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Source: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2, VIRAL (SPRING/SUMMER 2012), pp. 76-96

Published by: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333437>

Accessed: 25-03-2020 00:19 UTC

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Masked States and the “Screen” Between Security and Disability

Mel Y. Chen

I open with a typical poster from a hospital emergency room that advises on contingent measures taken to prevent the spread of H1N1, showing calm, gently smiling eyes behind a biological mask secured around a blue surgical cap (fig. 1). The poster reassures us—acknowledging that the sight of a mask *could* be frightening—that masks, benevolently, not threateningly (“you may see others . . . it does not mean that someone has the swine flu”), protect everyone.

Such evocation of all possible parties does not at first seem a standard security apparatus, but in fact its language mimics the all-embracing appeal



FIG. 1: Poster in hospital emergency room, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2011: “Masks Help Protect Our Patients, Visitors and Employees.” Photo by the author.

of “for your protection” slogans found today in many security genres, from extraordinary extensions of airport search techniques to digital passcode access. This mask, when worn in health or medical contexts, is urged as necessary protection from the transmission of disease, while other masks are coded as threat—for instance, facial coverings that occlude individual features potentially thwart facial-recognition surveillance software. Masks can, in these versions, render the face unmappable to security operations of the vulnerable state.

In light of heightened contagion scares in the contemporary United States, we might consider the medicalized mask as a newer prosthetic disability form in light of the concurrence of modern public health conventions, the increasing potential for rapid transnational communicability of disease, and the significant incidence of breathable pollution for the common citizenry. But before drawing such a conclusion, we might ask: what counts, and doesn’t count, as a mask; and what is, and isn’t, disability? Mask forms and figurations are multiple and complex and deserve a closer look; the value of “disability” is similarly mobile, attachable variously to human bodies, notions, and abstract entities.

From a broad viewpoint, facial masks certainly symbolize more than illness or its possibility. They also suggest (and have historically been used to symbolize) the “horror” of disfigurement, the use of ritual, the protection of self and other. Indeed, much work has been done in drama studies and anthropology on the theatrical and ritual effects of masks. In today’s political environment, how does the role of masks in obscuring the face work within a national public? And, observing that masks can incite complex emotions from various perspectives, how does the visage itself enable, disable, or compound affect?

For the purposes of this experimental essay, “the mask” is considered quite openly. Visiting an array of mask citations (public announcements, journalistic photos, artistic re-creations, television series), I discuss questions of security and sensitivity before turning to a consideration of Levinasian facial ethics as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s articulation of masks. I propose that masks could be understood as roving, material instances of a *screen*, one that bars access to the visage while functioning as a device of projection for others. In specific sites, such a screen functions epistemologically to translate for or against the face, where the face is understood as a prioritized site of human engagement.

To clarify, this essay intends to undo any singularly assured “mask”

visual trope by running among diverse exemplars (with all their anthropological, horroristic, and ethnic trappings) to map their sensible geographies, and to ask what their often polarized and racialized valences might tell about the investments of nationalistic self-imagining. Ultimately, my hope is that the masks appear less as concrete objects per se than as screens with affective resonance. Thinking through Deleuze and Guattari and others, such screens are what I will claim most stably undergird projects of securitized, nondisabled whiteness. I discuss how this screen today might bear ever greater affective intensities, since it occupies a primary symbolic position within overlapping discourses of security.

Security

Commonly mouthed within the post-9/11 U.S. climate is the notion that heightened security efforts, including the recently extended USA PATRIOT Act, are instituted for the “protection” of U.S. citizens. This occurs against a global terrain in which today’s empires are finding that effective protection is hard to come by; that is, military and strategic “security” are unstable. Contrary to a prevalence of accounts that speak to the ever growing military counterparts of an ever present war on the part of the United States and, to a lesser degree, European and UN nations (and also to an associated, also perpetually growing prison-industrial complex), I wish to attend to what I see as a quiet construction of weakness—not weakness as attenuated masculinity, but weakness in disability terms—a kind of threatened *immunity* wherein the “body” of the nation is vulnerable to attack. On the part of these Western states, this weakness is the requisite underside of frenzied war-making. Given that economic and military security have in many ways merged as critical interests of state formations, it is telling that U.S. economic sovereignty is being interpreted as increasingly fragile (indexed by such events as the historic Standard and Poor’s credit downgrade of August 2011) in the same period in which surveillance of “terrorism” grows to unprecedented levels.

