

**Buchanan, Lindal. *Rhetorics of Motherhood*.  
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In July 2015, Hillary Clinton made the first of many speeches in the long run up to the 2016 elections and, though she was very familiar to the voting public, something significant had changed since her previous White House bid. Namely, Chelsea Clinton gave birth to a daughter named Charlotte and Hillary Clinton became a grandmother. This change in maternal status was on full display in that speech as Clinton discussed being at the hospital for Charlotte's birth and the responsibility she feels to enact long-term change so that all children, not just her own granddaughter, are given opportunities to succeed. It was clear, as Anna North noted in *The New York Times*, "Not only will Mrs. Clinton not be bowing out of the presidential race to care for her grandchild, she's made her grandmother status central to her message." Indeed, Charlotte continued to show up during stump speeches and Chelsea Clinton herself hit the campaign trail for her mother, giving speeches and sending out emails to potential supporters. Amber Kinser argues in the foreword to *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, "We do seem to have a bit of an infatuation with motherhood and, for the most part, we don't like to think of it as a strategy, of employing it adroitly to achieve particular social or personal ends or, more accurately but perhaps less palatably, deploying it to achieve them" (Buchanan xiii). Clinton, like both Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama who are discussed in chapter one of *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, embodies the discomfort people feel about the obvious deployment of motherhood as a rhetorical strategy.

Lindal Buchanan explores this slippery, vexing terrain of motherhood as it has been deployed by both women and men through three case studies that span the twentieth century. The book is divided into four chapters: a theoretical framework for analyzing motherhood in public discourse and one chapter for each of three case studies of motherhood in public discourse. Buchanan begins chapter one, "Theorizing Motherhood in Public Discourse," with an epigraph by John McCain that lays the groundwork for the theory to come. In it, McCain announces Sarah Palin as his running mate, framing her history as beginning in the PTA and defining her as "devoted wife and mother of five."

Drawing on Lyotard's use of denotation and connotation, Buchanan clearly illustrates how the image of Palin with her son is both a simple image of a mother holding her son and a savvy rhetorical move that aims capitalize on motherhood's positive cultural associations; motherhood helps her connect strongly with her conservative audience but also subtly challenges them, and undermines her, because her appearance as a mother on the national stage moves the Mother, which Buchanan capitalizes when discussing the ideological construction or cultural code, from the private to the public sphere. Because of its gendered nature, the Mother advances and obstructs, benefits and detracts, frees and detains—much like its counterpart, the Woman: "The devil term Woman and the god term Mother are rhetorical expressions of the code of motherhood and overarching system of gender; they provide speakers with immediately recognizable benefits (and culturally resonant) stereotypes, each comprised of well known qualities and associations" (8). In addition to explicating the complicated relationship between gender and motherhood, Buchanan also notes that there are significant gaps between ideas about motherhood and mothers' lived practices, specifically in the ways that motherhood is coded to privilege white, heterosexual mothers, which results in serious consequences for mothers who fail to fall within these normative practices.

This coding of motherhood as white and heterosexual is particularly significant—and problematic—in the rhetoric of Margaret Sanger, the twentieth-century birth control advocate. In chapter two, Buchanan focuses on Sanger's efforts to harness the rhetorical power of the Mother to change her image from a militant, activist "woman writer" to a mother of two—and, specifically, a mother with a righteous cause. Buchanan argues, "Motherhood provided Sanger with a set of shared precepts that enabled her to promote feminist objectives in an accessible, attractive, and nonthreatening manner and persuade women to embrace novel ideas about reproductive self-determination" (27). As suggested in chapter one, however, the coding of motherhood leaves out many mothers, and Sanger's deployment of motherhood is no different in that she depicted the stereotypical user of birth control to be a white, married homemaker. While acknowledging these legitimate criticisms, Buchanan argues for greater attention to the rhetorical context within which Sanger was operating. Sanger crafted her ethos using maternalism, which emphasized both the familial importance of a woman's role as wife and mother but also the Mother's social role in maintaining a just and moral public. This change in Sanger's rhetoric, from the radical class warrior fighting alongside her brothers to morally righteous mother defending those less fortunate, allowed her to successfully expand her audience but also worked to recast "female proletarians from class warriors to victims in need of rescue" (32), an unfortunate move that opened the door for the eugenic rhetorics that Sanger

has become known for. In addition to the ways Sanger negotiated multiple audiences and spaces as a rhetor, Buchanan also analyzes how she crafted her ethos within and across multiple genres, particularly photography and film. Newspapers and periodicals covered her *Woman Rebel* trial using a family portrait constructed by Sanger, which shows her with her two sons. As Buchanan points out, she is the epitome of the white, conservative homemaker with her loose hair and dainty lace collar. The fact that the photograph was distributed widely: a sampling in the Library of Congress includes 49 papers that feature the photograph, indicates how well this visual depiction of motherhood resonated with audiences of the time. The consequences of Sanger's rhetoric have been long lasting: "Sanger compromised her politics and sacrificed the reproductive interests of far too many women for far too long. Her accomplishments, however, were also substantial, contributing to the creation of a legal and social environment that recognized women's right to control their own bodies. Sadly, such environments are fragile, susceptible to backlash and deterioration" (62).

