

“Prayer Warriors Needed!” The Warrior-Priest Archetypal Metaphor in American Cancer & COVID Rhetorics

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In this essay, I reveal the presence and power of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in American cancer and COVID-19 rhetorics. The warrior-priest’s role in these rhetorics is that of an obfuscating agent of ideology operating to maintain the hegemony of capitalism in our healthcare system. Through the fusion of religious and martial metaphors, the warrior-priest archetype emerges to misplace agency, divert attention, and justify capitalistic systems of power in American healthcare. By examining the popular Reddit community r/HermanCainAward, the crowdsourcing website GoFundMe, and a “viral” cancer story, this essay demonstrates how the warrior-priest accomplishes these ideological goals. Finally, this essay’s conclusion functions as a reflective space as I first contemplate my findings as a former cancer patient before then discussing the efficacy of two potential correctives to the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in American cancer and COVID discourses.

Keywords: cancer rhetoric; COVID-19; archetypal metaphor; ideology; capitalism

In late October 312 CE, Roman Emperor Constantine stood in the dusky stillness of twilight at the edge of his army’s encampment, his eyes fixed upon the horizon. As he witnessed the day’s last light extinguish, Constantine breathed in the crisp autumn air of the Italian countryside and slowly exhaled, searching within to locate some resolve. Behind him, the familiar murmur of soldierly conversation and the occasional crackle of campfire continued unabated, providing at least the veneer of normalcy for the emperor.

The scene changed in an instant. A flash of fiery light consumed the evening sky, shattering the steady hum of the camp and piercing the autumnal stillness. As abruptly as it appeared, the light vanished. In its wake, a cross of white light materialized above Constantine. Accompanied with a faint inscription – *in hoc signo vinces* – “through this sign, you shall conquer” – the cross¹ of white light lingered for a moment before fading into the darkening sky.² Constantine located his resolve at last.³

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¹ Gianfrancesco Penni, Giulio Romano, and Raffaellino del Colle, *The Vision of the Cross*, 1524, Painting, 1524, Vatican Museums, <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/stanze-di-raffaello/sala-di-costantino/visione-della-croce.html>.

² Eusebius, *Eusebius’ Life of Constantine* (Clarendon Press, 1999).;

³ Contemporary, popularized, and artistic accounts differ significantly regarding both the nature of the symbol and the manner in which Constantine is said to have witnessed the symbol. For example, in Penni, Romano, and del Colle’s painting, *The Vision of the Cross* (1524), the symbol depicted is the traditional Christian cross. However, in Eusebius’ biography of Constantine, the symbol is said to have been the Chi Ro, which was an early Greek symbol for Christ.

Convinced he would triumph over his rival for Rome's Imperial throne with the protection of the Christian God, Constantine instructed his legions to paint the symbol he saw in the sky upon their shields. At the Battle of the Milvian Bridge the next day, Constantine and his warriors gathered to face their enemy, the painted Chi Ro emblem alight in the bright sun. While this may have been the first recorded invocation of the Christian divine in combat, it was certainly not the last. Almost a millennia after Constantine's victory, Christian crusaders laid siege to the Holy City of Jerusalem in the name of Jesus Christ, his cross emblazoned upon their armor. Centuries later, the Thirty Years' War raged across much of central Europe. In a now all too familiar tale, Protestant and Catholic forces invoked their shared Christ to justify the slaughter that would eventually claim more than eight million lives.⁴ Of course, the use of religion in war is not unique to Western history, nor even to Christianity. Indeed, the confluence of war and religion flows through all human history, arguably providing the primary undercurrent for conflict from the genesis of humankind through modernity.

My concern in this essay, however, is not in proving the existence of this ancient confluence of violence and faith in the human experience – my concern is situated elsewhere. In this essay, I explore a curious contemporary manifestation of this union between religion and combat: the rhetorical invocation of what I call the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor. The historical vignettes I outlined above – of Constantine, the Crusades, and the Thirty Years' War, of Christian soldiers summoning the Divine to aid their conquests – endure today and help describe the underlying rhetorical function of the archetypal metaphor as it appears in modern discourses. The warrior-priest archetypal metaphor is activated in the sustained amalgamation of religious and martial discourse uttered in response to profound exigencies. Within these exigent situations, the warrior-priest emerges through fight and faith laden language as rhetors attempt to discursively: sacralize and (re)frame challenges to themselves or their community, justify bodily and/or rhetorical violence, and seek to triumph in their now sacred endeavor. In other words, the ethereal inscription that is said to have appeared before Constantine – “through this sign, you shall conquer” – abides today through metaphor and metonymy, through fight and faith rhetoric. The warrior-priest is no longer confined to the annals of history or the religious battlefields of Europe and the Middle East – the warrior-priest is now infused within other facets of the modern human experience through language imbued with metaphor.

The warrior-priest archetypal metaphor is especially omnipresent in contemporary rhetorics of health and medicine, specifically those of cancer and COVID-19 in America. Within these rhetorics, the warrior-priest archetype is at work in the “discursive background of social life,”⁵ in social media calls for “prayer warriors,” obituaries, within movies and television shows, in dinner table conversations, hospital corridors, billboard ads, and scattered throughout crowdsourced fundraising campaigns. Americans, in short, seemingly understand and frame their experiences with cancer and COVID through the prism of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor. When faced with the existential threat posed by cancer or COVID, Americans employ language steeped in religious and martial metaphors – through Christ, in other words, they shall conquer the ailment that befalls them. While this reactionary reliance upon Christian violence in American disease discourses may be explained, at least partially, by tracing the Puritanical and militant foundations of American

Additionally, there is no consensus regarding when and where Constantine is said to have seen this symbol – one account suggests it was during the day before the battle, another suggests it was the night before.

⁴ Peter Hamish Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.

⁵ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (May 1987): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

history, the elusive rhetoricity of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in contemporary American cancer and COVID discourses warrants a closer examination.

The warrior-priest's presence and power within these discourses dwells within the communicative phenomenon central to this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* – the conceit of liberation in contemporary religious rhetorics. In concert with the other religious rhetorics examined in this issue that, as Christopher Oldenburg earlier summarized, promise “freedom from the yoke of sin, addiction, affliction, guilt, slavery, poverty, death, or perceived cultural forces of depravity and destruction,” the warrior-priest assures deliverance from cancer and COVID-19. This assurance, however, is deceitful. The warrior-priest deceives Americans into believing that true “freedom” from these diseases is possible through a fight inspired by faith. Within this deception, the warrior-priest operates as an obfuscating agent of ideology, truly working to ensure the continuation of capitalism's dominance over American healthcare by maintaining cultural adherence to the delusional belief in capitalism's liberatory capabilities. As I explore throughout the remainder of this essay, the warrior-priest archetype emerges through the fusion of religious and martial metaphors to misplace agency, divert attention, and justify capitalistic systems of power in American healthcare.

