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Witnessing Fabrics: How Face Masks Change
Social Perceptions During the Covid-19
Pandemic in Digital Times

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Witnessing Fabrics: How Face Masks Change Social Perceptions During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Digital Times

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1 Introduction

Face masks are one of the most tangible prevention measures against the Covid-19 virus that have been used during the ongoing pandemic. This paper studies face masks from a sociological and artistic research perspective towards understanding how they become litmus fabrics for the societies we live in. Transcending their medical purpose, face masks have become everyday objects, integrated into quotidian activities. We argue that they are one of the most politicized materials of our present, particularly in the countries located in Western Europe. This is especially the case since, as they became mandatory in many public spaces, in some Western countries the requirement to wear face masks almost instantaneously ignited fierce political debate and became a new marker of ideological difference. By following the sociological and visual impacts of face masks on individuals and communities in European countries in general, and in Germany in particular, we claim that their omnipresence makes the complexities of various social issues and the interwoven character of different political discourses more apparent, vibrant, and viral. In this paper, we aim to analyze face masks' "thing-power," a power, as Jane Bennett once described, that indicates the "curious," and also perhaps unexpected, "ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2009: 6).

Face masks are used in more than one hundred nation-states in response to the pandemic, though regulations around their use differ per region/country (#MASKS4ALL 2021). Indeed, the regulations around wearing face masks in public spaces reveal, we argue, unique characteristics of local social, political, and economic circumstances, both prior to and during the pandemic. Face masks were already highly politicized materials in the West, including in Germany, and the discourse surrounding them has been expanded upon – online – as we are experiencing "the first pandemic of a datafied society" where much of life has taken place in digital space (Milan et al. 2021: 15). We suggest that face masks can be read as a *text-ile* material, where viral, bio-political, and digital aspects intersect; and we explore how face masks serve in discourses around representation within an increasingly polarized and datafied society.

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Face masks are a *text-ile* extension of digital viral worlds, we argue, and include the ableisms, otherings, and fascist coalitions that have accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, both on- and offline. We follow what becomes perceptible and tangible when reading face masks as a witness to the digital data and algorithmic politics that produce political polarizations, to consider what is encoded into these pieces of fabric that we wear on our faces.

By looking at the depictions of face masks in political discourses that have gone viral online, we suggest that debates about face masks, which actually target mouths and noses, are interestingly more centred on *eyes*. That is, in these digital public discourses, being able to *see* the truth refers to the ability to accept or reject the truth. Drawing on critical perspectives from disability studies, we suggest that this ocular-centric approach of who *sees* the truth needs to be reconsidered. By analysing two different memes, we follow Sami Schalk's claim that using disability as a metaphor, for instance in the context of referring to the unfunctional parts of social life, is problematic and reductionist, as multi-sensory methods of inquiry suggest that ways of knowing also include touching, feeling, noticing, and breathing.

An ocular-centric construction of universal truth participates in a Western-centric understanding that *seeing* and *uncovering* are the only ways of knowing. According to this perspective, *veiling* is perceived as an act of radicalism or illegality, of concealing and hiding. This perception suggests a debate-worthy link between the contradictory narratives around face masks that have emerged during the pandemic, and the emergence and convergence in Europe of anti-mask movements and anti-Muslim sentiments.

Working from a trans*feminist intersectional perspective concerned with care and interdependence, we suggest that this pandemic has become crystallized in the images and material specificity of face masks, and has also generated a shift from a politics of care to a politics of vulnerability-in-common. On the one hand, with the concept *affect:ability*, we aim to decenter ocular-centric debates around viral truths by suggesting a multi-sensorial perception of what is going on. On the other hand, we use this term to highlight the transcorporeal ability to acknowledge vulnerability as common and to create a collective sense of response-ability (Barad 2007; Haraway 1997), by which we mean cultivating the capacity to respond to the damages that ableist discourses perpetuate – and have perpetuated – both before and during the pandemic.

Following this line of questioning, we follow the discourses and practices of wearing face masks in Germany and in the West. We ask: What relation do face masks have to structural oppressions like anti-Islamic sentiment or ableism? How can we read their social testimony as material witnesses of our time, and understand their political grammatology as knitted in their *text-iles*? And who is afforded a breathable life and who is not? (see Gumbs 2020; Górska 2016).

