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## Behind the masks of Covid-19: A photographic look into the lives of healthcare workers

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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Approved by:

MA Graduate Program Coordinator:

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### **M.A. ITP Thesis Paper Abstract:**

Photographing healthcare workers and focusing on their struggles gives their perspective to the pandemic. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the writer and philosopher Susan Sontag suggests that photographs can provide insight into the lives of people who have lived through conflicts such as war and terrorists' attacks, (not unlike the pandemic), as well as hinder the narrative and devalue their efforts. Beginning with Roger Fenton's photographs of the Crimean war in 1855, there is an extensive catalog of photographs documenting multiple wars and catastrophic occurrences. These photographs are consistent with death, destruction, and suffering. In his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes associated photography with death, as he felt that it bears witness to something that is no more. I decouple the linkage of photography to death by documenting the pandemic from an intimate perspective, lending to a more humanizing documentation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **M.A. ITP Thesis Production Abstract:**

The final format of my production project is a series of photographs of masked healthcare workers next to their unmasked selves with a personal statement detailing their personal experience with the Covid-19 pandemic. The focal point is the individual healthcare workers who are directly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The unmasking is revealing the healthcare workers and their personal experiences with Covid-19.

# **Behind the Masks of Covid-19: A Photographic Look into the Lives of Healthcare Workers**

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## Abstract

Photographing the healthcare workers and focusing on their struggles gives their perspective to the pandemic. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the writer and philosopher Susan Sontag suggests that photographs can provide insight into the lives of people who have lived through conflicts such as war and terrorists' attacks, (not unlike the pandemic), as well as hinder the narrative and devalue their efforts. In this paper, I intend to show how photography has been used to narrate the truth of historical and current events.

Beginning with Roger Fenton's photographs of the Crimean war in 1855, there is an extensive catalog of photographs documenting multiple wars and the catastrophic events. These photographs are consistent with death, destruction and suffering in the most intense form. In his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, the theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes associated photography with death, as he felt that it bears witness to something *that is no more*. "In Plato's Cave," an essay in her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote:

Living with the photographed images of the suffering...does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate... Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize" (Sontag, 20).

This project challenges Barthes and Sontag perspective that photography is associated with death. I intend to decouple the linkage of photography to death by documenting this pandemic in perhaps, less dramatic, and more intimate ways, while I hope still provoking the same response. The focal point is the individual healthcare workers on the frontline, who are directly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. This paper will also for argue for a humanizing documentation. This project includes photographs of previous wars and from the current pandemic taken from a humanizing perspective. The unmasking is revealing the healthcare workers and their personal experiences with Covid-19.

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## Introduction

### **Part I: Introduction to Covid-19, Photography, and Its Significance**

Photographing the healthcare workers and focusing on their struggles gives perspective to the pandemic through their eyes. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, would suggest that photographs can both provide insight into the lives of people who have lived through conflicts such as war and terrorists' attacks, (which are not unlike the pandemic), as well as hinder the narrative and devalue their efforts. Throughout this paper, I intend to walk viewers through how photography has been used to narrate the truth of historical events as well as current ones and ones that have yet to happen

In March 2020, the world shifted, and forced everyone into battle. A battle that was like the one I was in when I was deployed as an active-duty member of the United States Air force. It felt as if I was still in the military but this time around, I was a registered nurse and frontline worker. In this case, we were battling a relentless virus known as the corona virus also called Covid-19. It landed on our doorsteps, literally and figuratively. The world, as we knew it, was thrust into something not seen in many lifetimes, a pandemic. Healthcare professionals became known as frontline heroes. But what was overlooked, is who the frontline workers were behind the scenes, and behind the masks we were forced to wear for survival and protection.

Many of the photographs taken during the Covid-19 pandemic showed the most dramatic moments of the pandemic, depicting mass graves, people who lost their lives to the coronavirus, and faces of healthcare workers filled with fear, exhaustion, and defeat as they continued to work through the pandemic. What is not depicted is the endless sacrifices we make in our personal lives to fight this battle in our professional lives.

As a registered nurse, I am one of these caregivers. We are mothers, daughters,

caretakers, friends, and victims of the pandemic as well. Our professional lives forced us to make drastic changes in our personal lives. This side of the pandemic has not been acknowledged. In addition to showing up to take care of others, we're continuing to make sacrifices behind the scenes, so we can continue to be "heroes" to everyone else.

