

Can the plant speak? Giving tobacco the voice it deserves

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Abstract

The idea of non-human objects speaking has an illustrious pedigree. Using Holbraad's (2011) question 'can the thing speak?' as a springboard, the author asks what it means to say that tobacco might speak. Accepting a degree of ventriloquism in giving a voice to plants, he tracks examples of tobacco (and its paraphernalia) speaking in English literary sources, demonstrating that the postmodern turn to 'material agency' and object sentiency, voice and intentionality is, in fact, nothing new. Taking Miller and Latour's conceptions of hybridity in human/non-human relationships seriously, he argues further that tobacco can speak, or remain silent, through a number of different human and corporate locutors. Where tobacco speaks in its own words, its voice – in contrast to the 'tinny but usable' voice of a mushroom spore – becomes that of an imperious autocrat intent on world domination.

Keywords

hybridity, material agency, object sentiency, tobacco

Introduction

Recent developments in the social sciences and humanities such as actor-network-theory and the various other branches of what can loosely be termed 'material studies' or 'object-oriented ontologies' claim to offer new ways of considering human/non-human relations. In general, their intention is to reinstate the importance and significance of the non-human, a broad and overlapping category that can encompass other animals, plants and things both 'natural' and 'manufactured' (amongst others). The focus of this article is the different relationships between humans, tobacco and its associated paraphernalia (e.g. pipes, cigars and cigarettes). Tobacco, an example, like sugar, of the kind of substance Appadurai (1986: 40) styles 'a homogeneous, bulk item of extremely limiting

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semantic range [that] can become very different in the course of distribution and consumption' has a deeply ambivalent status in this relationship. On the one hand, it is a living plant, revered by indigenous populations in the Americas for its ability to heal, as well as to mediate relationships within and between the spirit and human worlds (Russell and Rahman, 2015). On the other, it is a harvested commodity, the object of worldwide opprobrium responsible for extensive periods of premature morbidity and an estimated one in two deaths of regular long-term users (Proctor, 2011).

Tobacco's transition from sacred herb to commodity occurred in tandem with

the powerful contemporary tendency ... to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words ... Yet, in many historical societies, things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to act and the power of words to communicate. (Appadurai, 1986: 4)

Any consideration of the entanglement of people and tobacco from a more ontologically quickened perspective soon comes to challenge the easy presumption of human exclusivity, that it is people who inevitably have the upper hand. Miller (2008) writes persuasively about the mutually constitutive way that 'the things people make, make people', and argues that this is a key to dissolving the convenient dualist fictions of 'people and things', 'subjects and objects' and 'culture and nature', amongst others. Bruno Latour (2005) takes us further on this hybridizing journey, inviting us to consider humans and non-humans of all sorts as equal a priori 'actants' operating across flattened topographies of hybrid and mutually transformative relationships or 'networks'. In the case of tobacco, however, the sacred/secular transition noted above has perhaps muted appreciation of 'the universal ways in which objects mediate, effect, and alter both consciousness and experience' (Geismar, 2011: 214). To bowdlerize Miller, the things people make not only make people but, in some cases, may kill them too.

Dissolving the distinction between 'people' and 'things' (in this case, tobacco) has a number of implications. In the botanical realm, it leads to books with titles such as *Plants as Persons* (Hall, 2011), and *How Forests Think* (Kohn, 2013). In the latter, Kohn champions the idea that

we are colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality ... Forests are good to think because they themselves think. Forests think ... the fact that we can make the claim that forests think is in a strange way a product of the fact that forests think. (pp. 21–22)

Kohn accepts that his somewhat tautological assertion requires of the reader 'a modicum of goodwill, patience, and the willingness to struggle' (p. 14).

I demand no such ontological leaps of faith from readers of this article. The research on which it is based is part of a larger project attempting to re-imagine tobacco through a nonhuman ethnography (Raffles et al., 2015) of the plant that I have pursued over a 10-year period – 8 years extensively (from 2005 to 2013) and 2 years intensively (from 2013 to 2015), following the thing (Marcus, 1998: 91–92) wherever it and serendipity (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013) led me. This has required research that is both cross-cultural and historical, and traverses a number of different academic disciplines – following tobacco through as many different contexts as possible, charting the changing

relationships between it and the worlds it constructs, wherever and however it is to be found. There are limitations, of course, to how comprehensively we can follow any ‘thing’, and the contexts within which it should be considered are in many respects inexhaustible (Huen, 2009). We lack a time machine to take us into the past and must resort to documents and archaeological resources (e.g. Fox, 2015) to track tobacco’s moves from past to present. In addition to offering us insights into tobacco’s past lives, literature and the creative arts can sometimes provide additional ‘existential’ evidence (Macnaughton et al., 2012: 457) or reveal ‘those dimensions of personal and social life we may have little access to when using other research strategies’ (Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus, 1994: 67). In addition, since I had never knowingly met a living tobacco plant before, I sought to enhance the breadth of my non-human ethnography still further through the purchase and back garden cultivation of five *N. tabacum* plants brought from Mel424 on eBay.

