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Masking COVID, Crafting Community

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This autoethnographic account traces and troubles the ideas of crafting, care, and craftivism in the time of COVID-19. I investigate mask making using the backdrop of its materials. Beginning with scenes from Mardi Gras 2020, I parade the reader through the transformation from Mardi Gras mask maker to COVID mask maker and reflecting in/on/through a tumultuous year of racial strife. In this transformation, I evaluate crafting as a way to work through care, connection, and change. With elastic as a commodity, a model for care and community-building, and an essential material of mask making, I focus on the overlaps between relationships and crafting. COVID-19 and its lockdown has stretched how we think about community through the ideas of connection, care, and craftivism.

Introduction

Mardi Gras season in New Orleans is not just about showing up and partying. For locals, Carnival begins long before Mardi Gras Day with costume and mask-making. I went to the second-hand store to buy anything and everything with sequins. My plan was to cut, sew, and alter garments to make costumes. Making do with what supplies you have on hand and ones that you acquire inexpensively are a part of the process. This includes supplies such as jars of glitter, sequins, silk flowers, headbands for headpieces, glue guns, fabric, and cardboard spools of elastic. The elastic is for altering clothes to make them stretchy, comfortable, and easy to wear under or over layers of pants, leggings, sweaters, jackets, raincoats, and any other type of weather Mardi Gras may bring. Elastic is also for attaching masks.

On Friday, February 21, 2020, I flew to New Orleans to take part in the weekend celebrations before Mardi Gras. I wanted to be a part of the festivities, and my friends and relatives live along the parade routes. One of my friends lives along the Muses Parade route, which "rolls" the Thursday night before Mardi Gras. A storm blew into town, forcing Muses to postpone and roll on

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Friday. "Just my luck!" I thought. I had always wanted to go to Muses but could never take the time off.

After arriving in New Orleans, I walked along the route to meet up with friends. Costumed revelers lined St. Charles Avenue hours before the parade was to start, Professor Longhair's "Mardi Gras in New Orleans" was on repeat from multiple, competing speakers. Mardi Gras beads from Wednesday's parade hung in the trees along the route and feather boas, silly string, and broken Mardi Gras beads stretched through the streets. As Kim Vaz states, "On Carnival Day friends and neighbors 'masked,' that is, created a collective identity and put on a costume that reflected their sense of themselves."[1] On this particular day in February, locals covered their eyebrows and noses with purple, green, and gold masks. Some masks had feathers, some had just plastic and glitter, and some were bright blue, the Krewe of Muses' signature color. Revelers' eyes peeked out through the small holes in their masks.

Walking along the parade route, we hadn't made it to my friend's house when the floats started to roll. We wove through the ladders, portable chairs, blankets, and throngs of shoulder-to-shoulder people to find a position with other revelers near the front yet making room for newer parade goers (who are sometimes reveling more i.e., drunker).

Catching beads is only a small part of Mardi Gras. To catch beads, footballs, stuffed animals, and other throws, you have to stretch your body - often reaching across other bodies and violating the norms of personal space. When you catch a throw, you give a throw to the fellow reveler next to you, often the one whose personal space you just violated. In between floats, you make small talk with the fellow revelers next to you—compliment each other's masks and costumes and share your life story. *How did you get here? Is this your first Mardi Gras? What is your connection to New Orleans?* Every seasoned Mardi Gras reveler knows that catching a throw is just lucky, and that giving a throw is a way to share your luck with those around you. Mardi Gras is a time to let loose, to give, to receive, to meet new people, stretch your personal boundaries, and to create community in this time of revelry.

After a successful Mardi Gras weekend, I returned to New Orleans two weeks later to spend more time with friends and family. I don't ever seem to tire of New Orleans. While I was there, the local news reported that a resident at one of New Orleans's nursing homes became ill and died. A caretaker at the same nursing home became ill, and more residents fell ill. The news connected the illness to COVID-19. Soon thereafter, an attorney in his 40s was on a ventilator, a man who worked as an Uber driver during Mardi Gras died, and more

[1] Kim Marie Vaz, *The Baby Dolls: Breaking Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

and more stories of people contracting COVID and falling ill emerged.[2] By Sunday morning, I was ready to leave. I couldn't wait to get out of New Orleans. I wanted to be catapulted out of the city. Tulane University physicians suspected Mardi Gras, with its welcoming of tourists from near and far and its community ethic, had caused a major outbreak.[3] When COVID invaded my home city, I participated in a different kind of making do—I started making homemade masks.

Epidemiologists stated that wearing masks controlled the spread of COVID.[4] Even though no US government official was recommending residents of the United States wear masks, other countries affected by COVID in large numbers were asking residents to wear masks. The delivery and retail giant, Amazon, had masks on backorder. As a crafter, I did what I always do when I'm stressed, feel like things are out of my control, or get overwhelmed. I went into my fabric stash—which is partly composed of an embarrassing amount of sometimes neatly folded fabric in bins and drawers intended for my hobby of making clothing—and picked through the scraps. I found elastic left over from my Mardi Gras costume and other sewing projects. I threaded my sewing machine and serger. I googled "maskpattern.pdf" and scrolled past Mardi Gras mask patterns that allow wearers to disguise their identities to search for masks that covered the nose and mouth to protect their health. I found two possibilities and printed them.