Moreover, the warrior-priest's conceit of liberation festers in the absence of a public healthcare system and subsequently manifests as a fleeting dose of affect mixed with Divine Providence. My objective in this essay is to demonstrate that, like the American healthcare system as a whole, the warrior-priest has indeed been commandeered by powerful capitalist interests to distract the masses from the material and bodily consequences of the very systems that bind them. Or, to borrow from Kenneth Burke, my goal is to reveal the alluring composition of this “medicine” that the “medicine-man has concocted”⁶ as we continue to reckon with the scourge wrought by disease and capitalism in the 21st Century.

To advance this objective, this essay proceeds in four parts. First, I describe the unconventional repositories that house two artifacts of my analysis – r/HermanCainAward and *GoFundMe* – and provide the context necessary to situate their import in American health discourses. Second, I review the scholarship on metaphors within cancer and COVID contexts and discuss the definitional parameters of archetypal metaphors through a brief outline of Osborn's research regarding their presence in rhetorical discourse.⁷ At the conclusion of this section, I then trace the critical and Marxist rhetorical scholarship that informs my overarching heuristic approach in my critique of the warrior-priest's supporting role in the maintenance of capitalism's hegemony in America. Third, I turn to my analysis and work through how, exactly, the warrior-priest performs its role as an agent of ideology to misplace agency, divert attention, and justify capitalistic systems of power in American healthcare. Finally, I reflect upon several important implications stemming from my analysis and draw from my own experience as a young cancer patient to briefly ponder the efficacy of two potential corrective frames.

⁶ Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler's ‘Battle,’” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt, (Strata Pub., 1941), 238.

⁷ Michael Osborn and D. Ehninger, “The Metaphor in Public Address,” *Speech Monographs* 29 (August 1962): 223–34; Michael Osborn, “Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53, no. 2 (April 1967): 115–26.

r/HermanCainAward & GoFundMe

r/HermanCainAward is an online community (called a “subreddit”) on *Reddit* that functions as part digital repository, social media forum, and public health advocacy group that “nominates” potential “awardees” who have made “public declaration[s] of their anti-mask, anti-vax, or Covid-hoax views, followed by admission to hospital for Covid.”⁸ The subreddit and its accompanying “award” are named after Herman Cain, the former businessman and (2012) Republican presidential candidate who died from COVID-19 in July 2020. r/HermanCainAward bears his name because Cain consistently “made statements downplaying the pandemic and refused preventative measures such as mask-wearing” (Walters, Johnson, & Silvertson, 2022), and “was photographed maskless” at former President Trump’s first reelection rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma in June 2020 where, as many suspect, Cain contracted the virus.⁹ Even after his death, Cain’s social media accounts continued to “downplay the virus.”¹⁰ As of April 2024, r/HermanCainAward has over 493,000 members and continues to be featured in outlets ranging from *Fox News* to *NPR*.

While r/HermanCainAward is, itself, a novel and curious rhetorical artifact, it is the contents of this repository that provides a unique look into American COVID-19 rhetorics and the continued manifestation of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor. Each post on r/HermanCainAward maintains a relatively standard form that includes a title, a brief commentary from the “OP” (Original Poster), and a slideshow of screenshots¹¹ from the nominee/awardee’s various social media accounts. The featured screenshots chronicle the nominee’s journey with COVID that always begins with their virulent misinformation peddling (via memes, status updates, and comments), to their COVID contraction announcement, to their eventual hospitalization due to COVID, and, finally, to a friend or family’s announcement that the nominee (now awardee) has died. The misinformation shared by the awardee is from a “remarkably consistent set” of about 30 images and memes that range from crudely “vilify[ing] Dr. Anthony Fauci” to framing liberals and the vaccinated “as ‘sheep’ and the unvaccinated as proud free lions,” as well as the deplorable reference to immigrants “as vectors of disease” and the vile comparison of “vaccination requirements to the Holocaust.”¹² Oftentimes, these memes also echo the false likening of COVID to cancer that are common in right-wing discourses and this connection is then frequently reified in screenshots of the nominee/awardee’s own writings. Most importantly, however, the final few screenshots of a post in r/HermanCainAward that track the awardee’s death prominently feature the warrior-priest in action. These screenshots are often of family and friends commenting on the deceased’s lost “battle,”

⁸ “About - r/HermanCainAward,” *Reddit & r/HermanCainAward*, n.d., <https://www.reddit.com/r/HermanCainAward/>.

⁹ Quincy Walters, Ben Brock Johnson, and Amory Silvertson, “The Herman Cain Award: The Prize No One Wants to Get and Creators Want to Destroy,” *Endless Thread* from NPR Boston (Wbur), n.d., <https://www.wbur.org/endlessthread/2022/04/08/herman-cain-award>; Lili Loofbourow, “The Unbelievable Grimness of HermanCainAward, the Subreddit That Catalogs Anti-Vaxxer COVID Deaths,” *Slate*, September 21, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/09/hermancainaward-subreddit-antivaxxer-deaths-cataloged.html>.

¹⁰ Loofbourow, “The Unbelievable Grimness of HermanCainAward, the Subreddit That Catalogs Anti-Vaxxer COVID Deaths.”

¹¹ Per the stringently enforced “posting rules” of r/HermanCainAward, any identifying information of the nominee/awardee must be redacted. They say: “posts about non-public figures must redact the entire name(s) of everyone in every image. Block it out completely. Don’t scribble and allow redacted names to leak through. Profile pictures are not allowed and must be blocked out” (*Help/Posting-Rules – r/HermanCainAward*, n.d.).

¹² Loofbourow, “The Unbelievable Grimness of HermanCainAward, the Subreddit That Catalogs Anti-Vaxxer COVID Deaths.”

their “fight,” and their “struggle” with COVID, and are often followed by a statement on the deceased’s strong, enduring, and, notably, Christian faith. For hospitalized nominees with dire prognoses, a family member or friend will take to social media to request prayers, frequently framing this request with a variation of the phrase “prayer warriors needed!” For the posthumously awarded, the “prayer-warrior” rallying cry is extended to those closest to the deceased who need prayers for the strength to endure their grief and to heal. Indeed, “a call [for] ‘prayer warriors’ is almost a required feature at this point in a r/HermanCainAward entry.¹³

Although less centralized than the COVID rhetorics featured in r/HermanCainAward, cancer narratives abound in the discursive background of American social life. Indeed, there is no shortage of these narratives today as they seemingly proliferate on social media and are a common feature on local news outlets. The cancer narratives shared on social media are usually featured prominently on fundraising, or “crowdfunding,” websites like *GoFundMe*. With an “average fundraising goal” of \$21,000, *GoFundMe* crowdfunding campaigns often cite the need to pay medical bills and stave off resultant “financial ruin” and “financial devastation” from cancer care in America.¹⁴ The “viral” popularity of a cancer narrative is oftentimes obtained through the number of “likes,” “shares,” “retweets,” and/or “reposts.” Determining the “virality” of a popular culture artifact like a cancer narrative, however, is still a fluid and subjective process as these rhetorics are inherently “diffuse,” seeping into “many other signs, potentially without limit.”¹⁵ Generally, viral cancer stories are defined by their narrative style and are loaded with affect and framed as inspirational. Regardless of where cancer narratives are found, however, the warrior-priest maintains a spectral presence, haunting every aspect of the associated discourse from the expository narrative to the comments of support.

