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# PROTESTS AND PANDEMIC

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## THE MASKS OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

BY MAXINE ALLISON VANDE VAARST

Summer's end returned to New York City this August, as it has every year for almost a century—accompanied by the hurried sound of tennis balls thwacking against rackets, as the world's best players compete for the US Open title. Yet, this had been no ordinary summer, and so, the 2020 US Open could not be an ordinary tournament. Instead, it would reflect all the anxieties that had unsettled American life throughout the preceding months. The COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures put into place to combat it meant no celebrations in Flushing Meadows Park, or fans to cheer on their favorite stars from high above the court. Some questioned the wisdom of staging such an event in the midst of a global health emergency, and whether New York, still recovering from its days as the national epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, was fit to host. Compounding this were the effects of the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and the corresponding weeks of social upheaval, which had pitted New Yorkers against their city's own police force on the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan. Video of the NYPD pushing activists to the ground, beating them with clubs and fists, and even ramming their vehicle through a crowded street filled social media. It was a brutal summer. People were sick, scared, and angry. What room is there for tennis in a crisis?

Into this moment stepped Naomi Osaka, the biracial Japanese-American winner of the 2018 US Open, who was then ranked

the top female player in the world. Osaka chose to wear seven face masks onto the court, one for each round of the tournament. These masks were simple in their design, consisting of a solid black field on all sides except for a splash of white across the front—each mask spelled out one of seven names belonging to an African-American person murdered in an act of racist violence. Similar masks had become commonplace at protests around the country, allowing those who wore them to make visible their demands for justice while at the same time protecting themselves and others from disease. These masks also reaffirm the informal alliance, which has manifested between pro-mask advocates and the BLM movement, in opposition to the strange, yet very real fellowship between anti-BLM conservatives and those agitating against mask use. In this way, the face mask has been transformed into a double symbol, the material nexus of two competing worldviews at the center of America's endless struggle against itself. Though one might say that the decision to cover one's face during a respiratory pandemic should not be controversial, it has nonetheless become a kind of statement in the face of widespread anti-mask sentiment. To wear a mask emblazoned with the names of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, therefore, is like shouting into a bullhorn. It marks the body with political intent. It makes one's outrage impossible to ignore. Naomi Osaka's face masks soon proved

the talk of the tournament, attracting news coverage from around the world. If we, as folklorists, want to understand why Osaka's masks were such a sensation and better assess the burgeoning link between political discourse and the mask as cultural element, then it helps to briefly consider how our field approached the wearing of masks prior to COVID-19.

“What is the meaning of such an accessory as the mask?” ethno-anthropologist Marianne Mesnil asked in 1976. “Does it determine the event as a whole, or is it something which could possibly be discarded without changing the nature of the festival?” (Mesnil 1976, 11). As this inquiry suggests, much of the existing folklore scholarship on masks has focused on festival costumery, as one might encounter at Mardi Gras, Carnival, or a Junkanoo parade in the Bahamas. These masks are impractical. They exist to impart legends or give shape to formless concepts, like joy and evil. Though they conceal the wearer's identity, their greatest strength is not in deception but in collapsing the boundary between everyday life and the realm of the symbolic. “The mask is the instrument, *par excellence*, of the break between the order of being ... and the order of seeming or representation,” Mesnil wrote. “In other words, the mask is used less for the purpose of disguise than as the instrument of an affirmation” (Mesnil 1976, 12). As such, these masks are far more than mere ornaments. We cannot separate them from the festival while

retaining the full heft of their symbolic meaning, and neither can the festival exist without its masks. They are the embodiment of the hyperreal space festivals produce and the ideals embedded within them. They give shape and even a sort of personhood to what before had been only imagined, awakening festival-goers to possibilities beyond what the quotidian “order of being” will allow. In so doing, they present a challenge to hierarchy and offer us another means of ordering our social relationships.

