

Skunk: Olfactory Violence and Morbid Speculation

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During the 2020 protests responding to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, Elijah McClain, and other African American individuals, Twitter and other social media saw frequent calls for the deployment of Skunk water – a weaponised malodorous regularly used by Israeli police forces – against US protesters. Unsatisfied with the tear gas, rubber bullets, metal batons, tasers, pepper spray, and flash bang grenades already being deployed against civilian protesters, commentators fantasised about a weapon that had primarily been used to target Palestinian people: ‘Time to break out the Skunk Water Cannon. F these rioters.’¹ Such comments frame counterinsurgent

¹ @Blackler_C. ‘@Sassafras_Knob @KenWebsterII @selvestekjetil I wish we would try this... <https://t.co/6phwQC7Ybf>’. Twitter. 1 June 2020. https://twitter.com/Blackler_C/status/1267489601859604481; @flatbush711. ‘Where’s The Skunk Water ??????’ <https://t.co/6phwQC7Ybf>.

violence inflicted by police and self-appointed vigilantes as a spectator sport. In a historical moment when both the coronavirus and police violence have made glaringly evident the racially uneven distribution of the conditions for breathing, conservative commentators advocate the use of a crowd-control weapon that would make the air unbreathable for protesters worldwide who have interpreted the last words of George Floyd, Eric Garner, and countless other targets of antiblack violence – ‘I can’t breathe’ – as a call to action. Although Skunk’s developers present it as a humanitarian, ‘less-lethal’ weapon, these online fantasies evoke the ways in which the malodorous is also *more-than-lethal* in its unbearable, dehumanising effects on civilians’ bodies and minds.

While there has been no record to date of Skunk water being deployed on US soil, fantasies about its use are grounded in fact. In November 2014, during a series of protests and popular uprisings in the wake of the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department purchased fourteen 1.4-litre canisters of Skunk from Mistral Security, Inc., a company that provides security technologies to the Department of Homeland Security, law enforcement

Co/5seitfNQWI.’ Twitter. 1 June 2020. [@realMarryFanning](https://twitter.com/flatbush711/status/1267789688653447168). ‘@realDonaldTrump Where are the SKUNK BOMBS that disperse violent rioters – Israel uses them!!!’ Twitter. 29 May 2020. [@P3ENG](https://twitter.com/realMaryFanning/status/1266544748807979011). ‘@NYPDnews Time to break out the Skunk Water Cannon. F these rioters.’ Twitter. 15 July 2020.

agencies, and private security firms.² The purchase of Skunk by several US police departments is just one facet of the ongoing exchanges between the US and Israel that have fuelled the militarisation of the police in both settler states. Since 2002, thousands of US police have been trained by Israeli officials in both Israel and the US in programs funded by the Department of Justice, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.³ The US Campaign for Palestinian Rights states that ‘the Israeli military trains US police in racist and repressive policing tactics, which systematically targets Black and Brown bodies.’⁴ Skunk’s movement from Israel to the US also exemplifies the significance of capitalist commodification to this transnational circuit of police militarisation. From its inception, Skunk was intended to

² Patrick Tucker, ‘After Ferguson Unrest, St. Louis Police Bought Stink Weapons to Launch at Protesters’, *Defense One*, 11 August 2015, <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2015/08/after-ferguson-unrest-st-louis-police-bought-stink-weapons-launch-protesters/119044>

³ Edith Garwood, ‘With Whom are Many U. S. Police Departments Training? With a Chronic Human Rights Violator’, *Amnesty International USA*, 25 August 2016, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/with-whom-are-many-u-s-police-departments-training-with-a-chronic-human-rights-violator-israel>

⁴ @USCPR_. ‘The Israeli military trains US police in racist and repressive policing tactics, which systematically targets Black and Brown bodies. The recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery are examples of racialised, systematized violence.’ Twitter. 28 May 2020. https://twitter.com/USCPR_/status/1266113526545944576?s=20; see also ‘The Knee-on-Neck, Long a Staple of Israel’s Occupation of Palestine’, *TRTWorld*, 30 May 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-knee-on-neck-long-a-staple-of-israel-s-occupation-of-palestine-36787>

be field-tested on unconsenting and uncompensated Palestinians – a process that has demonstrated both its effectiveness and its supposed non-toxicity as a ‘less-lethal’ anti-crowd technology. How does a necessarily imprecise chemical weapon with unknown health effects that was developed in support of a settler colonial nation with a bleak record of human rights abuses get used, praised, and marketed as a humanitarian technology?

