TO BE AN ESSENTIAL WORKER: AN EXPLORATION OF RHETORIC DURING COVID-19

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COVID-19 has demonstrated the necessity of examining the implications of the deceptively simple term "essential worker." As an author who spent summer 2020 as an essential worker, I explore one federal and two Minnesota-centered artifacts that focus on creating and distributing definitions: the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's guidance, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz's Executive "stay-at-home" order, and a debriefing by Walz and other officials to the public. These artifacts and my analysis all attempt to answer the question, what does "**essential worker**" mean and what are its implications on people's lives? What arises in these artifacts is a slippage between the "worker" and the "infrastructure," each defined as essential through their relationship with the other. Cluster criticism (Burke) shows that the term "essential worker" invokes the obligations and responsibilities of a group identity for people defined by it. I argue that in our capitalistic society, value is ultimately placed on labor yet demands workers take on this heavy responsibility and identity. However, the term has caused audiences to recognize this discrepancy in how value is communicated. Because language and the material world influence one another to create a "mangle" of meaning (Hekman), the usage of "essential worker" in discourse has contributed to a cultural re-imagining of labor and the identity one holds as a worker within society.

I've spent about six hours here, but I can only really tell by the stiffness making itself known in my knees and lower back. Customer-service smile under my mask, rag in one hand, and a cleaning solution bottle hooked over the other, I play an essential customer service role. In a world dominated by paranoia about sanitation, I am here to provide relief, which is not the worst job I've ever done. The repetition and mindlessness can even be nice as I wipe around the sides of the cart, scrub the front, and roll it over to the line of clean carts. An older woman approaches, and I straighten up and shift into that higher octave of my customer-service voice. "Hi, can I help you with anything?"

Smile lines appear above the woman's mask. "I just want to thank you for keeping us all safe."

"Of course!" is my automatic answer. Of course, I want to keep my community safe during the global pandemic. Of course, I prefer to be in public where unmasked guests feel the right to touch my shoulder, where my phone vibrates in my back pocket with automated texts of new cases in the store. Of course, I, with my spray bottle and rag, am single-handedly stopping the spread of COVID-19. In

my head, a different answer arises: Am I *really* doing anything important here?

In the summer of 2020, I was considered an "essential worker." Ever since the United States went into varying degrees of lockdown in mid-March, to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 respiratory virus, the term has prominently emerged in everyday discourse. During quarantine, people were only allowed to leave their homes for essential business. Questions of who could leave, who could work, and who could gain income were and remain central concerns for the public. But who is an "essential worker"? What counts as essential business? To get a sense of the answers a typical essential worker might garner to these pressing questions, I first turned to Google. The search engine generated a wealth of information in 0.83 seconds striving to define the term, and yet there is no single, stable definition, which prompted me to want to dive deeper into understanding the term as a scholar would.

The issues here are that the term not only identifies some category of workers as distinct from other, unnamed (presumably inessential) workers, but it is also presented as if it is a straightforward, neutral label, whereas it is enormously ambiguous in use. As someone who has experienced being an essential worker, I have a personal and scholarly interest in studying not only the rhetorical but also the material implications of the term because the "frameworks and labels we choose to apply to what we encounter influence our perfections and interpretations of what we experience and thus the kinds of worlds in which we live," as well as how we interpret and view *ourselves* (Foss 6). In the discussion that follows, I analyze how three rhetorical artifacts engage with defining "essential work(er)" and how these definitions characterize labor in American society as unification and a balance of sacrifices. I employ perspectives from Kenneth Burke and Susan Hekman to illuminate the impacts of the term, particularly on individuals making up the labor force. I first interpret these rhetorical artifacts' intentions through considering what rhetorical choices mean about the people making them, as Burke does. Following that, the interaction of the rhetorical/material that Hekman uncovers gives voice to why I believe studying the term "essential worker" is important: it affects lives in a mix of both discursive and tangible ways.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

