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Yulyurdu: Smoke in the Desert

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Abstract: I begin this paper with a nod to 'the beginning' by linking smoke to fire, and fire to humankind. Bound up in this deep history of smoke and humanity is a dichotomy cleaving humans from animals and the west from the rest. Taking smoke at Yuendumu, a Warlpiri community in central Australia as my subject, I aim to destabilise some of the certainties entrenched in this dichotomy.

Smoke, of course, is nigh impossible to pin down, literally as well as conceptually. So rather than trying to immobilise it, I follow in smoke's own fashion and waft across different kinds of fires and different kinds of analytical approaches. Ethnographically, I draw a narrative picture of the different ways in which smoke at Yuendumu permeates everyday life by considering the smoke of breakfast fires, signalling fires, cooking fires during storms, caring-for-country fires, and the scent of cold smoke on blankets, clothes and bodies. Analytically, I move from smoke and how it relates to embodied Warlpiri ways of being in the world, to smoke and childhood socialisation, including baby smoking rituals. From there I shift to the smoke of caring-for-country fires, and on to smoke, memory, odourphilia and odourphobia. I conclude by pondering the potential of a smoke-like approach.

Keywords: fire, embodiment, senses, olfaction, memory, Aboriginal Australia

Introduction: No Smoke without Fire

The control of fire by humans is, as Pyne puts it, ‘a species monopoly’ (2001a, 9; see also Pyne 2001b). Further, it has been positioned as ‘an integral aspect of human life’ (Goudsblom 1992, 3) more basic than language acquisition or tool use (Burton 2009; Goudsblom 1987; 1992). The human mastery of fire resulted in ‘the first great ecological transformation brought about by humans’ (Goudsblom 1992, 4). Its history is timeless, and has been described by Goudsblom (1992, 5) as having ‘been in existence not just for one or two generations, and not even for ten to twenty generations, but for many thousands of generations.’ For so long in fact that, as Bachelard (1964 [1938]) would say, we cannot relate to fire as a natural phenomenon, for us fire is inherently cultural. The acquisition of control over fire by humans is mythologised everywhere on earth as illustrated in the myths of the origin of fire collected by Frazer (1930). So is its role as a tool in culture-making (as for example in Lévi-Strauss 1970; 1973).

While there is an extensive literature about fire, there is little on the smoke it produces (Bachelard does not even mention smoke!). Indeed, the unsurprising incision in the history of fire—the industrial revolution—is a double turning point (see also Goodwin-Hawkins, this volume). On the one hand, as Pyne states, it ‘remade the ecology of urban fire, virtually banning open flame altogether’, to which I would add, it not only banned open flame but also the intertwining of everyday life with wood fire smoke.¹ On the other hand, as industrial smoke began to suffuse first the urban and then the earth’s atmosphere, it simultaneously drifted into the literature.

It is possible, I suggest, to synthesise this conventional history of fire in two dichotomies:

wielding fire : not wielding fire :: human : animal

industrial smoke : wood fire smoke :: west : the rest

Writing within, against, and across the second of these, in this paper, I am concerned with smoke at Yuendumu, a Warlpiri settlement on the south-eastern edge of the Tanami Desert, in central Australia. Yuendumu has been my research location since the 1990s, and the past two decades have impressed upon me how smoke permeates Warlpiri life, phenomenologically as much as metaphorically (see also Curran, this volume). Smoke is everywhere at Yuendumu: first hand smoke from cooking fires, warmth fires, the fires that illuminate dancers at night, the smell of smoke from hunting fires, the fragrance of healing fires, the plumes of signal fires, the haze of bush fires wafting across the horizon and at times into the settlement, and the omnipresent scent of cold smoke caught on skin and clothes, in hair and bedding. There are manifold different Warlpiri terms for different kinds of smoke, as well as generic ones. Whether diaphanous or opaque; pale and flimsy or blue-black and baleful; fragrant or stale, smoke can be captured by one term: *yulyurdu*, or, its synonym *kunjuru* (see also Curran, this volume). Despite its material omnipresence, pinning smoke down is tricky, literally and conceptually. Rather than trying, in this paper I pursue smoke in smoke-like fashion, following it as it wafts through the air, into people’s lives, and across