The first mask pattern I found online had pleats and room for a filter requiring intricate folding, ironing, and delicate stitching. I cut the pattern out of fabric, gently folding the pleats, and got quickly annoyed. Christopher McRae and Aubrey Huber tell us, "Developing a craft leads to productive accomplishment. In terms of performance, craft over time may be practiced and refined in order to yield particular desired results and outcomes."[5] The problem was that I didn't have time. *We* didn't have time. The virus was quickly taking hold of communities—especially in New Orleans—and specifically people with preexisting conditions. The desired result of wearing a mask was to prevent infection, quickly and easily. This pattern was too fiddly to make quickly. I found another pattern that was quick and easy for me to sew together. I also knew that my parents and surely others in vulnerable populations didn't have time to wait for backordered masks from Amazon. They and their neighbors, like many others,

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[2] John Simerman, "Coronavirus Threat Mounts with Two More Louisiana Cases; Hospitals, Schools, Churches Scramble," *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans), March 10, 2020.

[3] Mike McDaniel, "Coronavirus Patients Were in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, Doctor Not Surprised," *WWLTV* (New Orleans), March 12, 2020.

[4] Benjamin J. Cowling and Wey Wen Lim, "They've Contained the Coronavirus. Here's How," *New York Times*, March 13, 2020.

[5] Christopher McRae and Aubrey Huber, *Creating Performances for Teaching and Learning: A Practice Session for Pedagogy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave McMillian, 2017), 101.

didn't have access to delivered or curbside pick-up groceries. I made test masks for my spouse and me and then made several for my parents to distribute. Even though we were apart, I wanted to care for them and their friends and neighbors. Belinda MacGill states, "craft-making as embodied knowledge is generated within the cycle of ethics of care."[6] As MacGill asserts, the craft is for another person, not for the crafter. As crafters, our care for the other person is in every cut, stitch, fold, and fiber of the craft. The care woven into the fibers of the craft are as important as the craft itself. Crafting is inexorably tied to our bodies and our identity. Masks, which just weeks ago were a way to disguise one's identity and were a symbol of revelry and celebration, now served as protection from COVID, the deadly virus that spread worldwide in a matter of months.

Crafting allows us to be elastic in a time of intense turmoil, encouraging us to take the materials that we have and make something useful and/or beautiful. Making masks is something that I could do to feel like I was helping in this time

[6] Belinda MacGill, "Craft, Relational Aesthetics, and Ethics of Care," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* (Volume 4 Issue 1, 2019), 407.

when we, as citizens of the world, feel so separated and so hopeless.[7] As I repurposed my Mardi Gras elastic into mask-fastening elastic, its malleability helped me be malleable. Elastic made me refocus and craft my everyday frenetic life into what my body could do in that moment for others. Care is embodied and demonstrated by crafting. As crafters, we're stitching and strengthening new and existing bonds with those for whom we're making the craft. In so doing, we're tightening the weave of the relationship. At the beginning of the pandemic, I treasured my collection of elastic that shape-shifting stretchiness that bends, curves, and adapts to conform to its surroundings. Elastic was in short supply and something I needed to make masks. The pandemic required using all my elastic, including all the potentialities and possibilities of stretching, bending, and adapting to the curves of life during the pandemic.

Elastic was not only the scarcest of mask-making supplies when the pandemic hit, but also a useful tool to examine our relationships with ourselves and others. The elastic served as a draw away from and back to ourselves at a time when we had only ourselves and the members of our immediate households, forcing us to be elastic to/with them. In ways that we used to go to work or run errands or do leisure activities, we were now sling-shotted back into our homes. The masks allowed us to extend out into the world—if only at a six-foot distance.[8] Masks allowed us to connect with those not in our households. Whether at the grocery store or walking on streets, masks allowed us to be around other bodies and engage in embodied connectedness, even if thwarted by masks.[9]

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This autoethnographic account of the mask-making process throughout the tumultuousness of 2020 helps to further conversation about making masks as a way of explicating the ways crafting shapes and provides a path for providing care, connection, and change. Among so many other experiences, COVID forced us to slow down and become introspective in ways our self-involved lives never allowed us to do.[10] This project looks at crafting as a practice and crafting

[7] Whether or not I'm "actually" helping, this is about empathy, "our capacity to grasp and understand the mental and emotional lives of others." Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 3.

[8] This is, of course, if we were lucky enough to work from home. Those who were not were sling-shotted out of their homes only to return with trepidation and tried not to get sick.

[9] Mask-wearing was normalized in Asian countries during the SARS outbreaks, so when COVID hit, there was little resistance.

[10] Of course, this experience has been very different for essential workers who had to report to a physical location to work, those whose home lives were met with challenges

as care, which leads to how crafting, and specifically mask-making, forms a connection, demonstrates care, and serves as a way to evoke change. Crafting allows us to connect to people. Crafting allows us to show care for ourselves and others. Simultaneously and hopefully, crafting allows us to make a change in a world where we feel we have no control.

