



South African eucalypts: Health, trees, and atmospheres in the colonial contact zone



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ABSTRACT

In this article I suggest that a reading of previous studies, which cast the early transfers of eucalyptus to South Africa along economic and aesthetic rationales can be enhanced by medical history. Through a case from King William's Town in the 1870s, I show that the appeal of the eucalyptus hinged on the olfactory aspect of the trees, which were conceived as an important public health factor. I then proceed to outline how a clearer understanding of the role of olfaction in ecological studies can uncover new aspects of social dynamics and human relations to the natural environment. I argue that taking the atmosphere seriously as the medium through which we interact with the world, opens for an understanding of olfaction as an important and largely unexplored ethos that guided the dramatic reshaping of the colonial landscapes during much of the nineteenth century.

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1. Introduction

In this article I will outline a hitherto neglected field of study regarding alien species in South Africa. By combining historians' and geographers' work on introduced species and landscape alterations in the Cape Colony during the latter half of the nineteenth century with work by medical historians, I intend to show that there is a considerable overlap in these studies. Two topics surface regularly in work on the trans-oceanic movement of alien species to South Africa: the economic rationale and the transfer of trees and plants as landscape modifiers.¹ I want to expand these accounts along with historical medical discourses in order to argue that tree planting in general, and the introduction of eucalyptus in particular, was also pitched as a public health initiative that viewed health as directly determined by air quality.

In an early study of the significance of olfaction for place making, Daniel W. Gade called for studies that investigated active human efforts to "develop a pleasant environmental smell as an aspect of landscape aesthetics [as it] holds promise for geographical insight by integration of its social, economic and environmental dimensions in the context of real places" (1984: 38f.). Though a few studies on smell and place making have emerged over the past

decade or so (e.g. Hensaw, 2014), I have not encountered studies that actively try to link this concern with the changing landscapes in the colonial contact zone.

As a number of studies have pointed out, colonial expansion was intimately attached to the transfers of plants and further more, that these exotic species never travel alone (e.g. Crosby, 2003, 2004; Dunlap, 1997; Lever, 1992). They are bundled together with other ideas, experiences, economic conditions such as market access, as well as accompanying microorganisms (cf. Kull and Rangan, 2008). These bundles inevitably vary greatly over time, and will also be affected by socioeconomic changes and events such as wars, conflicts, and epidemic threats (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). The meaning and significance newly introduced species gain thus depend on the larger social contexts, on which smell may have a significant impact. I will therefore outline the cultural and historical contexts trees and woodlands were wrapped up in, and suggest that eucalyptus trees shaped colonial life-worlds in significant ways because of the scents they left in the atmosphere.

In order to place the analytical focus on the olfactory presence of the eucalyptus I rely on Tim Ingold's phenomenological approach to 'earth and sky' (Ingold, 2011). Ingold's focus on how the atmosphere is the medium through which we perceive and interact with the world, provides me with a theoretical vantage point to investigate the important aspect of the olfactory presence of eucalyptus as shaping human action and interaction. Viewed within this theoretical framework I will suggest that the transfers

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¹ Following Kull and Rangan (2008) I refer to 'transfers' as trans-oceanic movements of plants; 'diffusion' as the spread of plants from person to person; and 'dispersal' as the spread of plants by natural forces such as insects, animals, fires.

and diffusions of eucalyptus gains new significance in the context of South Africa's turbulent and oppressive racial history.

2. Locating the story in time and space

My ethnographic focus is King William's Town in the Eastern Cape. As part of a project on contemporary Zulu conceptions of health and disease, and uses of soap and disinfectants (cf. Flikke, 2016), I first travelled to the Amathole Museum in King William's Town to do some archival research on a sanitation hysteria that plagued the town during the 1870s. I had discovered that the strong disinfectant Jayes Fluid, patented in England in 1877 and used to combat scarlet fever and other diseases, was at an early stage imported to King William's Town to disinfect public spaces (Laidler and Gelfand, 1971: 362). I assumed this had to do with the fact that South Africa's first native hospital had been established there a few years earlier. Going through the archives I was surprised to discover precious little on disinfectants and soap. Instead I discovered heated public health debates on the planting of eucalyptus trees, which were discussed in ways that partially overlapped with soap. Soap and trees were both seen to be ways to combat epidemics that plagued the area, and the attention was on the olfactive aspect of the eucalypts. The significance of the trees was their relation to the air and atmosphere.

Today, King William's Town can be described as a small, sleepy town about a thirty minutes drive inland from East London, in the Eastern Cape. The town was the capital of British Kaffraria from 1847 until 1865, when it was incorporated into the Cape Colony. When my story starts in the 1870s, it had been a settlement plagued by decades of unrest and uncertainties, which made it prone to the kind of landscape alterations I will argue the eucalypt transfers to South Africa constituted.

