

Project 1 | Assignment 5

For several weeks now, you have witnessed various scholars examining the nature and effects of public metaphors, used to influence the public's conception of social challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. By speaking of a public response as one of war, we understand the virus as an unexpected enemy arriving stealthily, silently invading our security and destroying life. This kind of story, it can be argued, is both the stuff of science fiction and the narrative of asylum-seeking immigrants as told by President Trump. The story of invasion, as we know, is utilized as a xenophobic narrative when applied to protestors invading our cities or to non-white persons flooding into suburban neighborhoods. The very idea of a virus acquires its salient meanings as a foreign intruder, disrupting the otherwise secured body.

We have explored how the metaphor serves certain political ends. If a president's rhetorical agenda is to appear heroic or salvific, then fashioning himself as a chief warrior battling the invader may boost his public status. If the so-called "front line" of defense is composed of health professionals, police, and epidemiologists, then the theatres of war are hospitals, clinics, and crowded streets. The metaphor redefines social roles (for policy makers, for healthcare workers, and for citizens) in predictable ways.

But some scholars have reminded us (and we have come to see) that no single public metaphor is mandatory. Humans, we would like to think, have control over the ways in which social meanings are launched and evolve. Responding to a virus in terms of battling an enemy isn't the only way to understand the problem. The metaphor is of our own making. Furthermore, we know that some metaphors have gone out of favor and have been replaced by fresh metaphors, with significant consequences (in some cases, benefits). Think, for instance of the way in which alcoholism was thought of through the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries *as a sin*, or *as a moral failing*, and was regularly damned as such, with problem drinkers considered to be louts and drunkards who willingly surrendered control in favor of mindless indulgence. Imagine how persons characterized in this way were treated; envision their social status; contemplate the stigmatized lives they led.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, physicians proposed that alcoholism be treated *as a disease*, amenable to therapies, an equal opportunity affliction with persons perhaps genetically predisposed to addictive behavior. One way of thinking was discarded in favor of another. Or, one might look to the deeply-rooted definition of traditional marriage, reoriented in light of same-sex couples—another example of a once ideologically-anchored set of associations loosened to accommodate new practices. Recall that those who opposed same-sex marriage claimed, rightly so, that marriage would never be exactly the same as it was before same-sex couples were permitted to enjoy its purported benefits.

At the close of Flusberg et al.'s essay, they touch on what they find to be a vague possibility: the abandonment of war metaphors in favor of some other "more beneficial way of communicating" about a social problem:

Finally, because war metaphors are so ubiquitous—and in some ways are a reasonable target of criticism—we believe more research is needed to pursue and evaluate possible alternative frames across a variety of domains (e.g., politics, business, crime, disease). As we have seen, some scholars have already made suggestions along these lines, but more work is required to investigate the aptness and appropriateness of substitute metaphors. War metaphors may not be inevitable in public discourse, but it remains to be seen how much effort would be required to shift the conversation to a different and potentially more beneficial way of communicating. (13)

It is difficult to predict exactly how much effort would be associated with changing from one predominant metaphor to another. Change would, in all cases, take time and the new metaphor would need “buy in” of the most significant kind: people would need to witness in others and experience for themselves distinct advantages of the fresh metaphor.

In an essay (of approximately 1000-1250 words), I ask that you envision an alternative to the war metaphor currently being used to characterize the United States’ public response to COVID-19. In your essay, please establish what you see as the need for a fresh metaphor (In what ways has the war metaphor become tired, ineffective, limiting, or even dangerous?), and suggest an alternative metaphor, one that seems to you potentially viable, able to be operationalized (put to use by citizens, health professionals, and politicians), and, if embraced, would benefit the well-being of those effected by the coronavirus.

Please upload your draft to Moodle by Sunday, September 13 at 11:00 p.m.