Some of these sacrifices include sending our kids away to stay with family and friends, for fear of infecting them. Some of us had to isolate ourselves from the people we love to protect them. Some of us didn't have the option to do any of the above, instead had to take extra precaution, as best as we could, to protect our loved ones that live with us and depend on us as we are their primary caregiver. Some of us, even with extreme efforts, contracted the Covid-19 virus, and this upped the ante. Every day was a struggle, and it continues to be mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing on all frontline healthcare workers.

There are pictures of makeshift morgues planted outside of hospitals to keep up with the deaths due to the coronavirus. There are also photographs of the effects of their experience on healthcare workers' faces due to masks we were forced to wear. One will also see pictures of healthcare workers visibly exhausted. These sorts of images are like the ones viewers will see of photographs documenting events of war, for example dead soldiers, injured soldiers, and soldiers with looks of defeat on their face. Soldiers are fighters and so are healthcare workers, but they are also so much more than that.

Susan Sontag (1933-2004) was a theorist who spoke intently on photography and its impact on people who have viewed these images. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), she focused on photography, specifically photographs taken during world conflicts, and expressed how those images have impacted and continue to impact those who were not on the battlefields and even those who weren't alive during such events. Sontag wrote: "The

understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images.... In an era of overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it.”<sup>1</sup> With photographs, one is able to freeze a moment in time and simply revive it by looking at the photo. The ability of this medium to preserve history, while simultaneously allowing for it to remain relevant and present gives an idea of how powerful photographs are. The photographs of this pandemic will become a part of history and will document the most notable events of this pandemic.

Historically, photographs have been used to document events that occurred during the war. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), author of *Three Guineas* (1938), published photographs taken during the first two years of the Spanish Civil War. Sontag discusses Woolf’s argument on “Why War?” and reiterates her opposition to it, while also mentioning that Woolf’s opinion was “regarded as too obvious or inapposite to be mentioned.”<sup>2</sup> Sontag's opinion extends to the power of the photographic images taken during war, by stating that “photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus.”<sup>3</sup> The choice of anyone to devalue or simply ignore the sacrifices of anyone who is risking everything to defend their country, is hard to defend when the images reflecting the courage is present. Every photographic image tells a story. Ultimately Sontag believes that “photographs are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.”<sup>4</sup> The photographic events of Covid-19 will have the same effect; they will memorialize the events of the pandemic and the people who

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<sup>1</sup> Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. E-book. Picador, 2013. p. 14.  
<https://books.apple.com/us/book/regarding-the-pain-of-others/id707372418>, Accessed 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag, 2013. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Sontag, 2013. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Sontag, 2013. p. 7.

were directly affected.

In 1924 Ernst Friedrich (1894-1967), published *Krieg dem Kriege! Guerre à la Guerre! War against War! Oorlog aan den Oorlog!*, which consisted of over 180 photographs taken over a four year period during World War I. Sontag refers to these photographs a “shock therapy.”<sup>5</sup> To elaborate on the photographs, Sontag explains that with these photographs, Friedrich was able to document:

[Y]ears of ruin, slaughter, and degradation, pages of pictures that showed: pages of wrecked and plundered churches and castles, obliterated villages, ravaged forests, torpedoed passenger steamers, shattered vehicles, hanged conscientious objectors half naked prostitutes in military brothels, soldiers in death agonies after poison-gas attack, skeletal Armenian children[...]pictures of dead soldiers belonging to the various armies putrefying in heaps on field and roads and in the front-line trenches.<sup>6</sup>

This is very similar to the images documenting the Covid-19 pandemic. There are remnants of destruction caused by the pandemic to the of lives of people who have been lost due to the coronavirus, and the healthcare workers striving to fight against it.

What is missing from those images, are the people and the sacrifices they made to fight for their country. Who are these soldiers? What sacrifices have they made, except for the obvious, which is sacrificing their lives? They sacrifice their families and the needs of the people who are very important to them. In fact, Bernd Hüppauf, *The Emergence of Modern War in Early Photography*, has commented on the personal experiences of soldiers of war being slighted by the byproducts of the war. He stated “...The battlefield with all its abundance of details was the ultimate space of horror and misery, and their literary recollections are graphic descriptions of their dehumanizing experiences.”<sup>7</sup> The aftermath of the war garnished more interest and

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<sup>5</sup> Sontag, 2013. p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Sontag, 2013. p.11.

<sup>7</sup> Hüppauf, Bernd. “The Emergence of Modern War Imagery in Early Photography.” *History and Memory*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1993, pp. 130-51., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25618644>.



attention then the experiences of the soldiers who fought in it.