This essay interrogates how Skunk water’s developers and advocates have leveraged the legal distinction between morbidity and lethality. We argue that Skunk capitalises on the construction of the ‘non-lethal’ in international law, which opens up a space for pre-emptive violence that is speculative in both its legitimisation and its ongoing commodification. We begin by discussing the broader history of airborne biological weapons – particularly tear gas – in international law. We argue that the legal construction of ‘less-lethal’ weapons not only obscures the violence and health risks associated with morbidity, but also valorises these as modes of humanitarian intervention.⁵ We then analyse marketing materials for Skunk alongside accounts of its embodied effects, focusing on how this ‘less-lethal’ weapon simultaneously trivialises and weaponises the visceral, trans-corporeal qualities of olfaction.

⁵ For example, Sari Bashi of Human Rights Watch recommended in 2018 that, instead of using bullets, Israel ‘can and should exhaust’ ‘nonlethal means, such as tear gas, skunk water, and rubber-coated steel pellets’ to secure its border. Sari Bashi, ‘Don’t Blame Hamas for the Gaza Bloodshed’, *Human Rights Watch*, 22 May 2018 (repr. from *Foreign Policy*), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/22/dont-blame-hamas-gaza-bloodshed>

Less-Lethal Loopholes

Skunk's Israeli manufacturer Odortec, the Israel National Police, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) present malodorants as the apotheosis of more than a century of 'less-lethal' weapons development. 'A non-lethal, non-toxic liquid spray, Skunk is the most innovative and effective riot control method available. And there simply are no countermeasures,' reads Israel's 2018–2019 *Homeland and Cyber Defense Directory*.⁶ Skunk is promoted as a cost-efficient and 'ecofriendly' means of dispersing 'the most determined of violent demonstrators.'⁷ According to a *BBC News* story published in 2008, the year of the IDF's first reported use of Skunk, 'the beauty of Skunk – if beauty is the right word – is that it is said to be completely organic.'⁸ Interviewed for the story, Superintendent Ben Harosh maintains that 'it's totally harmless, you can even drink it.'⁹

To understand the transnational career of this euphemistically labelled 'organic' 'spray', a joint venture between police and military agencies, we must situate Skunk in relation to the legal history of chemical agents. Although simple chemical weapons have been used occasionally since antiquity, the rise of chemical warfare is

⁶ The Israel Ministry of Defense, SIBAT—International Defense Cooperation, *Israeli Directory 2018–19: Homeland and Cyber Defense* (Tel Aviv: Hoffen, 2018), 112. <http://www.sibat.mod.gov.il/Industries/directory/Documents/Sibatdir-HLS-en2018-19.pdf>

⁷ The Israel Ministry of Defense, *Israel Directory 2018–19: Homeland & Cyber Defense*.

⁸ Wyre Davies, 'New Israeli Weapon Kicks Up Stink', *BBC News*, 2 October 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7646894.stm

⁹ *Ibid.*

commonly attributed to World War I, when poison gases such as chlorine and mustard gases were diffused to break the stalemate of trench warfare.¹⁰ From its inception, poison gas was prohibited by international law under article 23(a) of the Hague Convention of 1899 ('it is prohibited to employ poison or poisoned arms').¹¹ The Geneva Protocol of 1925 explicitly outlawed asphyxiating and poisonous *gases*.¹² The most recent arms control agreement with the force of international law is the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which the United States signed in 1993 and ratified in 1997, and which Israel signed in 1993 but has yet to ratify.¹³

While the CWC prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons toward warfare, it allows them in 'types and quantities' consistent with the purpose of domestic law enforcement. The use of less-lethal weapons by US police has been a pivotal component in a counterinsurgency project that preemptively suppresses challenges to the state's legitimacy and its monopolisation of means of violence.¹⁴ Whereas

¹⁰ Anna Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas: From the Battlefields of World War I to the Streets of Today* (New York: Verso, 2017), 15–24; Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 9–14.

¹¹ Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its Annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, 1899.

¹² Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, 1925.

¹³ Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, 1993.