Throughout this article, we invite readers to enact breathing and mask wearing exercises as a way to engage with the materials we are working with. We invite you now to take a short breath, gaze away from this reading, and return after a moment.

2 Face masks as an ideological litmus test

Despite changing epidemiological narratives about their usefulness and function in preventing the spread of Covid-19, when the World Health Organization (WHO) updated its medical advice in April 2020 to suggest the use of face masks to effectively protect against Covid-19, these garments rapidly became widely worn worldwide.

In the beginning of the pandemic, it was claimed that face masks were not effective against Covid-19. However, this narrative was revisited by officials and healthcare professionals, who stated that face masks *might* be effective for preventing the spread of the virus; however, people were urged not to purchase surgical face masks, as these were reserved for healthcare personnel. The public response to this narrative was to create homemade masks using everyday cloth, and was perhaps economically more creative, aesthetically more cheerful, and one of the politically more solidarity-focused moments of the pandemic in Western countries. What was also embedded in this narrative, which radically altered the social meaning of face masks, was the claim that they were not necessarily effective for self-protection but rather for the protection of others. That is to say, wearing face masks was not about protecting oneself, but about reducing transmission rates and breaking contamination chains before the virus could reach vulnerable people.

Kar Keung Cheng et al., for instance, have argued that wearing face masks in the community “shifts the focus from self-protection to altruism, actively involves every citizen, and is a symbol of social solidarity in the global response to the pandemic” (2020: 2). This narrative represented mask-wearing as an act of altruism and solidarity. Cheng et al. called this as “an intervention paradox” – paradoxical in the sense that “wearing a face mask brings moderate benefits to individuals but also has large population benefits” (2020: 1-2).

Soon after this, however, the altruistic narrative was abandoned, with new claims being made that face masks actually protect both the wearer and others (Bhatia 2020). Interestingly, this narrative also abandoned the previously-endorsed homemade masks, as it was claimed that such masks are not effective enough. It was suggested, and even demanded, that people wear either surgical or FFP masks, which are particle-filtering masks used by professionals – a type of mask that the public was initially discouraged from buying. With this new

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epidemiological public discourse – that face masks are mutually effective to control the spread of the virus – they were globally adopted. As of today, with the exception of nine countries such as Greenland, Sweden, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Sudan, face masks are used as a primary prevention measure against Covid-19.

These rapid and highly contradictory discursive shifts about face mask wearing in public have, however, created a sense of confusion and fostered a lack of trust towards public officials and healthcare professionals and experts (Tüfekçi 2020). It remains a mystery how leading and prestigious institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and governmental agencies have managed to create so many different and paradoxical narratives about face masks. Especially, in so-called post-truth era, when “the fake news” go viral and the scientific languages and findings are contested and challenged by certain groups of people, particularly those whose political motivations are driven largely by the conspiracy theories, these confusing claims around face masks have fuelled sceptics of scientific, medical, and social research and have also provided further arguments for anti-mask movements.

This is particularly interesting given that using face masks in public spaces is, for many countries in the Global South, not new. For instance, many resources indicate that wearing face masks in East Asia and in south and central African countries has both medical and environmental reasons (see Burgess/Horri 2012; Mohammed Mohammed 2015; Offeddu et al. 2017; Howard et al. 2021). In a 2014 online article, Jeff Yang gives a brief but illuminating historical background of face masks in public space in Asian countries and underlines the fact that wearing a face mask in public emerged as a response to both the SARS-CoV and Ebola epidemics. Interestingly, Yang also makes a prophetic claim, writing that “as pollution, climate change and pandemic illness become a routine aspect of our global reality we may soon see face mask fashion go viral in western countries as well” (ibid.).

Despite the scientific evidence and societal experiences of countries in the Global South, which have experienced two different epidemics prior to Covid-19, the confusing discursive narrative and curious resistance to using face masks in European countries demands further critical analysis. Regardless of the scientific and collective knowledge of those in the Global South, which shows that face masks, together with other prevention methods, are effective, face masks were late to be adopted and caused unique reactions in Western countries. For example, a study shows that face masks are still the least accepted measure against the pandemic in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, and France, while they are highly used and accepted elsewhere, particularly in Asian countries such as Vietnam, Japan, Turkey, and India.