¹ Or, its alternatives, like dung fire smoke (see Tan, this volume) or seal oil and whale blubber smoke in the Arctic.

spheres of experience and thought: phenomenologically, symbolically, ritually. This approach towards *yulyurdu* permits a sense of the multifaceticity of the shapes, feels, embodied and conceptual meanings of smoke's ever-presence in Warlpiri country to emerge without the need to pin it down. Starting with embodiment in the smoky habitus and smoke and childhood socialisation at Yuendumu, I move on to smoke's medicinal, symbolic and metaphoric properties, and from there on to smoke, memory and olfaction. I conclude by pondering how taking smoke seriously as an object of enquiry can contribute to thinking about how we see the world.

Smoke gets in my eyes

During participant observation, the peculiar relationship between fire and smoke—categorically, inexorably, absolutely concomitant but also discrete in their thingness—provided me with an insight into two kinds of embodied knowledges. The first one is associated with fire and follows, exactly, the relationship between knowledge and practice as elucidated by Michael Jackson in his *Knowledge of the Body* (1983). The second is associated with smoke.

In Jackson's renowned paper there is a passage in which he contrasts his own fire-making with the insights he gained when he copied local practice:

Then one day, for no reason at all, I observed how Kuranko women kindled a fire and tended it, and began to imitate their technique which involved never using more than three lengths of split wood at one time, laying each piece carefully between the firestones, and gently pushing them into the fire as the ends burned away. When I took pains to make a fire in this way I found myself suddenly aware of the intelligence of the technique, which maximised the scarce firewood (...), produced exactly the amount of heat required for cooking and enabled instant control of the flame. (Jackson 1983, 340)

The same can be said about Warlpiri fire practices, and through copying the Warlpiri people around me I learned how to build a fire (like Kuranko fires, Warlpiri ones line up logs, twigs or branches in parallel), how to adjust the firewood when smoke starts building, how to stoke or reduce flame as required by adding, moving closer or pulling apart the logs, which kinds of wood to avoid exactly because they smoke too much when burned, which woods to collect instead for cooking or warmth fires, in short, everything there is to know about Warlpiri practices of fire-making. Jackson calls acquiring knowledge in this way 'practical mimesis' and lists the insights to be gained from it:

This 'practical mimesis' afforded me insight into how people economised both fuel and human energy; it made me see the close kinship between economy of effort and grace of movement; it made me realise the common sense which informs even the most elementary tasks in a Kuranko village. (Jackson 1983, 340)

In much the same way, after a good 20 years of research at Yuendumu, many of these tasks have become second nature to me, and what Jackson calls the ‘intelligence of the technique’ is deeply pleasing to me, so much so that other fires, say at a suburban backyard party or on a camping trip, now often appear to me as wasteful, and, indeed, excessively smoky.

In contrast, Warlpiri cooking or warmth fires are a lot less smoky (due to the wood used and the technique of building them), but they are by no means smoke-less. The way in which the smoke disperses depends on the flow of air, and generally pans out in one of two ways: If there is no breeze (or an ever-changing one) the smoke unpredictably circles around the fire in different directions, which causes people to tell the person sitting in the best position to do so to adjust the logs for a minimal smoke-burn. If the breeze or wind comes from one prevailing direction, it wafts the occasional swirls of smoke away with it. It is in this latter situation that I encountered (and continue to encounter) a further kind of embodied fire-related knowledge; one that is nigh on impossible to mimic, namely, how Warlpiri people place themselves in space when they join others around a fire. When Warlpiri people join, they inevitably choose the place closest to the people they would like to sit next to where they will *not* be exposed to smoke from the fire. Countless times, I sat down only for the wind to shift a fraction and me being right in the path of the smoke. Countless times, I have witnessed other Kardiya (non-Indigenous people) doing the same and then either having to reseat themselves or stoically dealing with coughing and smoke-induced tears.