This is not that different from the frontline healthcare workers. The fallout of the pandemic is overshadowing the personal experiences of the healthcare workers who are soldiers of the pandemic. We need to refocus our attention and acknowledge the healthcare workers. Who are the *health* heroes? They are parents, they have parents, spouses, children, and friends. They breathe and bleed just like everyone else, which is what makes the sacrifices they made that much more significant. Their selfless acts are overlooked, and they are dehumanized by being called heroes. Let us begin to humanize these healthcare workers by focusing on who they really are and what they risk by going to work every day to help those inflicted with this deadly virus.

My intent is to use photographic images to reveal who the “heroes” truly are behind the N95 respiratory masks. I want to strip away the mask and the superhero capes and show you just how human and vulnerable they are. The focus of my photographs will consist of less dramatic images and a more humane approach compared to the more gruesome images of the pandemic that has been previously captured.

## **Part II: *Photography and Its Contribution to History***

Photography has been utilized for many decades to document the catastrophic events that have resulted from conflicts and terrorist attacks. The occurrences resulting from such events have been made real and kept relevant with photographs. Photography has made it possible to realize these memories and allowed them to be carried on for centuries. An advertising slogan from *Paris Match* states, “The weight of words, the shock of photos.”<sup>8</sup> The cementation of these visuals allows for history to not be forgotten and to prevent the fading of such memories of the

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<sup>8</sup> Sontag, 2013. p. 15.

sacrifices made by the individuals involved.

The camera has long been used during times of conflict, but the images captured were limited to the mobility, or lack thereof, of the camera. For example, photographic accounts of The Crimean and The American Civil wars (1852-1856 and 1861-1865 respectively) were limited to the aftermath only. They consisted of dead bodies, destroyed lands, remnants of fired cannonballs. As the camera began to be more mobile and technology improved, the images captured also improved, allowing for more detail and realization of the events.

Roger Fenton (1819-1869) was a photographer known for his photographs during The Crimean War. One of his most memorable photographs is “The Valley of the Shadow



Figure 1: Photographer Roger Fenton, “Valley of the Shadow of Death,” 1855.<sup>9</sup>

of Death,” (See Fig. 1) which depicts a field of endless cannonballs. Observers can only assume or imagine the chaos and destruction that was caused when the cannonballs were fired. In relation to Covid-19, the virus is symbolic of the canons, which is the weapon that has caused so much destruction, much like the coronavirus.

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<sup>9</sup> Lowe, Paul. *A Chronology of Photography: A Cultural Timeline from Camera Obscura to Instagram*. Thames & Hudson, 2019. p. 57.



Figure 2: Photographer Timothy H. O’Sullivan,  
“A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania July 1863.”<sup>10</sup>

“A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania July 1863” (See Fig. 2) taken by the photographer Timothy H. O’Sullivan during the American Civil War, is of dead soldiers, waiting to be buried. We didn’t bear witness to how they were killed, but we can again, use our imagination to conceive a storyline. Even though the assumption wouldn’t compare to the actual events, this image is no different from the makeshift morgues that were put outside of hospitals during the height of Covid-19 to keep up the with the increasing number of deaths due to the coronavirus.



Figure 3: Photographer David Seymour (Chim),  
“Republican Soldiers in Combat, Spanish Civil War, 1936.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lowe, 2019. p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Seymour, David. “Republican Soldiers in Combat, Spanish Civil War.” *Art Object Page*,

When cameras were liberated from the tripod and became more travel-friendly, images became more profound and exact while capturing things as they happened. It was during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when photographers were able to be on the battle ground, during the action, with their cameras in hand, taking pictures. The below photograph (See Fig. 3) “Republican Soldiers in Combat, Spanish Civil War” is an actual action image taken by the photographer David Seymour during the Spanish Civil War. During this time, cameras had become more adaptable, making it feasible for photographers to take pictures during the battle, as opposed to before or after said action had taken place. Viewers can see the cannonball as it is being shot out of the cannon. The ability to take the camera into the battle made it possible for photographers to capture images that would provide the viewer more detailed information. As the technology with the camera evolved, so did the images they were used to take.



Figure 4: Photographer George Rodger, “Bergen-Belsen,” (1945).  
The *LIFE* Picture Collection/Shutterstock.<sup>12</sup>

As progression was made to the camera the photographs also improved. In the above picture, (See Fig. 4) the depth of the image in this photo is pertinent to the reality of this

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<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.142126.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Roger, George. “Bergen-Belsen: Photos from the Liberation of the Notorious Camp, 1945.” *LIFE*, 12 Aug. 2021, <https://www.life.com/history/at-the-gates-of-hell-the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen-april-1945/>.

situation. The size of this burial site is validated by the number of deceased individuals. During the liberation of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in Germany, they had to dispose of the bodies, the many casualties of the Holocaust, and this was the gravesite they dug in which to do so. The specificity and clarity of this picture allows for a full story, to be there is to know the truth. The content of this image is imperative to preserving the memory of the lives lost.