We can then ask: When immunity is historically premised on a collective body such as the state, then when that state is felt to be either incomplete or impaired, what are the prostheses mustered to protect against threat? If we were to map the biopolitical links between individual and national body, what are the confluences between ways that people and nations protect against visible and invisible threats? In this section,

I consider masks as emblematic of new kinds of prostheticized integrities that supplement the human body in its defense against threats (where a prosthesis is defined as an “artificial” limb to replace a missing or impaired part of the body). I argue that masks also quietly emerge in the symbolic economies of national “defense,” wherein mask symbolization is deployed to project a nation’s own broken state onto certain racialized others.

Masks both symbolize and effect security; by both representing and doing, they are performative technologies of a sort. As such, they bespeak action and transformation. Yet at the same time, they cover, conceal, and hide, and in so doing simultaneously perform a very different sort of vulnerability. They suggest the robbing of sentience as a cost of that security, and thus a radically different model of personhood. This is precisely why the ideological fear felt by certain Americans intensively focuses on Islamic facial and head coverings, in that these garments’ implication of apparently self-cancelling personhood seems to perform the threat of Arab collectivity to Western democracy—one that is, like socialism, felt to be violent to U.S. self- (individualistic) representation and distinction.

Among the most potent (and hence most threatening) forms of “masks” for contemporary U.S. politics is the burqa, along with other Muslim facial coverings. The image of the burqa has been made potent not simply, of course, because it is just any old facial covering. It is connected to a racialized construction of Islam, and to a perverse femininity. But I also believe that its appearance as a symbol of international strife at this moment makes sense in terms of the embodied, gendered imagination of security. Rather than focus on the “veil” as an ordinary garment, or even as an instrument of pseudofeminist democratic expansionism, both of which have been extensively discussed (see, e.g., Yegenoglu 1998; Scott 2010; Mahmood 2004; Ahmed 2011), I consider here its curious entanglement in discourses of security.¹

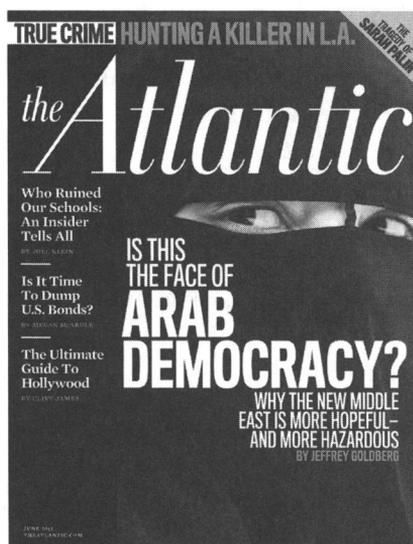
The cover of the June 2011 issue of the *Atlantic*, while it might first appear to rehearse a particular combination of “women’s rights” as a justification for the spread of Western political-economic systems, is a case in point (fig. 2). What doubles as the cover image and the background to stark white text is the image of a woman’s face in a niqab (Muslim headwear that covers most of the face), her eyes staring back at the viewer in the “direct gaze” style so often used in photojournalistic documentations of the “Third World” (see, e.g., Szorenyi 2004; Lutz and Collins 1993). In the cover story’s title, “Is This the Face of Arab Democracy?” the words

“Arab Democracy” appear in particularly large, bold capital letters. The letters deploy alarmist red on black, the inverse color scheme of that used for the “True Crime” banner at upper left, which announces coverage of a Los Angeles murder story (one that turns out to concern white-on-white crime). Words referring to threat are made explicit: the subtitle is “Why the New Middle East Is More Hopeful—and More Hazardous.” Within the cover story, by Jeffrey Goldberg, the templative notion that “Muslim women are oppressed,” employed with seeming abandon by politicians in the United States and Europe and sometimes forming part of an explicit strategy to legitimate war, is generally presumed to be valid (Goldberg 2011).²

The cover’s wider insinuation is not so much that a “hazard” to feminist civic values exists in the form of covered women under an unrecognizable patriarchal structure; it is rather that the covering is itself a threat to democracy, a threat that inevitably leads to terrorism. The title blurb reads, “As dictatorships crumble across the Middle East, what happens if Arab democracy means the rise of radical Islamism?” *Muslimah Media Watch*, a feminist Muslim blog, identifies this exploitative cover, humorously titling the blog entry “Arab Women: They’re in Niqabs, Gettin’ in Ur Democracy” (2011).