In seating themselves around a fire, Warlpiri people marry the extensive practical knowledge they have about wood, fire, and smoke, and a deeply embodied, unreflected upon, habitual but always referenced-in-action, awareness of the directions the wind is taking and, relatedly, the paths the smoke will be taking. This awareness, I cannot learn through participation; I can only deduce it by observation, as it arises out of a radically different orientation towards the world, one where meteorological awareness is paramount and smoke is commonplace.

Growing up with Smoke

Warlpiri children grow up with fires and smoke: they spend the first months of their lives being held by relatives sleeping close to warming fires and sitting next to cooking fires, and smoke is a foundational sensuous element of their world.² Smoke also is what makes them strong: during the baby smoking ritual a senior female relative of the child will collect fresh branches of a number of different aromatic bushes and trees, then dig a hole in the red desert ground, line it with crushed termite mound, build a small mulga fire within and then layer the leafy branches on top (see also Carter, et al. 1987; Kruske, et al. 2006; Pearn 2005). She is then handed the baby by its mother and ‘cooks’ it: the baby is held and turned in the smoke for a good while to make sure the smoke enters all orifices and coats the baby’s body entirely. The smoke does the work in this ritual—there is no singing, no chanting, no dancing, nothing: just the smoke.³ Its efficacy is both medicinal and symbolic.

² For more on the politics of the locations of cooking and sleeping fires (as well as the sharing, or not, of firewood by co-residents) at Yuendumu, see Musharbash (2008).

³ Carter et al. (1987) report the singing of ‘borning songs’ during baby smoking rituals. At Yuendumu, however, I have never witnessed any singing during the ‘cooking of babies’.

The aromatic wood and leaves collected for the ‘baby cooking’ fire are said to have a number of medicinal properties, healing the navel, calming the child, making it strong (for more about the medicinal properties of smoke see, among many others, Abusharaf 2005; Manderson 1981; Pearn 2005; Pennacchio, et al. 2010 as well as Sharrock, this volume). Coming out of the land, smoke sensuously enacts and symbolically expresses the baby’s multilayered interconnectedness with the land; Warlpiri personhood is understood to come out of the land and return into it after death (Musharbash 2011). The smoke of a ‘baby cooking’ fire, in this regard, is a prime example of why smoke lends itself so powerfully to express meaning in ritual. The underlying mechanics have been explored by Howes (1987) through the twinning of olfaction and transition. Taking smell, which escapes its source in order to be noticeable, to signal transformation it serves to signal category change (for example, in rites of passage). This is elaborated on by Parkin (2007) with special reference to smoke. As he puts it: ‘smell and its optional expression through smoke or vapour are half-way, so to speak, between invisible spirit and visible life-forms’ (Parkin 2007, S42). Or, in the case of the Warlpiri baby smoking ritual, smoke forms a sensuous connection, a vaporous umbilical so to speak, between the baby and the land out of which it (as well as the trees and bushes that are transformed into smoke) has come.⁴ This connection soothes and calms the baby, makes it strong, and stops it from crying (in the future, that is, they often cry while being smoked). By the time toddlers start crawling/walking, their familiarity with fire and smoke is profound and guardians only rarely need to intervene or warn them but generally, adults leave kids playing close to fires without concern.

Smoke is in the Air

The smoke enveloping Warlpiri people does not only originate from hearth fires. Warlpiri life is also accompanied by the vista of columns of smoke in the distance and banks of smoke wafting across the horizon and sometimes into the settlement. These kinds of smoke originate from signal fires, hunting fires, and caring-for-country fires, and, much as the smoke from hearth fires, have been part and parcel of Warlpiri ways of being in the world since time immemorial.⁵ Indeed, smoke is such a prominent feature of Aboriginal presence across the continent that early explorers, as Tom Vigilante (Vigilante 2001, 149) puts it, ‘simply recorded observations of smoke to indicate the presence of Aborigines’, underscoring also how it was the smoke not the fires they usually recorded. He cites a telling quote from Morgan’s survey of the Kimberley as typical: ‘Although few bush Natives were sighted, their presence was indicated frequently by the sight of “Smokes”’ (in Vigilante 2001, 150).