As anyone who has lived through 2020 knows, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fear, confusion, and danger in many facets of life: health, labor, politics, education, interpersonal interaction, and more. The exigencies caused by the pandemic have demanded the creation of rhetorical artifacts to direct the populace's responses and actions. Some smaller artifacts have one specific aim or action, such as arrows in stores determining social distancing practices for guests in that visit and location. Other artifacts that have the term "essential worker" serving a key role affect larger populations and situations. Because my own experience being an essential worker is shaped by such policies and guidelines in the state of Minnesota, I focus my analysis on texts generated by or related to Minnesota state agencies during the initial phase of the COVID pandemic (i.e., March 2020). I look at 1) Minnesota Governor Tim Walz's press conference briefing on the coronavirus situation on March 20, 2020;

2) the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency *Guidance* on the essential critical infrastructure workforce (hereafter referred to as the CISA *Guidance*) distributed on March 23, 2020; and 3) Minnesota's Emergency Executive Order 20-20, or stay-at-home order, which was enacted on March 25, 2020.

To closely examine how the term "essential worker" operates in each of these artifacts, I employ Burke's strategy of cluster criticism. In this method of analysis, "the meanings that key symbols have for a rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols of an artifact" (Foss 63). In other words, the words and phrases that are often in marking scheme (see figure 1) to track what I anticipated to be the "key symbols" of artifacts responding to COVID-19 in this manner: "essential work(er)," "government," "Minnesota(ns)," "healthcare," and "business(es)."

Table 1 records the instances of these key terms, the numbers of which include synonyms and closely related terms, such as "industry" being counted under the "business(es)" category (see table 1). The clusters around these symbols led me to recognize patterns of unity and labor within the documents.

Instead of understanding the world solely through language, however, we need to acknowledge the simultaneous interaction between and separation of language and reality

Table 1: Number of Instances of "Key Symbols" in Each Artifact

Key Symbol	Coronavirus Briefing	CISA *Guidance*	Executive Order
essential work(er)	11	14	14
government	42	14	51
Minnesota(ns)	41	0	48
healthcare	33	1 (section)	16
business(es)	29	32	15

association with a term may reveal how an artifact's author understands that term's meaning and communicates that meaning to an audience. As Burke puts it, "the nature of our terms affect[s] the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the *at*tention to one field rather than to another" (6). Cluster criticism, therefore, pinpoints rhetorical implications through a word-level analysis, which makes it a valuable tool to tease apart the use of a specific term, like I am here with "essential worker." During several read-throughs of each piece, I utilized a color-coding and (Hekman 2). I draw on Hekman's conception of "the mangle," which she adapts from Andrew Pickering. The mangle is "the entanglement of the human and non-human" and centers around the idea that a variety of agency exists beyond human action, which can include the agency of the natural world, institutions, systems, communities, etc. (Hekman 22). All these elements interact with and on one another, none truly separate from the rest. Although it was originally intended for application to the scientific process, Hekman applies "the mangle" of interaction to the social