How do masks produce such judgment, if we could say that they did? It has been argued that, for one thing, they create distance. In a recent article on the aesthetic mediation of torture, including covering the face or

FIG. 2: Cover of the *Atlantic*, June 2011. Reprinted with permission.



head of victims, Marita Sturken (2011) describes distancing devices that support the “modes of innocence and comfort culture.” These devices, she argues, are necessary for the U.S. public to disavow the torture of innocent people, even as that torture is openly acknowledged. Central to her argument is the depersonalizing hooded figure, arms outstretched, in Abu Ghraib who achieved a kind of iconic status as martyrlike (evoking Christ). She credits that iconicity with creating a certain distance for the American “comfort culture” that becomes more accustomed to torture. Anne McClintock (2009) further reminds us of an underlying reason we see such coverings: masks are used as a sensory deprivation torture technique at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay. She notes, “There is a terrible tension here of the bright visibility of the scene and the unseeable darkness of the prisoner’s torment, the invisible obscene of their suffering” (65).

Does this image participate straightforwardly in Sturken’s culture of comfort (even if for self-reassurance)? Despite her sense that “in the image’s iconic status, it does not matter who he is” (2011, 429), the hooded figure, in my reading, must be racialized and thereby achieves affective ambiguity. Sturken passes too quickly over the protest poster variation of this image, created by Forkscrew Graphics, that she describes as putting the Statue of Liberty into a Ku Klux Klan hood. Presumably, this poster makes use of the fact that the Klan hood can be easily viewed in the United States as worn by the *perpetrator* of violence rather than by its victim. This iconic perpetrator of violence, the Ku Klux Klan, diverts violence to history even as it calls forth the association of a timeless symbol, the Statue of Liberty, with modern-day racism. A faceless symbol of the police state, for example, hooded riot police, does not enjoy the same symbolic consensus. Instead, Sturken prefers a somewhat deescalating reading of the figure as Christ-like.

In its nonwhiteness, it is difficult to see the hooded figure evoking only Christian martyrdom—even, as W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) argues, it was “as if the MPs at Abu Ghraib sensed that their mission was to realize America’s Crusade against infidels, its Holy War against the Unholy Terrorists, with the staging of an Arab man as a Christ-like sacrifice” (304). In my calculation, the assumed-to-be person of color under the mask stands for something else: literally, a veiled threat upon whom violence must be obligatorily—necessarily—unleashed.³ The icon in itself does not guarantee distance; some icons are proximating, enlivening, affectively valenced.

Sensitivity

Ed Cohen's (2009) recent work traces the history of immunity as an initially political/legal notion that was taken up into biomedical discourses.⁴ What is most interesting to me here is the translatability of this political notion into biopolitical understandings of self and world. On the basis of belonging to a worldly community predetermined by civic codes of face and faciality ascribed to Western possibilities of subjectivity, individual immunity gives way to a certain vulnerability. Yet, as Priscilla Wald notes in her theorization of "imagined immunities," epidemiological narratives resolutely align themselves in terms of national boundaries (2008, 65). We might consider a tension between political immunity and resolute sovereignty, on the one hand, and a felt vulnerability that codes as a state of emergency in Western regimes inchoately aware of their brokenness, on the other. Ultimately, concerns of health and political sovereignty come together and blend, seemingly irretrievably, in the heightened figure of the mask.

When discussing masks, then, it is fitting to discuss their involvements with disability discourses. Wearing a mask as an evident prosthetic "outs" a person who otherwise passes as nondisabled. It visibly marks as invisibly "damaged" (or at least, vulnerable) a body that might otherwise seem healthy. While some prosthetics "enable" or "restore ability" while remaining cosmetically indiscernible, others are evident, as is the cane or wheelchair; conventionally these draw attention to the disability. The chemically sensitive person's mask falls into this latter category.⁵

While multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) has often been regarded as peripheral or even external to conventional understandings of disability, Anna Mollow and others with MCS argue that it is appropriate to discuss this condition, like other disabilities, precisely in terms of access, despite the fact that "our requests seem to fall far outside the realm of what's 'reasonable'" (2011, 194). Although Mollow's excellent piece in a recent issue of *WSQ* does not mention—perhaps does not imagine it possible?—the mask, it is one rather practical way to approach, and protect oneself from, at least some of the threatening everyday chemicals in our environment. It is indeed a prosthetic in the sense that it is an extension of a chemically sensitive person's breathing apparatus, comparable in at least some ways to the prosthetic limb's operating as an extension of a partially amputated extremity.

