

The Mask

Masking is a form of hiding. Masking is a way to reveal who we really are.

Historically in the West, public masking was connected to being untrustworthy and having something to hide. Those who masked in large groups were often engaged in acts or behaviors that they did not wish to be connected to their lives. Masking was suspect, and, in many places, illegal.¹ The mask has always served as a form of protection, but often that which was being protected was one's identity and, by extension, one's character, one's reputation, and indeed, one's freedom. In the current pandemic, the opposite is true: wearing a mask in public is a prosocial behavior that is heavily encouraged in the service of public health and safety. Wearing a mask signifies adherence to emergency orders and concern not for oneself but for others. In the context of public health, masks are less for protection from the virus *to* the wearer than protection for others from the possibility of contracting the virus *from* the wearer. This has always been so: despite xenophobic assumptions made by Westerners unfamiliar with Asian masking etiquette, those who don medical masks do it for the sake of others rather than to protect themselves.

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1. There has not yet been a full-length book treatment of the history of anti-masking laws, but there are a number of legal articles and opinion pieces that deal with the rich primary source material. See, for example, Timothy Cuffman, "The Inexorable Anti-Mask Movement," *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* (20 Mar 2018), <http://blogs2.law.columbia.edu/jtl/the-inexorable-anti-mask-movement/>; Melissa Gira Grant, "A Brief Criminal History of the Mask," *The New Republic* (21 Apr 2020), <https://newrepublic.com/article/157370/brief-criminal-history-mask>; Robert A. Kahn, "Anti-Mask Laws," <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1169/anti-mask-laws> (accessed 9 Sep 2020); Jay Stanley, "As Facial Recognition Expands, Demand The Right To Wear A Mask," <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jaystanley/facial-recognition-right-to-wear-a-mask> (accessed 9 Sep 2020).

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There are other forms of public protection as well: in the context of protests for Black lives, the mask can protect participants from facial recognition software and other police surveillance, as well as providing some coverage from pepper spray and rubber bullets. Masking in the pandemic is a way to save lives: by protecting the medically and economically vulnerable from transmission, and by protecting the structurally vulnerable from state-sponsored violence. Masking in the pandemic is a way to save Black lives.

Except that for Black men in the US, mask wearing remains indexed to the violence and crime that are often read onto Black bodies as part of the racist history and attitudes of this country. Yet again, Black men's bodies are always already vulnerable, always already wrong. Masks evoke different racial implications, especially for Black men and Muslim women. Some Black men are still—*still*—asked to remove their masks in stores, on public transportation, in communal gatherings. As Rashawn Ray has pointed out, Black families engage in self-protective signaling in multiple aspects of life to appear less threatening and dangerous.² Masking is no exception; signaling strategies include wearing brightly colored masks, choosing masks with smiley faces or soothing patterns, making sure to be as clear as possible that this is a mask of health not hazard.³ The publicly worn mask—once a symbol of illegality and suspicious behavior—has become an object of veneration, an emblem of safe-keeping, a sign of collective action. And within this community of care, some are, still and always, left out.

Many US states and a number of countries have laws prohibiting the wearing of masks in public, particularly during protests and other forms of mass gatherings. The laws are designed to protect people by ensuring that everyone can be visually identified, thus discouraging violent and aggressive acts. New York State's 1845 anti-masking law was enacted during the Anti-Rent

2. *COVIDCalls 5.15.2020 Sharrona Pearl and Rashawn Ray—Facemasks, Race, & Injustice in COVID-19*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZStsNBwkTCk&t=3265s> (accessed 9 Sep 2020); Derrick Bryson Taylor, "For Black Men, Fear That Masks Will Invite Racial Profiling," *The New York Times* 14 Apr 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/coronavirus-masks-racism-african-americans.html> (accessed 6 Dec 2020). See also "Opinion: This Is Why Some Black Men Fear Wearing Face Masks during a Pandemic," *Washington Post*, 8 Apr 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/editorial/opinion—why-some-black-men-fear-wearing-face-masks-during-a-pandemic/2020/04/08/5a897b6a-78bf-4836-94cd-c3446dc06196_video.html (accessed 9 Sep 2020).