realm. In this context, the entanglement of discourse and material, real-world events and actions contribute to the long-lasting power of my three artifacts. Considering both rhetorical and material factors through the framework of the mangle demonstrates why the term "essential worker" is important to analyze and how it has responded to, and even caused, exigencies in American labor.
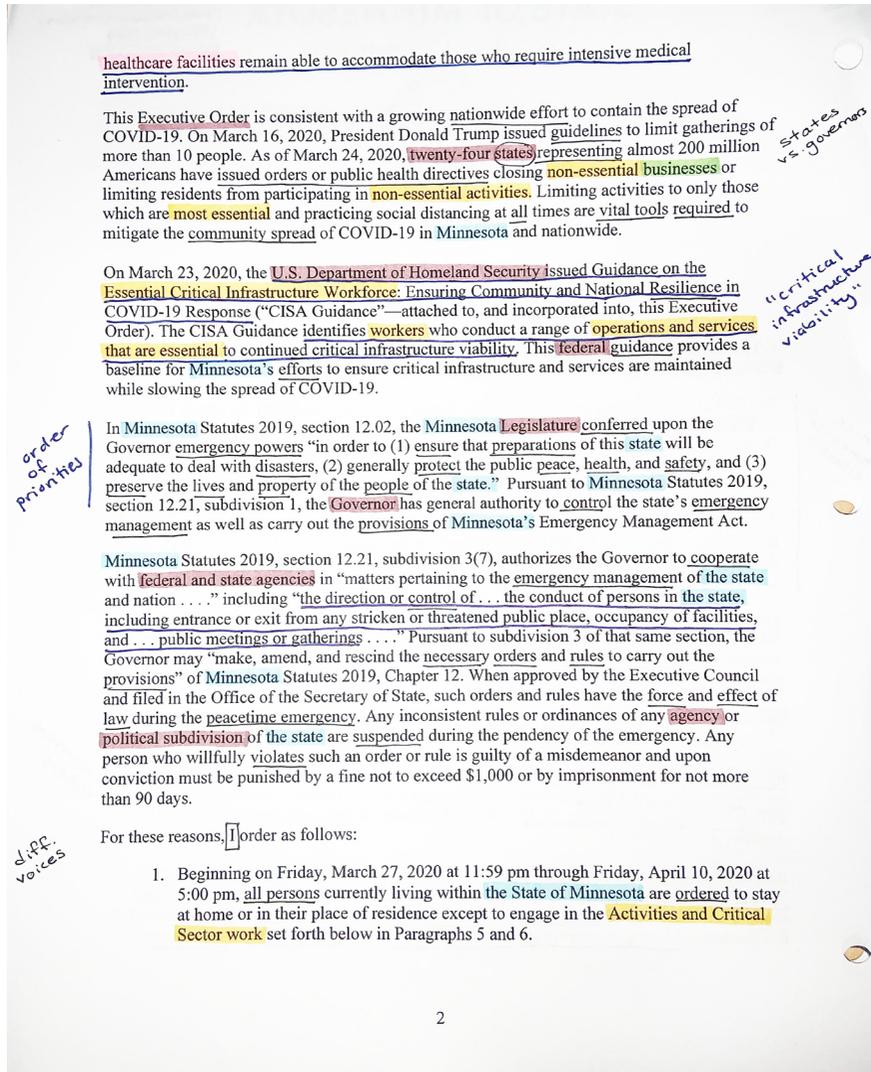
healthcare facilities remain able to accommodate those who require intensive medical intervention.

This Executive Order is consistent with a growing nationwide effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. On March 16, 2020, President Donald Trump issued guidelines to limit gatherings of more than 10 people. As of March 24, 2020, twenty-four states representing almost 200 million Americans have issued orders or public health directives closing non-essential businesses or limiting residents from participating in non-essential activities. Limiting activities to only those which are most essential and practicing social distancing at all times are vital tools required to mitigate the community spread of COVID-19 in Minnesota and nationwide.

states vs. governors

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: Ensuring Community and National Resilience in COVID-19 Response ("CISA Guidance"—attached to, and incorporated into, this Executive Order). The CISA Guidance identifies workers who conduct a range of operations and services that are essential to continued critical infrastructure viability. This federal guidance provides a baseline for Minnesota's efforts to ensure critical infrastructure and services are maintained while slowing the spread of COVID-19.

"critical infrastructure viability"

order of priorities

In Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.02, the Minnesota Legislature conferred upon the Governor emergency powers "in order to (1) ensure that preparations of this state will be adequate to deal with disasters, (2) generally protect the public peace, health, and safety, and (3) preserve the lives and property of the people of the state." Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 1, the Governor has general authority to control the state's emergency management as well as carry out the provisions of Minnesota's Emergency Management Act.

Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 3(7), authorizes the Governor to cooperate with federal and state agencies in "matters pertaining to the emergency management of the state and nation . . . ." including "the direction or control of . . . the conduct of persons in the state, including entrance or exit from any stricken or threatened public place, occupancy of facilities, and . . . public meetings or gatherings . . . ." Pursuant to subdivision 3 of that same section, the Governor may "make, amend, and rescind the necessary orders and rules to carry out the provisions" of Minnesota Statutes 2019, Chapter 12. When approved by the Executive Council and filed in the Office of the Secretary of State, such orders and rules have the force and effect of law during the peacetime emergency. Any inconsistent rules or ordinances of any agency or political subdivision of the state are suspended during the pendency of the emergency. Any person who willfully violates such an order or rule is guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction must be punished by a fine not to exceed $1,000 or by imprisonment for not more than 90 days.

diff. voices

For these reasons, I order as follows:

1. Beginning on Friday, March 27, 2020 at 11:59 pm through Friday, April 10, 2020 at 5:00 pm, all persons currently living within the State of Minnesota are ordered to stay at home or in their place of residence except to engage in the Activities and Critical Sector work set forth below in Paragraphs 5 and 6.

2

Figure 1: Color-coding scheme on page two of Executive Order 20-20, marking key symbols: "essential work(er)" (yellow); "government" (brown); "Minnesota(ns)" (blue); "healthcare" (pink); and "business(es)" (green).

THE AUTHORITY OF RHETORS

When considering the "slippery definition of 'essential worker,'" John Patrick Leary questions "not whose work is essential, but for *whom* it is essential." He turns attention to operative authority figures and questions what their motives may be. Authors in positions of power, like the government agents and agencies, tend to produce language with significant rhetorical and material consequences. While the term "essential worker" may at first appear straightforward, it actually involves choice for the rhetors: who counts, what work counts, and why specific persons/labor count. These decisions serve some and disservice others. In an introductory clause, the CISA *Guidance* explicitly claims who was involved in making such decisions: "When government and businesses engage in discussion about critical infrastructure workers [...]" (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency). Burke defines terministic screens as particular messages or values as indicated by the language rhetors use, whether conscious or subconscious (50). Analyzing these terministic screens can reveal just whose purposes are valued: government, businesses, or communities of workers.

Government entities—such as the Department of Homeland Security and state governors—hold an immense amount of rhetorical and material power in responding to the COVID-19 exigencies because they author the documents that shape pandemic life. In his March 20 briefing, Walz seconds the government's allegiances to business owners and indicates that the government and businesses have engaged in these conversations. Even though Walz

discusses how Minnesotan residents are his highest priority, he says that "I was on the phone with diverse groups of CEOs [...] and I first of all want to thank the industries that they're stepping up" ("Minnesota Governor"). He praises the businesses for their hard work and for reporting the needs of their workers, a value later reflected in Walz's definition of essential work. However, this same gratitude and appreciation are not extended to individuals who are "stepping up."

Each document is formatted to provide information for defining critical sectors/workers, but the way they go about doing so implicates questions of value and true purpose. Because "we must be able to account for the material reality of our social existence without losing sight of the discursive dimension of that reality" (Hekman 90), I consider the complex social relationships that may influence rhetors' decisions as they deal with the material threat of the virus. Governor Walz had been "conferred upon [with] emergency powers" by the Minnesota Legislature (State of Minnesota 2), which allows him to create definitions and rhetorical artifacts which then have material consequences. CEOs may or may not have an accurate understanding of worker conditions on the ground, and their self-interest in continued profits and operation can affect coordinating a response with the governor, particularly considering how being categorized as "essential" would benefit a business's bottom line and economic viability. While these

discussions and definitions are meant "to ensure the health, safety, and security of all Minnesotans" (State of Minnesota 4-5), in fact, these conversations occurred above essential workers. Without input, workers have been defined by this marker of "essential worker," when it is not clear whose values are prioritized or even what the term means. Because someone "can only be a subject if [their] identity conforms to one of the identities offered by the society in which [they] live" (Hekman 94), it is incredibly important for audiences to understand the meaning and implications of this new identity term.

WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?