In “The Other Arms Race,” David Serlin (2006, 49–67) writes a history of prosthetics particularly in relation to World War II male amputees. He points out that there exists a bifurcation of types of disability that have consequences for gender: “disability induced by modern technology or warfare,” on the one hand, subject to even higher valorization and secured masculinity because of service to nation or to industrial capitalism, and, on the other hand, “hereditary disability,” which subjects a disabled person to suggestions of effeminizing (or feminine) weakness (54).

Prosthetic masks, too, have gendered valences. Feminist artist Allison Smith, in her 2009 project *Needle Work*, painstakingly re-created cloth gas masks used in World Wars I and II. Their fragility, she has reported, was literally and figuratively palpable (fig. 3). Arguably, we can think of such masks as the first environmental prosthetics made en masse, linking them genealogically to the contemporary prosthetic practices of people with MCS in ways that mirror Serlin’s history connecting the timing of



FIG. 3: Allison Smith, *Needle Work*, 2010.
Re-creation of cloth gas masks. Photo
courtesy Allison Smith.

expanded prosthetic limb manufactures with disabilities due to World War II.

Smith points to these masks' "handmade quality, which seems to suggest simultaneously a level of loving care as well as functional inadequacy. . . . I have begun to see these objects as remnants of an as-yet unwritten history of needlework" (Smith 2009). In so doing, Smith restores the gendered making by women of the early cloth gas masks for provision to European and American males on the war front. Smith's work further demonstrates that across this historical reach back in time, certain things remain: the fragility, the faltering promise of the gas mask and its haunting transnationality as a symbol of a war against people—of whatever location—deemed criminals or war opponents.

In current culture, images of masks proliferate; they have become symbolic fodder for all sorts of imaginative posthumanisms. For example, consider a regular event in 2011 at Café Guru, a cosmopolitanized Indian-



FIG. 4: Poster for Cafe Guru, Contagious Behaviour event, Leeds, England, 2011. Photo by the author.

style restaurant and event venue in Leeds, England. Café Guru hosts an invite-only dance/entertainment evening called “Contagious Behaviour.” (fig. 4). The launch poster presents a young, apparently white female, with decorous swirls emerging from her head that look sometimes like oily hair, suggesting a punk aesthetic, sometimes like background decoration. She wears a chemical filter mask, with plastic cartridges, rubber noseguard, and fiber gaskets, of the general type used by painters and others who work with fumes. One end of the mask appears to be attached to a lit fuse. The typeface, with the raised lettering of a punch-style roll labeler, nostalgically evokes former eras, possibly the simpler techne of 1980s science fiction. That the wearer of the mask is a white female modulates the affective threat of the mask, fetishizing and aestheticizing it.

Interestingly, photo shoots from the events posted on the Internet show not young white women with chemical masks, as in the poster, but women wearing a different kind of facial covering: many women are wearing ensembles of fake veils (revealing the eyes) *and* bindis, both of which presumably have been provided to guests of the parties. Such coincident images draw on existing links between discourses of health, security, safety, religion, and sexuality.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (1997) point out the tendency among posthumanist theorists to consider virtual technologies as prostheses; according to the authors, N. Katherine Hayles “forgoes a discussion of disabled people’s more obvious status as ‘cyborgs’ in order to privilege the chosen prosthetic identification of computer hackers and video junkies” (8). In a site in which media are materially altering the felt world of its denizens, it is important to condition or delimit (as Hayles herself recognizes) the locatedness of the posthuman figure and its chosen prosthetic identifications, while the spread of media icons like the racialized woman in the burqa or niqab needs to be triangulated with race and disability both.