The below photograph (See Fig. 5) shows a wounded marine soldier reaching to help



Figure 5: Photographer Larry Burrows, “Reaching Out,” (1966).  
“Depicts US Marine Gunnery Sergeant Jeremiah Purdieas reaches out to his wounded colleague.”<sup>13</sup>

another wounded soldier. The image was best described as, “the muted tones and muddy clothing combine to create a scene of utter destruction, and the wide-angle perspective brings the viewer into the heart of the action, emphasizing the suffering of the soldiers”<sup>14</sup> This is like healthcare workers reaching out to other healthcare workers.

Photographer Kelly Guenther captured the photograph below (See Fig. 6) just as the second hijacked plane was about to hit the other Tower. She was in her apartment in Brooklyn Heights when she heard the first tower had been hit; she grabbed her camera and ran outside and from another borough was able to capture this photo. In this photo, you can see the aftermath of

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<sup>13</sup> Lowe, 2019. p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Lowe, 2019. p. 59.

the first tower after a plane crashed into it and the freeze frame of the second plane as it is about to attack the other tower. This image itself is horrifying to look at, but to understand what you are looking at is heart wrenching.

In the photograph below by Justin Lane, (See Fig.7), you are witnessing first responders assisting people immediately following the collapse of the World Trade Center. The ability to capture this event as it was happening, was life changing and eye opening, especially for those



Figure 6: Photographer Kelly Guenther, *The New York Times/Redux*, September 11, 2001.<sup>15</sup>

whose heroism and selfless acts were being recorded. Their deeds could not be devalued, downplayed, or overlooked. And those who had no idea of the actual events that were occurring, as they were safe in their home far away from the madness, were able to get a real look at the current events as the pictures were posted in newspapers and magazines for all to see.

### **Part III: *Gruesome Photography and Susan Sontag***

Sontag was a theorist who has spent a lot of time dissecting the impact of a photograph in comparison to other mediums. Ultimately, Sontag believes no other medium has the same impact or the ability to tell a story like a photograph. In fact, Sontag stated in her book, *Regarding the*

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<sup>15</sup> Almond, Kyle. "The 9/11 Photos We Will Never Forget." *CNN*.  
<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/09/us/9-11-photos-cnnphotos/>.





Figure 7: Photographer Justin Lane,  
*The New York Times/Redux*, September 11, 2001.<sup>16</sup>

*Pain of Others*, that photographs are a “[...]record of the real—incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be — since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real — since a person had been there to take them.”<sup>17</sup> Simply stated, the image produced in a photograph is the truest form of any representation.

Photographic documentation, or photojournalism is very crucial to the preservation of all elements of life, to include the good and bad. Sontag’s perspective on the receptiveness of messages delivered through photographs by observers is, “if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, people often take the most gruesome content and photograph it and use them to bring awareness to the downside of wars, which no other medium can do.

Sometimes a single photograph alone can have a very graphic effect, that one image will force one to look within and evaluate one’s own belief. One will be forced to rethink what they stand for or forced to stand for something. Photographer Robert Capa captured one of the most

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<sup>16</sup> Almond, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Sontag, 2013. p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 10.

notable action shots taken during the Spanish Civil War; it is a photograph of a soldier, right as he was falling to the ground after being hit by an enemy bullet.<sup>19</sup> Supporting this matter, Sontag says images are, “expected to arrest attention, startle and surprise.”<sup>20</sup> And this is what this image as well as many other images during wartime have done. As horrifying yet intriguing as they are, they draw in the attention needed to get people to pay attention to the despair happening to those in the fight and those caught in the crossfire.

As impactful and necessary a wartime photograph may be, there is still the subject of vulnerability the subject and their family are placed in. Their privacy is exploited for the cause. For example, Sontag quoted *The New York Times*, in saying. “We would scarce choose to be in the gallery, when one of the women bending over them, should recognize a husband, a son, or a brother in the still, lifeless lines of bodies, that lie ready for the gaping trenches.”<sup>21</sup> One is aware how degrading such an image is, but one also understands the importance of telling the story. Unless the story is closer to home, do we then take greater consideration to posting said images? If one can connect to a photograph, then it is more likely to be effective, magnifying the relation one has to the image.