Even in artifacts explicitly concerned with defining what, exactly, is essential, there is slippage: "[...Is] 'essential' describing the workers themselves? Or only the work they do?" (Jaggers). Namely, is it the person or the labor that is valued? This tension exists not only in everyday discourse, as Zachary Jaggers observes, but also in these rhetorical artifacts. The Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) *Guidance* starts with the heading "The Importance of Essential Critical Infrastructure *Workers*," but then immediately promotes a "functioning critical *infrastructure* [as] imperative [...] for both public health and safety as well as community well-being" (Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency, my emphasis). Which is essential, the workers or the infrastructure? Just as discursive and material factors mangle to create our society, as Hekman points out, so do the individual and structural (125). These questions are

complex, as workers and infrastructure are necessarily implicated in one another, each essential due to the other. However, distinctions between the individual and structural exist within these documents; rhetors emphasizing different elements of these complex inter-relationships can cause varying, sometimes conflicting implications for the audience of these messages, ranging from offense to motivation and beyond.

The CISA *Guidance* approaches definition first through the structural, detailing the different "critical sectors," or areas of systemic infrastructure, and after that, their respective essential workers. These sections are titled according to different industries, such as "Healthcare/ Public Health," "Food and Agriculture," "Energy," and so on. These areas, deemed essential for infrastructure reasons, keep daily life going. Identifying these areas indicates the Department of Homeland Security's underlying belief of what is valuable for the continuation of society within a pandemic—these systemic resources. The one anomaly in their section titling is "Law Enforcement, Public Safety, First Responders," which has one element, "First Responders," that places people within the category, rather than infrastructure alone. Following the headings, each category consists of bullet-pointed lists of what constitutes "essential." Notably, the majority of these list items are people-focused; the words "workers," "employees," "personnel," or "staff" are often the first word. Even though the list items are organized in terms of occupation, the syntax of these sentences could subtly indicate that people are, indeed, "first" and the most important. In doing so, the *Guidance* indicates to essential workers that not only is this work important, but *they* are important

and valued. This subtle personal appeal may motivate workers through a sense of personal fulfillment, as opposed to obligation to a nameless, larger system. Even as the *Guidance* emphasizes areas of work first, it is this valuation of workers that motivates action, which in turn maintains overall infrastructure, and so on.

The organization of the CISA *Guidance* plays an integral role in how Minnesota established its own definitions, and a copy is attached at the conclusion of the Executive Order. Interestingly, the rhetoric found within the Order appears more distanced from the worker and places more emphasis on the areas of business. Headers are copied from the *Guidance* word-for-word. This may indicate that priorities for the Minnesota Governor lie in more systemic or structural matters. The Executive Order defines people in terms of "workers at," as opposed to the CISA *Guidance's* "workers who." For example, let's take a look at the section titled "Financial Services" in each (see table 2).

By listing workers based on the services they provide, the CISA *Guidance* places importance on the *people* who are necessary to fulfill said services. On the other hand, Walz's Executive Order purports to put people first,

but the emphasis on business location indicates a different value. This could have varying implications in terms of audience response, depending on whether they share this same value on infrastructure and areas of business. Workers may feel secure in their position within a larger organization, and business owners may feel valued and prioritized; however, individuals may also feel they are overlooked or just another cog in the machine of capitalism.

Early on in his March 20, 2020, briefing to the Minnesotan public, Governor Walz remarks that "my top priority is always the protection and the security of Minnesotan citizens" ("Minnesota Governor"). Yet, cluster criticism reveals that the word "essential" is almost always in conjunction with a business rather than its workers. Walz mentions conversations between himself and the CEO of Barnes & Noble. Walz asks the rhetorical question, "Would we [the business] be considered an essential service" if they deliver online orders curbside and "continue to educate their children and to get them entertainment during this time?" This question indicates it is possible that fulfilling orders, providing education, and entertaining are essential. Later in the address, Walz responds to an audience question about "the media being essential