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In Germany, using face masks in public spaces, such as on public transport and in grocery stores, was first introduced in the city of Jena on 6 April 2020. After this, mask-wearing regulations quickly spread throughout the entire country after the number of new infections in Jena fell to almost zero (Mitze et al. 2020: 2-5). This discursive shift about face masks impacted public opinion in Germany and created mixed feelings towards their use. After becoming compulsory, face masks quickly entered into an already heated debate concerning government control of the pandemic and became a symbolic material that carried with it both dystopian and utopian societal sentiments. Face masks, through their *thing-power*, unexpectedly blurred the boundaries

Figure 1



Image description: Seven people in a line are wearing business attire and a black piece of cloth over their eyes. The image includes text in German. In English it reads: Soon there will be the obligation for a blindfold, so that no one will see anymore what is happening in this country.

Source: Muthelm [Meenzer721] (2021)

between biology and culture, utopian and dystopian beliefs, and became a political filter. In this sense, the political discourses that went viral on the internet became coded, materialized in the form of these masks. In this way, face masks have almost turned into an analogue visual demonstration of a polarized society; as a new *text-ile* territory for ongoing divisions, they embody different political ideas and are a fabric precursor of the future not yet here. This division can be crudely put into two different categories: on the one hand, there are those who endorse and embrace face masks, the seekers and believers of scientific truths, advocates of social order, those who practice solidarity and empathy; on the other hand, those who resist donning face masks portray themselves as individualists, reductionist naturalists, and anti-governmentalists, as they perceive face masks to be a reflection of top-down governmentality, the footfalls of a totalitarian regime, and a violation of the laws of nature. For those who are critical of the capitalist politics of reproduction and its impact on the environment and under-privileged groups and communities, face masks represented hope and a sign for change towards a society in which collective sharing and caring practices become a norm, but most importantly perhaps, rendered a

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reaction to the rising extreme right-wing opinions in Europe more tangible and visible.

Figure 2



Image description: There are two people in the image: on the left a person with medium-length black hair is wearing a white face mask and is looking out at the viewer; on the right is a person with short hair and a board in front of their eyes, emblazoned with the word *Querdenker*in*, which refers to a politically mixed group of people, who are mostly consist of the supporters of extreme or centre right-wing politics in Germany and rejects the prevention measures against Covid-19 for various reasons. There is also a text in the image in German. In English it reads: Better a mask on your face than a board in front of your head.

Source: BgR – Bündnis gegen Rechts Kassel [BgRKassel] (2021)

Furthermore, we have observed how face masks have become one of the most hotly debated and controversial garments after hijabs and niqabs in European countries. We suggest that the initial resistance to the hijab and niqab informed the resistance to adopting face masks to combat the Covid-19 pandemic; we thus read subsequent anti-mask demonstrations as linked to Western ideological visions that accompany ‘the veil’ and ‘veiling’, which are seen to be against the principles of Western Enlightenment, and therefore face coverings in general are seen as against Western body politics. The banning of hijabs and niqabs in public spaces in some European countries, such as France, and yet allowing and even requiring the wearing of face masks in public spaces, has led to controversial reactions in public discourse (McAuley 2020; Warner et al. 2020).

As can be seen in the above two images, however, both the political discourse that criticizes and that which endorses face masks have shifted the focus to the eyes. The desire to *see* the evidence, to unveil things for vision – as the primary way of knowing – is very much ingrained in Western forms of knowledge-making and inquiries for truth (Rose 2016). This ocular-centric understanding of ‘evidence’ has also been criticized by many scholars within critical disability studies. As Sami Schalk argues,

“the assumption that we can presume the existence of a shared understanding and knowledge of bodily (including sensory and cognitive) experiences that will

