

Anthropology Book Forum

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BRUNO J. STRASSER & THOMAS SCHLICH, 2025, *The Mask: A History of Breathing Bad Air*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 288 pp., ISBN 9780300276039

At a time when masked officers from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency carrying out immigration raids are in the news and memories of the Covid-19 pandemic remain fresh, *The Mask* is a timely contribution. Covering a broad sweep of history, Strasser and Schlich offer a thoughtful reflection on what masks say about both the wearer and society. Masks, as they point out, can be deployed for multiple purposes – as a means of protection, form of transformation, comedic tool, mode of resistance, and mechanism of provoking fear. They examine the use of masks to mediate the flow of air in and out of bodies, drawing on a wide range of sources, from comics and novels to medical texts and paintings, with rich illustrations throughout. The focus is primarily on Western Europe and North America, but one chapter on Japan and China extends the geographic coverage.

Through a discussion of how masks have been used to counter various kinds of bad air over the years, the authors demonstrate the deeper significance of this technology and the ramifications of its uptake. Their narrative is peppered by many fascinating nuggets. I was struck, for instance, by the accounts of the experiment in which medical assistants had to fill their mouths with coal dust and move around a room emitting strange sounds so as to model how far bacteria could travel (p. 118) and the US executive who saw the commercial potential of applying bra cup technology to mask design (p. 211).

I would have liked to see more discussion, though, of what exactly it is about covering the mouth and nose that provokes the response that it does. How does this differ from the masking of other parts of the body, such as the covering of the eyes with dark glasses, ears with headphones, hair

with a headscarf, or hands with gloves? The book made me ponder the resonances attached to different body parts and the culturally and politically shaped ideas of what we should, or should not, bare to others. Is there something about the sensorial ways in which we interact and connect with one another that influences the meanings we attach to the body parts through which we speak, hear, smell, touch, or see and their covering? I would have been interested to read more theoretical reflection on this.

Ultimately, however, this is not the authors' project. Strasser and Schlich set out to offer an overview of the history of how masks have been taken up as technological fixes to various societal problems, and this they do well. *The Mask* is an engaging read, which would be of interest to the wider public and a valuable addition to an undergraduate or graduate course on the history of science, science and technology studies, medical anthropology, or health geography.

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