Rather than requiring matter to offer evidence of abstract thought, as Kohn beseeches us to accept, my ethnographic researches thus far have led me to a far more empirically testable question, ‘can the thing speak?’ (Holbraad, 2011). In asking this question, Holbraad is extending Spivak’s (1988) concern for the human subaltern into the non-human domain. Many are willing to ask this question in a metaphorical sense. Mitchell (2002), for example, investigating the rise of the technocratic development expert in Egypt, asks ‘can the mosquito speak?’ as a criticism of the anthropocentric notion that humans are the sole agents and causes of change. Similarly the contributors to Daston’s (2004) edited volume all apply the concept of ‘speech’ figuratively or as an elision of ‘communication’, while archaeologists such as Witmore (2015) set great store in letting ‘things speak for themselves’. In this article, however, I am moving from the metaphorical to the concrete by focusing on examples from within English literature where tobacco has (literally) spoken. Such utterances are the product of human imagination rather than botanical fact, of course, but they provoke fresh insights into the nature of human–plant relationships and what the limits of those relationships might be. They also enable us to answer the subsidiary questions Holbraad asks in his paper: if a thing could speak, what would it say? What language would it speak in (‘thing-ese’)? As well as considering by what ventriloquism a plant might be enabled to speak, I introduce the notion of ‘tobacco-persons’ and ‘tobacco-corporations’, which presents a more complex plant–person/plant–corporation/corporation–person picture. Through such alliances, tobacco becomes far more than a subaltern voice; rather, where it appears to speak unaided, its words are that of an imperious autocrat intent on world domination.

The philosopher Stephen Vogel (2006) argues that an important distinction needs to be made between ventriloquism – which involves people (in this case, the researcher) speaking for objects that patently do not and never will speak and translation, which involves researchers speaking for objects that maybe use a different language or register with which to communicate. While ventriloquism can be entertaining (Connor, 2000), Vogel (2006: 162) finds it problematic when dependent on the ventriloquist ‘projecting her own words onto a mute object and then pretending that it is that object that is speaking and not herself’. Tsing is one of the few anthropologists to have created a voice for a non-human entity: in her writing experiment of 2014, a matsukake mushroom spore is given the ability to speak. Tsing makes no attempt to hide the ventriloquism in her

account; indeed, it would be difficult to pretend a fungal spore really was speaking. As the spore (supposedly) puts it: 'An American human made me up ... she has made me a tinny but usable voice and reminded me that we all come into being as figures through unfaithful translation. It's what all storytellers do, she says' (Tsing, 2014: 222). In making tobacco its own ethnographic subject and looking for evidence of its voice, ventriloquism and/or unfaithful translation invites us into a similarly imaginative story-world that moves from the plant's co-dependency on people to the autonomy of tobacco-in-the-world, an active agent – a spirit, if you like. Tobacco products – pipes, snuff, cigars and (latterly) cigarettes – are only the corporals of this enigmatic being, as are its human producers and consumers, and those entities that engage with it for purposes of exchange, trade and commerce. In this way, using literary sources to expand the ethnographic evidence takes us beyond the constraining notion of 'worldview' with its 'multiple *meanings* that stand in relief to a singular, objective reality' (Geismar, 2011: 215) and into a more tenuous realm of alternative and, in many cases, speculative worlds that are, as Holbraad (2012: 264) says elsewhere, 'as contingent, time-bound, and subjunctive as any', but important for what they tell us about '*how things could be*' (Holbraad et al., 2014).

Looking at when and in what contexts tobacco speaks helps to turn the tables on a substance which is archetypally 'hidden in plain sight', omnipresent, diffuse and elusive. As Miller (2009: 50) suggests of things more generally, 'the less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations ... They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.' Part of its ambivalence lies in the power vested or contained within its diverse contextual worlds – the 'real and divine energy' attributed to smoking in Victorian England (Machen, 1884: 122), its status as 'king' in a Papua New Guinea prison (Reed, 2007), a substance that has generated its very own global health treaty (Russell et al., 2015). How could a mere plant have come to assume such a contested role in global affairs? Dependency is multifaceted. Persons (growers, manufacturers, users, controllers and researchers), corporations and states alike are proof that, rather than an inert and passive player in the global assemblages of which it is part, tobacco has exerted a strong degree of material agency in the relationships it has forged with humanity.