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serve as the concrete concept through which we figuratively communicate abstract ideas (as metaphors of disability do) is, however, very problematic”,

since such assumptions, according to Schalk, “rely upon allegedly universal experiences of the body” (2013: 5). Their analysis re-affirms critical perspectives on ocular-normative ways of knowing and re-enforces an ableist construction of truth. Ben Whitburn and Rod Michalko argue “that ways of being (ontologies) fully sighted or otherwise” are linked to the “way of knowing (epistemologies)” that generate a marginalized depiction of experiences and knowledge of “people with vision impairment” (2020: 219-220). Such vision might also be the reason why in Western countries, Covid-19 deniers became more dominant and gained more legitimacy during the pandemic due to the disbelief in anything that the eye cannot see. In this sense, face masks have become a material witness, a social testimony, that both right extremist discourses and contagious particles can go viral. Yes, even in Europe.

What is the scale of breathing (Gumbs 2020)? When coming into awareness with your breath, how many more-than-humans and humans are you simultaneously breathing alongside? Consider our connectivity and come back to the text when you are ready.

3 The face mask as material witness

Face masks are permeable materials between discourses, also in our explorations between sociological and artistic research contexts. We take up the concept of the material witness, as materials that twist between divulging evidence of their experiences in the world and existing themselves as evidence (Schuppli 2020). This Möbius-strip-like concept twists in on itself to consider how material artefacts, as non-human entities, archive (through imprints, toxins, accumulations, discolorations, stains, etc.) their interactions with the world. In this way, face masks are intriguing materials that witness, or expose, evidence of their use during the Covid-19 pandemic. We follow face masks as materials that trace intersectional impacts and provide traces of where and when matter becomes consequential. Coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term intersectionality has been taken up by many and “simply put, this principle says that we are many things, and they all impact us” (Sins Invalid 2019).

Who, what, and with what means information becomes knowledge is at the centre of our tracing of face masks as material witnesses, and as agents transforming relations throughout this paper. So far in this paper, we have followed how face masks become permeable fabrics that evidence some of the more

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violent right-wing, eugenics-leaning, survival-of-the-fittest, coalitional politics, as well as some of the more interdependence-leaning thinking that has come from the instituting of face masks as commonplace. We have traced how face masks have been taken up within nation-states as part of public health programs and have further explored how their transformation from homemade to mass-produced and store-bought has also brought out different capitalist and feminist considerations. Then we considered how the material qualities of face masks as face coverings, which have similar hotly problematic discourses as those surrounding veils and veiling, have become encoded as being against Western body politics. Now, in the final sections of our paper, we will explore how face masks, as material witnesses, have the potential to describe our common vulnerability and interdependency. We consider what makes a breathable life, and for whom, and we encode shared chances for care towards a *text-ile* that produces *affect:ability*, as a chance for face masks to literally and physically make a difference. Harbours direct evidence of events, and witnessing more than human realms, face masks share a story through their material specificity that traces political discrepancies.

We invite you to come into awareness and presence with your breath for a moment and ground into your body. When you spend time noticing your breath in your body, where does it go? What parts of your body feel present with your breath and which ones not? Can you send your breath to those not-yet-touched places?

4 Affect:ability, collective care, and politics of vulnerability

In this section, we explore how negotiations between borders, boundaries, and collective permissions have been differently handled at the state, community, and interpersonal levels, and how these negotiations have been taken up via face masks.

In Germany, face masks have been at the centre of debates around questions of self-reliance and individual responsibility (both tenets of neoliberal capitalism) and understandings of bodies in common (a counter to this). These values, as expressed through wearing – or not wearing – face masks, have been at the heart of German leadership, with Angela Merkel herself becoming a figure of much debate regarding her use – or not – of what kind of face masks during the pandemic. So much so that a video of Merkel shortly forgetting to wear her face mask after delivering an address went viral and has been watched “more than 3 million times on twitter” (Lock 2021). The mask as a material

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becomes a witness to the critiques and commentaries of Merkel as a figure of the state, and regarding what kinds of forgetfulness – or not – the state enacts.

During the pandemic, face masks evidence on each individual our inescapable interdependency. The collective sense of responsibility for public or collective care that face masks indicate also positions them politically as an indicator of relations in terms of who cares, and who does not, in political discourse. Such politicized moments have exploded within expanding anti-mask movements.