Table 2: Comparison of Financial Services Essential Worker Explanation

Walz's Executive Order:	CISA *Guidance*:
"Financial services. This category includes workers *at banks, credit unions, insurance companies, insurance agencies*, and other financial services workers identified in the CISA Guidance" (my emphasis, Exec. Order 7).	"**Financial Services** Workers *who are needed* to process and maintain systems [...] Workers *who are needed* to provide consumer access to banking and lending services [...] Workers *who support* financial operations [...]" (my emphases, CISA).

services" ("Minnesota Governor"). In both cases, he justifies his answer in terms of what services could be offered to the larger Minnesotan community, but it is those services and the businesses, the infrastructure, which remain classified as essential, not the reporters, retail personnel, or others doing the work. It may be tempting to wonder if "essential worker" doesn't refer to essential workers at all, but that conclusion would fall into the "trap of dichotomous thinking" (Hekman 89). What is ultimately revealed is that there is no simple separation of work and worker, even as these documents attempt easy, clear definitions.

As a government entity, the Department of Homeland Security aims to be as straightforward as possible in the CISA *Guidance*. They try to accomplish this through the lengthy term they employ, "essential critical infrastructure workers," which acknowledges both the workplace (the "infrastructure") and the employees who populate it (the "workers") and includes two adjectives linked with necessity ("critical" and "essential"). The word "critical," defined as "of the nature of, or constituting, a crisis: of decisive importance in relation to the issue" ("Critical," def. 5a), makes sense in the context of dealing with a pandemic. Meanwhile, something in the term—could be the workers; could be the infrastructure—is also "essential," or "absolutely necessary, indispensably requisite" ("Essential," def 4a). This is a missing distinction that remains unclear within the *Guidance's* term and the artifact overall: what is essential? "Workers" here are inextricable from "infrastructure;" one can only be essential when in conjunction with the other. In other words, workers are valued solely for the work they provide, rather than in and of themselves as human beings. It is clear that the rhetors of these artifacts prize the United States' infrastructure as what will get this country through the COVID-19 crisis; cluster criticism reveals the word "essential" itself almost always in conjunction with a type of infrastructure, business, or service. However, the term being condensed to "essential workers" in common discourse, as opposed to "critical workers," "essential infrastructure," or other combinations, may indicate an underlying goal of these documents: the self-identification of workers as "absolutely necessary." While the term "essential worker" may be a misnomer, it has effectively catalyzed audiences into a nationwide response during the pandemic and mangled with the material to influence the actions of individuals, businesses, and larger communities.

GROUP IDENTITY: ESSENTIAL SACRIFICE

Immediately, discussions in these documents deal with "workers" in the plural, which indicates a communal analysis will be relevant. When it comes to labor, there is often an intrinsic level of group affiliation, because historically "the development of labor [...] brought members of a society closer together by increasing mutual support and joint activity" (Hekman 120). In his briefing, Walz rhetorically constructs larger group identities beyond the one grown through laboring with others: those who are "essential" and non-essential. He further indicates that Minnesotans at all levels are in this together, invoking an even greater one-ness ("Minnesota Governor"). In doing so, he rhetorically communicates that creating these classifications in our society is worthwhile, and fulfilling one's

sometimes-sacrificial obligations is materially necessary. Each worker is called to not only uphold a duty that keeps infrastructure operational but also sacrifice something—this could be time, other habits or interests, a family, even a life—to preserve this structure and the one-ness which is rhetorically and culturally demanded.

One example of this "unity rhetoric" is evident in the use of "we" throughout Walz's briefing. In different instances, "we" refers to different groups of people, but intermixing those groups intends for the audience to feel part of that "we" as well, even when the "we" that is implicated is of Walz and other governing officials. He says things like, "So we're [the government officials] getting a much better picture of where we're [the state's citizens] at." He also switches perspectives from "We [the government] are trying to balance this in real time and trying to listen to those employers that are out there" to, barely a paragraph later, "But their question was what happens if we [the business owners] have to close?" Walz also does use "we" in a more comprehensive way, such as when he says, "The thing I would say that we need to guard against: rumors, misinformation. We need to understand that there will be changing data." The slippage of "we" referring to different groups rhetorically reduces the distinctions between those groups, uniting people under a holistic sense of group belonging and identity. Walz directly invokes this sense of larger group identity while giving a direct order to "stay home, Minnesota." He uses the state as a way to frame and classify all of his audiences under this one united identity. The work we need to be doing, he says, is for the good of all Minnesotans, and it is this goal that binds us together, thus invoking a

sense of duty, responsibility, and commitment to the larger community.