Magazines, newspapers, and television news used these images to show cause, to elaborate on the horrors that exist during wartime. But they rarely show the horrific images taken on their own turf. Censorship has been used to control such actions from occurring, viewing your fellow countryman slaughtered will provoke a different reaction than those of a country you are unattached to. An example of this would be the different reactions of published photographs from the Boer War by the Boers. According to Sontag, reflecting on a moment in the midst of the

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<sup>19</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 13.



Boer War (1899 – 1902), the “Boers thought it would be morale-building for their own troops to circulate a horrifying picture of dead British soldiers.”<sup>22</sup> However, the opposing side, the British, felt differently. According to Sontag, “British indignation upon hearing of this latest Boer outrage was keen, if stiffly expressed: to have made public such pictures, declared *Amatuer Photographer*, ‘serves no useful purpose and appeals to the morbid side of human nature solely’”<sup>23</sup> The images will trigger different emotions for those who are close versus those who have no connection to the people in the photographs. This effect is what censorship is intended to prevent and control.

#### **Part IV: *Photography, War and Covid-19***

Photography has been vital throughout history in capturing the events of conflicts and what remains from such terroristic attacks and pandemics. For example, The Crimean war (1852 – 1856), The American Civil war (1861– 1865), The Spanish Civil War (1936 –1939), Bergen-Belsen concentration camps in Germany (1945), The Vietnam War (1955 – 1975) and the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. Conflicts among countries causing wars to break out, have reasoning behind them. Ultimately the soldiers are fighting for a purpose; the same applies to the Covid-19 pandemic. People are fighting for a cause; the cause is survival. Patients are fighting for their lives and healthcare workers are fighting to keep their patients alive. Healthcare workers are at war with a virus, known as the coronavirus.

Some photographs are more explicit than others, and there are several reasons for this, one being the viewers are more intrigued by more graphic images. Sontag would argue that people are more inclined to remember a photo if it is ghastlier in nature. Another reason being,

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<sup>22</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 15.

they are not close to the victims in the images. As evidenced by my and many other observations during the pandemic, a lack of a connection can limit the emotion one might feel. In fact, 48 percent of people without a college degree believed at some point this was a conspiracy.<sup>24</sup> As suggested by Sontag, the response an individual would have is directly related to the connection one has to the victims and frontline workers.

I believe photographers have the ability, with their camera, to not only capture macabre images of any occurrence, but to focus on who the people are in the images. Many articles and news outlets during this pandemic have quoted healthcare workers as “heroes,” but the reality is, they don't have superpowers; they are human, just like the patients they fight to treat every day. I intend to draw attention to these individuals as people, I want to humanize them. We are already privy to the struggles healthcare workers face inside the hospital and the number of deaths due to COVID-19. But what about the sacrifices they continue to make outside of work to protect their loved ones? What about the risk to themselves while trying to help save the lives of others? When they take off their masks, who are they?

Sadly, people are drawn to morbid images, which is why photographs consisting of these sorts of negative depictions are more appealing, and it also explains why the photographs with negative images of the Covid-19 pandemic are in high demand. Sontag would argue, in fact, she herself believes that there is something alluring about repulsive images. Sontag compares this desire to the reaction people have when slowing down while driving past an accident that has already happened. She says it is not only curiosity, but for many, the wish to see something

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<sup>24</sup> Schaeffer, Katherine. “A Look at the Americans Who Believe There Is Some Truth to the Conspiracy Theory That Covid-19 Was Planned.” *Pew Research Center*, 18 Aug. 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the--to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>.

gruesome.<sup>25</sup> People are attracted to images with negative connotations, if this is true, photographers, amateur and professional, will always produce these sorts of images.

In his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, the theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes associated photography with death, as he felt that it bears witness to something *that is no more*. Barthes wrote “that if photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death.”<sup>26</sup> If the pictures are of death or near death, people will want to see them and will continue to seek them out. These types of images of the Covid-19 pandemic have already been taken and viewed. An article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Searing Photos Show What It’s Like Inside This San Diego Hospital Right Now,” by Paul Sisson and Marcus Yam, yields examples of this.



Figure 8: Photographer Marcus Yam, *Los Angeles Times* April 2020.<sup>27</sup>

In the photo above (See Fig. 8) one can see several frontline workers assisting a vented patient who has the coronavirus. The patient fighting for their life and the healthcare workers, while wearing very cumbersome personal protection equipment (PPE), is risking their lives to

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<sup>25</sup> Sontag, 2013, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill and Wang, 2010. p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Sisson, Paul, and Marcus Yam. “Searing Photos Show What It’s Like Inside This San Diego Hospital Right Now.” *LA Times*, 15 Apr. 2020.

protect themselves and take care of their patients at the same time. This is an example of the typical images seen during the pandemic, healthcare workers in full PPE caring for a very sick patient, but what is missing are pictures depicting them as humans, everyday people.