At a community scale, we suggest that face masks as material witnesses can be informed by disability justice as a framework through which to consider how interdependent relations structure the conditions that determine for whom life is breathable, liveable, and possible, and for whom it remains restricted, impossible, and about survival rather than co-flourishing.

To consider face masks as shape-shifting figures, both in material reality within communities and in political discourse, requires a framework that accounts for interdependence as a political tool. We are inspired by the work of Sins Invalid and their *10 Principles of Disability Justice*. In point eight on interdependence they state:

“Before the massive colonial project of western European expansion, we understood the nature of interdependence within our communities. We see the liberation of all living systems and the land as integral to the liberation of our own communities, as we all share one planet. We work to meet each other’s needs as we build toward liberation, without always reaching for state solutions which inevitably extend state control further into our lives” (2019: 25).

What might it mean to understand collective vulnerability as something grounded in body-minds that do not reproduce a compulsory able-bodiedness? For many people, face masks are neither new nor novel. People have been using face masks for all sorts of care work for a long time; they are protective garments that create the conditions for life.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, as academia and multiple other professional contexts moved online, it became clear that the problem was not about making conferences accessible for people who are at home. Rather, one of the major problems has always been, and continues to be, ableism that is structural and pervasive. Our work considers how face masks have become material witnesses to the ways in which care is not equally distributed and is highly politicized.

Following the work of Alison Kafer, specifically her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), she describes how we can think towards *otherwise* for crip queer presents and futures that do not reproduce the same ableist paradigms of the recent past. Kafer cites multiple examples of locating disability as a site of pleasure and taking pleasure in taking care. How can we think about face masks as a site of collective pleasure in protection? How can our always-in-

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becoming body-minds inform lives that are less about the reproduction of ableism and racism and more about creating the conditions of care that would allow all of us to live and breathe more freely?

In this section, we invite you to grab a face mask, whichever one you might have nearby, and put it on. Breathe for two minutes with the face mask on, wherever you are. Does your experience of your breath change?

From feminist concerns of care, we suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has crystallized, through the use of face masks, a perspective shift from a politics of care to a politics of vulnerability-in-common. On the one hand, with the concept *affect:ability*, we aim to decentre the ocular-centric debates around viral truths by suggesting the multi-sensorial perception of what is really going on. On the other hand, we use this term to highlight the transcorporeal ability to acknowledge our common vulnerability and to create a collective sense of response-ability to combat the damages perpetuated by ableist discourses both before and during the pandemic.

When we take face masks out of their practical use, as a garment that protects the physical body by filtering infection, they make us face, experience, and confront the body in a different way. They become a non-human agent, a *text-ile* extension, that reshapes our relationship to ourselves, to matter, and also to our environment and our social contexts. At once they mark fear and hope, solidarity and exclusion, they highlight and problematize hetero-patriarchal structures, and they mark particular people as obedient and subversive at the same time, in an extraordinarily banal way.

Yet, face masks also gesture our interrelatedness as a biological mass in relation to a tiny particle, and play a role as a barrier between the two. Thus, face masks force us to decentre our anthropocentric vision of life. What would we do without them, right? Pausing on this question reveals instantly the vulnerability of our human condition; perhaps most importantly, as face masks condition our lives in a *partical-ar* matter. Our shared vulnerability becomes understood as commonplace in a more significant way than before. This vulnerability, as the common rather than the particular, the ordinary rather than the exceptional, may also give space to generate new modes of political agency.

At the same time, face masks impact our ways of intimacy and proximity, since breath, although rarely acknowledged, is also an important language of communication. Breath meets through thin air, where bodies cannot or do not want to come together. Breath also constitutes a compassionate and an erotic entanglement of bodies – the touch in the air – as well as a border, as we keep a breath's-length distance from a person we dislike. In this sense, by recreating these intimate aspects of breathing, face masks become a means of alienation to others' breaths and at the same time are a way of protecting our bodily borders.

We invite you to once more come into awareness and presence with your breath. If you can, breathe into your toes. It may take several breaths to find them. Keep breathing until you feel your breath stretch through your body and return when ready.