Walz's emphatic reliance on unity rhetoric draws on nationalistic identity. Employing the term "essential worker" in this context is meant to rhetorically strengthen our collective national identity and, therefore, rhetorically increase resident buy-in to the demands of the documents. This narrative of nationalism has influenced state residents during COVID-19 through operationalizing war rhetoric. Phrases like "on the frontlines," "fighting the disease," "hero pay,"[1] and "the battle against COVID" rhetorically equate our time of the pandemic to a time of war, and our essential workers to soldiers with a duty to the nation. The term "essential worker" was last used widely during World War II, when it described an all-hands-on-deck effort to join the workforce and support the nation as soldiers went off to fight (Graves). As befitting soldiers, essential workers have recently been honored nationally, such as when we were named Guardians of the Year along with Dr. Anthony Fauci by *Time* magazine (Kluger and Park). In the CISA *Guidance*, the words clustering around "workers" tend to be positive and imply this sense of communal duty and personal pride in one's role, words like "support," "ensure," "critical," "effective," "responsible," and "provide." And this view within such authoritative rhetorical artifacts has trickled down to essential workers themselves. In a news piece reflecting on the first anniversary of Walz's stay-at-home order, one worker says that "we would do it again. Because that's what we're called to do," and another testifies that "I feel lucky to be here right now," despite both suffering personal loss and hardship (qtd. in Mohs). However, all of this gratitude, supposed honor, and positive

associations obscure the other side of the term "essential worker," a side that demands anonymity, exploitation, and sacrifice. Follow the war rhetoric one step further: to refuse essential work under these taxing and often exploitative conditions would be to deny the nation's request in its time of need. If workers do so, they push against what this group identity demands of them, causing not only a rhetorical classification as unessential but also tangible negative consequences to work availability and income, among others, that come with no longer belonging to the group identity.

Cultivating this rhetoric of national unity, therefore, achieves not only rhetorical but material ends in reference to COVID-19. For essential workers, one material outcome of this communal effort and responsibility can even be losing one's life. Soldiers and essential workers may be praised for putting themselves at risk, but the tangible effect of that risk means that they put their lives on the line, some of which are lost. This draws from the rhetorical argument that the good of the many is worth more than the good of the few, an argument that Walz aligns himself with as he urges citizens to stay home for "the safety of Minnesotans" ("Minnesota Governor"). This reasoning derives from utilitarianism, where "decisions are chose [sic] based on the greatest amount of benefit obtained for the greatest number of individuals" (Mandal et al.). Even this is framed in terms of positives—"greatest," "benefit"—and overshadows the ways that group identity allows exploitation of essential workers.

This exploitation is natural within capitalism, "invisible to the senses, an abstract concept, yet it is also undeniably concrete and 'real' to everyone in a capitalist society" (Hekman 116). In the context of essential workers, this exploitation has concrete and 'real' dangers. Jaggers notes, "It makes you wonder whether some of these workers are considered all that essential. Might 'expendable' be a more fitting term?" People who fulfill many "essential worker" positions are historically those who have been disadvantaged: lower-class, minimum-wage, minorities, etc. (McNicholas and Poydock), who may be deemed as more easily sacrificed by predominantly White institutions. Putting essential workers "on the frontlines" to "battle" such a contagious and deadly virus communicates that their lives are worth less than the work that they do. Essential work(ers) is deemed a worthwhile risk and even a necessary sacrifice for the "good" of larger communal needs.