The photograph below (See Fig. 9) depicts EMT frontline workers transporting a patient with a suspected Covid-19 infection. This image gives a lot of insight into the measures being taken to prevent healthcare workers from becoming infected while still doing their best to care



Figure 9: Photographer Marcus Yam, *Los Angeles Times* April 2020.<sup>28</sup>

for their patients. The patient has been donned with a drape, to contain the suspected virus infection as they transport the patient to an isolated area.

I would agree with Sontag, in that people are drawn to the dramatics, but I would disagree with the opinion that they are necessary. Focusing less on such images and more on the actual people in them is important and needed. The soldier shooting an enemy may be what people want to see but showing who that soldier is when he takes off his uniform is necessary. The same is true for healthcare workers, especially the frontline workers. Showing their efforts as they fight to save someone's life is attention grabbing, but also revealing what they risk is just

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<sup>28</sup> Sisson and Yam, 2020.

as valuable. It is important to show this perspective. With my photographs, I want to focus on who they are when they take off their masks. Who are they when they are not at work – the life they fight to go home to? Therefore, my photographs primarily focus on the individual. I do this by showing them in everyday life, outside of work, with their friends and family. I also focus on the downside to this.

### **Part V: Using Photography to Humanize Healthcare Workers**

In these photographs, I first show healthcare workers masked and then unmasked. Initially, I depict healthcare workers supporting each other, protecting each other, providing support for the patients, in the absence of the patient’s family members; and then I finally reveal who they are without the mask. My intention is to draw attention to the humanity of healthcare workers rather than the inhumanity of their experiences.

For example, in the photo below (See Fig.10), one can see two healthcare workers screening each other, making sure they are OK to work, before beginning their shift screening hundreds of people.



Figure 10: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Frontline Warriors.” 2020

In this photo, there isn't a "field of fired cannonballs," but the intent is the same. I argue that there is clear intensity in this photo. As stated by the article "Healthcare Workers' Perception of the Duty to Work During an Influenza Pandemic," "healthcare workers are at the forefront of both pandemic response and exposure to infection."<sup>29</sup> I support this statement. They are at the



Figure 11: Photographer Diasia Riley, "Exhausted and Overwhelmed." 2020

frontlines. Just like the soldiers who stood face to face with the cannonballs and the cannons that were fired in their direction, healthcare workers stand face to face with the virus.

Similarly, the picture above (See Fig.11) depicts a nurse in full PPE, exhausted, but continuing to provide care to her patients. Working a whole shift in this is not easy. The masks are difficult to breathe in and the gowns are very hot to work in. But it is necessary to protect herself and her patients while doing a job she signed up for. What one does not see is the patient she is caring for because the focus is the nurse. Like a wartime photo, we see someone on the frontline. However, what is not necessary to show is a field of fallen soldiers who have lost their

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<sup>29</sup> Damery, S, et al. "Healthcare Workers' Perceptions of the Duty to Work during an Influenza Pandemic." *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2009, pp. 12–8. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.2009.032821>.

lives in combat. Sontag would argue the more gruesome the more attention. However, I disagree because one does not need to see such images to appreciate the healthcare workers and conditions, they are working in.

As seen in the photograph below (See Fig. 12) builds on the last photo because it shows a nurse providing emotional support to another nurse. Healthcare workers not only care for their patients, but they support each other. This photo is important because it shows healthcare



Figure 12: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Emotional Support.” 2021

workers understand each other and the situation that they are in. This type of image will also draw people in because it shows the human side of the healthcare workers. While some may say the public needs to see healthcare workers as invulnerable, I contend that showing their vulnerability helps us to relate to them. While under normal circumstances, healthcare workers would look to their family to buffer stress,<sup>30</sup> this is now complicated by the virus. Healthcare

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<sup>30</sup> Maunder, Robert G., et al. “Applying the Lessons of SARS to Pandemic Influenza.” *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, vol. 99, no. 6, 2008, pp. 486–8., <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03403782>.



workers, to protect their family members, isolate themselves from them. This does not negate the need for support, rather it emphasizes the need for it, and this is when the support of fellow co-workers come into play. This role of supporting each other through this time has more meaning now than it did before. Tough times tend to bring people closer together, like healthcare workers in a pandemic.