⁴ An inverse process happens when, upon death, the residence of a deceased person is smoked. A further link to the interconnections between smoke, country, and person can be found in post-mortem practices such as burning the clothes of the deceased to see whether the smoke leads to the murderer.

⁵ Smoke for signalling and signal fires used to be prominent in the past, including the recent past (Gould 1971, 20-21; Kimber 1983). Today, however, many of their functions have been taken over by different kinds of communication technologies and signal fires are reserved for (stationary) emergencies, used for example in case of a stranded car, where a signal fire’s smoke indicates its position during the day, and the illumination from the fire itself serves the same purpose at night—assisting the relatives of people who did not return home in their search.

Such smokes suffuse Warlpiri country, smelling of freshly burnt country and the excellent hunting it promises, they are a sign of the health of country (see also Kimber 1983). Much as smoke strengthens babies, so it, and the fire at its source strengthen the land (see Curran, this volume, for the poetics surrounding this). This kind of smoke is a sensuous expression of the complex interplays between Dreaming and Yapa (as Warlpiri people refer to themselves), between the earth and the sky, between fire and rain (see also Munn 1973, 179-180).⁶ More profanely, the smokes originating from hunting and caring-for-country fires are indices of the Aboriginal regime of land management, commonly called ‘fire-stick farming’ (coined so by Jones 1969).

Regimes of fire-stick farming across the continent, including in the Tanami, have variously been altered, interrupted, forbidden in the wake of colonisation, sedentisation, and pastoralism. Warlpiri people, for example, continued these practices on land to which they hold title but were forbidden to burn on pastoral stations. Over the years I have witnessed that more burns took place in and around hunting grounds near to roads while sites further afield (which used to be visited regularly during the hunting and gathering past) were necessarily (but unhappily) neglected. More recently, the economic and ecological benefits of fire-stick farming have started to become recognised by non-Aboriginal bodies and organisations (see, for example, Wilman 2015). As a result, Warlpiri people continue to burn country, even if under new regimes, and with new tools (Central Land Council 2013): Land Council fire officers, ranger programmes, Toyotas, helicopters, drip torches, GPSes and satellite maps are just some of the augmentations to the traditional burning regimes that entirely depended upon walking across and knowing the country, knowing the seasons and their winds, knowing fire, and knowing smoke.

Smoky Memories

The omnipresence of smoke in Warlpiri lives was also brought home to me in a negative: When I asked my Warlpiri co-residents what the smell of smoke evokes in them—mentioning warmth fires, cooking fires, hunting fires and so forth—they looked at me blankly. As blankly, I realised, as I would have had somebody asked me about the taste of water (see also Introduction to this volume). Based on my own experiences of the olfactory allure of smoke, I had, minimally, expected people to say the smell of smoke reminded them of home when they are away, but nobody volunteered such an answer.⁷

⁶ Dreaming is the English term for Aboriginal cosmologies, including the Warlpiri version of *jukurrpa*. The interplay between smoke and rain clouds manifests on manifold levels (see also Curran, this volume). For example, atmospherically, smoke clouds attract rainclouds; an attraction expressed also in the taboo against cooking meat during thunder storms. The scent of the cooking meat is said to travel skywards in smoke form and to lure rainbow serpents travelling as storm clouds across the country off their intended tracks, causing them to strike people around the cooking fires instead. Rainbow serpents are Dreaming beings that reside in waterholes but can arise out of them as rainbows or storm clouds. They have protective as well as avenging characteristics.