Metaphor, Archetypal Metaphor, and Critical Rhetoric

Metaphor

Metaphors are a purposeful rhetorical device used to achieve understanding between a rhetor and their audience by comparing two seemingly dissimilar experiences, events, or objects to one another. Given the omnipresence of metaphor in “everyday life,” George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued that metaphor functions as an important sinew in linking human thought, speech, and action together as “how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” is “fundamentally metaphorical.”¹⁶ Within rhetoric(s) of health and medicine (RHM), war metaphors in particular continue to attract the attention of several scholars. Judy Segal, for example, wrote that the “medicine is war” framework “still informs a great deal of common parlance about [general] medicine” practices – we speak of “*invading* microbes” that can be “*resisted* by the body’s *defense* mechanisms or by pharmaceutical magic *bullets*,” and, especially “in the *battle* with cancer,” “we *bombard* foreign cells, and we *fight* for our lives.”¹⁷ Following the passage of the *National Cancer Act*

¹³ Loofbourow, “The Unbelievable Grimness of HermanCainAward, the Subreddit That Catalogs Anti-Vaxxer COVID Deaths.”

¹⁴ Carolyn Crist, “Cancer Patients Use Crowdfunding for Medical Bills, Expenses,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2019, sec. Healthcare & Pharma, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-cancer-crowdfunding-idUSKCN1VX29F>.

¹⁵ Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 5th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2017), 98.

¹⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

¹⁷ Italics added for identification purposes; Judy Segal, *Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 123.

in 1971, the “War on Cancer” and its accompanying martial metaphors ascended to and “maintained a hegemonic position within American cancer discourse”¹⁸ – and scholars such as Sontag, Reisfield and Wilson, Garrison, Agnew, and Wernecke traced and critiqued the history, efficacy, and shortcomings of this metaphoric language.¹⁹ While war metaphors may initially “resonate with many [cancer] patients and physicians,” Reisfield and Wilson wrote, the framework’s fidelity is fleeting and hindered in what the metaphors eventually engender.²⁰

War and its metaphors function similarly within ongoing American COVID rhetorics. Bates, for example, examined former President Trump’s use of the martial metaphoric framework at the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Although “not the only actor circulating” the war metaphor in the context of COVID, Trump “positioned himself as a wartime president” at the helm of the country’s response, ultimately leading the news media and the punditry to further proliferate the frame.²¹ Through Trump’s use of war and its metaphors in framing his administration’s response to COVID, Bates found four major “entailments” of the martial metaphoric framework in subsequent policy and political discourses – the enemy, the soldiers, the home front, and the conditions for “victory.” Despite the appearance of congruence between COVID and war, Trump’s use of the martial metaphoric frame failed for several notable reasons. In addition to the “gratuitously xenophobic” and racist labeling of the virus as the “enemy” “Chinese virus,” Trump’s COVID war metaphor also misplaced agency by “transforming healthcare workers, first responders, and delivery persons into soldiers,” which ultimately shifted “healing and helping and support professions into militarized ones.”²²

Although “religion lies close to the core of America’s genetic code,” and religious rhetoric is intimately infused within American political and popular cultural discourses,²³ rhetorical scholarship has yet to thoroughly explore the larger impact of its metaphors in health and medicine contexts.²⁴ In its fusion with the warrior, the “priest” is an abstraction that is “both constrained and authorized by the mystical sacred” and is defined by an “obligation to the realm of things beyond

¹⁸ Christopher J. Wernecke, “‘A New Moonshot’: Exploring the Metaphoric Shift in American Cancer Discourse,” *Southern Communication Journal* 86, no. 4 (2021): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2021.1941223>.

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Macmillan, 1978); Gary M. Reisfield and George R. Wilson, “Use of Metaphor in the Discourse on Cancer,” *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 22, no. 19 (2004): 4024–27, <https://doi.org/10.1200/JCO.2004.03.136>; Kristen Garrison, “The Personal Is Rhetorical: War, Protest, and Peace in Breast Cancer Narratives,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (September 30, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v27i4.52>; Lois Agnew, “Ecologies of Cancer Rhetoric: The Shifting Terrain of US Cancer Wars, 1920–1980,” *College English* 80, no. 3 (2018): 271–96; Lois Agnew, “Managing Visibility: Emotion, Mascots, and the Birth of US Cancer Rhetorics,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 194–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2020.1752130>; Wernecke, “‘A New Moonshot’”; Christopher J. Wernecke, “Rhetorics of Cancer in America” (Doctoral dissertation, Atlanta, Georgia, Georgia State University, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.57709/35205585>.

²⁰ Reisfield and Wilson, “Use of Metaphor in the Discourse on Cancer,” 4025.

²¹ Benjamin R. Bates, “The (In)Appropriateness of the WAR Metaphor in Response to SARS-CoV-2: A Rapid Analysis of Donald J. Trump’s Rhetoric,” *Frontiers in Communication* 5 (June 30, 2020): 10–11, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00050>.

²² Bates, “The (In)Appropriateness of the WAR Metaphor in Response to SARS-CoV-2: A Rapid Analysis of Donald J. Trump’s Rhetoric,” 11.

²³ James Darsey and Joshua R. Ritter, “Religious Voices in American Public Discourse,” in *The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Andrea A. (ed. and introd.) Lunsford, Kirt H. (associate ed. and introd.) Wilson, and Rosa A. (associate ed. and introd.) Eberly (Sage, 2009), 553.

²⁴ The role of religion in a patient’s disease diagnosis, treatment, and recovery is better understood in social scientific health communication research.

human capacity to alter, a realm not accessible through our pedestrian methodologies or logic.”²⁵ While the “warrior” in the warrior-priest largely operates via the traditional parameters of metaphor (comparing cancer to a war), the “priest” contributes to this archetype by operating within a vague and ethereal space. This allows rhetors employing the warrior-priest to call upon the inherent affect coursing through religious rhetoric, imbuing the archetype with a comparative power that is both difficult to define and difficult to refute.