Genuine chemical (vapor) mask iconographies of the sort on the Contagious Behaviour poster, unlike that of the aestheticized and essentially ineffective surgical mask Julianne Moore wears as a woman suffering from MCS in the 1995 film *Safe*, necessarily build upon sites in which they were made en masse: military histories of wartime protection—in particular, the gas masks deployed as early as World War I to protect against poison and irritant gases. Yet MCS, building as it does upon a popularization of sick building syndrome, seems to bespeak neither war nor the physically disabling work of industrial capitalism, but rather the service-related office

jobs of late capitalism.⁶ It resolutely folds into imagined primary employments of middle-class white women. For all these reasons, it is not surprising that the iconic persona of MCS remains a white woman, a fact noted by Mollow.⁷

The iconic persona of multiple chemical sensitivity—someone like Moore’s economically privileged character in *Safe*—is also precisely *not* a man or woman of color, as much as the bodies who occupy present-day service economies have changed. The wearing of masks by white women or men, I argue, cannot quite arouse the kind of heightened, transnationalizing security sentiment that a woman of color (or a man of color, for that matter) in a mask might. For instance, an article titled “Fashionable MCS Terrorist Goes for a Bike Ride” (2008) in *The Canary Report*, an online publication about multiple chemical sensitivity, shows a photo by a masked male bicyclist with MCS of his reflection in a bus, with a quote in which he humorously contemplates the possibility that he might be perceived as a terrorist, but only with benevolence: “I can only imagine what the people inside the bus were thinking, probably something like ‘Well, it’s nice to see the terrorists are making an effort to be a little more fashionable now.’” One senses that the bicyclist’s whiteness is what makes merely humorous the possibility that this masked person with MCS could be perceived as a terrorist. His clear recognition of a likeness between masks, or his feeling that both are screens of a sort, does not lead to a meditation on the possible structural relationships—polarizations as well as resonances—between one person’s sensory protection and another’s sensory deprivation.

Indeed, discussions of masks in accounts by white women with MCS seem largely to have to do with their own chemical insecurity in an otherwise racially (though not always economically) secure world. There is no acknowledgment that one’s wearing a mask could arouse terror, or even a reading of hostility, in others. From the other side, there is no equivalent righteous pronouncement that such women need reveal their faces in an open society. For such use of masks is easily read as “functional necessity,” except when it is not—in the case of burqas. The juxtaposition of MCS masks and Muslim veils and the qualitatively different affects attaching to them suggest a different, yet curiously analogous, pairing of the kind that Lennard Davis offers in his consideration of the Venus de Milo as a register of the visual-psychic economies of ability discourses. For Davis, the Venus de Milo, with her missing limbs, facial disfigurements, “scars,” and missing

toes, is a specter of disability whose threat requires that the disability must be covered over and replaced with a corrective idealization of perfection; Davis notes that art historians have regularly overlooked Venus’s missing and scarred parts. But Medusa is a “poignant double . . . the disabled woman to Venus’s perfect body,” playing a different part in scopic regimes of ability and disability. Davis writes, “In this moment, the normal person suddenly feels self-conscious, rigid, unable to look but equally drawn to look. The visual field becomes problematic, dangerous, treacherous. The disability becomes a power derived from its otherness, its monstrosity, in the eyes of the ‘normal’ person” (1995, 132). The pairing in this essay is not obviously of one disabled person against another. Yet there is a way in which disability can itself double upon another form that may or may not be disabled. We can imagine in the preceding discussion of MCS masks and Muslim veils that one person’s disability prosthetic, read as protective device, can be “overlooked”—or, to be more realistic, redeemingly accommodated, at the cost of demonizing (or, indeed, disabling?) another’s—in the eyes of a Western “normal”—yawning and horrible “missingness.”

Returning to the promotional image for Contagious Behavior, Cafe Guru’s poster graphic runs roughshod over the division between chemical and biological, since a biological mask that would more directly link to notions of contagion either generally covers the entire face, in the extreme version, or is a simpler piece of synthetic cloth, rigid or slack, secured by an elastic band and with no valve. It is therefore quite unlike the hospital mask that opened this essay. I read the Cafe Guru mask’s contemporary conflation of biological and chemical toxic agents less as a sign of popular ignorance or a recognition of the fact that both biological and chemical agents can constitute threats, than as an overdetermination of tropes of immunity and the attraction of the mask’s ranging affective touch in a context of global political flux.

Screen

I have argued that masks are contested sites of security and disability. The term “masks” also, I contend, is a complicated one within debates about ethics and affect. For what *happens* to the face when it is masked? In his *Totality and Infinity*, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes of the ethical first importance of the face, in particular the primacy of the face-to-face encounter (1969, 194–219). The face itself, to Levinas, is phenomeno-

logically distinct and, indeed, is likened to a *force*, the capacity to affect; it affects even before being judged. The naked face presents a vulnerable other, demanding compassion in the ethical encounter. But taking this phenomenological abstraction to its limit, what becomes of the ethical encounter when—in the case of a mask—an altered face, a covered face, or a non-face, presents itself?

