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“How to Make a Mask”: Quarantine Feminism and Global Supply Chains

ROSIE THE SEAMSTRESS. Also, Sally, Sylvia, Sharon, Susie/Suzie/Suzy the Seamstress. These are just some of the names given to, and adopted by, hundreds of thousands of (mostly) women and girls in the United States making face masks from their homes.¹ They’re part of a loosely coordinated grassroots effort to help alleviate the national shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Other collective terms, like sewing army, seamstress battalion, and craftivists also figure prominently in the popular discourse about this mass movement.

As these names suggest, at-home mask-making in the context of COVID-19 is being interpreted as a gendered form of civic participation based on traditionally feminine skills of sewing and crafting as well as moral, spiritual, and cultural uplift. Like her predecessor, Rosie the Riveter, Rosie the Seamstress is understood as the feminine embodiment of the American can-do spirit. She’s a tough but feminine, white, middle-class woman who, when her country needs her, dutifully rolls up her sleeves and gets down to work—not by making airplanes and bombs but by sewing face masks. In national and local newspapers, this latest icon of feminist empowerment and national solidarity can be seen in the myriad photos of grandmothers, moms, sisters, neighbors, little girls, and social media

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1. The masculine counterparts of Rosie the Seamstress are the portrayals of men and boys using their personal 3-D printers to fabricate face shields.

groups sitting at sewing machines making face masks. With few exceptions, they're all white, feminine-presenting, and middle-class.

"Rosie the Seamstress" is uplifting, but it's also a narrative that pushes women of color, low-income women, and immigrant women to the margins of the US cultural and social imaginary, thus threatening to erase them from the historical memory of COVID-19 (and of World War II). Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of garment workers, the other group of mostly women and girls who are making face masks.

Few sectors were as rapidly and severely affected by the early spread of COVID-19 than the global garment industry. Even when the virus was still contained to China, its effects were already being felt in garment factories all over the world. When China expanded its quarantine efforts in January 2020, fashion sales plummeted across all markets. Chinese consumers, the world's fastest growing luxury market, stopped buying.² Chinese garment and textile workers stopped going to factories to make clothes or to ship textiles and other materials (e.g., zippers, buttons, rivets, and Velcro) to apparel manufacturers in countries that depend on China for supplies.

When COVID-19 spread globally, the impact on garment workers was catastrophic. As demand went into freefall, so too did new orders. Garment factories worldwide reported unprecedented production slowdowns in February and March of 2020, the effects of which will last for months, if not years. Typically, brands place orders at least three months ahead of delivery and pay for the finished product only after it arrives. In other words, production slowdowns in late autumn can mean a loss of wages and increased precarity for garment workers through the spring and summer, which can be devastating for those who lack savings and largely don't get paid a living wage. For garment workers, the loss of a job often involves not only the loss of potential future income but also the loss of unpaid back wages. This is the second impact COVID-19 had on garment workers.

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2. McKinsey Greater China's Apparel, Fashion and Luxury Group, "China Luxury Report 2019," McKinsey and Company, April 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/china/how%20young%20chinese%20consumers%20are%20reshaping%20global%20luxury/mckinsey-china-luxury-report-2019-how-young-chinese-consumers-are-reshaping-global-luxury.ashx>.

In the midst of the pandemic, Western fashion brands and retailers exercised their contractual right to cancel existing orders, or more accurately, to stiff workers on wages for orders *already completed* and, in some cases, already shipped. Public pressure led some brands to pay for their full orders (e.g., H&M and Zara) but many others still refuse to pay (e.g., Urban Outfitters/Free People/Anthropologie, Primark, The Children's Place). Some, like Gap, Inc. (including Gap, Old Navy, Athletica, and Banana Republic) and the Arcadia Group (including Dorothy Perkins, Topshop, and Miss Selfridge) demanded steep discounts on orders that had already been produced at rock-bottom wages. Mostafiz Uddin, a denim supplier in Bangladesh whose clients include Arcadia and Global Brands Group, which owns high-end brands such as Sean John, Jones New York, Tahari, and Aquatalia, aptly characterized these demands as "blackmail": "That means I am making the jeans for free and my workers made the jeans for free. It's blackmail."³ As of May 2020, Bangladeshi garment workers are still awaiting payment for work completed two months ago.⁴ Worker Rights Consortium, a watchdog group, has a running tally on its website of the brands that have committed to paying their suppliers and those that are refusing to do so.⁵