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Universities moved teaching entirely online after I returned from New Orleans. Crafting not only is a way to connect with others, but also serves as the elastic between us. This is especially true when a global pandemic requires that we remain physically apart. Howard Risatti highlights the time and energy it takes to craft, acknowledging that "All man-made objects—simply because they are man-made—must have a purpose for someone to spend time and energy to make them."[11] This time and energy builds connection between people. Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfcram Cox, Betsy Greer, and Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush argue that crafting provides a connection that we don't experience through the other means of electronic communication.[12] With the adjustments made at the onset of COVID, I, like many scholar/academics and other workers, found my once face-to-face classes, meetings, conferences, and other interactions completely online. Although I was provided with tools to meet my classes, have happy hours, chat with family members, and even have birthday parties on Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Learning Management Systems, the disconnect was palpable. I had to engage in self-care. In addition to allowing us to show care for others, crafting provides an avenue for self-care. We learn how to make crafts from individuals within our community, and in turn, we give crafts to other members in our community.

Additionally, communities teach the crafter how to craft. Although Elizabeth Garber talks about the informal way(s) one may learn how to make crafts through "a community education site such as a craft store or community center

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of domestic violence, and even those who have children. This also does not account for the millions of who suffered the loss(es) of loved ones.

[11] Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 24. It's interesting that he uses man-made to discuss work that is traditionally seen as "women's work."

[12] Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfcram Cox, "Stitch'nBitch: Cyberfeminism, A Third Place and the New Materiality," *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 1 (2007): 5–21; Betsy Greer, *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014); Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush, "Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender," *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 233–260.

or a group of like-minded learners (such as a knitting circle),"[13] at the onset of COVID, communities were not allowed to gather. Stores and centers for gathering were shuttered. The crafting community became the means in which we had to communicate and gather information - YouTube and Pinterest to learn how to make masks. My community was my classroom—my online, Zoom classroom and working groups. Through the making of the masks, I felt a connection with those I gave them to. I mailed them to my parents, neighbors, coworkers, students, their parents, and friends throughout the country.

Garber talks about the ways that crafting expresses care for others and how making is tied to caring: "Many of [the crafts] result in gestures of caring: covers from the cold, for example."[14] Unlike the cold, which can be mitigated by a jacket or a blanket, in March 2020, masks were not widely available and leaving one's home to purchase a mask when stores reopened was in and of itself a dangerous proposition. Gifting a handmade mask was unique; it expressed care for the recipient's health and well-being. When Dr. Anthony Fauci called for US residents to wear masks, he was wearing a homemade Washington Nationals baseball print mask and encouraged everyone to wear homemade masks. But no federal sewing co-ops were set up, no apparel companies were commissioned by the government to start producing masks to give to the US population at no cost.[15] Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese define "radical care as a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds."[16] In this sense, making masks in addition to completing the responsibilities of my fulltime job were underappreciated but came from an obligation to keep my fellow humans safe. I put myself in the position of someone who may not have a machine, fabric, elastic, or the physical dexterity to make masks. I *wanted* to do anything I could to help protect people. This desire to help people became an instance of radical care.

Trial and Error—Connection and Care

I wash my hands and approach an overflowing plastic bin of materials sitting on a neatly made bed. Elastic, fabric that I prewashed, scissors, and pieces of paper are laid out on the bed. The paper is preprinted, and I've cut the mask patterns out of the pieces of paper. The half-shell cutouts are labeled "Maskpattern.pdf"

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[13] Elizabeth Garber, "Craft as Activism," *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 33 (2013): 54.

[14] Garber, "Craft as Activism," 54.

[15] Many apparel companies have outsourced manufacturing to countries where products can be made more cheaply. "No cost" in this sense means that our tax dollars already go to something, and a reallocation of tax dollars to making masks would have shown a reallocation of priorities.

[16] Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (March 2020): 2.

Man, Woman/Teenager, 6–12 years old, and 3–6 years old.[17] Pausing for a moment, I push past the thoughts of making masks for children, the sadness that washes over me of how confusing it must be for a child to discover these things about parts of the body—the way that the mouth can give power and control, or that the nose can filter germs and toxins while it breathes—only to cover them.

I can't say that seeing these pattern pieces, scissors, and bin of fabric and the potential of sewing masks *feels* altruistic; it just *feels* like what I can do in this moment. It feels automatic. Making masks feels different. I really like to sew. I like to sew clothes. I like to sew clothes for my dog and me, in particular. However, I have three machines that sew. I saw the patterns, saw my fabric stash, and said to myself, "Making masks is something I can do." I can't do much else, to be honest. I'm at home. All day. All night. Everyday. Every night. Crafting as a mode of self-care allows us to re-engage with our bodies in a way that decenters our own isolation. In "Craft, Relational Aesthetics, and Ethics of Care," MacGill discusses the ways crafting disrupts the neoliberal and economic systems that value productivity and serves as a way for the crafter to engage in a communion with their materials and "products" as an act of self-care.[18] The self-care I was able to perform as I made masks became a way to stretch the bonds I formed with others. Some of these connections were new, and I had known other folks for years. Also, the connection with fibers, fabric, thread, elastic, and scissors and the ties between these materials and the health of my family, friends, and strangers. A global pandemic the only known protection against which are two pieces of fabric across the face isn't expected or predictable. As of February 2021, the CDC encourages us to wear two masks for protection. The first mask should be a surgical mask and the second should be a homemade mask over the surgical mask. Even after vaccination, people are still required to wear masks as they can be carriers of the virus.[19]