Here, Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* presents a compelling, if problematic, discussion of face and faciality in the context of Westernized culture. In their account, what counts as "face" is but a production of an "abstract machine of faciality," a machine that facializes many more things than heads: "The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face. . . . What accomplishes this is the screen with holes, the white wall/black hole, the abstract machine producing faciality" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 170).

For Deleuze and Guattari, then, not only is "face" a particular kind of material-discursive production, rather than a biological self-evident given, but also integral to this production is the surrounding screen: it is a determinative, calculative, generative "white" screen against which a "black" face emerges as a distinct hole. They write, "The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European, what Ezra Pound called the average sensual man." (196). They further explain that the production of such a Christ-like "face" creates the possibility for racist judgment against faces that do not resemble this idealized face. In her description of the hooded figure in Abu Ghraib as "martyric," Sturken (2011) claims it is because of iconicity that it doesn't matter (or matters less?) who is inside the hood. The concealment of a (racialized) face presumably permits the iconic image to float even more. But what kind of identity matters against what kind of nonidentity?

For Deleuze and Guattari, when a "mask" appears, it is merely the accouterment of the primitive. They breezily claim that for the primitive, face (and facial expression) symbolically means nothing and hence doesn't, or didn't, exist ("The mask assures the head's belonging to the body, its becoming-animal, as was the case in primitive societies" [181]).

Against their confident historicization of “the primitive,” I wish to affirm the material presence of the mask in contemporary society, a mask that continues to signal primitivity for believers in the Western political ideology’s creation of the modern moment in a way that neatly aligns with Deleuze and Guattari’s temporalization of the mask.

I see the mask in contemporary transnationalized security frameworks as a screen in itself, a screen of projection, and as a negative screen for what lies beyond it. It offers no vulnerability to a Levinasian ethics of encounter; it seems to insult that nakedness and, as such, stands as a figure of violence toward the idea of encounter itself. To others, the mask (as burqa) is a screen on Muslim women, seeming to cancel them in the eyes of Christian Westerners seeking to find Deleuze and Guattari’s White Man there instead; in other cases, a mask (as biological: antiviral, antivapor, or antiparticulate) for protection seems to threaten its viewer rather than simply affirm the possibility of the viewer’s own threat to the sensitivity of the person wearing it. The mask wearer has broken the civic pact necessary for *communitas*: you must offer the vulnerability of your face, because this is part of your contract.

The burqa has been seen as causing a rupture in that civic pact and has been the contested site of legal restriction in European nations such as France. An op-ed piece in the United Kingdom’s *Catholic Herald* in April 2011 was titled “Wearing the Burqa in Our Streets Is a Hostile Act: The French Are Right to Ban It.” The author goes on to say, “To be a society at all, we have to be able to see each other. That’s the beginning of any communication between individuals” (Oddie 2011). The author quotes another commentator: “Common citizenship involves trust, and trust cannot exist where one cannot see people’s faces in public. Obviously there can be necessary functional reasons for concealment—surgical masks, beekeeper’s helmets, extremes of cold—but concealment in normal circumstances in an open society amounts to a hostile act.” Still another quoted person points to the security threat of “the woman with a bulging shopping bag and a hidden face who is sitting opposite us in the Tube.” This writer identifies such functions as protection of the body undergoing surgery, protection of the beekeeper’s face from stings, and protection from the elements, but the quieter condition he imposes is one of exception. In normal circumstances, masks should not be worn.

What the opinions in the *Catholic Herald* do not acknowledge is that “normal circumstances” are subject to interpretation, and the author has

unwittingly absorbed the perspective that the United Kingdom is, to use Agamben (1998)'s words, in its own state of exception. "Normal circumstances" were the aesthetic goal, if not the true condition, of the postspill Gulf shores, and they are precisely why, for a time, the Latino disaster workers cleaning the spill in Louisiana were threatened by BP with losing their jobs if they dared to wear protection like masks and gloves, for fear the public would be aroused to "mass hysteria" (read: feminized weakness, psychological disability) upon seeing them (Kennedy 2010).⁸

We might therefore say that the mask-screen can operate negatively, precisely when what is at stake is the loss of *face* as the necessary translating mechanism for what is inside. In the case of the burqa, Islam—the United States' "unfathomable obscurity"—displaces idealized American affiliation amid a growing nationalist securitization via a communalism of the body, a biopolitical demand by which a body must become eminently accessible to others. The mask-screen in Western scopic regimes scrambles the affectivities of risk with its subjects and objects, resulting in violent social and physical acts of "protection."