In contrast to Sanger, who used motherhood to her benefit in public discourse, Diane Nash, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), illustrates the dangers of motherhood. In 1962, Nash decided to uphold the SNCC's jail-no-bail policy by agreeing to begin a two-year prison term while she was pregnant with her first child. The jail-no-bail strategy was designed to avoid the economic burden such fines places on nonviolent activist organizations and, more importantly, put pressure on the justice system by refusing to support its immoral practices. Therefore, instead of appealing her confinement, Nash accepted her prison term, explaining her decision in two documents: a press release and a letter to civil rights workers. Chapter three begins with a paragraph from Nash's press release within which she employs a variety of maternal appeals. Although Nash's willingness to enter jail while pregnant was at odds with typical notions of motherhood, Buchanan argues that Nash's particular framing of her decision—to "hasten that day when my child and all children will be free, not only on the day of their birth but for all their lives" (qtd. in Buchanan 70)—drew upon common assumptions about mothers in that Nash, as a soon-to-be mother, was giving up her own selfish comforts to suffer for all children. That said, Buchanan also argues that Nash herself did not rely on motherhood to advance her cause. Through an analysis of Nash's eighteen-paragraph letter to civil rights workers, Buchanan effectively shows that Nash's preferred rhetoric focused on logical, well-reasoned arguments. Others, however, have focused on Nash's pregnancy and impending motherhood, "[...] overlooking her strategies and organizational contributions to civil rights initiatives. Such depictions ultimately pushed Nash into the background of movement history" (64). Buchanan focuses on three subsequent

historical accounts of Nash's appeal revocation (her stated reasons for not appealing her confinement), which deploy common narratives about race and gender, thereby, Buchanan argues, making Nash's contributions to the civil rights movement invisible. First, Buchanan shows how Manning Marable, author of *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, acknowledges that Nash is a committed activist, like her SNCC counterpart Bob Moses, but unlike Moses Manning frames his discussion of Nash by highlighting her marriage and pregnancy. The other two antiracist historical accounts, Buchanan argues, similarly deploy the Mother to erase Nash's contributions to the civil rights movement. In *In Struggle*, Clayborn Carlson suggests that Nash's pregnancy is a publicity stunt, and Taylor Branch, author of *Pillar of Fire*, describes how Nash's husband acted as his wife's lawyer and argued with the judge on his wife's behalf—an event that never happened since Nash was represented by a lawyer. These popular accounts illustrate that “Nash's marginalization transpired through a double movement: first, antiracist historians' perspective reinforces inequitable gender relations, and second, their allusions to the Mother flattened the accomplished and multifaceted organizer and projected a simple, authoritative stereotype in her place” (73).

In the final case study, Buchanan details a new development in the social and cultural history of the rhetorics of motherhood—specifically within the political realm—and the consequences it has for women. As she explains, “Traditionally, pregnancy has been framed as a holistic process that unfolds within a woman's body over the course of nine months and culminates in the birth of a living person and legal subject” (88), but this changed dramatically when President George W. Bush signed Laci and Conner's Law: The Unborn Victims of Violence Act (UVVA) into law. While many states had passed feticide laws, Laci and Conner's Law was introduced to ensure federally that when a pregnant woman and her fetus are murdered the perpetrator is held accountable for two victims or, more importantly, two lives. Opponents of this bill introduced an alternative in the Motherhood Protection Act (MPA), which recognized only the mother as a victim but imposed greater penalties for the termination of pregnancy. Buchanan argues that MPA advocates focused on the primacy of women's rights, “confining pro-choice rhetors chiefly to logos, minimizing opportunities for pathos, and damaging ethos” (94). UVVA proponents, on the other hand, rhetorically used the full power of the motherhood code by focusing on both the mother, Laci Petersen, as the wholesome, protective Mother betrayed by her husband, and the *preborn child*, Laci's son, Conner. By pointing out the complexities of these rhetorical choices, Buchanan effectively brings the reader back to the early framing of the Mother as a god term and Woman as the devil term. Buchanan explores the complexity of motherhood's rhetorical force and the difficulty of countering it, ending with the argument

that “[i]nvolving powerful cultural codes, creating connections with others, and stimulating trust and feelings are the missing elements in current pro-choice discourse” (114). This focus on current pro-choice discourse moves the analysis of motherhood into the current political realm, establishing how rhetorics of motherhood continue to affect women both socially and politically.

The good news, however, is that Buchanan makes it abundantly clear that the women in her book demonstrate not only individual resourcefulness and rhetorical savvy but also that motherhood is not an unchanging monolith—that people, events, and issues move across and within its construct, changing it as they go. Buchanan also gives us a framework from which to view current political events. When Hillary Clinton accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination for President, she invoked motherhood in ways both personal and rhetorical: “Standing here as my mother’s daughter, and my daughter’s mother, I am so happy this day has come. I’m happy for grandmothers and little girls and everyone in between.” Buchanan’s research gives us the tools to understand how Clinton and others might use the Mother in specific contexts and “exposes the construct’s seams and structuration and creates opportunities for transforming motherhood and gender” (124).

## Work Cited

North, Anna. “Hillary Clinton: Unapologetic Grandma.” *Taking Note: Editorial Page Editor’s Blog*, New York Times, 13 July 2015, <http://nyti.ms/1HqOOSk>. Accessed 17 August 2015.

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## About the Author

**Dalyn Luedtke** is Assistant Professor of English and Communications at Norwich University, the oldest private military college in the United States. At Norwich, she has had the opportunity to teach courses as varied as first-year writing, *Introduction to Mass Media*, *Advanced Composition*, *Rhetoric of Popular Culture*, and *Professional and Technical Writing*. Her research focuses on television, digital writing, and pedagogy, and she is currently working on a project that argues for the pedagogical use of reality television in the writing classroom.