5 Conclusion: Social *text(ile)* matters for breathable lives

The breathability of fabrics determines the quality of a face mask. With the ongoing structural racist violence against migrants, refugees and, black and people of colour, the unequal impacts of who gets to breathe, who gets to have a life, and who does not immediately become apparent when studying face masks. Racial and social justice in the USA, as marked by and with the Black Lives Matter Movement and beyond, quite painfully expose the political fabrics of social structures that determine the conditions of breathable lives.

Masks ironically also unmask the existing sexist, racist, and ableist social infrastructures. For instance, the politically-charged rhetoric of anti-maskers evokes the anti-Islam approach to the veil. Anti-mask demonstrations in Europe have created more space for the already increasing violence towards racialized minority populations. This increasing violence has become affiliated with so-called anti-maskers and is anti-Muslim, anti-migrant, and racist. Face masks, one cannot help but think, seem to touch nerves and unsettle racist sentiments with their presence; a presence that indicates a collective care structure. On the other hand, one can also suggest that face masks have become a ground for compromised masculinities, as they perform a kind of challenge to normative masculine bodily autonomy and presentation. In fact, a study done at Middlesex University London (2020) found that cis men “more than women agree that wearing a face covering is shameful, not cool, a sign of weakness, and a stigma”.

We would like to draw on Magdalena Górska’s discussion of the politics of vulnerability. As she argues in her 2016 text *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability*, in such politics “vulnerability” should not be seen as the “qualifying characteristic (...) but rather it becomes an intrinsic part of political dynamics” (302). This is to say that intersectional politics of vulnerability point to the “continuous process of ambiguous transformations” that come with layers of ambiguities and social tensions, including “failure and potentiality, pain and pleasure, affinities and separations, empowerment and weakness” (ibid.: 303). In this sense, face masks become the witness of such politics, as they also hold together “natural, social, chemical, biological, genetic, microbial, material and imaginary environments” (ibid.: 303).

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Their material existence becomes a witness as their very texture testifies to our care-abilities for holding our lives breathable.

As a non-pharmaceutical collective care apparatus, medical face masks have become tangled up in multiple concerns about race, gender, religion, class, and ableism during the Covid-19 pandemic. These masks have become one of the most hotly debated garments of our time and the site of controversial debates over body politics. They have departed from indexing self-protection to becoming a metaphor in multiple contexts, unsettling many social borders. In determining who cares and who is careless, who believes in facts and who follows conspiracy theories, face masks have become material witnesses of social polarization. They do not only differ in terms of their type, colour, and shape in public spaces, but also demonstrate different political positionalities. From a hetero-masculinist perspective, for instance, face masks can be taken as a symbol of feminine (and feminist) care work. From a Western understanding, face masks can be taken as a practice of covering a body part, and can thus be associated with ‘Islamic’ veiling. And from a disability justice perspective, face masks can be a symbol of interdependency and community care.

In our paper, which embraces a trans*feminist intersectional perspective, we have analysed face masks as material witnesses, thinking with Susan Schuppli (2020). We propose that their presence and absence fabricate an ambiguous shift from a politics of care to a politics of vulnerability. Drawing on the discursive shifts regarding the use of face masks in public – that is, the different witnessing of masks – we aim to unfold face masks as socio-technical infrastructures and show how their shapes, types, functionalities, and even the ways in which they are worn have become contested agents. Face masks produce a kind of data that ventures into questions of measurement, witnessing, and information, and produce the chance to recognize our vulnerabilities-in-common in a datafied society. Our discussion with and through face masks in terms of how they determine our social lives aims to create an analytical space wherein matter, event, and evidence can be stitched together. From a critical disability and anti-racist feminist perspective, we suggest a focus on *affect:ability* to highlight the fact that we are all in this together: in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, nobody gets to be outside of our viral reality. Face masks are material witnesses acting against the disbelief that right-extremist discourses and contagious particles can go viral at the same time. With their thing-power, they have shown: yes, they can both go viral in Western Europe, too.

Breathe and read:

“I remember what you gave us which is everything. Light, home, and each other. Love, warmth, and ourselves. If I breathe, I sing your name. I can only

breathe because of you. Do you have a century more of breath? And if not, what do I have?" (Gumbs 2020: 26).

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