Spinoza accords a more active, Latourian view to the non-human: 'nature ... is a place wherein bodies strive to enhance their power of activity by forging alliances with other bodies in their vicinity' (Bennett, 2004: 353) and Geismar (2011: 213) is right in asserting that, to have agency, things 'must be entangled within social relations and indeed within our own humanity'. A plant like tobacco has neither spread nor perpetuated itself unaided. The processing of tobacco (by various industrial and non-industrial means) into a range of consumable items – cigarettes, roll-ups, cigars, pipe tobacco, snuff, chewing tobacco, *gutka*, tobacco paste, etc., etc. – creates products which are regularly used to create hybrids that I call 'tobacco-persons'. Yates (2006: 1007), writing of a different plant product as it was used around the time that tobacco came onto the European scene, talks of 'orange-persons', those who give themselves over 'to the principle of connection that is "orange"'. I would like to make a similar play for tobacco-persons, to be superseded, perhaps, by the more recent (and equally contentious) manifestation of e-cigarette users as a type of 'nicotine-person'. Some of the talking we are going to see here comes

from the pen of tobacco-persons. Adding to these voices are those of the tobacco corporations, the corporeal capitalist incarnations of their plant master who between them have carved up the world in a neo-colonial ‘irresistible empire’ (De Grazia, 2005). They are able to exert their overweening influence by acting like an individual at some times (Kirsch, 2014) and like a state at others (Russell et al., 2015). Could it be (we might speculate) that, through these means, far from following the thing, tobacco has actually been following us? In this formulation, ‘can the plant speak?’ becomes less a topic of incredulity and something with much more sinister implications for what it says (or doesn’t say) about both the plant and its human locutors.

The discursive reading of the literary texts that follow starts with the first literary appearance of tobacco in English, particularly its astonishing appearance in a 1604 stage play where its god-like status is reflected in it speaking a language nobody can understand. Its subsequent appearance in what was originally a Dutch play demonstrates its ‘muscling in’ to a landscape of liquid intoxicants and the uneasy accommodation this involves. Then, however, tobacco per se falls silent, and remains so for nearly 400 years. This is surprising given that the 18th century was marked by a plethora of printed works in which things spoke as they had never done before. This remarkable genre – 284 novels that use the ‘object’- or ‘it’-narrative form have been identified by scholars between the 18th and 19th centuries – mysteriously contains no examples of either tobacco or its paraphernalia. There are some interesting examples of a pipe and cigar talking in an 18th-century poem and 19th-century literary journal, respectively, but the overall impression is of tobacco’s unexpected silence. The 20th century is a darker period, with the cartoon character Mr Butts, a walking, talking cigarette, emphasizing the amorality of tobacco sales to minors and the military, while tobacco itself reappears again as an inner voice in the head of the author Richard Craze as he attempts to overcome his addiction to what he regards as a parasitic host. In all these examples, the powerful agency of tobacco is to the fore – indeed, in giving tobacco a voice, it is as if the multiplicity and strength of its material agencies is acknowledged in ways that a more straightforwardly human ethnography might be less able to articulate.

‘The great and puissant God’

The arrival of tobacco on European shores in the 16th century was an event with extraordinary implications for both literature and life. Spenser makes a fleeting reference to ‘divine tobacco’ in ‘The Faerie Queen’ in 1590 (the first recorded reference to the plant in English poetry), but only 17 years later tobacco became ‘air apparent’ in a play by Thomas Tomkis: *Lingua, or, The Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority: a Pleasant Comoedy*. In this drama, Lingua (the tongue, speech, language), ‘an idle, prating dame’ (Tomkis, 1607: sig. A3), is campaigning to become the sixth sense in what until then has been the exclusively male domain of *Microcosme*. Tobacco appears as part of the bid that Olfactus (smell) makes for superiority. Tobacco’s entrance is an apparition indeed:

... apparelled in a taffata mangle, his arms browne and naked, buskins made of the pilling of Osiers, his necke bare, hung with Indian leaves, his face browne painted with blue stripes, in

his nose swines teeth, on his head a painted wicker crown, with tobacco pipes set in it, plumes of tobacco leaves, lead by two Indian boyes naked, with tapers in their hands, Tobacco-boxes and pipes lighted. (Sig. H3)

Introduced by Olfactus as ‘the great and puissant [powerful] God of Tobacco’, the only problem with tobacco’s dialogue is that the God speaks a language no-one else can understand. For example:

Ladoch guevarroh pusuer shelvaro baggon,

Olsia di quanon, Indi cortilo vraggon.