¹⁴ Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Politics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 13.

international uses of chemical weapons were deemed ‘repugnant to the conscience of mankind’, domestically, such weapons, restyled as riot control agents (RCAs), were part of an effort to redeem US policing after the violent responses of police and soldiers to Black freedom protests in the 1960s.¹⁵ ‘Stamped with the politically significant though inaccurate name “tear gas”,’ Stuart Schrader explains, chemical weapons ‘conferred the appearance of sensitivity to political criticism, while also enhancing the ability of police to conduct their business of fabricating social order unfettered.’¹⁶ Skunk, an allegedly ecofriendly, organic, and potable liquid, keeps alive what Anna Feigenbaum describes as ‘the continued fiction that riot control agents are safe – that these are law enforcement equipment and not chemical weapons.’¹⁷

As an exception to the CWC, the use of chemical weapons by police constitutes an ever-expanding zone of unaccountability or severely limited accountability. As the rubric of *law enforcement* balloons to accommodate the illegal actions of police, so, too, does the rubric of the *domestic* begin to expand. In Vietnam, the US deployed tear gas, supposedly a ‘less-lethal’ means of preventing ‘crowd-based violence’, in situations where no crowds were present, and with lethal consequences.¹⁸ More

¹⁵ Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, 1993; Schrader, *Badges Without Borders*, 192.

¹⁶ Schrader, *Badges Without Borders*, 194. See also Amory Starr, Luis Fernandez, and Christian Scholl, *Shutting Down the Streets: Political Violence and Social Control in the Global Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 44.

¹⁷ Anna Feigenbaum, ‘Riot Control Agents: The Case for Regulation,’ *SUR* 12, no. 2 (2015), 109.

¹⁸ Schrader, *Badges Without Borders*, 192, 209–210.

recently, US border patrol agents fired tear gas across the country's border with Mexico, and the IDF has deployed various chemical weapons, including Skunk, in East Jerusalem.¹⁹ There exist some regulations around the trade of the chemical compound most commonly referred to as 'tear gas' (2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile, or CS) at the national and international levels, but the extent of their implementation varies from country to country. Likewise, the policing guidelines of the United Nations 1990 Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials (BPUFF) are unevenly observed. As Feigenbaum notes, 'Because less-lethal weapons are not well regulated under international law or trade policies, it remains relatively easy for security forces to acquire large quantities of them without public scrutiny or human rights oversight.'²⁰ As a result, Israel has been able to export arms tested on Palestinian civilians to around 130 countries.²¹ Although the foreign-domestic divide regulates how policymakers render military and police action toward civilians acceptable in legal and moral terms, Schrader observes, 'these weapons' travel [undermines] this divide's very regulatory power.'²² It is through this contradiction – the foreign-domestic divide

¹⁹ 'How Tear Gas Became a Favorite Weapon of US Border Patrol, Despite Being Banned in Warfare', *Democracy Now*, 28 November 2018. https://www.democracynow.org/2018/11/28/how_tear_gas_became_a_favorite

²⁰ Feigenbaum, 'Riot Control Agents', 109.

²¹ Yaya Hawari, 'Another Israeli Weapon for Collective Punishment', *Al Jazeera*, 12 August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/5/12/the-skunk-another-israeli-weapon-for-collective-punishment>

²² Schrader, *Badges Without Borders*, 195.

holds when it comes to authorising chemical weapons, but not when it comes to regulating them – that Skunk becomes an object of speculation.

Morbid Speculations

The legal construction of ‘less-lethal’ as a permissible degree of harm has opened a limitless space for speculative investment. As Aimee Bahng observes, both financial speculation and speculative fiction are ‘forms of extrapolative figuration that participate in the cultural production of futurity.’²³ Increasingly dependent on simulations and ‘premediation,’ the security industry is also oriented by speculative processes that imagine possible futures in order to prevent them.²⁴ The development, testing, and marketing of Skunk exemplify how the legal framing of ‘less-lethal’ violence makes space for entangled narrative and financial speculations that simultaneously target and extract value from colonised and racialised populations.