A few studies from other disciplines have identified a pattern of fight *and* faith metaphors in cancer discourse, offering a useful opening to explore this enduring combination more fully and to, also, apply it to discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Hoffman-Goetz, for example, surveyed personal cancer stories featured in the magazines *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* from 1987 to 1995 and found that an “emphasis on religious beliefs” often included “images [of] crusaders, winning the cancer battle, spiritual champions, and victory struggles” across all three publications focused primarily upon their large audience of Black women.²⁶ Seale similarly reviewed the religiosity of personal cancer stories in newspaper articles available to readers in North America and the United Kingdom – but found religion to be “uncommon” in their quantitative analysis.²⁷ However, in many of the narrative excerpts Seale provided, the combination of fight and faith metaphoric imagery was prolific, with one article writing of a father who “died after *battling* against a brain tumor” and of how his two young children “will forever know where their daddy is as he is a bright shining star in the *sky looking over and protecting them*. And for one special day,” the excerpt continued, the father’s memory “will also be shining bright in the form of a light on a special Christmas tree.”²⁸ More recently, in her aptly titled article, “Praying to win this battle: Cancer metaphors in Latina and Spanish women’s narratives,” Magaña examined breast cancer narratives written as “public blog entries and as narratives on health advice websites or online publications on cancer.”²⁹ Magaña found that Latina women, more often than their Spanish counterparts, “described God as their protector in their battle and as their aid in fighting and winning,” remarking that all they needed in their fight was “faith in God” and continued prayer.³⁰ In all, these studies highlight the union of martial and religious metaphors that often occur within cancer rhetoric, further constituting the existence and allure of the warrior-priest in health and medicine contexts.

Archetypal Metaphor

Like rhetorical metaphors, archetypal metaphors also function to accomplish understanding, communicate values, and to connect thought, speech, and action together through the power of association. The power of archetypal metaphors, however, “extend[s] beyond the limits of a given time or culture” to condense more universal human experiences that are “relived by each generation

²⁵ Darsey and Ritter, “Religious Voices in American Public Discourse,” 555.

²⁶ Laurie Hoffman-Goetz, “Cancer Experiences of African-American Women as Portrayed in Popular Mass Magazines,” *Psycho-Oncology* 8, no. 1 (1999): 36–45, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1611\(199901/02\)8:1<36::AID-PON330>3.0.CO;2-8](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1611(199901/02)8:1<36::AID-PON330>3.0.CO;2-8).

²⁷ Clive Seale, “Cancer in the News: Religious Themes in News Stories about People with Cancer,” *Health* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 2001): 425–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136345930100500402>.

²⁸ Seale, “Cancer in the News: Religious Themes in News Stories about People with Cancer,” 436.

²⁹ Dalia Magaña, “Praying to Win This Battle: Cancer Metaphors in Latina and Spanish Women’s Narratives,” *Health Communication* 35, no. 5 (May 2020): 649–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2019.1582310>.

³⁰ Magaña, “Praying to Win This Battle: Cancer Metaphors in Latina and Spanish Women’s Narratives,” 655.

anew.”³¹ Put differently, archetypal metaphors transcend time and space to reflect humankind’s universal experiences, values, and motivations. However, despite this seemingly eternal rhetoricity and frequency across cultures, time, and geography, “the power of archetypal metaphor as an instrument of criticism [remains] largely untapped” and unexplored.³²

Osborn provided six characteristics of archetypal metaphors and further described their inherent rhetorical capabilities. Archetypal metaphors are: (1) “especially popular in rhetorical discourse,” with an “almost limitless range of possibility for figurative association;” (2) “immune to changes wrought by time,” geography, and culture; (3) “grounded in prominent features of experience, in objects, actions, or conditions which are inescapably salient in human consciousness;” (4) universally appealing due to their “embodiment of basic human motivations;” (5) persuasively potent due to the inherent “double-association” of being based in shared human experiences and motivations; and (6) are featured prominently in important public rhetorics across history.³³ Altogether, archetypal metaphors maintain a particularly salient rhetorical power through their fidelity to the human experience, providing us with a discursive mirror of sorts. Through archetypal metaphors, an individual’s experiences, motivations, hopes, fears, challenges, and triumphs are etched in immortality – these metaphors tangibly link the audiences of today to a shared past. Indeed, examples of established archetypal metaphors include light and darkness, the sun, temperature, and seasons,³⁴ the sea,³⁵ as well as journey metaphors.³⁶ Human beings, across time, geography, and culture, are not only familiar with these metaphors, but also identify with them as well.

Metaphors and their archetypal manifestations can also function as “ideographs,” or words and phrases that serve as the “building blocks” of ideology.³⁷ Although they primarily operate to through comparison, metaphors can work ideographically as they can also be (1) an “ordinary language term found in political discourse,” communicate a (2) “high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal,” (3) “war-rant[] the use of power” and “guide[] behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable.”³⁸ Ideographic archetypal metaphors – what McGee called “diachronic” ideographs – have the “capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s ‘reality.’”³⁹ Osborn later situated the use of metaphors and archetypal metaphors within the communicative process of identity and ideology creation, writing that “ideographs and archetypal metaphor can sometimes combine their power” through their shared ability to house “noble abstractions that bind people into a community of political values.”⁴⁰ Through their power to advance understanding via association, archetypal metaphors can offer a window through which to view the ideological contours of a culture and to,

³¹ Osborn and Ehninger, “The Metaphor in Public Address,” 229.

³² James Darsey, “Barack Obama and America’s Journey,” *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (February 2, 2009): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802571151>.

³³ Osborn, “Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric,” 116–17.

³⁴ Osborn, “Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric.”

³⁵ Michael Osborn, “The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea in Rhetoric and Poetic,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63, no. 4 (1977): 347–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637709383395>.

³⁶ Darsey, “Barack Obama and America’s Journey.”

³⁷ Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 7.

³⁸ McGee, “The ‘Ideograph,’” 15.

³⁹ McGee, “The ‘Ideograph,’” 5.

⁴⁰ Michael Osborn, “The Trajectory of My Work with Metaphor,” *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (January 2009): 79–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802559131>.

crucially, witness how a people maintain these ideological contours over time through their discourse.

Ultimately, I argue that the alluring confluence of fight and faith metaphors in rhetorical discourse is remarkably congruent with Osborn's six features of archetypal metaphors and can be wielded in the service of ideology. The warrior-priest is linked to two distinct set of actions, conditions, motivations, and experiences that are universal throughout the entirety of human history: war and religion. The commonalities linking civilizations together, regardless of geography and era, include the waging of war and the establishment of religion. Furthermore, and bolstering the prominence of the warrior-priest archetype in the human experience, is the frequency of war waged in the name of religion. Thus, I offer the immortal discursive convergence of war and religious metaphors, the warrior-priest, as an archetypal metaphor. While the union of metaphors that create the warrior-priest are indeed an archetypal and can be (and often are) employed across humankind regardless of region, time, culture, context, and religion, its presence in American cancer and COVID rhetorics is distinct, offering a useful exemplar to further explore the warrior priest's form and to also critique its elusive ideological power.