In total, an estimated sixteen million garment workers have lost their jobs in the COVID-19 era.⁶ Asian garment workers, particularly in Bangladesh (the world's second-largest clothing manufacturer), have been hit the hardest. A study by the Centre for Global Workers' Rights found that a staggering 91.3 percent of brands that canceled their

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3. Mostafiz Uddin, quoted in "Bangladeshi Garments Suppliers Held Hostage By International Clothing Brands, Retailers," *Daily Star*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/bangladeshi-garments-suppliers-held-hostage-international-clothing-brands-retailers-1901218>.
 4. See "RMG Workers Protest for Full Pay in 4 Districts," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/14/rmg-workers-stage-demo-vandalise-factory-in-savar>; and "Garment Workers Protest for Full Wage Bonuses in Dhaka Amidst Lockdown," *PenNews*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.pennews.net/international/2020/05/19/garments-workers-protest-for-full-wage-bonuses-in-dhaka-amidst-lockdown>.
 5. See the Worker Rights Consortium's COVID-19 Tracker here: <https://www.workersrights.org/issues/covid-19/tracker>.
 6. Clean Clothes Campaign, *Un(der) Paid in the Pandemic* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020), 8.

orders in Bangladesh refused to pay suppliers.⁷ The extensive and systematic wage theft of workers, who make, on average, about one hundred dollars per month, resulted in the partial or complete closure of more than half of Bangladesh's factories (about 58 percent), which left more than one million garment workers unemployed.⁸ According to the Penn State Center for Global Workers Rights, 72 percent of workers were sent home without pay and "98 percent of buyers — many of them big global clients — refused to contribute to the cost of partial wages for furloughed employees, as Bangladeshi law requires."⁹ In total, Bangladesh is expected to lose six billion dollars in export revenue in 2020 — about a sixth of the country's total.¹⁰ Across Southeast Asia, hundreds of thousands of garment workers have been let go from factories without receiving their owed wages or severance pay. In Myanmar, 150 of the country's 600 factories shut down. In Cambodia, 200 of 600 factories have shuttered.¹¹ And in Viet Nam, an estimated 30 to 50 percent of garment workers have lost their jobs.¹²

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7. Akbar Hossain, "Coronavirus: Two Million Bangladesh Jobs 'At Risk' as Clothes Orders Dry Up," *BBC*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52417822>.
 8. Hossain, "Coronavirus." Some sources are reporting that the number may rise to two million, see Naimul Karim, "H&M in Talks to Support Bangladesh Workers as Lockdowns Hit Livelihoods," *Reuters*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bangladesh-manufac/hm-in-talks-to-support-bangladesh-workers-as-lockdowns-hit-livelihoods-idUSKB N21P2UQ>.
 9. Lauren Frayer, "1 Million Bangladeshi Garment Workers Lose Jobs Amid COVID-19 Economic Fallout," *NPR*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826617334/1-million-bangladeshi-garment-workers-lose-jobs-amid-covid-19-economic-fallout>.
 10. Ruma Paul, "Garment Exporter Bangladesh Faces \$6 Billion Hit as Top Retailers Cancel," *Reuters*, March 31, 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-bangladesh-exports/garment-exporter-bangladesh-faces-6-billion-hit-as-top-retailers-cancel-idUKKBN21I2R9>.
 11. "Coronavirus Cuts a Swathe Through Asia's Garment Industry, Leaving Thousands Out of Work," *South China Morning Post*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3084963/coronavirus-cuts-swathe-through-asias-garment-industry>.
 12. Tomoya Onishi and Yuichi Nitta, "Vietnam Garment Makers Hung Out to Dry as Global Orders Vanish," *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 19, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Vietnam-garment-makers-hung-out-to-dry-as-global-orders-vanish>.