Even a brief overview of the history of Skunk illustrates how its deployment, putatively in the name of maintaining security, has been entangled with the marketing pressures to test delivery technologies, gather data (for example, about lethality, strategic effectiveness, and public opinion concerning its use), and demonstrate potential applications in the field. Skunk’s first documented deployments in the Palestinian villages of Bil’in and Na’alin in 2008 were described by the head of the Israeli police department for

²³ Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

²⁴ Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

technological development as ‘monitored exercises’.²⁵ The ‘experiment’ used Palestinians as test subjects. According to Wyre Davies, even then the Israeli police force had ‘high hopes of turning Skunk into a commercial venture and selling it to law-enforcement agencies overseas.’²⁶ Each documented deployment of Skunk since – including, in the spring of 2021, against Palestinians protesting forced evictions from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood²⁷ and Palestinians protesting a Jewish ultranationalist rally at Damascus Gate,²⁸ both in East Jerusalem – should be viewed as an experiment that draws information and value from its subjects’ suffering. The IDF has experimented with a range of delivery mechanisms, from the ‘backpack spray devices’ that were initially used in 2008 to a ‘truck-mounted water cannon’ and a drone that can drop Skunk directly onto crowds.²⁹ These delivery devices progressively increase both the physical and the ontological distance between the security official and the target population. Meanwhile, security forces have also experimented with dilution: ‘at times, security forces have used the trucks to spray plain water, or water containing

²⁵ Quoted in Rania Khalek, ‘Will Israel’s ‘Whiff from Hell’ Weapon be Used to Crush US Protests?’ *Rania Khalek: Dispatches from the Underclass*, 7 June 2015, <https://raniakhalek.com/will-israels-whiff-from-hell-weapon-be-used-to-crush-us-protests>

²⁶ Davies, ‘New Israeli Weapon.’

²⁷ Hawari, ‘Another Israeli Weapon for Collective Punishment.’

²⁸ ‘Skunk Water Used Against Palestinian Protesters’, *Euronews*, 18 June 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/06/18/skunk-water-used-against-palestinian-protesters>

²⁹ Michael Crowley, *Chemical Control: Regulation of Incapacitating Chemical Agent Weapons, Riot Control Agents and Their Means of Delivery* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 42.

a very small amount of the Skunk liquid.³⁰ In 2017, India tested Skunk water on a group of volunteers – including Central Reserve Police Force personnel – in Delhi with the hopes that the weapon would be effective in suppressing protests in Kashmir and Jammu;³¹ although the volunteers tolerated the stench reasonably well, this incident represents another speculative application of the malodorant designed to ascertain the scope of its effectiveness. In both 2017 and 2020, Israeli police deployed Skunk against Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) protesters in Jerusalem – a move that broadened the demographic base of unconsenting test subjects beyond primarily Palestinian targets.³²

The development of Skunk has been driven by speculative security narratives. Ruth Pinney, a retired Naval biochemist who registered a patent for a malodorant similar to Skunk in 2001, recalls that her invention was ‘inspired by an anecdote of an enemy militia attacking a US embassy (in an unnamed country) by using pregnant women as a defense mechanism; the US troops could not

³⁰ Sarit Michaelo, *Crowd Control: Israel's Use of Crowd Control Weapons in the West Bank*, trans. Shuli Schneiderman (Jerusalem: B'Tselem, 2013), 22.

³¹ This was widely reported in finance news outlets. See, e.g., ‘Amazingly, Stinky Bomb Skunk Fails to Deter Protesters in India’, *Financial Express*, 27 July 2017. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/amazingly-stinky-bomb-skunk-fails-to-deter-protesters-in-india-reason-will-leave-you-stunned/781897>

³² See ‘Israeli Police Knock Over Innocent Woman with Skunk Cannon’, *Daily Sabah*, 27 November 2017. <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2017/11/27/israeli-police-knock-over-innocent-woman-with-skunk-cannon> and ‘Dozens Arrested as Israel Police Break up Haredi Anti-Draft Protest in Jerusalem’, *Middle East Monitor*, 27 January 2020. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200127-dozens-arrested-as-israel-police-break-up-haredi-anti-draft-protest-in-jerusalem>

retaliate without hurting the women.³³ Whether or not this narrative about human shields was based on a historical occurrence – the authors have found no record of such an incident – it leverages the vulnerability of pregnant women to frame a weaponised malodorous as a paradoxical form of humane violence. Although it invokes both the precarity of the womb and the futurity associated with unborn children, the anecdote actually serves to normalise a modality of sensory violence that has frequently been inflicted upon pregnant women and children in Palestine.³⁴ Singling out the pregnant body as an icon of vulnerability also de-emphasises the complex, temporally dispersed modes of ‘slow violence’ through which an environmental and sensory weapon like Skunk – whose stench lingers for weeks on bodies and in spaces including schools, hospitals, playgrounds, and homes – could affect both reproductive health (for example, through the intergenerational transmission of

