

Intervention Symposium:

“The Sanitization of/via Populism during the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Mist at the End of the Tunnel: Sanitation Tunnels and Populist Desire

Sophia Jaworski

Department of Anthropology

University of Toronto

sophia.jaworski@mail.utoronto.ca

Human speech produces thousands of airborne droplets per second that drift for up to 14 minutes, every droplet potentially carrying COVID-19. Imagining this drift, weeks into the pandemic, hundreds of sanitation tunnels appeared around the globe. Typically up to 15 feet long, tunnels are large enough to walk through comfortably while pushing a shopping cart. Fine aerosolized spray surrounds you from multiple directions, leaving a light residue on clothing and exposed skin. These dystopian structures are variously used at border terminals between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, market entrances in Belgium, India, Mexico and Chile, and entrances to stadiums in Israel.[1]

Sketching tunnels’ exposure, scope and significance, I problematize the presumed safety of tunnel mist petrochemicals, and consider examples of unprecedented combinations of AI surveillance, exposure, and labour disciplinary regimes. In May 2020, the World Health Organization warned of sanitation and disinfectant use, and exposure to harmful levels of chemicals, stating that tunnels are not effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 (WHO 2020). While many tunnels stopped being used in response to this guideline, as of Winter 2021, many still remain.

Given that sanitization tunnels provide no medical benefit, why did they become so prevalent throughout the pandemic? Just as Nicholas Abrams’ piece in this collection on Karenized

memes exemplifies how the sidelining and victimization of essential workers can occur through metaphorical sanitization of moral discourses, sanitization tunnels, too, conceal sanitizing attitudes that assume the working class' unhygienic state in the name of workers benefit. I argue that in all cases, these performances of sanitization constitute claims to authority through a paternalism that presents as populism – populism, in both the “vertical” sense that it claims to exist for the “worker’s benefit”, and in the “horizontal” sense that it performatively constructs working-class citizens as “unclean” (Brubaker 2019).

Building on this collection of overlapping timeline moments in the contradictions of populism during the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider how tunnels not only expose the financialization of toxicology, but also sanitize populism by preemptively sanitizing the political impulses of lower class workers through a paternalism that presents as being for their benefit. While private companies promote rhetorics of mass sanitization, delayed and fragmented responses from governments indicate a tacit endorsement of the uneven stakes for workers. The practice of mass spraying corresponds to a pattern of nations with larger far-right political presences, and relies on both a reactionary affect of safety and scientism. Ironically, rather than actually bolstering group immunity, spraying maintains the ways uneven petrochemical exposures continue to structure industrial and manufacturing production and corporate profits under late-capitalism. In this sense, the tunnels promote what some have termed “authoritarian capitalism,” further reinforced by the fact that many emergent tunnel technologies are buttressed by AI.

Foregoing the longstanding relationship between chemical exposure and worker oppression in European and North American industrialization, populist sanitation has tended to globally intensify during war or pandemic. Fogging technologies have a military legacy in the development of chemical gas use during WWI and WWII (Sloterdijk 2009). Yet fumigation is also classist, long targeting populations deemed to be “unclean”. Migrant labourers and racialized individuals are historically overrepresented in sanitary occupations such as street cleaning and janitorial work (Zimring 2015).



Source: “Putin uses disinfection tunnels to screen guests”, Reuters, 17 June 2020;
<https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/putin-uses-disinfection-tunnels-to-screed-id714424924>

Existing since the early 20th century, sanitizers and disinfectants are not meant to be aerosolized or inhaled.[2] “Safe for use on surfaces” does not mean tested for daily embodiments, concentrated forms, or poorly ventilated spaces. Short-term health effects of tunnel spray listed by the WHO include eye and skin irritation, bronchospasm, nausea and vomiting. Guidelines occlude long-term low-level consequences, as well as how exposure intensifies other forms of unevenly distributed petrochemical embodiments. Many of the aforementioned petrochemicals can be sensitizers, increasing the likelihood of future reactions to low-levels of similar substances.

Mists, sprays, and fogs do not scientifically “work”. Failing to kill the virus on the surface of the body nulls the rationale behind their main function, which is to prevent surface transmission. Clothing fibres cannot adequately absorb spray, and it does nothing to identify asymptomatic infection. Moreover, context specific concentration, duration of exposure, and choice of compound

may not be regulated or monitored. Secondary by-products, such as chloroform, can result depending on atmospheric temperature, humidity, wind, and other ambient levels of pollutants.

Rather than materializing protection, sanitizing mists and fogs satisfy a populist desire for mass-sanitization, as a response to viral outbreak. As technoscientific artefacts of pandemic control used in labour contexts, tunnels have an especially problematic relationship to chemical exposure. Experimental atmospheric embodiment is required for access to labour income. This practice is nonconsensual, potentially harmful, and does not align with medical and epidemiological guidelines for prevention or protection.

The capacity for state governance of chemical exposure is altered, when national ability to regulate composition and mode of exposure is superseded by the infrastructures of international consumer product markets. Beyond supply and demand, entrepreneurial endeavours capitalizing on viral prevention continue to expand. The disinfectant chemical market is projected to grow by several billions of dollars between 2019 and 2026 (Global Market Insights 2020).