The US garment industry—concentrated mostly in Los Angeles, California—is much smaller than any in Asia. This is a consequence of the deregulation of the global fashion market throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which prompted US and other Western fashion brands to move their apparel production to countries with low-cost labor. Still, the impact of canceled orders and factory shutdowns was no less catastrophic for garment workers in the United States. Even before California implemented quarantine measures in March 2020, most factories had already stopped operations—often without giving workers notice. Los Angeles garment workers are predominantly Latina and Asian women immigrants, many of whom are undocumented. Most are ineligible to receive funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the federal stimulus package passed by Congress at the end of March 2020. California has since committed to providing undocumented immigrants funding through a partnership between the state and nonprofit groups, but the amount of relief is negligible. Adults can receive a one-time payment of five hundred dollars, small comfort in the second-most expensive state in the country.

Unemployed and unlikely to recover their unpaid wages, many garment workers who were offered jobs making face masks and other PPE (e.g., medical overalls and hospital gowns) reluctantly agreed. Some, like those in Los Angeles, were approached directly by hospitals and state officials about making masks.¹³ Other garment workers are making masks for fashion brands that have promised to donate to frontline workers as well as to sell in their online stores. As I've written elsewhere, the attention the media lavished on fashion designers and brands offering to donate PPE glossed over the actual conditions of workers making these products.¹⁴ The reality is that jobs making PPE are “bad jobs,”

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13. Charles Davis, “California’s Governor Said Hospitals Are So Strapped for Face Masks They Are Turning to Los Angeles Seamstresses—An Industry Notorious for Poor Labor Conditions,” *Business Insider*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/covid-19-mask-shortage-forces-hospitals-to-turn-to-seamstresses-2020-3>; Elizabeth Chou, “Garcetti Urges Garment Industry to Make 5 Million Masks Against Coronavirus for Those on Non-Medical Frontline,” *Daily News*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.dailynews.com/2020/03/26/garcetti-urges-garment-industry-to-make-5-million-masks-against-coronavirus-for-those-on-non-medical-frontline>.
 14. Minh-Ha T. Pham, “As Fashion Lines Are Praised for Making Face Masks, Don’t Ignore Garment Workers,” *Truthout*, March 31, 2020, <https://truthout.org/articles/as-fashion-lines-are-praised-for-making-face-masks-dont-ignore-garment-workers>.

which Ashley Mears characterizes as “unpredictable, poorly paid, and without benefits” in her study of fashion modeling, another kind of fashion work.¹⁵ The manufacture of PPE has done little to improve garment workers’ lives and, in many cases, exacerbates their vulnerability to illness, labor exploitation, and death.

Garment workers making face masks are being paid the same abysmal wages they were being paid to make clothes. Some in Los Angeles “are earning as little as \$.05 per mask, which leads to wages as low as \$190 per week.”¹⁶ As I’ve previously noted, they’re also making masks in “factories that are poorly ventilated and dirty, where masks for workers themselves are few and far between, where the bathrooms have no soap or hand sanitizer (and sometimes no water), and where social distancing measures — and paid sick leave — are non-existent.”¹⁷ Gap, Inc., was one of the later brands to announce that it would be making masks to sell as well as to donate to community organizations (in the United States and Canada). The media widely praised Gap for its philanthropy, ignoring or unaware of the fact that the company’s masks are being made in Bangladesh by the very workers whose wages it refused to pay at the beginning of the year.¹⁸ Similarly, Zara’s billionaire founder Amancio Ortega became a Spanish media darling after promising not to lay off Spanish retail workers and directing his factories to begin making PPE. Often left out in the media coverage about Ortega and Zara are the Burmese workers making Zara’s face masks and the union-busting tactics they face.