³³ Aleesa Cohene, Phone Interview with Ruth Pinney (23 October 2019). While Pinney’s malodorous differs from the yeast-based formula used in Skunk, her work likely influenced the development of the weapon deployed by the IDF. The US Department of Defense has also been exploring military applications of stench; see Elmar Schmeisser, Kimberly Pollard, and Tomasz Letwoski, ‘Olfaction Warfare: Odor as Sword and Shield’ (Aberdeen: Army Research Laboratory, 2013) and David Hambling, ‘US Military Malodorous Missiles Kick up a Stink’, *New Scientist*, 30 May 2012. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21428676-800-us-military-malodorous-missiles-kick-up-a-stink>

³⁴ A 2017 study of 455 Palestinian Bedouin children found that 30% of them had been exposed to Skunk Water during confrontations with Israeli forces (Salwa Massad, Umayyeh Khammash and Rosalyn Shute, ‘Political Violence and Mental Health of Bedouin Children in the West Bank, Palestine: A Cross-Sectional Study’, *Medicine, Conflict, and Survival* 33, no. 3 (2017): 196).

trauma) and capacities for social reproduction (for example, through the closure of schools affected by Skunk).³⁵ Drawing on field interviews with pregnant Palestinian women in Occupied East Jerusalem, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian has noted how, through everyday exposures to tear gas and other forms of violence, the ‘occupation of the senses invades space, time, the womb, and the sensory experiences of birthing mothers.’³⁶ Directly contradicting Pinney’s opportunistic invocation of pregnant women, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) attorney Anne Suciú wrote in a 2014 letter to the Chief Commission of the Israeli Police that, ‘the use of Skunk liquid in densely constructed residential areas is likely to harm small children, sick people, elderly people, and pregnant women.’³⁷

Marketing materials for Skunk rely on the proliferation of vague, speculative security scenarios reminiscent of Pinney’s anecdote. As Shimrit Lee explains in her analysis of corporate mediations of less-lethal weapons, marketing images blur the line between reality and simulation, detaching insurgency from local histories and contexts: ‘for example, a video produced by [TAR Ideal Concepts] to spotlight Skunk technology begins with a mash-up of footage from protests and riots around the world, though the video’s producers provide no indication of

³⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, ‘The Occupation of the Senses: The Prosthetic and Aesthetic of State Terror’, *British Journal of Criminology* 57, no. 6 (2017): 1292.

³⁷ Quoted in H. S. Salem, ‘Sources of Indoor Air Pollutants in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Including Skunk Liquid, Household Cleaning Products, and Others’, *Journal of Environmental Pollution and Control* 2, no. 1 (2019): 9.

when, where, or why they took place. The intended sensation that is manufactured is a global and pervasive instability.³⁸ Mistral enacts a similar strategy, speculating that the weapon's 'applications include, but are not limited to, border crossings, correctional facilities, demonstrations, and sit-ins.'³⁹ By presenting these scenarios as commensurable sites of potential instability, Mistral deracinates them from locally and institutionally specific histories of racial and colonial violence. In an effort to downplay the racist implications of these recommended 'applications,' Mistral illustrates them with an image of a Black police officer spraying an unseen target. Nevertheless, the racist and settler colonial conditions of Skunk's development, testing, and marketing are made explicit in popular calls for its deployment in the US. As Nick Estes (Sioux) reports, in 2016 a helicopter contractor named Toby Schweitzer sent an email recommending the use of Skunk to North Dakota probation officers employed at the #NoDAPL protests: 'forget the wall[.] Just put sprayers all along the southern border with sensors. Might have saved lots of store fronts in Baltimore and Ferguson. The US needs to get some of this for the looters in any out of control demonstrations. Israelis [sic] crowd control method. NOW WE ARE TALKING. BRILLIANT.

³⁸ Shimrit Lee, 'Simulating the Contact Zone: Corporate Mediations of (Less-Lethal) Violence in Israel, Palestine, and Beyond,' *Jerusalem Quarterly* 75 (Autumn 2018): 27.

³⁹ Crowd Control—Skunk, Mistral Security, n.d. <http://www.mistralsecurityinc.com/Our-Products/Skunk/Crowd-Control>, last accessed 21 July 2020.