From the printed pattern pieces, I pick out the largest mask size, labeled "man," and the pattern piece immediately smaller, labeled "woman/teenager." I look through the bin for a piece of fabric large enough to cut out several masks. I find a particularly bulky piece—meters of fabric from my fabric stash that I went through in a hurry to find suitable fabric for masks. I rediscover a piece I bought while traveling in Nigeria. A tightly woven 100% cotton, the fabric has yellow and blue geometric shapes with white lines throughout. Most of my fabric collection has bold prints. The care woven into the fibers of the craft are as important as the craft itself. Empathy is part of care and care is communicated

[17] These gendered categories are problematic. For example, some women's faces were too large for the "women's" mask pattern.

[18] Belinda MacGill, "Craft, Relational Aesthetics, and Ethics of Care," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal,* Volume 4 Issue 1, 2019.

[19] Future research could attend to the labor of mask-making, the manufacturing of masks in China, the anti-Asians and Asian-American racism.

through the crafted object. Describing radical care as a process that unites, Hobart and Kneese distinguish between radical care and other ethics of care: "Theorized as an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, [radical] care constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others."[20] I wonder if the mask wearers are able to feel and experience this?

I fold the edge of the fabric in half, and then double it over. I'm trying to use as little fabric as possible so I can make as many masks as possible out of this one piece of fabric. I move the piece of paper to the very edge to size it up. I place the cut piece of paper on top, grabbing my black-handled scissors with my other hand. They can handle cutting through multiple layers of fabric at the same time. I cut the fabric, squeezing my hand at each moment. I cut a straight line and then take a turn. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Two half shells. *I wish I could hug my mom right now. I can't imagine the thought of losing her to this after all she has survived.* I push that thought out of my mind and I take the cut fabric to my sewing table and put it down. I have a small drawer filled with elastic intended for making pajama pants for everyone I know. It's called baby elastic or foldover elastic. I found it in a clearance bin at a discount store, and I bought a lot of it. The elastic is printed, and the prints are *ugly*. Green-and-white animal print, pastel bubbles, brown animal print, zebra print, and megaphones. *Gross.* They were supposed to be inside the waistbands of pants, so the prints didn't matter. I don't know when I was going to make these pants for everyone, but I'm so glad I didn't this elastic in a Marie Kondo-inspired spurt of organization. I find some elastic that's light blue and says "LIVE." This once pithy word, printed on elastic from the clearance bin, has new meaning. If I were making a garment, I would never put this elastic with this fabric. The light blue elastic and dark blue fabric are not the same color base. I second guess myself. I hope the wearer will take "LIVE" to heart even though it doesn't match the fabric. Crafts are personal, and the quirky imperfections that make crafts unique are also what makes them personal and a way to show care for someone. Bratich asserts, "Indeed, craftwork has historically been performed as a gift-giving practice and as a form of care for others (kin, children, spouses, friends)."[21] Masks feel like something I *can* give. Something that won't be discarded. . . or at least not initially. Maybe the masks will tide my friends, family, and strangers over until they find other/more masks. These are just for wearing for essential activities— getting groceries, pumping gas, going to the bank or the post office.

The instructions accompanying the mask pattern provided estimates for the length of the elastic. I reach into the second drawer of my sewing station and grab my Dritz Ezy-hem, a metal ruler with hard corners for straight lines. I learned how to use the Dritz Ezy-hem from watching my mom hem pants for

[20] Hobart and Kneese, "Radical Care," 4.
[21] Jack Bratich, "The Digital Touch: Craft-work as Immaterial Labour and Ontological Accumulation," *ephemera* 10, nos. 3/4 (2010): 306.

my dad. She would place the Dritz Ezy-hem on the pants, fold the pant leg up to where she wanted to hem, and iron on top of the ruler, creating a perfectly straight line. Today, I place the elastic on the Dritz Ezy-hem, extending it to reverse the years of creases from sitting folded up and unattended. I stretch the elastic to the 6-inch mark. I cut. I repeat with a second piece of elastic. I cut. I place the two pieces of elastic next to my serger where the four half circles are.

I flip the power switch on the right side of my serger with my index finger. It's threaded with white thread. Unlike a sewing machine, you have to have a chain of thread before you insert the fabric and after you've finished sewing. I place two of the four half circles with the right sides of the fabric together. I try my best to line them up, placing the fabric under the presser foot. Pulling the chain of thread with my left hand while simultaneously pressing the pedal, I guide the fabric through the machine. I sew the two half circles together with the serger and giving it a nice, finished, four-thread safety stitch. I repeat with the two waves/half-circles. I turn one inside out and put the other one inside it. I open them so the seams are together and line up the seams. I put the two pieces of fabric in the machine and sew the tops together, then I cut the tail, the excess of the four-thread safety stitch in a chain and sew the bottoms together hastily. Unlike the garments I make, my masks show their seams. There's a chain of

thread around the top and bottom. The pieces of elastic are the final step. I put one piece of elastic on top of the newly conjoined fabric in the machine, using at first my finger and then the presser foot to keep them together. I sew through the top of the elastic and then pause to position the bottom of the elastic at the bottom of the mask. It forms a letter "C," or the ear loop. I take my small, orange-handled scissors and cut the tail and any excess strings, then do the same with the other side. I place the mask next to my serger. Repeat. This is my first attempt, and I try it on, stretching the elastic around my ears. I take it off immediately. I should have left it on a bit longer, tried to talk in it or tried to breathe while walking down the street in it. I should have tried to yell in it. I completely underestimated the amount of time we'd be wearing masks or how comfortable they needed to be to wear them for long periods of time.