Critical Rhetoric

Finally, because I view the warrior-priest as an obfuscating agent of ideology, it is important to briefly discuss the methodological perspective, defining parameters, and analytic potential of approaching the criticism of ideological discourse through the application of a critical rhetoric. Stemming from the "ideological turn in modern criticism," critical rhetoric understands the "existence of powerful vested interests benefiting from and consistently urging policies and technology that threaten life" on Earth, and, importantly, note that these powerful interests will exercise rhetorical power when they "realize that we [are in] search for alternatives."⁴¹ "In practice," McKerrow added, "a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse[s] of power."⁴² Through this process of demystification, then, critical rhetoric "demonstrate[s] the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship to power."⁴³ The critical rhetorician, moreover, "should go beyond assessing the efficacy of political discourse" and should, instead, "openly challenge rhetorical purposes if they are corrupt" – put simply, rhetorical critics "should take an activist role" in their analyses of public communication, especially when human lives and well-being are at stake.⁴⁴ Similarly, the beating heart of this essay is animated by my desire to put into action a critical rhetoric that demystifies how we talk about cancer and COVID-19 in America.

In this essay's practice of critical rhetoric, my critique of the warrior-priest as a supporting discourse of capitalism is also rooted in a Marxist and materialist understanding of language, ideology, and power. Indeed, Karl Marx "recognized that the most powerful ideological effects may

⁴¹ Philip C. Wander, "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt, Fourth (Strata Pub., 1983), 92.

⁴² Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (June 1, 1989): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390253>.

⁴³ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," 92.

⁴⁴ Carl R. Burghardt, ed., *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th edition (Strata Publishing Inc., 2010), 2.

be sedimented in language, language use, practical consciousness, and other forms of signification.”⁴⁵ In Marx’s view, rhetoric ultimately helps disseminate the “bourgeois mentality” in capitalist systems through the most everyday “turns of phrase, figures of speech, and commercial language.”⁴⁶ According to Dana Cloud, the task in a materialist rhetorical critique is to further “unmask the shared illusions of a society as ideas [discursively] promulgated by and serving the interests of the ruling class, or those who control the production and distribution of material goods.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, a materialist rhetorical lens posits that “economic forces and relations of power motivate discourses that justify, obscure, or mystify the workings of powerful interests and structures of power” – ideologies, in other words, produce “material consequences” through discourse.⁴⁸ It is the job of the rhetorical critic operating from this perspective, then, to reveal how ideological discourse generates these material consequences.

Regarding rhetoric’s role in the maintenance of ideology, Marx wrote that humankind often “conjure[s] up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names [and] battle slogans” to legitimize, through this “disguise[d] and borrowed language” their desired reality.⁴⁹ Furthermore, according to Jessop and Sum, Marx later charted the relationship between discourse and politics, or the “articulation between (1) the phrases and tropes of language and custom[s] borrowed from the past” that are “recontextualized through intertextual weaving in the present and (2) current political and social realities.”⁵⁰ In all, through a Marxist and materialist perspective, we can better account for how a timeless metaphor like the warrior-priest can indeed be “open to political or economic manipulation” by rhetorical actors today.⁵¹

To borrow from Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek in their critique of whiteness as a strategic rhetoric, my first “critical move” in this essay was to provide a name to – and to further prove below – the power at work within cancer and COVID discourses.⁵² Through my labeling of this rhetoric as a manifestation of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor, I can then begin to “displace its centrality and reveal its invisible position” within American rhetorics of health and medicine.⁵³ In addition to revealing its invisible position in American cancer and COVID discourses, the critical rhetorical act of naming the warrior-priest affords me the opportunity to better explicate its rhetorical form, to explore the intricacies of its functionality, and, perhaps most importantly, to position a “potential corrective” in how we frame these diseases.⁵⁴ That is, “instead of [only] being a guerilla [rhetorician], constantly undermining the foundations of any power/knowledge structure” through incessant “negative critique,” critical rhetoric helps me engage the possibility of

⁴⁵ Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, “Language and Critique: Some Anticipations of Critical Discourse Studies in Marx,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 15, no. 4 (September 2018): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1456945>.

⁴⁶ Jessop and Sum, “Language and Critique,” 327.

⁴⁷ Dana L. Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Communication* 58, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 141–63.

⁴⁸ Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron,” 145.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte - Sections I & VII,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Revised (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 595.

⁵⁰ Jessop and Sum, “Language and Critique,” 328.

⁵¹ Jessop and Sum, “Language and Critique,” 328.

⁵² Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (August 1, 1995): 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639509384117>.

⁵³ Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” 292.

⁵⁴ Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, “The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 483–505, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2002.0060>.

“new construction,” or envisioning what form a healthy cancer and COVID rhetoric could and should assume.⁵⁵

“Prayer Warriors Needed!” The Warrior-Priest Archetypal Metaphor as an Agent of Ideology

American Cancer Rhetoric

In November 2014, country music star Garth Brooks performed before an adoring crowd in Minneapolis, Minnesota and, in one interaction with a fan that later went “viral,” vividly illustrated the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in action. Sometime during his song, “*The Dance*,” Brooks noticed a woman holding up a sign that read “Chemo this morning, Garth tonight...Enjoying ‘*The Dance*.’” Brooks then brought the woman to the front row and sang directly to her, and when the song’s last chord swelled, he kissed her on the forehead and proclaimed to the audience while holding her sign up that “God just stuck his hand out and wrote ‘I exist. You have all of my strength; you have everybody’s strength in here and you will kick cancer’s ass!’”⁵⁶ In a follow-up feature of the viral exchange, a *Des Moines Register* contributor wrote that by “harnessing her strength,” the cancer patient answered Brooks’ onstage call and “indeed kicked cancer’s ass!” – with the patient’s daughter later reflecting that she “could just see her [mother’s] faith growing even more” as well.⁵⁷ From the initial on-stage exchange between Garth Brooks and his fan undergoing cancer treatment in November 2014, to the “viral” sharing of the moment on social media, and then from the local, regional, and national news coverage of both the exchange and its digital virality, the warrior-priest endured in every aspect of the discourse.

In addition to vividly illustrating the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in action, this cancer narrative also offers a way to begin the critical process of revealing the warrior-priest as an obfuscating agent of capitalistic ideology. As Marx noted, “bourgeois society” is “wholly absorbed in the production of wealth” and is, therefore, dependent upon the language borrowed and disguised from its feudal past to continue to maintain dominance.⁵⁸ In the English Civil War, for example, both Royalists and Parliamentarians “borrowed speech, passions, and illusions from the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution.”⁵⁹ Through the recycled language of past generations, Marx wrote, “rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life” that continuously justifies, mystifies, and entrenches capitalism’s hegemonic position in modern society.⁶⁰ Much the same way, the unrelenting fusion of religious and martial imagery – the discursive “awakening of the dead” – in health rhetorics today “serve[s] the purpose of glorifying the new struggles” and of “magnifying the given tasks” in the imagination of the afflicted, which, ultimately diverts attention away from the profit collected and capitalist

⁵⁵ Maurice Charland, “Finding a Horizon and Telos: The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77, no. 1 (February 1991): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639109383944>.

⁵⁶ Sterling Whitaker, “Garth Brooks Fan ‘Still Enjoying the Dance’ After Cancer Fight,” May 6, 2016, <http://tasteofcountry.com/garth-brooks-fan-still-enjoying-the-dance-beats-cancer/>.

