



Research paper

Becoming entwined: A new materialist take on smoking pleasure

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ABSTRACT

What might new materialist perspectives bring to our understanding of smoking pleasure? In this paper, I draw on this thinking to sketch out an alternative, non-unitary smoker who is at the mercy of the whims of the breeze – a yielding I will argue is key to smoking pleasure. With these intentions in mind, rather than thinking of what the biotechnology of cigarettes accomplishes in terms of the chemical delivery of pleasure, or adding to the multiply of social and cultural reasons anthropologists have tendered to account for it, I approach smoking pleasure in and through the medium of the smoky air. This approach permits examination of how nonhuman and human agents, like cigarettes, lungs, hands and other things form momentary and contingent relation in the air, as well as the role of the air itself in ‘enwinding’ the smoker. When smoking pleasure is explored from such a perspective, the smoker can be recast as part of a complex of relations that she does not fully control, rather than the agentic centre or principal arrayer of the nonhuman world. The pleasures of smoking, and the smoker herself, I argue, are emergent and come into being precisely in these relations: ‘the smoker’ originates, terminates, and is defined in and with elements, rather than being surely and certainly attached to a particular smoker subjectivity. Chief among the complex of things and elements that make the smoker and her pleasure is the air itself – and it is the air itself that is my primary informant in this paper.

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Introduction

For those of us who have followed the lead of theoreticians like and Tim Ingold (2011), new materialist operating principles – namely that there are not pre-existent, fixed entities such as humans, cigarettes, air, and so on but rather myriad materialities that gain their apparent form and continuity through their varied and fluctuating engagements with other material relations – are not so new. Not so new either is the notion that all events or interactions should be understood as assemblages of interacting relations. Assemblages are fluid and continually in flux, as relations (bodies, things, social institutions and constructs) join or absent themselves from myriad associations and clusters (see Clough, 2004). Equally familiar to anthropologists interested in materiality is the notion that the power of things lies precisely in their subtle, oft unrecognised, capacity to influence human action, perhaps best articulated by Daniel Miller (2005).

In my own work, I have utilised some of these principles. I have rehearsed the importance of nonhuman agents in understanding both smoking pain and pleasure, using phenomenologically inspired theories that attend to the intersections of person and world, particularly in and through how capacities (for such things as pleasure and pain) are not due to inherent or essential attributes, but instead emerge as a consequence of interactions with other relations (see Dennis, 2006, 2016). I’ve been particularly attendant here to the senses, and how their extension into the world beyond the ostensible site of the body makes a mockery of the concept of the bounded person.

In this paper, though, I abandon my usual phenomenological stance in favour of one that pulls back from embodiment. Using key new materialist ideas, I step back from embodiment’s explanatory power in order to acknowledge the air’s force and influence over the agentic body – a quite different perspective than I have previously taken, in which I have conceived of the air as extending the body’s own agentic capacities (see especially Dennis, 2016). This goes to my overall intention in this paper: I want to challenge the forms of subjectivity that firewall human agency as especial and bounded. I want to do that by attending to how the element of the air disrupts notions of agency, and is crucial to experiences of smoking pleasure.

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Methods

Given that I am a social anthropologist who, in keeping with my disciplinary expectations, tends to place a good deal of stock in the centrality of human agency, I take a quite unorthodox approach to explicating smoking pleasure in this paper. For disciplines (like anthropology and sociology) that tend to underwrite the centrality of the arraying agent, these notions can brook deep discomfort (see Fox & Alldred, 2016 for a good discussion). My main data here is in fact drawn from particular objects key to the practice of smoking: the cigarette packets that existed prior to the introduction of plain packaging (in Australia, in 2012), when company advertising was permitted. I'm attending to these old packets because they beautifully articulate the centrality of the air itself to smoking pleasure. Really, then, I use the packets to get at my main informant: the air itself.

I'm going to use a theoretical perspective informed by some key ideas of new materialism, especially as they have been articulated by Braidotti, 2013. I adopt her critical questioning of individualism, here in the form of agency – without turning to the oppositionary pole of nihilism. Rather, and following her, I try for an understanding of a non-unitary subject – that subject usually referred to without ado in anthropological accounts precisely as the bounded and unitary subject, 'the smoker'. I suggest herein a refiguring of this unitary subject, who is inherently embedded within a conglomeration of human and nonhuman actors, experiences and practices. Beginning with cigarette packets and their expressions of airy pleasure makes concrete acknowledgement of my intention to decentralize the bounded arraying agent in favour of a more 'tentacled' set of relations, in which things and persons reach out to one another to form temporary relations replete with possibility – including, in this case, the promise of pleasure. Cigarette company versions of smoking pleasure offer a deeply controversial and perhaps even unwelcome alternative perspective to the version of smoking pleasure presently supplied in most anthropological accounts; these are by and large constrained by the current cessation paradigm within which smoking is investigated by both public health specialists and anthropologists alike.