Masking Change—Seeking Connection

The US government hasn't supplied us with masks. In press briefings by the government, there has been no mention of how we are supposed protect ourselves from COVID. While stretching plastic latex hair-dying gloves over my hands to walk out to the mailbox, my tweenager neighbor is simultaneously making the same walk to her mailbox. She bounces out of the house, happily away from her computer screen/classroom, opens the mailbox, grabs the mail, sprays her mailbox with Lysol, and bounces back into the house. "Waving with my gloved hand, I say "Hi friend!" On a day filled with teaching classes online, she's the only person I've seen all day. In the mailbox is a large full color mailer

that in sum says, "Stay at home."[22] There is no mention that this is not a reality or a possibility. It implies you have a home. It implies you don't lose it because you lost your job because everything shut down. It implies $600 is plenty to pay rent and buy groceries anywhere. I'm lucky to have a home and a job. A steady job. A good job. A work-from-home job. I head back into the house and put my dog and my sanity on a leash. We walk past the mailbox and along the streets are more neighbors and their dogs than in pre-COVID times. A couple who lives down the street appears from their front door with their dog too. We exchange niceties, and he compliments my mask. "Oh, thanks. I made it," I reply.

"Really? Well, I have a business proposal if you're interested in making more. The nutritionists who have been giving food to food insecure families may be interested in purchasing masks to distribute food. Would you be interested in making more masks and selling your masks?"

I pause for a moment, "Like, how many masks?"

"I have contacted other people too, but we need a total of 80."

"80?!" I said trying to calculate how to contour my schedule to make 80 masks. "I'm happy to make as many as I can, but I can't charge for them."

Another neighbor found more elastic, and I used it to make 25 masks. I stopped counting after that. In this community where our interactions are limited to waving to each other when we enter and exit the neighborhood, we were suddenly each other's only human interaction. In addition to demonstrating thinking about someone and a fondness for them, crafting, in this sense, was a way to connect with others. I wanted everyone to be safe, and mask-making made me think about all my relationships differently. As Bratich states, "Craft-work as affective production allows us to think about value differently. Untied from capitalist valorization, craft-work produces communities and subjectivity laterally and contains an autonomous circuit of meaning and relationships"[23] As the lockdown continued, I heard from people whom I hadn't heard from in decades. I offered to make them masks.

In late April, a school custodian for one of my former institutions called me unexpectedly. We'd lost touch, and she was calling to reconnect, "I'm bored, Miss Jenn. I've been off work for a month now. I don't know when we're going back." I didn't want to ask if she was being paid. I wouldn't know what to do if she wasn't. She continued, "What are you up to, Miss Jenn?"

"I've been teaching. . .online. Oh, and I've been making masks. Would you like some for you and your family?"

"Oh yeah, that would be great." She gave me the preferred sizes and number in her family. She continued, "You know, Miss Jenn, I don't know what I

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[22] John Fritze, "Trump Administration Faces Pushback for Coronavirus Postcard Prominently Displaying President's Name," *USA Today*, March 27, 2020.
[23] Bratich, "The Digital Touch," 309.

would do if I *was* back at work. We're trained to clean. We're not trained for *this*," she said.

I made masks for anyone who asked me to make one and some who didn't. I made extra masks. Whether they were immunocompromised or not, I made masks for friends and neighbors and the parents of friends and colleagues and students and people I never met. They would all ask, "Can I pay you?"

"No, of course not," I would respond. I'm happy to know you, happy that we were pulled together in this moment over the phone or over Zoom or over email. I'm happy to be connected with you, to have made your acquaintance in this moment. I'm happy to have this machine, to have a supply of elastic, to be able to sit, to have a healthy-ish immune system. I can't imagine charging for masks. I'm also lucky to have a fabric stash. Did I say I'm lucky to know you? That you're taking the focus off of me and what *I'm* going to do. In this world where I am separated physically from the people I see every day, in what *was* my everyday, I'm happy that I'm connected with you. If it's two pieces of fabric and two pieces of elastic tethered with a four-thread safety stitch, then that's what it will take to bring us together in this moment.