Fortunately, Olfactus is able to offer a translation, although its language is uncompromising. He explains the significance of tobacco as a ‘mighty emperor ... that in being conquered, conquered all Europe, in making them pay tribute for their smoake ...’.

Tomkis gives tobacco a much more sonorous and in many ways believable language and voice than the ‘tinny but usable’ English of Tsing’s matsukake spore. Olfactus’ translation of tobacco’s words argues for the qualities of tobacco, acknowledging both its power as medicine and the ‘firme knot of good fellowship’ it provides. Tobacco is the ‘swift winde, to spread the wings of Time’, an allusion to its narcotic properties and its place in punctuating and stalling the rhythms of daily life. Finally the translation acknowledges the ambiguity inherent in conquering something which, once its pleasures are known, one ‘can hardly forsake’, words that Phantastes deems ‘very significant’.

Tobacco in competition

In 1629, a Dutch play, translated as *Wine, Beere, Ale and Tobacco. Contending for Superiority*, followed a tradition in European literature of personifying beverages in competition with one another. Tobacco, the new commodity in town, was absent from the first edition but its addition to the second and subsequent editions much enhanced the popularity of the piece. Speaking in English rather than an obscure Antipodean or Arcadian language, tobacco tries to assert his authority over the other intoxicants early on by claiming ‘I am your Sovereign, the sovereign drink, Tobacco.’ Wine, beere and ale are unconvinced by such assertions, however. Their intoxicating qualities makes them alike, and equal, in their eyes, notwithstanding tobacco’s claims for his ‘divine breath’ which ‘doth distill eloquence and oracle upon the tongue’. When his strength (as opposed to his eloquence) is questioned by Wine, Tobacco retorts ‘Whose brain hath not felt the effects of my mightiness? He that opposes me shall find me march like a tempest, waited upon with lightness and black clouds’ (Sig. C3). Ale mocks the 24 ‘postures’ required to smoke a pipe, which one has to do repeatedly ‘till you stink, defile the room, offend your friends, destroy your Liver and Lungs, and bid adieu to the world with a scowring flux’. Tobacco dismisses these concerns as ‘childish inventions’, but Wine considers them ‘most proper to illustrate your magnificence’, since ‘howsoever you pretend that you converse with men, it is apparant, that you make men children again, for they that use you most familiarly, do but smoke all the day long.’ The three drinks agree with Wine,

however, that they had ‘best admit him [Tobacco] to our society ... least he seduce men to forsake us’. After all, ‘he is a dry companion, and you may observe how he hath insinuated already with the greatest.’ The four ‘drinks’ (because ‘Tobacco is a drink too’) thus end up settling their differences and joining in a dance together.

Despite their jocular intentions, disquiet is expressed about tobacco in both *Lingua* and *Wine, Beere, Ale and Tobacco*. In each one, the power of tobacco is acknowledged and its equivocal influence on people’s life and habits discussed. The former raises the ‘who has conquered who?’ question, while the latter includes the suggestion that Tobacco leads to a chronic habit that destroys men’s vital organs. Tobacco scoffs at all these concerns, but then goes silent for 400 years.

Tobacco goes silent

During the 18th century, objects started speaking as never before. This might be surprising, considering the rise in international commerce with its increasing sense of separation of the human from the non-human and the growing dominion of the former over the latter in Enlightenment life and thought. A fascinating but under-researched English literary genre from this period is the ‘object’- or ‘it’-narrative. In these satirical pieces of prose – aimed very much at adults rather than the children who became their predominant target readership in the 19th and 20th centuries – the protagonists and narrators ‘are not humans, but, rather, mundane material objects such as banknotes, corkscrews, shoes, and coins that circulate through human society, commenting upon and damning it as they go’ (Nowka, 2006: 7). They were immensely popular: one of the first, Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal: Or the Adventures of a Guinea*, went into a third edition within three years of its original publication (Douglas, 1993: 65).

Curiously, there are no examples of tobacco or its paraphernalia speaking in the comprehensive list of 284 English ‘object narrative’ novels published between 1700 and 1900 (Bellamy, 2007[1998]), a somewhat strange omission for an assemblage so profoundly entangled in human life and thought during this time. A short interchange takes place between a tobacco pipe and a perfumed ‘bag-wig’ in Christopher Smart’s ‘poetic fable’ published in 1752. The pipe defends itself against the wig’s criticisms of its ‘barb’rous English! horrid Dutch!’ breath by arguing that [I] ‘with my cloud-compelling aid / Help our plantations and our trade’ (p. 213). But this seems a relatively small contribution considering (or perhaps because of) the growing ubiquity and ‘taken for granted’ nature of tobacco and its products.