⁷ In retrospect I realise that I should have asked about what the *sighting* of smoke evokes, rather than its smell. Seeing smoke rise up from the ground towards the sky is an undeniable sign of home: it indicates the presence of people in a camp, the whereabouts of hunters in the distance, and indeed, the aliveness of country,

My odourphile relationship with smoke first revealed itself in 2002, a few months before my PhD thesis was due. I had travelled from Canberra, Australia, to Yuendumu to attend the annual initiation rituals. On my return to Canberra, as I was about to stuff my clothes and linen from the trip into the washing machine, the scents of desert life hit me, traces of ochre and sweat bound together with the ubiquitous smell of smoke. I closed my eyes, buried my nose in my sheets and was transported back. I washed everything but one sheet. That, I kept in a plastic bag in my office and whenever I got stuck with my thesis, I took in a good long whiff of cold-smoke-on-sheet-scent and as memories rushed me, as I felt reconnected to the people and place I was writing about, ideas and words were set into motion and I could go on, writing.

Scholars in olfactory studies emphasise smell's mnemonic properties. As Classen et al (1994, 2) explain: 'The perception of smell ... consists not only of the sensation of the odours themselves, but of the experiences and emotions associated with them.' Smell can transport us across space, and, as Howes (1987) argues, across time. Burying my face in the linen was like diving into the ethnographic present. Such connections between scent and memory are idiosyncratic; as Howes puts it 'the same smell may summon up very different associations in different people' (Howes 1987, 402). In this vein, for me the scent of cold smoke preserved in my Yuendumu linen evokes being-in-Yuendumu while away from Yuendumu more powerfully than words, sounds, or pictures while it appears it has no such effect on my Warlpiri co-residents. Much as it is nigh impossible to describe a smell when it escapes your notice, as smoke does at Yuendumu, where it is so omnipresent, all-pervading, and ordinary that Warlpiri people do not comment on it.

The Smell of Cold Smoke

We are also ill equipped, linguistically, to describe smells and scents accurately. Apart from some generic terms like fragrant, putrid or floral, we have to revert to comparisons 'smells like freshly mowed grass, like roses, or like rotten eggs.' Perhaps, it is just as well that I can neither describe the smell of cold smoke in words nor afford you a soupçon of the real thing in actuality. Pungent and sharp, the smell of cold smoke is an acquired taste, and you may well not like it, or indeed, could be repulsed. Like smoke itself, it is so ubiquitous in the camps of Yuendumu that there, neither my Warlpiri co-residents nor I actually notice it. Others, however, do, and they often react strongly to it. Many non-Indigenous central Australians tell me they find the smell of cold smoke abhorrent and I can think of at least two reasons why this should be so.

First, cold smoke is often abhorred because of its associations with destruction; items after a fire are typically considered 'smoke-damaged' and either thrown away or sold cheap. In this regard, cold smoke also shares many characteristics with cigarette thirdhand smoke, defined by Kirsten Bell (2014, 154) as 'the designated term for the cigarette smoke toxicants that linger on room and car surfaces long after the smoke itself dissipates.' Both her and Simone Dennis (2016; as well as this volume) have analysed thirdhand smoke in terms of the abject, elucidating how it creates an involuntary and unwanted material connection between the one who emits it and the one who smells it, because:

The smell of stale cigarette smoke is marginal matter in Douglas' sense of the term: in its refusal to respect boundaries, it is dangerous and polluting. In the language of Kristeva, thirdhand smoke is abject: an in-between, ambiguous, composite substance—neither air nor matter—that destroys the boundaries between what is “me” and what is “not me.” (Bell 2014, 165)

Akin to thirdhand smoke, the cold smoke of fires at Yuendumu, as Dennis (2016, 13) puts it, ‘coats the [person] in an invisible cloak that stays about her, yet retains the properties of smoke to waft outbound, away from her.’ Next to the abject entailed in cold smoke’s very substance, there are the associations made with its scent.