⁵⁷ Matthew Leimkuehler, “Iowan ‘kicks Cancer’s Ass’ at Garth Brooks’ Request,” *Des Moines Register*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/entertainment/music/2016/04/25/iowan-kicks-cancers-ass-garth-brooks-request/83196846/>.

⁵⁸ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte - Sections I & VII,” 595.

⁵⁹ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte - Sections I & VII,” 596.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte - Section III,” *marxists.org*, 1852, para. 9, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch03.htm>.

power maintained.⁶¹ In other words, the invocation of the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in cancer and COVID contexts discursively resurrects the symbolic weight of the victorious dead – those that successfully fought and conquered in the name of God. Capitalism, being inherently exploitative, is in constant “need of heroism, of sacrifice,” and of celebrated battles as symbols to rhetorically repackage its existence to allow for the masses to continue “buying into” its logic.

Although the cancer patient fan in the viral Garth Brooks exchange did initially bring attention to her chemotherapy treatment, the activation of the warrior-priest immediately masked this aspect and instead placed the burden of the treatment’s success upon the fan. According to the underlying logic of the warrior-priest – “through this sign, you shall conquer” – the fan’s relationship to God (which acts as a catalyst for “all of [God’s] strength”), and the number of people “praying” for the fan are placed in the discursive foreground as the point of emphasis. The presence of the warrior-priest here, and in other cancer rhetorics, “conceals as much as it reveals.”⁶² There is no mention of the fan’s chemotherapy treatment outside of God’s presence and her “strength” in Brooks’ soliloquy onstage, his later interviews, within the viral proliferation of the story on social media, nor even in the subsequent media coverage. This omission constitutes a rhetorical silence. Even when “fully” insured, cancer patients in the United States are often forced to “borrow money, avoid leisure activities, decrease food spending, sell possessions, go into debt, and/or declare bankruptcy” to offset the inordinate cost of cancer treatment.⁶³ This cruel aspect of capitalism’s ideological dominance of the American healthcare system is indeed a profound material and bodily consequence that ultimately leads to despair, disrepair, and death. Cancer discourses (like the warrior-priest) that wittingly or unwittingly⁶⁴ shift attention away from these material consequences are ultimately complicit in the ideological maintenance of capitalism.

Because the viral Garth Brooks cancer narrative concluded with his fan “beating” the disease, the warrior-priest largely escapes further scrutiny and, thus, continues to help eschew a lasting critique of the material consequences of the for-profit American healthcare system. Importantly, however, the warrior-priest’s role as an obfuscating agent for capitalism endures even in instances of death from cancer, when a patient “loses” their battle with cancer. In one recent cancer crowdfunding campaign notably featured on *GoFundMe*’s “Discover Cancer Fundraisers” webpage⁶⁵, Isaac, a college student in the midst of a “battle” with brain cancer, received more than \$108,000 (as of this writing) in donations from more than a thousand donors.⁶⁶ Initially created on April 15th, 2022, the “Help Isaac Fight Brain Cancer” campaign provided a detailed account of Isaac’s character and his cancer diagnosis, specifically noting that he “loves and *protects* his younger brothers and friends” and that he “despises bullies and often *stands up* for those who could not stand up for themselves.”⁶⁷ In the closing paragraphs of the fundraiser’s description, the organizer requested

⁶¹ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte - Sections I & VII,” 596.

⁶² McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 92.

⁶³ Andrew J. Cohen et al., “Use of an Online Crowdfunding Platform for Unmet Financial Obligations in Cancer Care,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 179, no. 12 (December 1, 2019): 1719, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2019.3330>.

⁶⁴ Even in empirical studies of cancer care’s excessive cost, scholars seem to avoid assigning fault to the inherent and exploitative nature of capitalism. For example, Cohen et al. notably framed the cost of cancer care as a patient’s “unmet financial obligations” that stems from “technologic innovations, expensive new therapies, and improved access to treatment” (p. 1717). The authors do not mention the profit motivations of the private insurance companies that compose most of the American healthcare system.

⁶⁵ That *GoFundMe* has a “Discover” page devoted to fundraisers for cancer treatment is, itself, a sobering thought.

⁶⁶ “Help Isaac Fight Brain Cancer,” *GoFundMe*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-isaac-fight-brain-cancer>.

⁶⁷ “Help Isaac Fight Brain Cancer,” para 3.

donations to “to help his family with accrued medical costs, time off of work for his parents, and plans for his care,” and additionally noted (in bold) that “**all funds raised will go directly to [Isaac’s] family to pay for his medical bills, care, and expenses in this difficult time.**”⁶⁸ On April 23rd, 2022, just over a week after the initial creation of the *GoFundMe* page for Isaac’s cancer care, the organizer of the campaign posted an update, writing that Isaac had passed away and “joined the heavens” the night before. The organizer then noted that Isaac’s family wanted to thank everyone for their “prayers” and for helping them with the “financially crippling” “burden[] of medical bills” – “every single one of you” the organizer added, “helped lift this burden” for Isaac’s parents.⁶⁹

In the time between the campaign’s creation and Isaac’s passing, a total of 62 donors posted comments (what *GoFundMe* calls “words of support”) on the campaign’s webpage that further reveal the warrior-priest’s presence. Almost every comment invoked the divine in some capacity – most commonly in a variation of “sending thoughts and prayers” and “praying for” Isaac and his family. Within the religiously oriented comments, many donors additionally infused martial metaphors into their words of support. One donor, for example, wrote: “Praying for you, Isaac. Keep up the fight;” while another donor said “keep fighting Isaac. Praying for you and [I] know you will beat this!” Notably, no one specifically mentioned the material, bodily, and financial ramifications of cancer care outside the continuation of the “burden” frame – there was no mention, for example, of the insurance company, hospital charges or billing codes, or of the sad reality that members of Isaac’s family were forced to take an unpaid leave from their employment.

Even in death, the warrior-priest continues to place particular emphasis upon the individual. The departed’s character, their strength, their faith, and also their family’s strength and faith, as well as their associated “burdens” are the prime focus. Even when a viral cancer narrative like Isaac’s comes agonizingly close to critiquing the American healthcare system and its underlying capitalistic foundations with continued references to the “crippling” financial “burdens” of cancer care, the frame reflexively shifts again to the individual’s strength to fight and their enduring faith. Additionally, despite the continued references to the financial burden of American cancer care, the warrior-priest deflects attention away from the inherently for-profit foundation of the system and, instead, localizes the burden. Here, fight and faith rhetorics are first extended to the patient’s family. In the activation of the warrior-priest, the family can, like bygone Christian soldiers, stoically shoulder the burden, for they, too, shall conquer through Christ. The warrior-priest is then extended to the community in two subtle ways. First, it is through the community’s discourse that the cancer “battle” is made and continuously reified as divinely sacred. Second, the warrior-priest’s localization of the financial burden of cancer to the patient’s family creates an opportunity for the community, acting in the structure of a church, to donate or even “tithe” in support of a fellow Christian, ultimately providing logistical support for the Christian warrior in their sanctified conquest of cancer.