This is the same perspective Dorothy Noyes adopted in outlining her theory of the *façade* performance. In a 1995 article entitled “Public Face, Private Mask,” Noyes highlighted the role that masquerade plays in acts of protest. In this context, the mask serves as a counterweight to the ruling order, represented by the public face or *façade*. The masked protester ceases to be an individual and acts as a stand-in for the community and its interests at large, setting the stage for a performative—though often consequential—struggle between the bottom of the hierarchy and the top. The outlandish designs of the festival mask also help “introduce difference into this apparent consensus,” drawing upon popular taboos to “disrupt the social order at its foundations and thus encourage radically inversive imaginings” (Noyes 1995, 92–3). Once again, the mask works to disrupt the ordinary. It blurs the line between symbolism and reality, grants a collectivized voice to those groups that may otherwise lack a platform, and establishes a contest between public command and private desire. Though Noyes directs our attention to traditional performance genres, like mumming and charivari, we may also look to contemporary masked protest movements for proof of these disruptive powers. The presence of *V for Vendetta*-style Guy Fawkes masks at Occupy Wall Street and *Joker*-inspired costumes at 2019 demonstrations in Hong Kong and Chile suggest that today’s activists are interested in more than just shielding their identities from the state. They seek to make use of the mask’s symbolic properties as well.



Illustration by Eva Pedriglieri.

Mesnil’s and Noyes’ analyses may concentrate on festival masks, but I believe they provide a useful framework for assessing Osaka’s protest as well, and the pandemic face mask in general. Unlike festival attire, the pandemic mask is practical. It has a clear and necessary function and is not restricted to the topsy-turvy festival space, but instead meant for daily use. Yet, COVID-19 has fostered its own kind of hyperreality, turning day-to-day life into something a little more alien than what we knew before. The mask epitomizes this strangeness, stripping the face of many of its most familiar qualities and making even close friends look like strangers. This is in part what makes the mask such a perfect accessory for an event like the 2020 US Open—it *looks* as bizarre as a sports event without spectators *feels*. Much like a festival mask, it embodies the spirit of the moment. The pandemic would not be the same without masks, both because they reduce the risk of transmission

and because they are symbols of our anxiety and the feelings of social isolation that come with quarantine.

Perhaps, the most remarkable thing about pandemic masks is that they are also an antidote to alienation, at least in part. While they do confuse our ability to read faces, they are also a canvas for creativity, allowing the wearer to express more about themselves through their mask than their face alone could ever hope to communicate. Almost anything can be written or printed onto a face mask, and the last few months have gifted us a variety of incredible custom designs. These range from offbeat and downright “festival-esque” artistic creations to charming and colorful children’s masks, as well as Black Lives Matter-themed masks, featuring icons like the raised fist and slogans like “I Can’t Breathe.” When Osaka entered the finals with a mask honoring Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy killed by Cleveland police in 2014, she engaged in her own masked

*façade* performance. Though she said nothing aloud, that name—written across her mouth—spoke for her, assailing the dominant power structure and issuing a clear, unmistakable call for justice. The same is true for the thousands of Americans who wore pro-BLM face masks to school, work, or while attending protest actions. These masks do not hide one's personhood, but instead reveal political passion. They mark their wearers as part of a collective movement, making them feel united rather than alone. The pandemic mask may not be an obvious folk cultural item in the way festival masks are, but both face coverings share the ability to reshape what is possible in a given space and upend the status quo. They are, as Mesnil remarked more than 40 years ago, not a form of disguise but an affirmation of our beliefs.

Naomi Osaka said very little about her masks or the struggle against police violence, preferring to focus on tennis and let the masks do the talking for her. Then, following her championship victory, a sports reporter asked what message she intended the masks to send. Her response was a perfect encapsulation of the masked *façade* performance and the clarity of purpose that the supposedly enigmatic mask can present. "Well," she said, standing resolute beside her trophy, "What was the message that you got?" ▼

## References

- Mesnil, Marianne. 1976. "The Masked Festival: Disguise or Affirmation?" *Cultures* 3 (2): 11–29.
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