In a later article in *Chambers’s Journal*, a cigar narrates his story to the public (Anon, 1858: 71). In a classic example of the style by which the bourgeois adult male was inducted into legitimate forms of masculine consumption through acquiring the knowledge, skills and purposive rationality required of the gentleman connoisseur (Hilton, 2000), the cigar proceeds to give readers its perspective on the distinguishing characteristics of the tobacco family around the world. Thus the American is ‘supposed to be the best’, while Brazilian tobacco ‘is a very short scrappy-looking leaf ... covered with the sands of the plains’ (p. 71). Havana ‘is unquestionably our ancestral seat; the heads of our family there reside, respected and esteemed, and emitting a most agreeable odour’. Turkish tobacco is brightly coloured, sweet tasting but weak, while Latakia [a Syrian

province] is ‘aristocratic, enervated, [and] listless’ (p. 72). Holland is ‘respectable’, Java ‘volcanic’, and the German ‘a poor relation whom we are loath to own, with a most prolific growth – which poor relations always have’ (p. 72). There is some knowing commentary on how ‘boxes, brands, and labels are all imitated, or made up by the junior clerks out of the Spanish dictionary’ (p. 72), and how, through the use of additives ‘there is quite a Borgia system of poisoning administered to the British public, under pretence of the pipe of peace’ (pp. 72–73). Yet for all the cigar speaks, it is the male consumer who is ultimately in control:

But, alas, alas, I am in the hands of a purchaser; it is well that my story is told; for my existence will be but for a few minutes longer, and then my ashes will be scattered on the winds! (Anon. 1858: 73)

The shift from tobacco to its associated objects speaking (but surprisingly not in the hugely popular ‘it-’ novels of the 18th and 19th centuries) mirrors the increasing familiarity the herb acquired as its ‘social life’ became more complex. The need for self-justification, though, became stronger as the health risks associated with tobacco – alluded to even as far back as the 17th-century plays – were more authoritatively documented. The *Chambers’ Journal* piece, for example, was prompted by a number of articles querying the wisdom of smoking that the *Lancet* medical journal had recently published. Dis-ease over the long-term consequences of smoking grew with the introduction of machine-produced cigarettes at the end of the 19th century and the deeper inhalation into the lungs these new forms of tobacco consumption permitted. The stage was set for tobacco to speak more stridently – through cigarette advertising, a walking talking cigarette, and finally as an inner voice for someone trying to give up.

Welcome, Mr Butts!

Cigarettes were never as straightforward a commodity as pipes and cigars. The slang terms by which cigarettes became known – ‘little white slavers’, ‘coffin nails’, ‘fags’ reflect a knowing irony and tension inherent in their use – with ‘the sublime’ (Klein, 1993) came the need for ‘sublimation’ of their addictive properties and the risk that their use might involve a significant future payback. Eddie Bernays, Freud’s nephew, was quite willing to put his uncle’s knowledge and mastery of the unconscious to corporate use in spinning public opinion in cigarettes’ favour with no apparent moral scruple beyond furthering ‘the bottom line’. His particular skill was in ‘going domestic’, maintaining an illusion of individual human agency while engineering increased profits for his business clients in any way possible. Bernays is particularly known for his numerous ploys to engineer consent amongst women to start smoking. From the 1920s onwards, in a clever PR strategy undertaken in the interests of cigarette marketing, the big tobacco companies, keen to get more women to light up, symbolized smoking for Western women as a ‘torches of freedom’ issue (Brandt, 2007: 84–85; Tye, 2002). Women’s smoking was linked to the ‘ascendancy of the visual’ (Tinkler, 2006: 6) as a complement to the verbal. If not speaking, cigarettes could therefore communicate with their publics, either overtly or subversively, through the increasingly sophisticated medium of advertising, although

it is striking that they never seem to have talked directly to potential consumers. Schivelbusch (1992[1980]: 186) discusses how ‘as tobacco advertising evolved, we see how it became increasingly detached from the thing or product it represented ... With cigarette advertising, the item itself had become largely irrelevant.’ Indeed, having cigarettes speaking – in advertisements, for example – might have been an alarming reminder of the all too Faustian bargain their use represented.