When garment workers in the two Myanmar factories making Zara-branded face masks asked for PPE for themselves, they were fired. In total, 571 (unionized) workers from two factories lost their jobs. Burmese workers and their union representatives appealed to Zara to step in, but the company passed the buck to local factory owners — tacitly

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15. Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 65.
 16. Alyssa Hardy, “Some Fashion Brands That Are Making PPE Aren’t Providing It for Garment Workers,” *InStyle*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.instyle.com/fashion/fashion-industry-garment-workers-making-ppe>.
 17. Pham, “As Fashion Lines Are Praised for Making Face Masks, Don’t Ignore Garment Workers.”
 18. Hardy, “Some Fashion Brands That Are Making PPE Aren’t Providing It for Garment Workers”; Dara Prant, “Old Navy Donates \$30 Million of Clothing to American Families in Need,” *Fashionista*, May 12, 2020, <https://fashionista.com/2020/05/old-navy-coronavirus-donations>.

allowing union-busting. As Andrew Tillett-Saks, a labor-rights activist living and working in Myanmar, has argued, “If these brands were to indicate any interest in keeping workers safe, the factories would immediately follow suit. The fact is the brands have all the power to change things. They just don’t because they prioritize their financial profits over the people who make their clothes.”¹⁹

It should be obvious by now that garment workers making face masks aren’t Rosie the Seamstresses. They’re not making masks in the safety and comfort of their homes, they’re not doing it out of a sense of public-spiritedness or as a show of gendered civic engagement, and they’re not being hailed in the media as icons of feminist empowerment and strength. Garment workers are putting themselves and their families at risk of getting sick so that they can feed their loved ones, pay rent, and cover medical bills. In a twist of cruel irony — entirely consistent with globalization’s unequal distribution of rewards and risks — the reason garment workers lost their jobs is also the reason they’re returning to them. Then, as now, powerful Western fashion brands protect their profits by pushing costs and risk down the supply chain to be borne by the world’s most vulnerable workers.

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While garment workers face the impossible decision of having no income or risking their families’ health to go to work to make face masks that, in many cases, they themselves aren’t allowed to have, US Americans sheltering in place took up mask-making as a national pastime. As if to encourage this hobby, major media outlets from the *New York Times* to NPR published step-by-step instructions on how to sew face masks. YouTube and TikTok users created thousands of video tutorials tagged with labels like #DIYmask and #makefacemask. One of the most popular YouTube videos, created by Erica Arndt, a self-described “Christian, wife,

19. Nishita Jha, “Zara’s Billionaire Owner Was Praised for Helping in the Coronavirus Crisis: Workers in Myanmar Paid the Price,” *Buzzfeed News*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/coronavirus-zara-spain-inditex-myanmar>.

and mama,” got more than three million views in its first two weeks.²⁰ After April 4, 2020, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revised its guidelines to recommend that everyone — and not just health-care workers and sick people — wear masks, interest in mask-making surged. Between April 5 and April 11, “how to make a mask” was Google’s number one “how-to” search subject.²¹

By mid-April, homemade masks had taken center stage in US cultural, social, and political life. People made masks for themselves and their families but also for strangers. Volunteer mask-making groups sprung up all over the country to donate masks to essential workers and communities in need. More often than not, garment workers were left out of considerations about how to care for and celebrate essential workers.