Skunk spray!’⁴⁰ Schweitzer’s thinking moves seamlessly between sites of racial and colonial violence: from Israel’s indiscriminate and punitive deployment of Skunk in Palestinian communities to the US-Mexico border (where Schweitzer’s speculative technology of Skunk diffusion anticipates the deployment of tear gas by US border agents in 2018–2019); from the uprisings against police brutality in Ferguson (where Black protesters were often depicted as ‘looters’) to the Oceti Sakowin camp where protesters opposed the environmental effects of the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

Such real and imagined scenarios of counterinsurgency have been a key component in Skunk’s marketing strategy. The product’s publicity materials perpetuate a human rights framework wherein deaths are the only significant statistic, and other, less quantifiable modes of trauma and debilitation become simultaneously obscured and *revalued* as techniques of ‘psychological deterrence.’⁴¹ As Neve Gordon has explained, Israel’s use of Palestinian bodies and spaces as unconsenting test subjects for ‘less-lethal’ weapons including tear gas, Skunk, and a sound cannon called the Scream enables weapons developers to ‘establish or demonstrate some “truth” about their products and services, which both “certifies” them and provides

⁴⁰ Quoted in Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019), 250.

⁴¹ ‘Skunk: Non-Lethal Malodorant’, *Mistral Security*, n.d. <http://www.mistralsecurityinc.com/Portals/MistralSecurity/FINAL%20-%20MSI%20Skunk%20Product%20Brochure%205.16.13.pdf>, last accessed 21 July 2020.

them with credit.⁴² Meanwhile, the construction of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations – as well as people protesting in solidarity with them – as violent security threats creates potential scenarios that enhance Skunk's perceived value *whether or not it is ever actually deployed in the US*.

More-than-Lethal Consequences

Skunk stresses the status of the 'less-lethal' designation as a misnomer. This designation not only ignores the pre-existing conditions and different degrees of exposure that could in fact make weapons like tear gas or Skunk lethal, but also fails to account for social consequences that are *in excess of* what lethal weapons achieve. In rehearsing the contention that Skunk has not caused any fatalities across its many deployments, the weapon's marketers obscure diverse, everyday forms of morbidity. Although it is marketed as a 'less-lethal', humane, and environmentally sustainable product, Skunk is in fact used as an indiscriminate 'collective punitive measure' on political dissidents and their communities and surrounding environments.⁴³ Since 2008, Israeli forces have used both canisters and high-pressure water cannons to deliver Skunk water to 'Palestinian crowds, homes, hospitals, hotels, schools, mosques, shops, restaurants, yards, trees, entire neighbourhoods, and even [a] funeral

⁴² Neve Gordon, 'Israel's Emergence as a Homeland Security Capital', in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory, and Power*, eds. Elia Zureik, David Lyon, and Yasmeen Abu-Laban (New York: Routledge, 2010), 158.

⁴³ Michaelo, *Crowd Control*, 36.

procession....⁴⁴ Both the weapon's name and many of its proponents trivialise the sense of smell, bringing the long history of Western discourses of (racialised) deodorisation to bear on the task of minimising olfaction's capacities for violence. Yet, according to Marijn Nieuwenhuis, Palestinians associate Skunk's long-lasting effects with 'experiences of humiliation and both personal and social exclusion.'⁴⁵ That is to say that the victim's respiratory system isn't the only one to register the effects of Skunk, and that some of Skunk's more lasting effects are revealed once other people find themselves in proximity to the victim.

To dismiss olfactory damage is not only to minimise uncertainties concerning exposure and trauma in vulnerable populations for whom pre-existing conditions are endemic, but also to neglect smell's profound ties with limbic system, hippocampus, memory, emotion, identity, sense of place, chemically mediated affective attunement (or 'entrainment'⁴⁶) among groups, and material ecological relations. If smell is how we come to know our past – or how we come to feel attuned with a place or community⁴⁷ – then what are the psychological impacts of the intense and prolonged olfactory discomfort inflicted by Skunk? Racial hierarchies in the West have often been

⁴⁴ Salem, 'Sources of Indoor Air Pollutants', 13.