Such politics of the screen, I suggest, is precisely what produces interesting *affective* coincidences that are not otherwise attainable between masks of torture, figures of terrorism like the "concealing burqa," and biological or chemical protection. All of these—what we might call specular productions which are subject to judgments from an interested perspective of "global security"—betray confusions between subject and object, threat and victim. Such specular productions are closely tied to contemporary geopolitical conditions and environmental knowledge productions.

In this light, the mask participates in security assemblages that have effects within and without, much like the Sikh turban that Jasbir Puar (2010) considers. Puar argues against a purely specular model of terrorist visualities and for "information bodies" subject to racial and sexual biopolitics, into which certain bodies fall. It is crucial, as well, to examine the curious links between various figures of war/security and disability, as little as they might first have to do with one another. Robert McRuer (2010, 163–178) helpfully theorizes, tweaking Puar's generative formulation, "disability nationalism in crip times," urging a transnational perspective on disability, sexuality, and politics from directions of disability, postcolonial, and queer studies. Indeed, I wonder what happens to essentially white feminine representations of disability as they might become staged against

certain bodies of color that, despite being similarly prostheticized, would fall too easily in line with Puar's terrorist corporealities.

I conclude by considering questions of facial legibility and deception, visibility and security, with a somewhat unlikely case: the TV persona of Dexter, a serial killer who articulates his own concealing actions, as well as his psychological complexity/disability. In the pilot episode of the Showtime television series *Dexter* (2006), the titular character steers his boat through the waterways of Miami after he has murdered a man. Dexter introduces himself: "I don't know what it is that made me the way I am, but whatever it was left a hollow place inside. People fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all, and I fake them very well." He works as a blood-splatter forensics analyst for the Miami police (selecting his victims by identifying presumed habitual killers from police cases), part of the very team who seeks to capture this skilled killer. In later episodes Dexter repeatedly invokes the descriptor of "mask" to describe his social conundrum, having the need to perform a self that in his view does not exist, to conjure apparent emotion and connection where it cannot be felt. Indeed, even his sexuality must be conjured, and the girlfriend he acquires is but a cover for his persona of normalcy; to us there is no evidence of his attraction to her.

This mask is occasionally literalized. In the first episode's nod to the bondage value of plastic wrap in BDSM sex play, Dexter pulls the wrap tight around his face, distorting his facial features and frightening his victim; he later wears a splatter shield while dismembering another live victim. Yet while Dexter stalks his prey, he relies not on disguise, but on simply evading detection. In the course of this day job, he does not wear a literal mask (at one point, his unprotected face is splattered with blood spurting from a body), though one could say that because of Dexter's double life, his "mask" (of "normalcy," of human emotion) is dissolved into his proper face, or is integral to his character. The hidden double construction has been capitalized upon in a recent marketing joke: you can purchase a "Michael C. Hall Limited Edition" of Kiehl's Rare Earth Deep Pore Cleansing Masque, with proceeds benefitting environmental causes. What kind of temporary concealment, and ultimate salutary revealing, is on offer here?

The invocation of a mask in a crime show is not novel; concealment and detection were built into the early definition of criminality and have

been thematized in endless crime, adventure, and horror movies—to name a few, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Marcus Nispel, 1974), *Point Break* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 1991), *Set It Off* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 1996).⁹ Yet the figure of the mask as an appurtenance is increasingly operationalized in modern-day criminal surveillance and detection techniques, making Dexter’s citation both predictable and curiously insular in a time of expanded, transnational geographies of crime. Furthermore, Dexter’s mask serves two purposes for him: meticulous affectation of nondisability and concealment of crime. *Dexter* illuminates the complex status of masks as they appear and disappear in contemporary U.S. culture—and how those facial coverings have consequences for current debates about states of security, affect, health, race, and gender.