A series of nine wars from 1779–1879, referred to as the Xhosa wars, seriously affected the area. A prophetic Xhosa movement referred to as The Great Cattle-Killing of 1856–57 was an apocalyptic response to the sufferings these conflicts created. When the Xhosa, in search of divine intervention, started to kill their cattle and destroy their sustenance, starvation increased, spreading epidemics and further intensifying social upheavals (Peires, 1989). In the midst of the cattle killing the English doctor J.P. Fitzgerald arrived in King William's Town from New Zealand to become the first Superintendent of hospitals in British Kaffraria. Dr Fitzgerald was appointed in January 1856, and his first task was to build Grey Hospital—the first native hospital in South Africa (Burrows, 1958: 181f.). He is recognized as a pioneer in hospital architecture for his focus on ventilation, as an avid campaigner for African health who was regularly met with opposition in the settler community as he regularly treated Africans alongside European patients.

As I have argued elsewhere (Flikke, 2001), the social turmoil and ensuing epidemics spurred a number of religious responses and the region became the birthplace of the African Independent Churches (AIC) during the 1870s. Numerous studies have localized these secessionist movements to be a politico-religious response to the paternalism, discrimination, epidemic diseases and oppression the African communities experienced during the 'civilizing mission' (see Barrett, 1968; Sundkler, 1948). Later the ANC, through the founding member J.T. Gumede, and the Black Consciousness movement formed around Steve Biko during the 1960s, originated in the same area. In short, it is a small seemingly insignificant town that plays a key role at important junctures in South African history. However, the actors in this article are the British settlers and eucalyptus trees.² I start with the former.

2.1. Africa: the diseased and healthy continent

Most of the literature on Colonialism, health, and Africa posit a very problematic relationship between the European body and African landscape and climate. The focus is mostly on the death and destruction associated with Africa as the 'dark continent' and the 'white man's grave' (Comaroff, 1993; Curtin, 1989; Feierman and Janzen, 1992). The European settlers in South Africa, as elsewhere in the colonial outposts, were hence preoccupied with health (e.g. Wood, 2005).

There were, however, contesting discourses that connect colonial expansion with the need to improve European health. Notables such as Cecil Rhodes and Francis Galtung, Darwin's ambitious younger cousin and the founder of eugenics, both ventured to Africa in search of health (Fancher, 1983: 67; Gillham, 2001: ch. 3–4). Rhodes, recognized for his sharp mind and feeble body, was advised to travel to southern Africa in order to get away from the London fog and find a climate where his physical limitations would not stand in the way of his sharp intellect. The dry inland climate provided a health benefit, which at the latter half of the nineteenth-century drew an ever-increasing number of Europeans to South Africa, many of whom were consumptives (Packard, 1989: 38–40). In addition to the many travelogues that contained chapters on health (e.g. Bryce, 1897: ch. 1 and 2), a steadily increasing number of books and pamphlets promoting South Africa as a 'health resort' were published after the Suez Canal opened in 1869 and the flow of travelers that passed through South Africa decreased (e.g. Fuller, 1892; Marshall-Hall, 1908; Scholtz, 1897). Similar conceptions of colonial life and health have been noticed in New Zealand and elsewhere (Wood, 2005: ch. 1).

South Africa is a vast country with great biodiversity and varying climate. While the Western Cape and its interior were described as a 'health resort', the famed good hunting grounds along the north-eastern seaboard were feared as the 'white man's grave' due to malaria and other tropical diseases (e.g. Nustad, 2014, 2013: 89f.). King William's Town was apparently free from malaria, and with a healthy, dry climate, the town could have been described as a health resort because of its favorable climate. The arrival of the eucalyptus—notorious for its thirst and ability to 'drain marshlands' and thereby combat malaria (Doughty, 2000: 36–41)—would hence be differently received in King William's Town than in the wet, malarial marshlands of colonial Zululand. For this reason my story of eucalypt transplants, is one of several stories of why eucalypts were imported. However, the Victorian disease vector keeps these stories together: I have elsewhere suggested that the early African travelogues' preoccupation with landscape and climate, are best read as medical notations (Flikke, 2003). As 'malaria', (*mal aria* 'bad air') testifies, fevers were taken to be the result of high temperatures and humidity levels, which accelerated putrefaction and released the poisonous gasses of miasma (unhealthy or foul smelling air) (e.g. Pelling, 1978; Sargent, 1982). Miasmatic theory had dominated European conceptions of contagion since at least the fourteenth century. Epidemics were conceived to be spread through inhalation and exhalation of poisonous vapors carried in the air (see Adey, 2014: 76). The value of eucalypts at both instances was that they were thought to prevent airborne contagion. In colonial Zululand, the eucalyptus helped drain coastal marshlands and thus suppressed malaria, whereas in King William's Town it was the ability of eucalypts to purify the air from dangerous stenches, which was emphasized in the public discourses. As I will argue below, both were related to miasma.

3. Rooting trees in the South African soil

In pre-colonial South Africa the native humid-closed canopy forests never covered more than 1 percent of the territory

² For an introductory analysis of the cultural significance of smell and olfaction in African societies see Flikke (2016) and the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 2007, vol. 13, issue supplement s1.

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