It is difficult to trace the scope of tunnel usage relative to the first two-thirds of 2020. As media coverage dwindles, use now largely occurs in private workplaces, commercial centres, and residences. However, international exchange and accessibility only continues to increase for the average consumer. As the pandemic has grown, improvised privately-funded development of tunnel technology and marketing has made quick and large profits. Hegemonic platforms, such as Amazon, fuel profiteering from tech-start ups. You can purchase online hundreds of different disinfectant tunnels, chemicals and personal foggers for as little as \$50 CAD.

Employers may draw upon transnational populist discourses of group immunity to justify chemical workplace compliance. Tunnels both promote and co-opt leftist rhetoric about protecting vulnerable workers. Compliance is made hyper-visible, when workers are required to pass through disinfection tunnels in order to access workplaces, public services, and transportation. While differing from the conspiracy theories and anti-mask views of the far-right, which blame immigrants and migrant workers for the virus, spray practices still reinforce pandemic populism by normalizing unnecessary chemical use and facial recognition technology in the name of worker health.

What are the future stakes of this chilling precedent that combines chemical exposure with AI technology, surveillance, and worker productivity? Consider Novid, a sardonically named company, who has partnered with local governments to test fogging booths throughout Liverpool in the UK. Novid's website explains that the booths "can include temperature monitoring, facial recognition and the possibility of linking our booth to an on-site time and attendance package" (https://www.novid.ie/?page_id=61). AI technology that is part of newer tunnels claims to store information for future contact tracing, and is packaged as "attendance management". The sales pitch continues, stating that the technology "provides a molecular level penetration to the entire outer volume of the disinfected person". The spray, ProtectUs, is an eco-friendly biocide: 100% biodegradable and food-grade, yet containing lactic acid and phenoxyethanol as active ingredients, the latter being a glycol ether solvent often used as a preservative in cosmetics that has a number of known health effects at higher levels. Phenoxyethanol can have adverse effects on the central and peripheral nervous systems, and is a skin irritant. It can be contaminated with trace amounts of 1,4-dioxane, a known carcinogen. An Italian company advertises the "Sanitary Gate" and its accompanying "Go-Safe Gate", which checks individual temperatures, and uses facial recognition technology for mask compliance (<https://www.giulio barbieri.it/en/outdoor-products/retractable-tunnels-portable-carpports>). And MIT partnered with Dubai company Derq to repurpose AI surveillance technology created for vehicle traffic safety. It was subsequently used to monitor social distancing and face mask compliance in Dubai Silicon Oasis, a tech community that houses 77,000 people (<https://mediaoffice.ae/en/news/2020/June/08-06/Dubai-Oasis-Selicon>).

Ruha Benjamin (2019: 43) writes of how AI algorithms too often promote "coded inequities". For her, it is especially hard to hold accountable behind-the-scenes coders and platform developers who animate and embed their own racialized biases into AI facial recognition technology, leading discriminatory surveillance practices to become "more deeply embedded within the sociotechnical infrastructure of everyday life" (Benjamin 2019: 18). In this view, combining face mask and tunnel spray compliance with populist rhetorics of protection, does not protect so much as it further reifies how technological programming can perpetuate forms of discrimination in the name of scientific innovation. As Ferda Demirci's and Jesook Song's essays

in this collection show, social inequities are also maintained by how capitalist ills are metaphorically sanitized in state imperatives for self-subsistence and economic stability via gestures of redistribution.

The conceit of sanitation and disinfectant tunnels is that they produce “respiratory publics”, insofar as spraying the populace is justified as part of strict pandemic prevention compliances that require novel inhaled chemical exposures (Nguyen 2020). While appropriate apprehension surrounding hugs and handshakes is widespread, existing research maintains that there is a very low likelihood of transmitting COVID-19 via surfaces such as clothing and skin. As the first part of the pandemic showed, popular sociopolitical imaginations of infection clearly held greater sway over populist-influenced improvised sanitation practices than empirical knowledge.

Endnotes

[1] Other countries using tunnels include: Malaysia, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Argentina, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, Colombia, Brazil, France, Brunei, Ecuador, Egypt, Kenya, the Dominican Republic, Singapore, Spain, Scotland, Thailand, Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, Mozambique, Russia, the UK, Yemen, Venezuela, and Albania.

[2] Chemicals reported to be found in sanitation tunnel sprays include ammonium, sodium hypochlorite (chlorine based bleach), hydrogen peroxide, alcohols, glutaraldehyde, ethyl alcohol and N-Alkyl aminopropyl glycine.

References

- Benjamin R (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity
- Brubaker R (2019) Populism and nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism* 26(1):44-66

Global Market Insights (2020) Surface disinfectant market projected to surpass \$8.5 billion by 2026. *GlobeNewswire* 2 September

<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/09/02/2087481/0/en/Surface-Disinfectant-Market-projected-to-surpass-8-5-billion-by-2026-Says-Global-Market-Insights-Inc.html> (last accessed 17 March 2021)

Nguyen V (2020) Breathless in Beijing: Aerial attunements and China's new respiratory publics. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 6:439-461

Sloterdijk P (2009) *Terror From the Air*. Cambridge: MIT Press

WHO (2020) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces in non-health care settings. *World Health Organization* 16 May <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-cleaning-and-disinfecting-surfaces-in-non-health-care-settings> (last accessed 17 March 2021)

Zimring C (2015) *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*. New York: New York University Press