At first glance, an uninformed viewer may not understand or see the importance of the

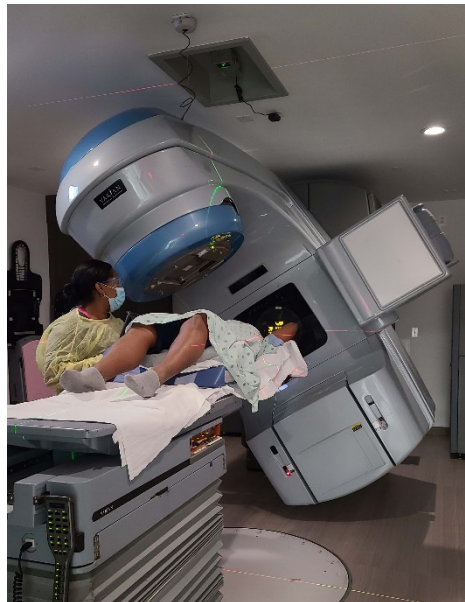


Figure 13: Photographer Diasia Riley, "Fighting for Life." 2021

above photograph (See Fig.13). This is an image of a patient who cannot stop her cancer treatments, even during a pandemic. In this photo, however, a healthcare worker is doing what she took an oath to do to aid in her patients' fight for survival. The sense of duty to work as a healthcare worker is important to understand and appreciate the same way one would the duty of a soldier in combat. Healthcare workers are also conflicted with their duty to work and their duty to family.<sup>31</sup> Sacrifices must be made for either duty to be executed.

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<sup>31</sup> Damery, S, et al., 2009. pp. 12-8.



To further elaborate on the commitments of healthcare workers, we have the above photograph (See Fig.14). While it may simply be depicting a healthcare worker assisting a patient, not an unfamiliar task, it also shows who is not present – the patient’s support system. Moments like this are more prevalent now that patients are separated from their families, especially during one of the scariest times of their lives. They not only need the healthcare workers to care for them, but to fulfill the role of their family. The virus robbed many patients of



Figure 14: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Protect and Serve,” 2021

this comfort. This may be a mundane version of protect and serve, but it carries the same sentiment.

In continuing my argument, which opposes Sontag’s theory that we can show healthcare workers and their dedication without the histrionics while continuing to deliver a powerful message, I follow with the below photograph (See Fig. 15). Here is a healthcare professional, up close, and personal with a patient, not only assessing the needs of the patient but assessing the condition of the patient. This image alone is not a rarity, but under the current conditions of a pandemic, the risks as well as the selfless acts are amplified — making this moment more breathtaking.



Figure 15: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Caring for the Sick,” 2021



Figure 16: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Mending the Ailing,” 2020

In my persistence to show that less is more, I present the above photograph (See Fig.16). Healthcare workers, under the most stressful situations, have to continue to be available to their patients. During this pandemic healthcare workers, especially nurses and other frontline workers, are experiencing the highest psychological burden.<sup>32</sup> Stressors are always present, but there are situations that magnify those stressors, which includes this pandemic. There are many healthcare workers, especially those on the frontlines who face high adversity, workloads, and stress and this in turn makes them vulnerable to burnout.<sup>33</sup> Almost two years into a pandemic, it has

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<sup>32</sup> Morgantini, Luca A., et al. “Factors Contributing to Healthcare Professional Burnout during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Rapid Turnaround Global Survey.” *PLOS ONE*, vol. 15, no. 9, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0238217>.

<sup>33</sup> Morgantini, Luca A., et al. 2020.

weighed heavily on healthcare workers, who continue to show up for their patients. Taking another look at this image, this healthcare worker has worked tirelessly for two years and is continuing to tend to her patients, wearing the same burdensome PPE; the message is made clear.

In concluding my argument that less is more, I present to you the photograph below (See Fig.17). Despite the conditions in which healthcare workers are currently working, healthcare



Figure 17: Photographer Diasia Riley, “Ready for War,” 2020

workers continue to rise to the occasion. In this photo, viewers see a healthcare worker, dressed in PPE, ready to tackle her day. Despite the obstacles ahead, she feels a sense of duty, an obligation to do her part. It has been said that the willingness to work during a pandemic, “has been linked to a sense of duty, whether motivated by a professional responsibility, a general duty to help those in need or loyalty to their colleagues.”<sup>34</sup> In all of these photographs, it is clear that something internal drives someone as special as a healthcare worker to continue to risk everything important to them, to continue to take care of complete strangers, day in and day out.

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<sup>34</sup> Damery, S, et al. “Healthcare Workers' Perceptions of the Duty to Work during an Influenza Pandemic.” *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2009, pp. 12–8., <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.2009.032821>.