May 25, 2020

Susan Lanzoni asks, "Can we envision radical and new forms of connection with objects and the world around us?"[24] Making masks has become automatic. The serger does a lot of my work. Lanzoni says, "If contemporary philosophers have urged us to think of the mind as extended, aesthetic empathy asks us to relax the familiar borders of the self to embrace objects, nature, even perhaps to reimagine the nature of matter, as did some of its early proponents."[25] No one ever expected to be connected with two pieces of fabric and two pieces of elastic: simultaneously meant to keep us physically distanced but connected through the elastic of our relationship in that moment. I repeat. I haphazardly use scissors to cut out an outline of a mask, leaving rough edges and mismatched sides. I press the pedal, and the serger will cut the fabric and stitch it with a four-thread safety stitch. I double up on the four-thread safety stitch as I attach the elastic to the sides of the mask. Safety from the virus. Safety from unraveling. The serger keeps me together when I feel I'm falling apart. It neatly trims with the blade. It wraps the edges of the fabric. Unlike elastic, the four-thread safety stitch doesn't have any give or take. The four-thread safety stitch contains the edges of the fabric, but you can see them begin to unravel. The stitch leaves them with enough room to breathe in the chain.

I hope my masks do the same. I try to make my masks breathable, carefully choosing fabrics that have complementary weaves. The outside of the mask is woven tightly, while I choose lining fabric with a bit looser weave. I still choose a fabric meant to protect while breathing. We have to breathe.

In my automaticity, I've made several masks quickly. On one mask, the seams of the front and back pieces of fabric weren't lined up. When I sewed them together, they were crooked. *Ah, who cares?* I felt a disconnect between the fabric and me. I felt like I didn't *need* to care. That I was doing enough. I proceeded to add the elastic and when I needed a clean mask one day, I put it on. The seams, put together haphazardly and without care, caused a gap from the nose to the ear. The mask lost its purpose. It was no longer protecting but causing a false sense of security.

I think about George Floyd and the machine of policing. Policing in the United States causes a false sense of security. The chains, excuse me, handcuffs, used to contain him. The serger is designed to sew and cut at the same time. Policing, designed to maintain order, to keep society neat and nice, can also cut off your finger if you get in its way. George Floyd apparently got in its way, and it cut off more than his finger. It cut off his ability to breathe. The machine of policing has lost its humanity; it has lost its ability to let off the pedal and readjust to let people breathe. It doesn't care.

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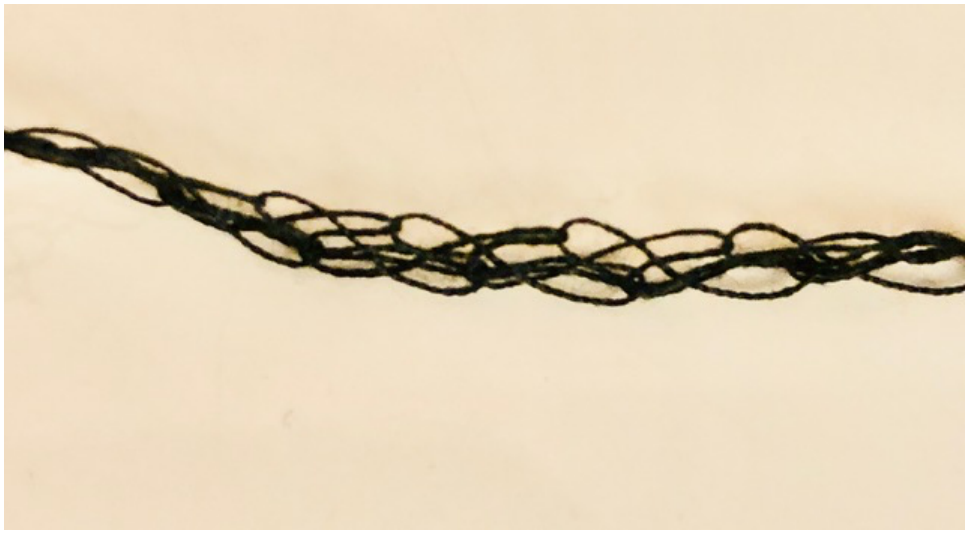
[24] Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 18.
[25] Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 18.



My attitude shifted. Touching the fabric, the thread, the chains of the serger made me reflect. Fibres have the ability to create reflective responses. Much like Grushka, et al. states, "Fibre materiality is linked to modal specific memories such as visual, auditory, touch, and in particular motor sensory acts of stitching through which conceptual memory and subjectivities emerge. It is a method that accommodates materiality as a driver of creative thought that surfaces as an affective pulse triggering the recall of memories within each active construction of a stitched sequence."[26] Sewing makes me think of things that I don't want to think about, that I have the privilege of not thinking about. The footage of George Floyd's murder is everywhere. Racism is everywhere. Heavy-handed policing practices are everywhere. . . especially if you're Black. Making masks helped me make the connections between policing practices, masking, and the virus. An effect of crafting as activism is reflection.[27]

June 10, 2020

Today I drove to campus for the first time since March to attend the socially distanced vigil for George Floyd. I felt conflicted. How would my white body

[26] Kathryn Grushka, Michelle van Gestel, and Clare Skates, "Crafting Identities: Folding and Stitching the Self," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 301.