American COVID-19 Rhetoric

Within American COVID-19 rhetoric, the warrior-priest archetype is similarly omnipresent and also operates to maintain capitalism’s domination of the American healthcare system. Moreover, the presence of the warrior-priest in this discourse reifies the ideologically driven misinformation

⁶⁸ “Help Isaac Fight Brain Cancer,” para 1.

⁶⁹ “Help Isaac Fight Brain Cancer - Organizer Updates,” *gofundme.com*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-isaac-fight-brain-cancer>.

infinity loop that falsely likens COVID to cancer, resulting in the further solidification of the warrior-priest's rhetorical form as well as the far-right's reliance upon the archetype to maintain their power and dogmatic adherence to capitalism. In a particularly emotional post on r/HermanCainAward, Reddit user u/bloody_hell featured fifteen screenshots from a daughter's *Facebook* page that documented her father's (name changed to "Joe" in the post to further protect his identity) month-long "battle" with COVID-19, which, eventually, claimed his life in early October 2021.⁷⁰ With almost 20,000 upvotes and more than 5,000 comments, u/bloody_hell's digital archival work demonstrates how the warrior-priest can transform from a faint silhouette lurking in the shadows of discourse to an almost corporeal form in instances of incessant employment of martial and religious imagery. While the first few screenshots document Joe's prolific trafficking in the far-right's health misinformation loop with his anti-vaccination memes and profile picture frames, the remaining screenshots from his daughter feature the warrior-priest activated in the starkest of forms. In an early post that provided an update on her father's condition, the daughter wrote that although Joe has not improved, he also has not regressed, so she is "choosing to rejoice and praise God that his body is fighting as best as it can."⁷¹ In a later post, the daughter said that she and her family are "in the greatest need [for] ALL PRAYER WARRIORS to help [them] go to battle in praying for healing over our dad."⁷² "Please keep praying for healing," Joe's daughter said at the end of this particular update. "COVID may be big," she said, "but OUR GOD IS BIGGER," concluding with what would become a frequent sign off slogan.

A few days later, Joe's daughter informed her *Facebook* friends that her father was now on a ventilator with a "hole in each lung," but reassured everyone that Joe "is a warrior. He is still fightin!"⁷³ In perhaps the most explicit exposure of the warrior-priest's role as an obfuscating agent of capitalism yet, Joe's daughter reiterated her call for "prayer-warriors," saying "right now[,] we need ALL PRAYER WARRIORS to go to battle with us! We're calling on Jesus to intercede and to breathe his breath into dad's lungs and all throughout his body." Pivoting, she then asked for financial assistance:

So many of you have asked what you can do to help during this time. Dad has been hospitalized for almost a month now. I have had to take on all of dad's bills in order to save his belongings and what he's worked so hard for on top of all my household bills. Dad also does not have any insurance so [I am] financially responsible for all his expenses. If you feel [led] to donate during this difficult time, you can message me. If you can't, that's okay. Please keep praying. COVID may be big, BUT OUR GOD IS BIGGER.⁷⁴

Shortly after this post, Joe passed away from complications due to COVID-19. Within the final slide, Joe's daughter featured a picture of him (again, with his face redacted in u/bloody_hell's *Reddit* post) that further reified the warrior-priest's rhetorical form – Joe is pictured with his arms spread wide in front of a large statue with angel's wings, visually implying that he is an angel now

⁷⁰ u/bloody_hell, "Joe' Accepts His Award. He Publicly Vowed Not to Take the Vaccine Just a Week before Walking His Daughter down the Aisle. She Had to Call up the Prayer Warriors before Her Marriage Was a Month Old. He Didn't Have Insurance and His Daughter Is Stuck with All the Bills.," *Reddit Post, R/HermanCainAward*, October 9, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/HermanCainAward/comments/q4iu1c/joe_accepts_his_award_he_publicly_vowed_not_to/.

⁷¹ u/bloody_hell, "Joe' Accepts His Award," Slide 5.

⁷² u/bloody_hell, "Joe' Accepts His Award," Slide 7.

⁷³ u/bloody_hell, "Joe' Accepts His Award," Slide 10.

⁷⁴ u/bloody_hell, "Joe' Accepts His Award," Slide 11.

too. This likening is then confirmed with his daughter's accompanying epitaph – "he's an angel now...fly high and give Heaven some hell."⁷⁵

Like its presence in American cancer rhetorics, the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor "conceals as much as it reveals" in COVID-19 rhetoric.⁷⁶ Notably, however, the warrior-priest operates here within somewhat of a paradox that, ultimately, further diverts attention away from capitalism in American healthcare. Initially juxtaposing its role in cancer rhetoric that emphasizes the laudable character of the patient, the warrior-priest here actively de-emphasizes Joe's deplorable public behavior, concealing his decision to *not* receive the highly effective COVID-19 vaccine and altogether ignoring his public peddling of anti-vaccination misinformation. Then, by focusing instead upon Joe's more admirable qualities – his bodily strength to "fight" COVID, his overarching "warrior" and "fighter" ethos, and his daughter's invocation of Christian imagery that surrounds Joe – the warrior-priest reverts to its, more or less, recognizable form. In framing Joe's experience with COVID through the warrior-priest, the individual character is revealed and the larger collective and its influence upon the individual is concealed.

Like in Isaac's brain cancer *GoFundMe* campaign, however, there is a moment in this narrative in which we come agonizingly close to critiquing the system that left Joe without insurance and led his daughter to have to pay his bills to "save his belongings and what he's worked so hard for." Joe's daughter plainly exposed the cruel, malicious, and thoroughly exploitative nature of capitalism – a vicious combination of Joe's lack of health insurance and an inadequate social safety net is the direct exigence to her family's dire circumstance. Instead of focusing upon this vicious, systemic combination, Joe's daughter, like Isaac's *GoFundMe* organizer, further manifested the warrior-priest. The continued manifestation of the warrior-priest effectively localizes the financial burden of COVID care and shifts the focus to the individual and the Divine's vague responsibility for care. Even when the material and bodily consequences of capitalism's dominance are painfully apparent, the activation of the warrior-priest eschews a critique of the infuriating fact that someone, somewhere, profited from this family's suffering.

Conclusion: We Hear Our Master's Voice

In the almost two millennia since Constantine was said to have witnessed the cross of light on the eve of battle, the narrative of the event has assumed seemingly countless forms. Present within each iteration of the story, however, are consistent thematic elements that are often overlooked. At its core, the story of Constantine and his vision is a demonstration of the conceit of liberation in religious rhetorics. For Constantine, his embrace of the Christian cross assured victory over his rival; for Constantine's followers, his embrace promised liberation from the alleged tyranny of Constantine's rival. This narrative is also a discourse of and about power – within each iteration, Constantine employed rhetoric to maintain his position of power and authority.