At-home mask-making also gave rise to a new market for “artisan masks.” Etsy, the online marketplace specializing in homemade and small-batch products, has become *the* go-to website for selling and buying face masks. In April 2020, Etsy reported a five-fold increase in the number of face mask sellers, searches (“an average of 9 times per second”), and sales (to the tune of \$133 million.)²² What distinguishes Etsy masks from mass-produced versions (i.e., those made by garment workers) is their aura of authenticity. Etsy masks can be *authenticated* to a specific maker, sewer, or crafter who, according to Etsy’s own demographic data, is most likely to be a middle-class woman living in the United States.²³ Etsy mask sellers tacitly or explicitly emphasize the

20. Erica Arndt, “How to SEW a Medical FACE MASK // TUTORIAL,” March 21, 2020, Video, 6:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FB--BOyTiU&t=28s>.

21. Alyssa Fowers, “Last year, we searched Google for how to tie a tie. Now we’re using it to find toilet paper.” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/17/last-year-we-searched-google-how-tie-tie-now-were-using-it-find-toilet-paper/?arc404=true>.

22. Josh Silverman, “Mobilizing Our Community in Times of Need,” Etsy blog, April 7, 2020, https://blog.etsy.com/news/2020/mobilizing-our-community-in-times-of-need/?ref=press_blog_title.

23. Eighty-six percent of Etsy sellers identify as women, ninety-five percent of sellers run their businesses from home, thirty-eight percent are “homemakers,” and sixty-two percent are located in the United States. See “Building an Etsy Economy: The New Face of Creative Entrepreneurship,” Etsy, 2015, https://extfiles.etsy.com/Press/reports/Etsy_NewFaceofCreativeEntrepreneurship_2015.pdf; and J. Clement, “Number of Active Etsy Sellers from 2012 to 2019,” March 3, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/409374/etsy-active-sellers>.

gender- and class-based appeal of their products. Although Etsy only requires sellers to identify their shops' countries of origin, most sellers make it a point to emphasize the local and domestic production of their masks by adding descriptions like "Made in Minnesota," "Made in Maine," "Made in Fairfax, California," and "Hand made with LOVE."²⁴

Homemade and locally produced masks—unlike those made in factories—emblemize the public-spiritedness of these times. It's become one of the most visible, and for many people, valued means of civic, political, and economic participation at a time when all three spheres of US society are in crisis. At-home mask-making also represents a contemporary model of women's strength through craft activism and collaboration, as reflected in volunteer group names like Moms Making Masks, Moms Make Masks, and the Auntie Sewing Squad. Popular discourse emphasizes women's empowerment through self- and national care work. As children's book author Colleen Paeff explains, "When I sat down to make the masks, I felt good because it was something that I could actually do to make a difference. There's a powerless feeling with this whole pandemic."²⁵

But if at-home mask-making represents a model of a feminist empowerment in the face of crisis—call it quarantine feminism—it's a distinctly white, middle-class, model. Not only are white, middle-class women centralized in the media coverage about at-home mask-making, repeated references to Rosie the Riveter and her modern variants construct this demographic as the ideal subjects of feminist civic participation—even when people who are not white women invoke the World War II-era icon.²⁶ This popular notion of a modern-day Rosie the Riveter took on institutional status when, in a White House press briefing,

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24. MagicVisionsManifest, "Face Masks 100% Cotton," Etsy, accessed June 30, 2020, https://www.etsy.com/listing/802199655/face-masks-100-cotton?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=masks&ref=sr_gallery-1-9&bes=1.
 25. Quoted in Shira Feder, "People Across the US Are Sewing Masks to Donate to the Vulnerable. Some Say It's Helping to Calm Their Feelings of Helplessness," *Insider*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/inside-rush-to-diy-face-mask-prevent-coronavirus-2020-4>.
 26. Kristina Wong, an Asian American performance artist and creator of the Auntie Sewing Squad, has said that she "feel[s] like a modern day Rosie the Riveter." See Nic Cha Kim, "Artist Sews Masks for First Responders and Hospital Staff," *Spectrum News*, March 27, 2020, <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/health/2020/03/27artist-sews-masks-for-first-responders-and-hospital-staff>.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams (who is African American) told the nation, “you’ve got to be Rosie the Riveter, you’ve got to do your part.”²⁷ Adams also characterized the pandemic as a “Pearl Harbor moment,” making Rosie the Riveter’s racial construction and implications plain.