Changing gears, in this portion of my photographs, I unmask the healthcare workers and zoom in on each healthcare worker individually. I reveal their personal experiences while working during a pandemic and how those decisions impacted their lives. No two stories are the same, but the observer will be able to see some similarities in each story.

Nancy is a registered nurse (RN) (See Fig. 18) who went from working in a doctor's office to working on the frontline. She was part of a team that had to use their knowledge and skills to screen hundreds of patients a day to make sure no one with symptoms could enter the building and contaminate other immunocompromised patients and staff members. Not sure if they were positive or not, she was the person who would encounter all patients first. She had to use her training as an RN to navigate the situation.



Figure 18: Photographer Diasia Riley, Nancy is a mother, daughter, sister, and friend. 2021

Nikki is a patient-care technician, (See Fig.19) who previously worked in an OB/GYN clinic but was transferred to the inpatient units at Montefiore Medical Center to work with those that required a higher level of care. Because of this, Nikki's risk of catching Covid increased. Not long after being deployed to this unit, Nikki was diagnosed with Covid-19 and was bed-ridden for a month. To this day, more than a year later, she still has symptoms of Covid-19.



Figure 19: Photographer Diasia Riley, Nikki, is a mother, spouse, child and friend, Covid survivor. 2021

Alexandria is an outpatient chemotherapy registered nurse (See Fig. 20) who showed up every day to treat patients who would otherwise die if their treatment was stopped. Her day didn't end when she left the hospital, she would then go home and care for her mother, who was also battling cancer.



Figure 20: Photographer Diasia Riley, Alexandria, a daughter, caretaker, spouse. 2021

Gwen is a Licensed Practical Nurse (See Fig.21) who moved from the office practice to



screening, becoming part of the 4-person team responsible for screening hundreds of people a day. She is motivated by the thought and weighed down by the fear that if she inadvertently allowed one person through who was positive, catastrophe could arise and put everyone at risk. And then, when she thought the worst had passed, she was diagnosed with Covid-19. As soon as she was able to touch her family again, she was forced to isolate to protect them yet again.



Figure 21: Photographer Diasia Riley, Gwen, a mom, daughter, wife, sister, Covid survivor. 2021



Figure 22: Photographer Diasia Riley, Ebony, a wife, daughter, and caretaker. 2019

Ebony is a Radiation Therapist (See Fig.22), who's job remained essential. People's lives depended on Ebony continuing to perform her duty. Patients diagnosed with cancer did not have the luxury of staying home, they needed their treatments, or the disease would take their lives. This was especially hard for Ebony; her mom lost her battle with cancer five years earlier and her dad was just diagnosed with cancer. She was not only essential to her job, but to her dad.

Brittany is a Registered Nurse (See Fig. 23), she worked in the emergency room during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Death and panic constantly overwhelmed her. Despite all her efforts, more people were dying than surviving. Brittany, like many others, had the pressure of protecting her family, especially her asthmatic daughter. Brittany is also a Covid-19 survivor.



Figure 23: Photographer Diasia Riley, Brittany, a mother, daughter, Covid-19 Survivor. 2021

Keisha is a Registered Nurse (See Fig. 24), she works in an infusion center treating patients diagnosed with cancer. Keisha selflessly risked the safety of not only herself, but her unborn child, her daughter, and her parents working during the pandemic. Keisha's selflessness did not protect her from the coronavirus, she is a Covid-19 survivor.



Figure 24: Photographer Diasia Riley  
Keisha, a mother, daughter, Covid  
survivor. 2021

## Conclusion

The objective of this project was to focus on the healthcare workers. With the complexity of the pandemic, it's hard to remember they are the main characters of this tragedy. Through my project, I urge people to try and avoid dismissing someone's situation because we cannot see their scars. Rather, the focus of my project is to try to appreciate someone's story taking into consideration the circumstances that they are in. We wouldn't doubt a soldier who just returned from war because he does not have any missing limbs.

My other intent is to show how soldiers in a war are like healthcare workers in a pandemic. This idea comes from my personal life. As a Veteran of the USAF and a Registered Nurse I took two oaths, one to protect my country and the other to do no harm to my patients. And with this, comes sacrifices. My project reflects on this sacrifice and the soldiers and healthcare workers who make them. Being heroic does not protect us from the danger around us, this project proves we are still human.

My project takes into consideration Sontag's theory, which differs from my assertion that



images that are grotesque in nature are more attention grabbing and better received. I partially support this notion, only in those observers are conditioned to look at and admire anything as long as the details are vivid. However, I also contend that observers can be attracted to more calm and relatable images.

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