Background

Thinking with smoke in the terms of new materialism permits us to untether smoking agency from the profoundly instrumentalist approach that has thus far characterised anthropological approaches to tobacco smoking. This approach has had dramatic impact on what we can know about smoking pleasure (see Dennis, 2016; Macnaughton et al., 2012). As Macnaughton et al. have noted anthropologists have been critical of public health's dual conceptualization of the smoker, as both the 'rational smoker' and the 'addict'. The figure of the addict is less prominent in Australia than the rational smoker. The rational smoker is the ignorant smoker. She has been mis- or ill-informed about the practice (usually deliberately, via the tactics of Big Tobacco). Once disabused of her misunderstanding (in and through public health education), this smoker can make a rational decision (to recognize smoking as dangerous and quit). 'Pavlovian manipulation' meanwhile, can be administered to the nicotine addict (Carro-Ripalda, & Russell, 2012, 455; Dennis, 2013).

It's certainly the case that anthropologists have been sharply critical of this original public health subject, but it is equally certain that they have not rejected her wholesale; instead, they have 'deepened' her with ethnographic and contextual detail (see Dennis 2016 for a full discussion). This deep ethnographic detail has been used to craft a notion of addiction, for instance, that goes beyond a physical relationship between nicotine and person, to

include the unequal (class, social, economic) relationships that might have pushed people into smoking in the first place (see for example Kohrman & Benson, 2011).¹ Ethnographic detail has also been used to demonstrate that ignorance or misinformation is not the sole foundational explanans for smoking; the person might smoke to maintain a social position, or so as not to be lonely, or to create reciprocal connections with significant others within a social or cultural group. Macnaughton et al. (2012) further suggest that the 'emotional and spiritual experiences' of smokers also need to be taken into account (455). They submit that comprehensive qualitative exploration of 'cigarettes as "companions" or 'friends', along with experiences of deep reliance on cigarettes and experiences of the 'sensual pleasure' they bring must be included in accounts of smoking (ibid; see also (see also Carro-Ripalda, Russell, Lewis, & Heckler, 2013).

Certainly, considering a broader range of reasons that might compel people to smoke, beyond addiction and ignorance have produced more analyses of the smoker. However, these proffered alternatives for interpreting the smoking person retain a key assumption made within the public health paradigm: the assumption that the smoker really is a rational agent. The anthropological task becomes one concerned with finding out what the particular reasons for smoking might be in a given social group. These reasons – and there have been as many proffered as there are specific ethnographic circumstances –² can then be pressed into the service of a cessation agenda which, as Macnaughton et al, Kohrman and Benson (2011) Nichter (2015) and most others working in the field assert is the appropriate role for anthropologists to take up in such a deadly space. Following a laudable (and dominant) public health cessation agenda, anthropological accounts have thus been produced firmly within an instrumentalist paradigm, which favours producing fine-grained understanding of smoking practice in order to inform tailored cessation strategies (see Dennis 2016). So evident is this pattern that those (very few) anthropologists who operate outside the dominant public health paradigm have called for the relabeling of the field from 'tobacco research' to 'tobacco control research' (see for example Bell & Dennis, 2013; Mair & Kearins, 2007).

That anthropologists have taken this instrumentalist approach toward smoking ought not to come as any great surprise; devising solutions to a wicked and consequential contemporary health problem is perfectly congruent with the aims of an anthropology – and especially a medical anthropology – committed to solving contemporary health issues. Being involved in solving a real world

¹ Kohrman and Benson (2011), two prominent figures in the anthropology of smoking, preceded Macnaughton et al. and Carro-Ripalda et al.'s calls for more ethnographic engagement with their 2011 summons to anthropologists to attend in far greater detail than ever before to 'the subjective experience' of smokers. Specifically, they issued an urgent plea to anthropologists to expand the bases of their present enquiries beyond contextual factors that influence why people smoke in different settings, and the production of gendered and ethnicized smoking patterns. They called for closer examination of those corporate predation and industry-related harm, cultivation of desire and addiction, and governmental management of disease elements, as well as the ethnographically documentable effects of smoking-related illness itself, including the ugly, fraught and sometimes fatal experiences of failing to quit.

² A selection is: People smoke because cigarettes play a key role in social life, including in patterns of material exchange that maintain one's social position even if addiction is the foundational explanans – see Glasser (2012). People smoke because smoking might soften the stiff rigidity of loneliness and provide pleasure, and cigarettes are not so much measured doses of nicotine as they are friends or companions (see Macnaughton et al., 2012). People smoke because smoking suspends and implicates them in webs of cultural meaning – which the tobacco industry is adept at exploiting (see Mark Nichter, 2003). And, people smoke because smoking punctuates long stretches of time, such as those interminable ones spent at a drudgerous job, and opens pathways into the future, as Baer, Singer, & Susser, 2003 note in the 'Up in Smoke' section of their *Medical Anthropology and the World System* volume, of 2003.

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