[27] As a white cis-gender able-presenting bodied woman, I recognize that the ability to reflect on the oppression facing BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and other marginalized communities is a privilege. It is a privilege that comes with great responsibility.

be perceived in Black spaces? I didn't want to be an invader, a co-opter, a reminder of the pain that my colleagues were wrestling with, trying to dismantle, fighting to overcome. I didn't want my white body to be centered reifying white supremacy.[28] I didn't know if this vigil would be a space of Black solidarity that Ibram X. Kendi talks about.[29] I worked to prepare by wearing dark sunglasses and hat to hide my face from the brutal summer sun, but more importantly to hide my white tears. Mamta Motwani Accapadi talks about the effect of white tears on Black pain.[30] I don't want to visit any pain on my colleagues. While discussing educational spaces, bell hooks states, "We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks."[31] My presence there was to mourn George Floyd's life, the lives of the students I never had because they were killed by the state, factors beyond their control; to stand in solidarity with my BIPOC colleagues and students, and to show that I'm willing to take action so that none of my students, friends, loved ones, former students, or colleagues need a vigil until they've lived a full life.

I made a mask. I made a plain black mask. I cut out white letters with my crafting machine that said, "Black Lives Matter." I stretched the elastic around the back of my head. Unlike the other masks I made, the elastic is snug and it fits tightly around my nose. The mask also covers my mouth, which is the best thing it can do right now. I need to listen. The only thing my mouth needs to say right now is Black Lives Matter. I need to say it to everyone. And I have, in this quarantined moment. I'm calling Minneapolis, Louisville, Houston, and Austin.

I hear the trouble of white saviorism.[32] I'm a white co-exister, co-human. I work to confront injustices. I hope by wearing my mask, I am standing in solidarity with Black folx and other white folks to be allies and to make masks with the seams showing, with elastic that doesn't fit.

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[28] Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling, "'White Supremacy in Heels': (White) Feminism, White Supremacy, and Discursive Violence." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 253-260.

[29] I'm not sure if campus is a place of cultural solidarity based on Kendi's discussion of space. Even though Kendi's (2019) talking about the period immediately following the Civil War, we know that racism didn't end there, nor did the desire for spaces of cultural solidarity. In this discussion, he talks about forced separation versus spaces of cultural solidarity and discusses HBCUs and other historically Black institutions as underresourced, while being spaces of cultural solidarity. He also talks about HBCUs as places where this cultural solidarity often takes place.

[30] Mamta Motwani Accapadi, "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," *The College Student Affairs Journal* 26, no. 2 (2007): 208–15.

[31] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

[32] Teju Cole and Brittany Aronson discuss the problems with white people, although well-meaning, going into communities of color to provide what they perceive as helping

I hear two women at the vigil who are over 6 feet away talking about my mask. They mention that they've seen the ones that say, "I can't breathe." But I can breathe. I can breathe through this mask. I can breathe. It's a privilege to wear my politics. To be able to put it on and take it off at the end of the day. At my home. In my neighborhood. And in Houston. Because I can breathe, because I can speak, because I can move freely and without being surveilled in this country, because I am not followed when shopping, when driving, when sleeping, because I am not suspected, I am not questioned. Because I'm not questioned, I must question myself. I must question my intentions, my thoughts, my words, my biases. My white skin makes me a receptacle of bias. Friends, strangers, and loved ones express their biases to me. Express their suspicion, their judgment. As I breathe in hate, I must breathe out questions. I must question friends and loved ones who express their biases to me. Questions make us think. Questions make us reflect. Questions make us question . . . ourselves, why we respond in the ways we do, and our role in sustaining white supremacy.[33]

I took the IAT.[34] I have no noticeable bias. But that doesn't mean that's constant or consistent. That doesn't mean that I don't make mistakes every day, every moment. That doesn't mean that I respond in the right way to my BIPOC and other friends, family, colleagues, and students.

Putting it together

Tied to connection, masks indicated a move to promote change. Masks were not only about connecting with others through a shared goal of community health, but making masks and wearing masks became a way to show that one cared about another's health. "Craft activism occupies spaces within individuals' lives, but moreover in local communities, engaging a 'human microphone' of makers and viewers directly in participatory democracy. For activist crafters, such making is a way of life, a way of voicing and participating, of expressing, and of raging that reaches a public directly, sometimes drawing them in."[35] Ironically these "human microphones" covered their mouths. Covering one's mouth (and nose) was a way of showing the ties that brought us together. The unspoken activism of wearing a mask became a glaring display of which side of the public health debate the wearer (or non-wearer) supported. According to Lauren O'Farrell, "Whether your work is waving a banner or not, you are saying something with each stitch: you are a part of this madness we call life and living; you

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without consulting the members of the community first about whether they should be there or how they can help.

[33] Moon and Holling (2020) talk about the ways white women reinforce white supremacy by not confronting other white women about their white supremacy.

[34] The IAT is the Implicit Association Test, which was developed by Harvard to help reveal unconscious bias. The test can be accessed at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

[35] Garber, "Craft as Activism," 55.

care enough to share what you feel with the wider world; and even if no one is listening, you want to be a part of making the world a fairer place."[36] Masks became banners over our mouths. In addition to making masks out of leftover fabric, I cut out iron-on letters and made Black Lives Matter masks. Greer reiterates the role of making and activism: "Craftivism is about more than 'craft' and 'activism'—it's about making your own creativity a force to be reckoned with. The moment you start thinking about your creative production as more than just a hobby or 'women's work,' and instead as something that has cultural, historical and social value, craft becomes something stronger than a fad or trend."[37] Greer is talking about the ways crafting affects the larger cultural and political landscape. Crafting can change humanity. We see this now as we wander streets or grocery stores full of people wearing masks. Our aesthetic landscape has changed by people wearing homemade masks.