Only in 1989 (19 April 1989, to be exact), when the cartoon rookie advertising executive Mike Doonesbury was approached by RJ Reynolds and asked to work on promoting their products to teenagers, have I found a cigarette that speaks – Mr Butts. Butts, a giant, talking cigarette, represents the tobacco industry, ‘always smiling, always lying’ (Wiener, 2010). He takes part in a congressional hearing concerning the ban on cigarette advertising (27 June 1990) in which he claims ‘the ban is unconstitutional ... People have a right to know which image their cigarette brand projects ... The ban will bring chaos! Cowboys will start smoking Virginia Slims! Blacks will smoke white brands!’ He then travels to the Middle East on a recruitment drive.

A marine company commander’s Iraq memoirs recount how

during Desert Shield, as a show of support for the troops, several tobacco firms had shipped complimentary cigarettes to Saudi Arabia. Trudeau had mocked it in his comic strip as he portrayed Mr Butts ... handing out smokes to the soldiers in the desert.

One soldier declined Mr Butts’ offer for fear of dying of lung cancer.

‘Lung cancer?!’ Mr Butts exclaims. ‘Hey, I hate to tell you this, but you’re a soldier. You might not be alive twenty *minutes* from now! Why worry about twenty years from now? Besides, you can always quit.’ (Folsom, 2006: 249)

However, Mr Butts’ finest hour was when he appeared on the cover of *The Nation* magazine on 1 January 1996, delivering a Federal Express box with a cheery ‘Hello? Anyone Home?’ As Weiner (2010) puts it, at this point ‘Mr. Butts crossed over from the comics to real life’, since in 1994, Stanton Glantz, a university tobacco researcher, received a Fedex box with the return address ‘Mr. Butts’.

The box ... contained 4,000 pages of documents that one of the world’s largest cigarette makers – Brown & Williamson (B&W) – later claimed were stolen from its files. B&W, the nation’s third-largest tobacco company, makes Kool, Pall Mall, and Lucky Strike, among other brands.

These documents proved that the tobacco corporations had known for 30 years that nicotine was addictive and that smoking causes cancer, information that was deliberately withheld from the public in a conspiracy of silence (Haapanen, 2003).

Tobacco as inner voice

Tobacco itself only speaks again in public in the 21st century – but this time not as a great and puissant god, but as an inner voice in the head of Richard Craze, a dedicated smoker intending to quit. His popular self-help book is in diary format, starting with the day he

watches a nature programme about the bizarre lifecycle of the *Ribeiroia* parasite lifecycle in the Everglades and has an epiphanal moment or trigger (as it tends to be called in smoking cessation work). 'Tobacco is just another parasite with a bizarre breeding cycle. I am just the host for it. The more I smoke, the more it gets planted. A successful crop trading its strange pleasure for increased growth' (Craze, 2003: 6). (In a second TV programme, a *Hymenopimecis* wasp larva feeds off a spider, injecting it with a hallucinogenic anticoagulant which causes it to spin a strange web which becomes the larva's cocoon.) Over the next three months, Craze reflects on his smoking history, health, family history of premature smoking-related deaths (something which seems to silence the Voice), the tobacco industry and his inner conflicts, such as how smoking is both 'cool, grown up, relaxing, enjoyable and smart. But it is also life threatening, dirty, smelly, addictive, uncool, expensive and unfair on others.'

Unusually, while admitting that both people and corporations are hosts helping tobacco to spread, he considers 'the tobacco corporation bosses are as much its victims as us, the poor smokers at the end of the chain.' Tobacco, of course, is unimpressed with these analogies. Speaking to Craze in a voice like the actor Leslie Phillips, it challenges, cajoles, and seeks to undermine his resolve at every turn:

'I'm not a parasite' [it says], 'I don't reproduce in your lungs. I don't live in you as a plant of infection. I am a gift from the gods to give you pleasure, ease your pain, help you relax, protect you from colds and chills, make you fear less and enjoy more. I am your friend.' (p. 36)

Tobacco suggests various strategies whereby Craze could have a cigarette by choice so as not to feel a failure should he crack, or become a secret smoker so that he can continue to smoke without others knowing. The book ends at 100 days without a triumphant sense of addiction conquered and cravings overcome. 'Will I go back to it?' asks Craze. 'I don't know, I really don't know' (p. 106). The Voice reveals its most menacing aspect at this point:

'You will smoke again. There is no doubt about that. I am your Dark Lord and you will obey. It is only a question of time. I will catch you off guard one lonely cold winter's evening and you will come back to me. You will return to the fold and I will be triumphant.' (p. 105)

The 'question of time' became irrelevant three years after the book's publication, however, as Craze died of a heart attack aged 56 (Anon, *The Times*, 1996).

