“This first book-length study of the rhetorics of motherhood in the twentieth century demonstrates how cultural codes of motherhood were tapped as resources for arguments and how codes of gender and race intersected with, and impacted, rhetorics of motherhood. In three carefully researched and argued case studies, Buchanan shows how arguments succeeded, were constrained, or were contained by the cultural commonplaces of woman and mother.”

—Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, professor of English, Miami University, and coeditor of Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge

Motherhood profoundly alters one’s perception of the world, as Lindal Buchanan learned firsthand. Suddenly attentive to representations of mothers and mothering in advertisements, fiction, film, art, education, and politics, she became intrigued by the persuasive force of the concept of motherhood, which unleashed a host of questions: How is the construct defined? How are maternal appeals crafted, presented, and performed? What do they communicate about gender and power? How do they affect women? Her quest for answers has produced *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, the first book-length consideration of the topic through a feminist rhetorical lens.

Although both male and female rhetors employ motherhood to promote themselves and their agendas, Buchanan argues it is particularly slippery terrain for women—affording them authority and credibility while positioning them disadvantageously within the gendered status quo. *Rhetorics of Motherhood* details the cultural construction and performance of the Mother in American public discourse, tracing its use and impact in three case studies, and theorizes how, when, and why maternal discourses work to women’s benefit or detriment. Buchanan looks at an array of issues—including birth control, civil rights, and abortion—and rhetors, ranging from Margaret Sanger and Diane Nash to Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama.

Buchanan contributes to the discipline of rhetoric by making a convincing case for the significance of this understudied subject. With its examination of timely controversies, contemporary and historical figures, and powerful women, *Rhetorics of Motherhood* will appeal to readers in rhetoric, communications, American studies, women’s studies, and beyond.

Lindal Buchanan is an assistant professor of English and women’s studies at Old Dominion University. She is the author of *Regendering Delivery: The Fifth Canon and Antebellum Women Rhetors* (SIU Press, 2005) and a coeditor of *Walking and Talking Feminist Rhetorics: Landmark Essays and Controversies*.

*Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms*
To my foremothers . . .
The myth of eternally changeless motherhood is a central pillar upholding patriarchal privilege; it is part of the assumption everywhere implicit in contemporary Western societies that motherhood is somehow more “natural” and “instinctual” than fatherhood (which has long been recognized as a fluid, socially constructed category, available for legal and philosophical theorizing and practical revision). . . . [M]otherhood, far from a static, “natural” experience, is a moving plurality of potential behaviors always undergoing supervision, revision, and contest, constructed in particularity.

—Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood*

Certainly it is possible to theorize women’s situations and experiences, or to theorize gender, in ways that minimize the issue of mothering, or do not address it at all. But assumptions about women’s mothering are so deeply embedded in U.S. society and culture and are so complexly intertwined with other fundamental beliefs and values that these assumptions are likely to be implicit in accounts of women’s situations and experiences and in theories of gender that do not explicitly address mothering.

—Patrice DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*

Whether I’m a mother or not, the always obvious fact that I am from the mother half of humanity conditions my life.

—Ann Snitow, “A Gender Diary”
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Few among us are immune to the psychological tugs of what Lindal Buchanan calls the motherhood code. In fact, few of any ilk are immune to it. We get pulled into its emotional force, or we are repositioned by or push against those who are so pulled. When people think, and rhetors speak, of motherhood, they call forth widely shared cultural codes that operate in tension with each other, expanding women’s political voice and igniting social change but also reifying gendered norms that contract and attenuate women’s agency and possibility. Motherhood is indeed “slippery rhetorical terrain” that proves, at turns, to open up and close off possibilities for creating cultural meaning, determining personal rights, and defining social responsibility.

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. But there is no doubt, and Buchanan exemplifies it beautifully here, that motherhood is being deployed and people can either figure out how to initiate and fuel their own deployments or they can agree to be positioned within range of others.’ The current political climate, with its two-person paradigm of pregnancy (which Buchanan also explains in this book) and fetal ultrasound bills, already has me rethinking my own language. The technologies with which we have medically and otherwise regarded and surveyed pregnancy over the last fifty years, and the ways that antiabortion rhetoric has appropriated them, have profoundly altered how we think about pregnancy and personhood. We had legally and philosophically long held to a view of gestation as a formative, pre-person fetal period experienced and attended to by the mother-as-person. Now, however, we confront impressions of pregnancy as comprising two independent persons, despite fetal dependence on the mother, with such impressions in fact foregrounding the baby over the mother. Having read *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, I am further called to consider anew how my own
arguments about women’s agency and selfhood may in fact feed the positions I wish to critique more than they fuel the changes I seek to drive. My reckoning here reminds me of my laments about parents who don’t want to talk with their children about sex explicitly because they don’t want their children thinking about “that” yet. They’re already thinking about “that,” I say. They have no choice but to think about it since sexual texts everywhere surround them. They already are in dialogue about it. You can join that dialogue and play a part in shaping it or you can choose to be omitted from the conversation, and from much more, for that matter. What Buchanan offers us here is related. The discussion about reproductive rights already is being led by an emphasis on maternal rhetorics, so we can either play a part in shaping those rhetorics or we can choose to be omitted from their conversations, and from much more, for that matter.