⁴⁵ Marijn Nieuwenhuis, 'Skunk Water: Stench as a Weapon of War', *Open Democracy*, 17 December 2017. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/skunk-water-stench-as-weapon-of-war>

⁴⁶ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 9.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Louisa Dahmani et al. 'An Intrinsic Association Between Olfactory Identification and Spatial Memory in Humans', *Nature Communications* 9 (2018): 1–12.

sustained by olfactory hierarchies (where both those who emit odours and those who value them are perceived as atavistic), and Skunk's 'less-lethal' status masks the deliberateness with which it inscribes olfactory difference onto racialised groups already stereotyped as olfactory deviants. Palestinians, Black people, and Latinx migrants have all been subjected to discourses of olfactory difference that mobilise (socially constructed) embodied knowledge to reproduce racial hierarchies.⁴⁸

Skunk perpetuates what Jasbir K. Puar, in the context of Palestine, calls 'debilitation', or the 'slow wearing down of populations'.⁴⁹ Puar's primary example of debilitation is 'the right to maim', a right expressive of sovereign power that extracts value 'from populations that would otherwise be disposable'.⁵⁰ Promoted as a humanitarian practice, shooting to maim rather than to kill leaves 'many civilians "permanently disabled" in an occupied territory of destroyed hospitals, rationed medical supplies, and scarce resources'.⁵¹ Much like maiming, Skunk spraying is promoted as a more humane alternative to other uses of force. Though mostly invisible, Skunk's effect is nonetheless dramatic. The scented violence of Skunk contributes to what Puar calls 'the slowing down of Palestinian life'.⁵² 'While the West Bank is controlled largely through

⁴⁸ On olfactory racism, see Mark Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xiv.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 136.

checkpoints', Puar writes, the Gaza Strip is suffocated through choke points: 'the intensification of policing and control thus happens through, and not despite, "disengagement" and disinvestment, not through checkpoints but through choke points.'⁵³ The use of Skunk, a weapon that seizes the respiratory tract and olfactory system, extends choke points deep into the bodies of East Jerusalem's inhabitants. Puar describes choke points as the product of a 'control society', and we may likewise understand Skunk as a technology through which the population control and surveillance achieved by the checkpoint come to saturate atmospheres and bodily cells.⁵⁴

Skunk simultaneously reproduces and extracts profit from a debilitating and humiliating atmosphere designed to perpetuate racial and settler colonial power relations. In doing so, it exemplifies the simultaneously material and cultural modes of atmospheric racism articulated by recent work in critical race and Indigenous studies including Renisa Mawani's analysis of 'racial atmosphere', Christina Sharpe's theorisation of the 'weather' of antiblackness, and Kristen Simmons' (Southern Paiute) provocative commentary on 'settler atmospherics'.⁵⁵ Simultaneously targeting human sensoria and environments, Skunk materially inscribes racial difference; it

⁵³ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 135; Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

⁵⁵ Renisa Mawani, 'Atmospheric Pressures: On Race and Affect', unpublished manuscript cited with author's permission; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 102–134; Kristen Simmons, 'Settler Atmospherics', *Cultural Anthropology*, 20 November 2017. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1221-settler-atmospherics>

differentiates groups by seeing to it that they literally don't breathe the same air. Skunk's international marketing capitalises on the legal grey area opened by the concept of 'less-lethal' violence, which leaves already vulnerable communities open to debilitating practices of narrative and financial speculation.

Conclusion

In the early 2020s, the escalation of Israeli attacks on Palestinians and the frequency of counterinsurgent violence against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) people in the US have confirmed what has for decades been an open secret: chemical weapons were never really banned. Their confinement to domestic use might have in fact aided their proliferation. For one, as we have recounted, the domestication of chemical weapons has coincided with their rebranding as humanitarian; a state's decision to debilitate rather than kill has come to signal benevolence and soberness, ratifying sovereign power through its deferral. What is more, 'domestic use' continues to connote measured and contained action even as what counts as domestic gets inflated through colonial occupation and border policing. While attacking the senses through chemical weapons is nothing new, the social life of smell – from its role in aesthetic judgments like disgust or abjection to its role in the management of racial difference through norms of hygiene – is such that we must understand Skunk as extending the reach, both temporally and semiotically, of crowd-control measures. Noxious smells that linger entail isolation and stigmatisation – not merely the short-term dispersal of crowds but

the medium-to-long-term obstruction of encounters and gatherings of all kinds. Skunk's promise of isolation and stigmatisation, we have contended, incites narrative and market speculation, with each deployment serving as a test for future deployments and thus driving up the weapon's (perceived) value.

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