Discussion

We have looked at key examples of tobacco speaking (or remaining silent) from the earliest literature in English to the present day. We have seen it presented as an alien god, a drink, and latterly as an all too present inner voice, while in between its paraphernalia (but not tobacco itself) have spoken in its favour, as a pipe, justifying tobacco for the support it offers to English plantations and trade, and as a cigar attempting to educate its gentleman readers on the nature and safety of its diverse forms. In the 20th century, the cigarette, personified in cartoon format as 'Mr Butts', offered a defence of its activities

in the US Congress, Iraq and elsewhere. One thing these examples demonstrate is that non-human objects speaking is nothing new, despite the attempts of Tsing, Holbraad and others to suggest there is something postmodern and avant-garde in the notion of their doing so. The 18th century, in particular, was a time when things on the page started speaking as never before, and various explanations have been offered for the rise and popularity of object narratives at this time. I shall go on to consider the explanations given for why the object narratives arose when they did, under the headings 'sociological' and 'philosophical', before developing one of my own, which I shall call 'anthropological' and which accords tobacco a far greater agency in its own silence and the speech of others than has hitherto been recognized.

The sociological explanations revolve around the development of the new market system in the 18th century, something which 'made English men and women uneasy' (Lynch, 1998: 96) and which the object narratives served to humanize and soften. Commodities were presented as having human qualities too, and in the case of many of the wildly satirical stories of the people they observe, their moral compass is more adroit than that of their frequently 'less-than-human' owners. We could also look to Marx in expanding the importance of the market. Marx himself was an inveterate tobacco user – he reported to his son-in-law that '*Capital* will not even pay for the cigars I smoked writing it' (Kiernan, 1991: 184). He was no stranger to the animacy of the non-human either, seeing the hidden powers of objects as deriving from the point where they shift from having 'use-value' to when they become commodities with 'exchange-value'. 'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (Marx, 1977[1867]: 163). Marx coined the term 'commodity fetishism' to mock the political economists of his day who saw it as natural and inevitable to measure the value of things by money. So enchanted were they by economics' elaborate symbol systems – money, debt, property rights, prices, etc. – they could conveniently ignore the labour which produced them, and the profit by which they gave political and economic dominance to a small class of property owners through their sale. For Marx, a commodity had mystical, spectral, magical qualities that lay outside concrete experience. Thus a table, on becoming a commodity,

changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (pp. 163–164)

Just as 'primitive' people were said to attribute magical powers to objects such as stones, wood carvings or weapons, Marx saw economists as motivated by a belief that spirits lurk in physical currency and move markets by magic – mysterious forces beyond human control. Commodities are 'like gods', Marx said – created by us (people) but appearing to us as an alien force that rules our lives.

People were becoming inured to the market system in the 18th century, and hence the pipe's retort in Smart's poetic fable that the consumption of tobacco aided plantations and trade would have had strong resonance. This was also the period during which the

slave trade was at its height, but the commodification of the slave and the diminished value accorded his or her labour in the brutal conditions of the colonial tobacco fields was conveniently effaced in the way the product was advertised in Georgian England (Molineux, 2007). Perhaps tobacco was never invited to speak directly in the 18th and 19th centuries for fear it might say too much? And for all Marx was interested in turning tables and invisible powers, he never actually claimed a speaking role for commodities. As Derrida (2012[1994]: 157) points out, for Marx ‘the autonomy lent to commodities corresponds to an anthropomorphic projection. The latter *inspires* the commodities, it breathes the spirit into them, a human spirit, the spirit of a *speech* and the spirit of a *will*.’ A more philosophical explanation for why things started speaking so vociferously focuses on the preoccupation of 18th-century thinkers with the question of ‘sentient matter’. Opinions were divided over whether sentience came from the soul, in which case humans (or, for some people, God) were the only source of agency in this world. Alternatively, if Man were nothing more than matter and thinking occurred in and through the brain, the boundaries between the human and the non-human became less clear. The logical complement to such a conclusion was that senseless matter might also be capable of some degree of sense, perception and thought. Nowka (2006) finds the term ‘material agency’, first used in William Jones’ essay *First Principles of Natural Philosophy* in 1762, remarkably similar to how the concept is understood by Science and Technology Studies scholars today. Locke, in his (1690) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, suggested it was impossible to determine whether thought occurs in our souls or in some matter ‘fitly disposed’ for thought in our brains, independent of any kind of metaphysical entity (4.3.6). The implications of this possibility for conceptions of the soul and the divine were huge and somewhat heretical (Nowka, 2006: 26). Are people complex pieces of organized matter sharing the attributes of all bodies (as the so-called monist ‘free thinkers’ argued) or do people have an immortal soul with spiritual attributes (as the dualist ‘immaterialists’ believed)?