Adams’s call to action disregards the reality that many Americans simply don’t have the option of staying at home making masks. Essential workers — nearly seventy percent of the entire US workforce — are exempt from “shelter-in-place” restrictions.²⁸ They’re not afforded what’s come to be known as “quarantine privilege.” Not surprisingly, quarantine privilege is divided along race, gender, and class lines. An Associated Press analysis of census data determined that essential workers “are mostly women, people of color and more likely to be immigrants” (the same demographic composition as garment workers). They are “also more likely to live below the federal poverty line or hover just above it [and] are more likely to have children at home and live with others who also have front-line jobs.”²⁹ In other words, the largest proportion of US workers are excluded from the homemade mask’s white feminist vision of national civic engagement precisely because their labor is necessary for keeping the country running. This is just one of many paradoxes that defines essential workers’ position in society.

Adams’s call for feminist civic sewing also disregarded garment workers’ labor and the role they were already playing in COVID-19 relief efforts. This erasure reveals how the mode and means of women’s civic engagement rests on race- and class-based hierarchies of gendered labor and value. As I discuss below, these power dynamics reflect the racialized geographies of global supply chains and women’s differentiated relationship to them.

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- 27. Tom McCarthy, Oliver Laughland, and Kari Paul, “US Surgeon General Warns of ‘Pearl Harbor Moment’ as Americans Face ‘Hardest Week,’” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/pearl-harbor-us-surgeon-general-coronavirus-deaths-donald-trump-white-house-briefing>.
 - 28. Francine D. Blau, Josefine Koebe, and Pamela A. Meyerhofer, “Essential and Frontline Workers in the COVID-19 Crisis,” *Econofact*, April 30, 2020, <https://econofact.org/essential-and-frontline-workers-in-the-covid-19-crisis>.
 - 29. Mae Anderson, Alexandra Olson, and Angeliki Kastanis, “Women, Minorities Shoulder Front-Line Work During Pandemic,” *AP News*, May 1, 2020, <https://apnews.com/029ea874dc964697358016d3628429fa>.

I mentioned earlier that the homemade mask has an aura of authenticity that is appealing because it can be authenticated by a real, identifiable person or localized to a place marked as domestic, familiar, and intimate (“Made in Fairfax, California,” and “Hand made with LOVE”). Put another way, the homemade mask reflects and enacts two linked processes of localization that are based on race and class — it localizes ideal feminist civic participation to the domestic mask-maker rather than the industrial seamstress and to the middle-class home rather than the garment factory. In the homemade mask, “women’s work” is given new meaning and value because it’s defined as locally produced.

The logic of the local intrinsic to the quarantine feminist model of civic participation dovetails with the ethical fashion ethos that celebrates “buying local” as a politically progressive choice. Buying local, as we’ve been told in so many ways, is what ethical consumers do to avoid the negative social and environmental impact of global supply chains. But as COVID-19 and the PPE shortage so starkly demonstrate, there’s no avoiding these systems. The mismanagement of the medical supply chain, on one hand, and the abuses of the fashion supply chain, on the other, have brought us to this point where two very different groups of women are making face masks (one medical grade, the other non-medical grade) that not only carry different cultural meanings but also afford them very different levels of socioeconomic power. Etsy sellers are their own bosses; garment workers are workers. Nevertheless, Rosie the Seamstress is as implicated in and affected by the same global supply chains as garment workers — whether we recognize it or not. Ultimately, that may be the most appealing thing about at-home mask-making. It provides a way of evading or transcending the stigma, inequities, and risks of globalization, if not the realities. But this is a privileged kind of feminist distancing that most poor and working-class women of color — garment workers, but also other essential workers — are simply not afforded.