Much the same way, the warrior-priest archetypal metaphor in cancer and COVID rhetorics entices contemporary audiences into believing that emancipation from, or victory over, these dreaded diseases can be achieved through Christ. Lurking within the call for "prayer-warriors" and loaded with glorious spiritual and martial affect cultivated across the centuries, the warrior-priest positions the individual patient and their sacred strength as the singular focus, thereby concealing the profit driven motivation that impacts the patient's material and bodily well-being in their cancer or COVID care.

⁷⁵ u/bloody_hell, "'Joe' Accepts His Award," Slide 15.

⁷⁶ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 92.

Part of the elusive allure and resultant ideological impact of the warrior-priest in American cancer and COVID rhetorics resides in its activation from otherwise well-meaning rhetors with no conscious intent to maintain capitalism's hegemony over American healthcare. For example, when I was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 23, my own *Facebook* page was inundated with well-intentioned and very diffuse uses of the warrior-priest that were meant to comfort and galvanize me for the long ordeal ahead. In droves, friends and family members commented that they were "praying" for me, "sending prayers" my way, telling me that I would "beat" and undoubtedly "conquer" the cancer. I, myself, felt reassured when utilizing this language, writing in one post that stoked by "a faith in God," I would "fight" the cancer growing inside of me. The warrior-priest archetypal metaphor was, for me, medicine by rhetoric. This, however, is precisely how dominant ideological rhetorics operate. We utter these seemingly natural slogans with sincerity, with little regard for how these phrases perpetuate an underlying ideology, and we, regrettably, do not consider the material and bodily consequences of our tacit endorsement of the ideology. Therefore, it is crucial that we not ignore even the best-intentioned invocations of fight and faith metaphoric language in rhetorics of health and medicine. In using the warrior-priest to comfort cancer's victims or to rally the nation around a COVID-19 mitigation policy, we hear our master's voice as our own. We mistakenly believe this voice to be a siren sound of freedom and agency, when, in reality, our master's voice is but the steady drone of capitalistic domination deceiving us into believing that health and healing is just a matter of prayer and personal strength.

I admit that as I reflect upon my analysis here at the end of this essay, I find myself paralyzed in uncertainty. Part of the task in critical rhetoric is to offer – for lack of a better term – a prescription for what ails us, and I initially set out to offer two potentially corrective frames to use instead of the warrior-priest in American cancer and COVID rhetorics. I am, however, still struggling to overcome the daunting question that challenges every aspect of this project: *how do we even begin to effectively challenge the hegemony of capitalism in American healthcare through discourse?* If the warrior-priest is indeed an obfuscating discursive tool brandished by and for powerful capitalistic interests in American healthcare, what discursive instruments can we use as a meaningful counter? On the one hand, I am still partial to my own⁷⁷ suggestion that there is positive potential embedded within implementing the space exploration metaphoric frame in cancer discourse – that if we frame cancer and cancer treatment as a moonshot, as a noble voyage of exploration undertaken in the name of scientific discovery, we can begin to ween ourselves off of the martial and religious metaphors that create the warrior-priest archetype. However, in addition to not yet knowing how (or if) this frame can be applied to COVID rhetorics, the potential corrective power of space exploration metaphors does little to challenge capitalism's domination in healthcare as we have recently witnessed that even space exploration can be privatized and reoriented for profit through the likes of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos for their vanity ventures into space.

On the other hand, perhaps Brian Ott and Eric Aoki's rearticulation of Kenneth Burke's "comic frame" offers a path forward. The comic frame is "not about seeing humor in everything," but is, rather, "about [raising] maximum consciousness"⁷⁸ through an appeal to "self-awareness and social responsibility."⁷⁹ The comic frame is rooted in its ability to "transcend" a focus on the individual to instead view the individual's character traits and actions as a product of larger, cultural

⁷⁷ Wernecke, "'A New Moonshot.'"

⁷⁸ Ott and Aoki, "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy," 497.

⁷⁹ William H. Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke* (University of Illinois Press, 1994).

forces. A narrative that utilizes this frame “promotes integrative, socializing knowledge”⁸⁰ by, essentially, placing a mirror before the audience to allow the audience to be “observers of themselves” as they act through the characters on stage.⁸¹ In other words, the comic frame helps locate the faults of the individual as not of their own ignoble volition, but rather as a “mistaken” and learned behavior.⁸² The relocation of the emphasis from the individual to the collective, then, performs a crucial pedagogical function, helping the audience learn or, at the very least, acknowledge the impact of the collective upon the individual. In the context of Isaac’s *GoFundMe* brain cancer care fundraising campaign, for example, the comic frame *might* shape the narrative as:

A combination of X Private Insurance Company continuing to place profit over people as well as an inadequate social safety net are proving to be a serious detriment to Isaac’s care and his family’s well-being. Although the CEO of X Private Insurance Company took home an additional X amount of money from his company’s record profit last year, this company seemingly cannot find the money we paid throughout our many years of on time premium payments, deductibles, and co-pays. In addition to donating to help Isaac and his family stave off resultant abject destitution and medical bankruptcy, please contact your elected representatives to urge legislation that addresses the systemic failures of our privatized system of healthcare.

While certainly imperfect, instead of a narrative that activates the warrior-priest and exclusively emphasizes the patient’s strength to fight and their faith in God, the cancer narrative shaped in the comic frame focuses on the larger failings of the collective (the for-profit health insurance industry in this case) and, in so doing, can move the audience towards a reflection regarding their adherence to unfettered capitalism through their voting, discourse, and even behavioral habits. Although a version of Burke’s comic frame is seemingly already at work in COVID rhetorics found on r/HermanCainAward, the largely unfavorable popular press portrayal of this forum’s tactics suggests that the frame’s efficacy may be limited. This may very well be attributed to the ideological power of decorum and civility, but, without question, more research into the comic frame and its further application to health and medicine contexts is needed. Ultimately, I remain presently unconvinced that the adoption of the comic frame in larger American cancer and COVID rhetorics can displace capitalism’s absolute discursive and material power over American healthcare as this power remains implacable, consistently and relentlessly thwarting reform efforts.

In the end, however, I recognize that the warrior-priest’s role in supporting capitalism’s domination of American healthcare is but a microcosm of the larger and existential challenge that looms before us as we confront what Wendy Brown called “civilizational despair” wrought by the neoliberal “undoing [of] the demos.”⁸³ Like Brown, I maintain that although the task before us is indeed “incalculably difficult, bears no immediate reward, and carries no guarantee of success,” it is the kind of critical work applied in this essay that I hope will inspire others to continue to do the same to, perhaps, “afford [us] the slightest hope for a just” healthcare system in America.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*, 117–18.

⁸¹ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, (University of California Press, 1984), 171.

⁸² Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41.

⁸³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015), 220.

⁸⁴ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 222.