In the non-Indigenous central Australian local imagination, the smell of cold smoke is as intricately bound up with Aboriginal bodies and stereotypes as the smell of garlic once was with Mediterranean migrants (on the ‘smelly immigrant trope’ see Manalansan IV 2006, and on odour and Othering cross-culturally, see Classen 1992). In central Australia, cold smoke marks the Other in ways reminiscent of the odour of the ‘stinking urban masses’ discussed in Corbin’s (1986) classic *The Foul and the Fragrant*. The negative associations between cold smoke and Aboriginal persons, thus are an exemplary example of odorophobia, sketched by Jim Drobrick (2006, 14) as a ‘cultural, and in many cases ideological, intolerance toward smells, specifically as it is directed at places and people’. As Corbin (1986, 142-160) and many others elaborate,⁸ such intolerance of specific scents makes divisions along class, gender, and ethnic lines sensuously perceptible. In the highly racialised and often racist atmosphere of central Australia, then, cold smoke smell serves as a sensuous marker of the Aboriginal Other par excellence—as the smell of cold smoke emanating from the Aboriginal person condenses an entire way of life into one whiff.

Conclusion: Thinking with Smoke

Yulyurdu—smoke in the Tanami—originates from different kinds of fires, it snakes into the air from hearth fires, infuses people and place during ritual, rises up from signal fires, and wafts across the land in caring-for-country and hunting fires, and indeed, as a result of natural, lightning-caused bushfires. Its source, fire, feeds off different materials: fire wood, aromatic leaves, and the country’s vegetation. *Yulyurdu* is quotidian in its presence, but it can also serve Yapa medicinally, ritually, and symbolically. Its scent can be so habitual as to be unnoticed, it can be the cause of nostalgia (for instance, in myself), and it can be received with revulsion. At first glance, this ethnographic narrative of *yulyurdu* supports the dichotomy of industrial smoke: wood fire smoke :: west : the rest with which I opened this paper. It is perfectly feasible to interpret *yulyurdu* as a token of radical difference, of Warlpiri people’s Otherness. I want to suggest, however, that it also complicates this dichotomy in multiple ways.

⁸ See especially Chapter 4: The Odour of the Other in Classen (1993), Chapter 5: Odour and Power in Classen et al. (1994), and the chapters of Part I: Odorophobia in Drobrick (2006).

First, there is the glaringly obvious fact that Yuendumu the settlement, as much as the Tanami Desert itself, are fully enveloped with the Australia nation state; they *are* of the West in the ways they are governed, traversed, experienced, and represented. Smoke in the Tanami *ipso facto* is smoke of the West. More poignant are the generational differences of Warlpiri people's relationships with *yulyurdu*: Senior people, for example sleep and cook outside more than younger generations (see also Musharbash 2017), affording different generational levels of phenomenological intimacy with smoke from hearth fires. Younger generations use the inside (wood-smoke-free) environment of houses more than the senior ones.⁹ Moreover, they also (perhaps in response to wrinkled non-Indigenous noses, perhaps because of susceptibility to advertising, perhaps out of personal preference) use more store-bought scents than senior generations: perfumes, aftershaves, body mists are all en vogue. On the other hand, it is exactly the younger generations (under tutelage of both senior elders and Land Council staff) who are employed as rangers, who sell their labour in order to (amongst other things) burn the country and envelop it in smoke.

What to make of *yulyurdu*, then, as a rejoinder to the dichotomy? I propose that it does neither fully support it, nor entirely unmask it as a straw man. Instead, smoke, in its inimitable fashion curls around the dichotomy, drifts through layers of it, veils others, and generally wafts in and out in ways that can either be ignored, overseen, un-smelled, or, that can be taken to carry meaning. I want to suggest that *yulyurdu*'s biggest potential, in good anthropological tradition, lies in its potential to 'think with'. A 'thinking with' smoke, I suggest, would seriously consider the implications of what it means for smoke to transport us across space and time. It could entail the alluring possibilities of considering the world from an angle where smoke is not object but subject, opening an outlook from which our dichotomies become diaphanous, opaque, and flimsy.

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⁹ Smoke-free here refers to lack of wood smoke. I should point out the younger generations smoke tailor-made cigarettes (as well as marihuana) much more so than senior ones, who generally chew tobacco. The former's domestic space is thus infused with a different kind of smoke (which would deserve a paper in its own right).

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