Maintaining ‘the ontological privilege of humanism’ (p. 59), as the dualists were wont to do, required an acceptance of Nature as passive and under the dominion of Man. The chemist Robert Boyle endowed a lecture series with the intention of reconciling science with the rational belief in God and the ‘vulgarly received notion of nature’ espoused by the free thinkers. The 1692 lecture in this series was a sermon by Richard Bentley titled *Matter and Motion cannot Think: or, a confutation of atheism from the faculties of the soul*. ‘Sensation and Perception are not inherent in matter as such’, Bentley argues, ‘for if it were so; what monstrous absurdities would follow? Every Stock and Stone would be a percipient and rational creature’ (p. 13). The authors of object narratives took the bathos of the objects’ stories and turned it into entertaining fiction for their human readers.

I have presented a more contemporary, anthropological analysis that incorporates occasions when tobacco has spoken in English literature. Going back to the thing itself, rather than sociological or philosophical explanations, offers one further speculation on the mysterious absence of tobacco from the ‘it-narrative’ genre that took England by storm between the 18th and 19th centuries, namely its very ability to ‘distill eloquence and oracle upon the tongue’. Paradoxically, to engage in the facetious notion that the non-human (be it commodity, coin, plant or animal) can speak is simultaneously to accept the plausibility that, in a singular, objectively real world of multiple meanings, it cannot. The

material agency whereby a table can dance, a pipe can speak or a cigarette can make a FedEx delivery is perhaps too true to life in the case of tobacco, where the hybridity of tobacco-persons and tobacco-corporations makes it only too easy, as Craze found, for the plant to 'speak'. By incorporating literary examples where tobacco and its paraphernalia have literally been given an imaginary, ventriloquized voice I embrace, rather than diminish, the potential for anthropology to incorporate not simply alternative worldviews, but alternative, subjunctive worlds in which "existence" covers everything both actual and potential' (Heywood, 2012: 148). This, of course, is a political act in the subaltern universe of things, given Holbraad and others' vociferous arguments for them to be allowed to speak. What we have found, however, is that we cannot assume that, when things do speak, the voice elicited will be diminutive and congenial, like that of Tsing's matsukake mushroom spore. Where tobacco has spoken, as found in this article, it speaks with the power of Tomkis' 'great and puissant God', makes sovereign claims over other 'drinks', and becomes a dark and strident schizophrenic voice in the life of somebody trying to give up. However, in the centuries between the vocalizations identified in this article, the most convenient fiction, I have suggested, was that tobacco – in the form of paraphernalia that are the result of human production and service (or 'use-value' to humanity) – was the servant of those objects and the people who used them, rather than their ontologically prior progenitor or co-creator, respectively. Object narratives – the personification of the non-human, and its converse, the objectification of the human – can sometimes say more about things that are silent than about the things that speak.

Postscript

But what of my own empirical investigations into the voice of tobacco, based on the five *Nicotiana tabacum* plant cultivated in my back garden? I nurtured them from seed bed to pots and open ground, protecting them from slugs and other vermin, helping them grow into the magnificent specimens they had become by the end of the first season before the winter frosts hit. The following year, I used the tiny seeds collected from their seed pods to repeat the cycle. Despite my care and attention to their presence, however, I must agree with Vogel's (2006: 168) discussion of his own attempts to engage with nature: 'I have listened carefully, I think, and I hear nothing.' Of course, it could be, in Vogel's paraphrase of a complex argument, that 'if we listened carefully, and expanded our conception of what speech and language involve, we would come to see, or rather to hear, that nature and natural entities in fact do speak, and so do deserve moral respect' (p. 145). Questions such as whether some lack the ability, or a sufficiently broad conception of language, to recognize that nature speaks are of course unanswerable, a kind of ontological trump card. Yet assuming that speech and morality are somehow intertwined, what moral respect is due a plant and its acolytes which, through its hybrid relationships with humans and corporations, has been responsible for the premature deaths of more regular users than two world wars and a host of epidemics combined? The reanimation of tobacco, for centuries held in the grip of a shared ideology that was only too happy to perpetuate the notion that it was a passive commodity about which 'you have a choice', opens the door to fresh perspectives on a plant that may deserve a voice that, unlike a matsukake mushroom spore, is less than benign.

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