While he may at first seem to be an interior fantasy and the newest instantiation of domestic crime tropes, Dexter—white, male, gainfully employed—suggests a shadow version of the threats to security and health that the United States feels itself surrounded by; his vigilante version of eye-for-an-eye “justice” mimics the extralegality of U.S. operations domestically and abroad. What is more, Dexter can choose to use the mask to literalize his own duplicity, but in the show the masks remain an infrequent device. The nonhuman/inanimate appurtenances of prosthetic masks have become part of the immune system itself, but made invisible on “proper” national self-representations; this is why we see a superficially “normal” and nondisabled body but one that is described as masklike, such as in the case of Dexter. Thinking of Dexter’s mask economies as a register of the complexities of regime vulnerability/immunity, it is interesting to note that the earliest documented sense of the word “vulnerable,” a meaning now declared obsolete by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was in fact one of potential aggression, not fragility: “having the power to wound.” Definitions resembling the contemporary meaning of “susceptibility to *being* wounded, injured, or attacked” appeared immediately thereafter, possibly in response to the passivizing “-able” suffix. The chronology of meanings of “vulnerable”—spanning the English seventeenth century—suggests a psychic economy imbued with the fortuitous exchange of rival roles.

Levinas, confronting the possibilities and difficulties of the presentation of the self, writes, “To seek truth I have already established a relationship with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor. . . . Every language as an exchange of verbal signs refers already to this primordial word of honor” (1969, 202). Dex-

ter exploits what Levinas calls the “primordial word of honor,” and this thwarted facial authenticity has a pedagogical value for Americans. In the early episodes, the rare choice of mild masking, in which the character’s face can still be identified or detected, serves its own allegorical function: (white) Americans can self-mask, but even if they regard themselves as duplicitous, as other than presentation, there is no need to consider themselves burdened by a permanent prosthesis. In fact, vulnerabilities must be projected, externalized, rather than owned; they cannot and should not occur on the white U.S. body, only elsewhere. This is another way of expressing that states of fragility can only be lightly acknowledged to the point of an ever growing war and an ever increasing surveillance mechanism. But disability—read as necessary prosthesis on the body—is to be considered beyond the ken, or visual register, of the self-representing domain of the United States. If the state is fragile, it is not yet disabled.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Julia Bryan-Wilson and Dana Luciano for fruitful discussion about masks; Julia was a generous and productive critic of my drafts. Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer, only some of whose excellent comments I was able to address in this version. Any errors remain mine alone.

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Notes

1. Diverse feminist work exists on the veil. One strand focuses on Western colonialist legacies residing in political ideologies’ deployment of discourses of racial and sexual difference in relation to the veil historically and contemporarily. Another strand takes up questions of the veil from a necessarily more complex Muslim feminist perspective.
2. For a critical response to the popular conception that Iraqi women have been “liberated” in some way by the U.S. occupation, see Sadig Al-Ali and Pratt 2009.

3. Jasbir Puar, however, refuses this economy, associating the iconic hooded figure with both the Ku Klux Klan and the veil/burqa (Puar 2007, 102).
4. Interestingly, the metaphor of immunity seems to travel within its own theorization: Roberto Esposito (2008) describes the political concept of *immunitas* as a “poisoned affect of gratitude” in the interest of belonging to a community that paradoxically reduces the individual’s immunity.
5. Tobin Siebers’s book *Disability Theory* (2008) has an extensive discussion of passing in relation to disability. Building on a discourse that identifies some prosthetics as normalizing, and others as disabling in the eyes of others, he identifies the strategic use of prosthetics (or prosthetic gestures) as what he calls the disability “masquerade.” While Siebers’s analysis works well for the strategic deployment of exaggerated movements (like limping) and the use of prosthetic devices like canes, it seems to falter when it comes to one prosthesis, the mask. This is mentioned in Chen 2011. I should note that Siebers’s not identifying the actual mask as part of disability accouterments is not surprising, for his schema somewhat neatly follows popular disability studies renderings of disability, in which chemical sensitivity is not typically included.
6. For a history of sick building syndrome in the United States and its gendered and classed racialization as white, female, and middle class, due to a combination of activist visibility, illness representation, and structural racism, see Murphy 2006.
7. There is much more to the classed, gendered racialization of MCS. In addition to the work of Murphy, for a study of environment, environmental justice, and body materialities, see Alaimo 2010. Chapter 5 in particular theorizes the construction of MCS in relation to class and race.
8. Kerry Kennedy of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (www.rfkcenter.org) reports that workers were discouraged from using respirators. From interviews with workers, Kennedy (2010) found that “workers were not only denied protective equipment but, after arriving for work wearing respirators, were threatened with the loss of their jobs if they chose to wear these ‘unnecessary’ devices which only serve to ‘spread hysteria.’”
9. For one feminist consideration of horror films, see Clover 1992.

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