My sewing hobby became a way for care, connection, and change as I furiously made masks for anyone and everyone. Crafting displays an inventiveness that is cherished and celebrated. Greer points out, "As craftivists, we are also permission-givers, helping us to breathe life into artistic practices that some people may think are obsolete by showing their relevancy and poignancy."[38] With the rise of the information age and the desire of individuals, particularly in more developed nations, to consume and dispose, traditional crafts were forgotten and disposed of. Craftivism allows those traditions to be revived and repurposed. Through that repurposing, we learn that perhaps consumption and disposal aren't the preferred mode of being. Greer states, "We also demonstrate that the act of 'making' is important; we give other craftivists permission to make boldly, make with the greater good in mind, and make in order to nourish ourselves."[39] Through the act of making, our goal is for self-care as well as for the care of others. This goal to help others adds to the humanity in making masks. Making masks not only provides a way to connect to others, but also serves as an agent for change and protection for one other and respect for each other's health.

I am by no means saying that wearing a BLM mask is enough. Wearing a BLM mask was a way to extend my voice beyond what I verbally communicate. To anyone and everyone who was in my presence. My BLM mask and the other masks I made were a way to show solidarity and my attempt at showing care for others.

Care and Connecting through Elastic

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[36] Lauren O'Farrell, "Craft as Political Mouthpiece," in *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism*, ed. Betsy Greer (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 111.
[37] Betsy Greer (2006), cited in Bratich and Brush, "Fabricating Activism," 248.
[38] Betsy Greer, ed., "Knitting Craftivism: From My Sofa to Yours," in *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 8.
[39] Greer, "Knitting Craftivism," 8.

Elastic allows us to change and move within the bounds of the material; we cannot extend beyond. Some of the masks I made had too little elastic, causing my ears to flap forward. I cut off the elastic and started over. I could not stretch my elastic anymore. I extended my reserves—which I intended on using for pajama pants (clothing that promises comfort). Our comfort levels were stretched in different ways. Masks are not comfortable. Talking about race is not comfortable. We are asked to stretch our care, stretch our connections, stretch for change. Given that we're resistant to discomfort to begin with and having to encounter so many uncomfortable things at once, it's really hard to stretch without breaking.[40]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated the ways mask making allows for connecting with others during the pandemic, taking care of myself, and engaging in grassroots crafting practices to ensure that some of the world's citizens are safe.

I arrive at the Beauregard Keyes House in the French Quarter in New Orleans on a chilly December morning in 2020. I signed up for a Mardi Gras Indian mask making class. I walk through the courtyard welcomed by flashbacks of my childhood when we would go on field trips to the Beauregard Keyes House. We learned about the French settlers of New Orleans, Lafayette and Bienville. It feels ironic to be here now, knowing what I know about the historic suppression of BIPOC communities in Louisiana. The other white classmates are my age or older and we each have a small table to sit at in the courtyard. I'm greeted by the director, a white man who is wearing a mask and is uninterested in my ticket, but who introduces me to the teacher, a Black woman who is wearing a mask donned with beads and sequins. She instructs me to pick out fabric to make a mask and a pattern to cut out pieces. This is the same mask pattern that I've been using since March. I was hoping to learn something new. I take my cut-out pieces back to her. We're outside and wearing masks, but I'm still trying to not get too close. She takes some fishing line and cuts off a piece for me and instructs me to grab a needle and some sequins and beads. She shows me how to secure the sequin with a bead on top to create a design.

The Mardi Gras Indians are about tradition, about learning through communities, about passing on traditions, about being present with each other.[41] The two instructors, one Black man and one Black woman, walk around the physically distanced tables and patiently check in with us, telling about the traditions

[40] BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and other marginalized groups experience many of these discomforts on a daily basis. Straight and cis-gender white folx are only recently encountering, and in some cases, learning about such discomfort.

[41] Ana Paulina Lee, "Memoryscapes of Race: Black Radical Parading Cultures of New Orleans," *TDR: The Drama Review* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 71-86.

of the Mardi Gras Indians while they teach us the techniques of the intricate beadwork they're so well-known for. I listen as another white woman tells the Black male instructor and member of a Mardi Gras Indian tribe that without the HBO series *Treme*—which tells a fictionalized story of a Black community in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, written by a white writer, David Simon—he wouldn't have the opportunity to share his craft. She says this like it's some sort of honor for him to wake up and get to the French Quarter on a cold December morning to maybe make half of the $25 we paid to take this class. If he got all of the proceeds, he's only making $90. And if you divide that by half and share it with the other instructor and give none to this historic building that's hosting this event, then he's made $45 maximum, not counting what the online event hosting platform made to share his family's trade. I watch his face as she looks up at him and tells him that. He looks at her like she doesn't know what she's talking about while politely stating that social media allowed him to get noticed in ways that he wouldn't normally have.

We are bound together by elastic, but there are limits.

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