Those of us who adopted “pro-choice” arguments wanted to push hard against empty sentimentality about motherhood and contest the erasure of women-as-persons by notions of “life” abstracted and inequitably actuated without regard for life lived. We quite justifiably wanted to fight for reproductive liberty as if women mattered, as if their lives and their desires and their purposeful decisions counted, as if “woman” was not a monolith. In our struggle, we accepted and even fortified a rhetorical distance from motherhood. But, as Buchanan points out, we have failed to tap into its potential for elevated status and rhetorical force, given how motherhood functions, to use Richard Weaver’s notion, as a “god term,” which renders all other models for talking about pregnancy, and children, and their care subordinate at best and damning at worst. As a consequence of having set up this distance, we are finding that reproductive freedom rhetoric operates now with severely and increasingly restricted currency. In fact, we are finding that our very discourse is being effectively dismantled and reconstructed to support structures antithetical to our purposes. Consider for example pre-abortion fetal ultrasound requirements, which, at this writing, are required in seven U.S. states. Couched in terms of the pregnant woman’s “right to know” and informed decision-making, the legislative and public rhetoric in support of these unnecessary procedures has deployed mother/child images characteristic of the political right and antiabortion rights rhetoric and has simultaneously co-opted arguments about information access that have been historically core to the left. That is, in their fevered effort to chip away at Roe v. Wade, not to mention Griswold v. Connecticut, abortion
rights opponents and, more recently, contraception opponents, have been dexterous in their use of a variety of arguments. It would behoove reproductive self-determination proponents to be as agile and shrewd. Buchanan argues that claims about supporting reproductive freedom and agency that are aligned with, rather than distanced from, the language and imagery of mothers and children are likely to operate with more persuasive force because they tap into “maternity’s rich valences” and they meet audiences where they already are—at least compelled by mother/child language and images, and more likely rather intoxicated by them.

Inspired by my read of *Rhetorics of Motherhood* to reconfigure how I talk about reproductive rights, I wrote a piece for my weekly blog, *Thursdays with Dr. Mama*, titled “Reproductive Wrongs.” My goal as I wrote the piece was to begin training myself to talk about abortion rights in ways that didn’t quash mother/child imagery. At the end of the post, I had, in fact, quashed that very thing. I posted a piece that focused on women and rights and did little to employ representations that would tap into public intoxications with mothers and children. I am finding the task of reconceiving my own position to be a challenging, though I’ll concede necessary, one.

Still, maternal rhetoric is polyvalent. Mother rhetors will often appease audiences somehow, evoking familiar images for women’s identities and social place that are socially constructed as, Buchanan explains, “natural, eternal, and timeless.” And women can use this audience-assuring “maternal ethos” to great advantage as they work to pivot social practices. Buchanan details how Margaret Sanger’s strategic use of motherhood in this way redirected public and political attention away from her more controversial activities and rendered her birth control activism concealable and even credible. But it could go a whole other way. A woman’s full selfhood can also be eclipsed by her role as mother in the public imagination, or by assumptions that she should be a mother, so being more shrewd won’t just mean using some of the language and images of those who would have women saddled with the lifelong impacts of a fertility that is unrestricted, or would subsume “woman” under “mother.” Buchanan also explores how Diane Nash’s use of motherhood as a way of justifying some of the choices she made in her civil rights work, and the choice to go to jail while pregnant in particular, was responded to in ways that effectively erased her legitimate place in civil rights history. So being shrewd won’t just mean foregrounding or revering motherhood. Approaching things this narrowly might well do more to further
constrain women than to secure or maintain their right to full personhood. But feminist and women activists have a long history, as I discuss in *Motherhood and Feminism*, of deploying maternal rhetorics in a variety of ways—to leverage other arguments, critique social structure, reconceptualize family forms, celebrate mothering experience, for example. We are being called to reimagine, once again, how we think about the relationship between womanhood and motherhood and we are called to do it in child-centric times that opaque the bodily integrity and personhood of women. Though these times may get worse before they get better, we will move from here as we have so many times before if we are willing to be rhetorically inventive, resourceful, and clever.

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Preface

Discourses about mothers, mothering, and motherhood permeate U.S. political culture and are employed by both women and men in order to advance themselves and their agendas within the public realm. These discourses, however, prove to be slippery rhetorical terrain for women, on the one hand, affording them authority and credibility but, on the other, positioning them disadvantageously within the gendered status quo. *Rhetorics of Motherhood* examines that paradox by detailing the cultural construction and persuasive operations of the Mother within American public discourse; tracing its use and impact in three case studies; and theorizing how, when, and why maternal discourse works to women’s benefit or detriment.

Chapter 1, “Theorizing Motherhood in Public Discourse,” explores historic, semiotic, ideological, and rhetorical dimensions of the Mother, a construct that encodes dominant beliefs, values, and assumptions about the role. Given its entrenchment within systems of gender, knowledge, and power and its familiarity to cultural insiders, the Mother is easily invoked but difficult to resist in rhetorical situations. I present a framework that explains the construct’s current signification as well as its capacity both to aid and to undermine women. The code of motherhood circulates widely in American culture, at once influencing social expectations of and ignoring critical differences among women and their mothering practices. The chapter, therefore, also addresses how subjects’ intersectional identities and social locations inform maternal goals and performances and investigates the reciprocal influence of practice upon constructs of motherhood and vice versa.

Chapter 1, then, prepares the ground for the project by detailing how motherhood invokes a shared cultural code and generates powerful persuasive resources that reinforce gender stereotypes and diminish women’s complexity, dimensions, and opportunities. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 present case studies that explore these tensions. Spanning the early twentieth to the early twenty-first century, they focus respectively on the issues of birth control, civil rights, and reproductive choice and track how motherhood