundant sense. Lastly, as Brown (this volume) reminds us, smoke serves beautifully to mark time: the length of a cigarette, but think also of the smoke of potato fires indicating autumn, the smoke of Walpurgis night fires marking the arrival of spring, or, the smoke from breakfast fires signalling to those still asleep that it is time to rise (Musharbash 2008).

## **Outline**

Two big questions motivate this special issue: The first one is concerned with what, multipliciously, smoke is, and how we should grasp it: including as material manifestation, political object, chemical reality, temporal and spatial traveller, harbinger of harm or nostalgia, boundary crosser and contradiction. How might we bring together its different material manifestations, the manifold ways in which it is socio-culturally conceptualised, how it is experienced through interaction with our bodies, what it means politically and

historically? As much as actual smoke wafts, plumes, billows, veils, dissipates, clings, and permeates, so smoke, as approached in this collection of anthropological contemplations, is one and many things. The second question is how to contemplate smoke anthropologically. And here, too, this volume offers many answers.

In an attempt to both contour and question smoke's temporal dimensions, we begin with Yasmine Musharbash's paper, which draws an ethnographic picture of quotidian smoke at Yuendumu, central Australia. Starting with humankind's very first fires, she draws a kaleidoscopic picture of the multifaceticity of smoke's shapes, feels, embodied and conceptual meanings in its ever-presence in Warlpiri country. The next paper, by Georgia Curran, contrasts the everydayness of quotidian smoke in Warlpiri country with the poetics of smoke in Warlpiri songs. In that context, rather than signalling soothing qualities, smoke becomes a metaphor signalling circumstances of discomfort or unknown states. Curran takes particular care in illuminating smoke's semantic depth by attending to its blurry materiality. This attention to visual perceptions of smoke is taken up in Gillian Tan's paper, concerned with Tibetan conceptualisations of smoke as colour. Her paper also bridges to the ensuing ones by considering a particular conundrum: How can smoke, which for Tibetans is both colour and purifying agent, be understood alongside another perspective that holds that smoke is particulate matter and pollutes?

This conundrum, in a markedly different ethnographic context, is also contemplated by Dena Sharrock. She considers how Westerners, who travel to the Amazon Jungle to seek healing through the increasingly popular plant medicine, ayahuasca, are exposed to a socio-cultural environment pervaded by the use of tobacco smoke. Focussing on *Mapacho*, tobacco employed by Shipobo shamans, she interrogates how tobacco smoke pervades culturally recognised boundaries of the Self, simultaneously permeating both the internal and external realms that constitute the healing environment; suggesting that the boundaries that are often conceived by Westerners to distinguish each from the other may well be as smoky as the medicinal practices they engage in.

Following (and undermining) smoke's own spatio-temporal arc, from there we move to Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins's paper which takes British chimneys as her central object of investigation, revealing that substances of brick and particulates have more than material meaning. She illuminates how chimneys and smoke have been 'written' into socio-spatial symbolism, and shows their polarisation between triumphant spectacle and savage monstrosity. And onwards we move, into the lungs of clozapine-treated schizophrenia patients in the UK. In her paper, Julia Brown examines body techniques of inhaling and exhaling nicotine smoke and vapour, respectively, as well as the responses they provoke from bystanders. This is taken up, not via olfaction but touch in Simone Dennis' paper, in which she takes touch to be the sense of things being in contact, of things coming up against us, to appreciate how useful it is for thinking through and with smoke. Her broadly constituted version of touch includes an appreciation of and for the violence in the offing when things come up against us—such as when tobacco smoke comes up against us, and, more than that, penetrates us, sticks and stays on and in us.

And so we come full circle, back to the issues of smoke, time, and politics. So why did we organise a conference panel and now a special issue on smoke? Because smoke gets into everything.

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