In a global emergency, the group identity surrounding the term "essential worker" has been integral in categorizing and controlling the masses and even sacrificing some of them. However, there is never only one set of implications for a rhetorical choice. These newly established social norms "tell us what we can be as subjects; they both constrain and empower us" (Hekman 100). For some, an "essential worker" has provided a sense of purpose and belonging in the national group identity, which may not have been present before the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONSIDERATIONS ON LABOR AND THE FUTURE

Through the evocation of unity and special "essentialness," the term "essential worker" has pushed against the typical views of labor in America because it provides a sense of personal value and identification with positions

previously lacking those qualities. There is a vast discrepancy from retail workers and truck drivers to medical positions and specialized jobs in terms of pay, benefits, and safety enforcement, yet these jobs are all categorized as essential. This shift furthers the prevalence of "workism," which describes work as "the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose" (Thompson). In describing workism, Derek Thompson presents a view of labor in the nation where work, when it is intellectually stimulating or rewarding, has come to serve as people's source of meaning. People in highly professionalized jobs, like political positions, classifying minimum-wage jobs as "essential" shows how workism has evolved in the material reality of the pandemic, may apply to new labor environments, and justifies the demands of greater sacrifice and responsibility.

The three artifacts examined here demonstrate inter-related intentions behind operationalizing the term "essential worker." The overarching purpose of the term was to regulate the actions of workers, both essential and not, in order to provide the services necessary to maintain the nation's infrastructure; workers and the work they do cannot be separated from one another. While the definitions proposed in these artifacts may primarily serve the economic purposes of government entities and businesses, their person-first language allows workers to feel personal value and therefore comply with the demands of the group narrative and identity. Being an "essential worker" exemplifies the mangle of the social world, as it has encouraged pride and responsibility on an individual level, but also is a significant application of workism within employees' lives meant to fulfill a larger economic systemic goal. What is incredibly heartening is that after the initial stage of the pandemic, there is a growing recognition among workers affected by the pandemic that these documents' articulation of "worker = value" does not match up with the current material conditions of labor in America. The supposed honor essential workers have been provided with, without change in material conditions like pay, unionization, and security, may not truly be honor. After the immediate urgency of the pandemic has tapered off, workers are demanding through their actions that material realities match the level of rhetorical value that has been communicated.

The intended audiences of these original rhetorical artifacts are turning around and calling attention to this new exigence. As companies urge the nation to go "back to normal" in 2021, there is a shortage of workers, especially in hospitality jobs and essential worker positions. I, for instance, am one of the many who decided to quit being an essential worker in the wake of the pandemic. My personal experience initially led to my interest in this topic, but studying the term "essential worker" has illuminated where my life is implicated in the mangle of individual and communal, the material and discursive, and has caused me to make a change in my life. Says one worker, "The problem is we are not making enough money to make it worth it to go back to these jobs that are difficult and dirty and usually thankless" (Long). While workers and some policy-makers have pushed to raise the minimum wage in the past year, they have been ignored in favor of temporary measures like COVID relief bills and stimulus checks. Ultimately, Heather Long's article title summarizes the current change best: "It's not a 'labor shortage.' It's a great reassessment of work in America."

Essential workers reimagining and advocating for change in their material situation only emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's own subject position and how various elements of society can constitute and impact it. Hekman says that "as subjects in a given society, we *live* in the mangle. Its various components constitute our lives and who we are" (93). Individuals and communities should see the importance of this question of definition, as we can see in this instance how the term "essential worker" has a widespread effect across all parts of the mangle. In the United States, we are living through a reassessment of labor, both rhetorical and tangible, that has been triggered by the term "essential worker" and the people occupying those roles.

NOTES

1. For an exploration of the rhetoric of "hero" pay versus the actual economic impacts, see: Selyukh, Alina. "As 'Hero' Pay Ends, Essential Workers Wonder What They Are Worth." *NPR*, 20 May 2020, www.npr.org/2020/05/30/864477016/as-hero-pay-ends-essential-workers-wonder-what-they-are-worth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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