3. For the classic work on self-protective signalling strategies, see Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

War, which saw a tenants' revolt demanding land reform, sometimes with violent clashes. Anti-masks laws in that context were framed to limit mass revolt by making people's faces visible in order to make their lives vulnerable.⁴ In the twentieth century, many of the masking laws were designed to limit the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, who use masking in their costuming and rituals.⁵ These coverings make the participants in these violent and deadly terrorist groups anonymous to those they attack, and limit the possibility of perpetrators being identified after the fact. More recently, anti-mask laws were evoked during large-scale political protests like Occupy on the grounds that they limited police enforcement and order, harking back to the tenants' revolt of the mid-nineteenth century. Anti-masking laws have been successfully challenged in a number of US states on First Amendment grounds of freedom of speech and association.

Mandatory masking ordinances have also been challenged. Notably, the San Francisco Anti-Mask League of 1918 protested the mandatory public masking enacted during the influenza pandemic.⁶ Anti-masking can be weaponized by those seeking to do damage just as much as Klan masks have been.

Protesting mask wearing—and refusing to wear them—was a bad idea then. And it's a bad idea now. There are the epidemiological reasons: proper mask wearing can cut down on transmission by 80 percent or more. There are the social and societal reasons: in this moment, it is more important than ever to protect others, particularly the most medically vulnerable amongst us, who are often the most vulnerable in multiple other ways. There are the technological reasons: masks afford greater freedom and safety during protests. The racial disparities and failings of face recognition systems have led major tech companies—including IBM, Google, and Microsoft—to halt the sale of their systems, but many companies continue to develop these lucrative products, and many police forces continue to buy them. There are the anti-racist reasons: if mask wearing is the absolute norm, requests for Black men to remove their masks in stores, on public transportation, and in public gatherings are highlighted even more clearly as explicitly racist.

4. Kevin Drew, "CNN.Com—Justice Not so Clear-Cut over Laws Directed at Klan—Jan. 23, 2004," <https://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/01/23/antimask.ruling/> (accessed 9 Sep 2020).

5. "Unmasking the Klan," Southern Poverty Law Center, 15 Sep 1999, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1999/unmasking-klan> (accessed 9 Sep 2020).

6. For more on this, see Christine Hauser, "The Mask Slackers of 1918," *The New York Times* 3 Aug 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html> (accessed 6 Dec 2020).

There are the symbolic reasons: a mask is both an object of protection and care, and an ethos of it. Because the mask is not just a symbol. It has become a weapon. Decrying mandatory public masking as an infringement of rights and a challenge to masculinity, anti-mask groups publicly demonstrate against wearing masks. While not wearing masks. In so doing, they protest collective responsibility. They protest communal protection. They facilitate the spread of a disease that disproportionately affects Black people. Their exposed faces are subject to facial recognition and other surveillance, but that doesn't matter: no one is trying to chase them down, or that is not what keeps them up at night. Their exposed white faces are always, in the current system of structural discrimination, already right: their exposed faces are safe.

From detection. Not from transmission.

Other faces are vulnerable to both. So let us view the mask as a form of racial activism: in protests, to protect faces from detection; in public, to protect the vulnerable; in politics, to resist those who unmask and compromise our collective health. And let us live with this expanded symbology of the mask and use it to undo histories that think masks only with criminality, with hiding, with harming. Let us think masks—be they medical masks worn by those giving us health care; homemade masks worn by those enacting collective care; religious masks worn by those engaged with their spiritual care; sports masks donned by those adopting collision care—as a way to take care.

The history of the mask has always been one of protection. In this moment, let us reimagine whom we are protecting—and how.