

Call for Abstracts for Special Issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*

Maternal Rhetorics: Deconstructing Expectations of Mother/Woman/Parenthood

In a 2021 interview with Tucker Carlson, then-Senate candidate and now-Vice President JD Vance criticized the Democratic Party “for becoming anti-family and anti-child.” He stated, “It’s just a basic fact—you look at Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez]—the entire future of the Democrats is controlled by people without children....How does it make sense that we’ve turned our country over to people who don’t really have a direct stake in it?” Vance’s logic implies that Ocasio-Cortez, who does not currently have children; Harris, a mother to two stepchildren; and Buttigieg, a gay man and father to adopted twins, do not share the same level of power, agency, or “stake” in their country’s future as those who fit Vance’s preconceived expectations. As we know, words shape reality, and, here, Vance (and the political administration he stood behind then and now) limits what it means to be a parent, mother, and/or a woman.

With this current political context in mind, we seek article abstracts to include in our proposal for a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* that will expand efforts in the field to reveal and deconstruct the rhetorical, socio-cultural, political, and gendered expectations of mothers, women, and parents. Abstracts should be 150-250 words. Final articles should be 6,000-8,000 words, including notes and references. The project timeline, submission instructions, and further context for our CFP are below.

Call for Proposals

As Lindal Buchanan writes in one of the first academic monographs on the subject of maternal rhetorics, motherhood is “slippery rhetorical terrain for women” given that motherhood can afford women “credibility and authority,” while also “positioning them disadvantageously within the gendered status quo” (xvii). Being a mother profoundly alters one’s identity and social world, for better or worse. Similarly, Jessica Clements and Kari Nixon extend this work in their conception of an “optimal” mother, a term that envelopes the often rudimentary rhetorical “mandates of ‘good motherhood’” that weigh “down our [mothers’] spirits” (2). As Clements and Nixon address, the path to becoming an “optimal” mother is often a fruitless mission, bound up in deeply gendered socio-cultural constructions of what it means to be a “good” or “bad” mother.

At the same time, constructions of “motherhood,” as scholars such as Heather Brook Adams (2022) and Jenna Vinson (2017) have argued, have been used rhetorically to shame certain groups of women who give birth and raise children in particular ways and in particular contexts. Too, as Courtney Adams Wooten (2023) explores, the concept

has been used to belittle, dismiss, or denigrate women who do not, by choice or circumstance, have children.

Yet feminists—mothers and “non-mothers” alike—have challenged and continue to challenge the patriarchal and racist discourses that seek to use “motherhood” as a rhetorical tool of oppression. In this same spirit, we hope to carry on the work begun by scholars such as Vinson, Wooten, and contributions to edited collections such as *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (Hallstein) and *Refiguring Motherhood Beyond Biology* (Renegar and Cole) by meddling with the rhetorical construction of motherhood and maternal identity.

We invite proposals that explore rhetorical representations of “motherhood,” domestically and/or internationally. Contributions might address the impact of these representations on individual and collective experiences and/or consider how mothers, maternal figures, parental figures, and/or those without children resist problematic or harmful rhetorical constructions of mother/woman/parenthood. We invite submissions of empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method), archival, autoethnography, counterstory, or theory-building manuscripts that address these topics, and we welcome scholarship from any cultural or national context, including those beyond the US.

Questions contributors may address include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. What are the standard expectations of a mother/parent and how do these expectations affect women and others? How do rhetorics of motherhood intersect with normative discourses or expectations about sexuality, marriage, love, embodiment, reproductive policy, and/or family?
2. How do women and others resist or write against oppressive/restrictive understandings of and expectations for motherhood or the threats of shame that accompany those understandings and expectations?
3. How is “motherhood” or “parenthood” as a concept rhetorically constructed or pathologized through raced, classed, ageist, heteronormative, and/or patriarchal discourses that empower some while shaming others? Some sample contexts to consider (there are many more) include:
 - a. entertainment, news media, social media, art, and/or “mommy blogging,”
 - b. medical or health care sectors
 - c. corporate and/or professional spheres
 - d. government, law, public policy, activist groups and/or
 - e. the university, the academy, and/or graduate school

4. How is motherhood framed, imagined, or composed across borders? What are the ways that women and others deconstruct, revise, or write against those narratives in global contexts?
5. How can scholars of rhetoric most effectively investigate constructions of motherhood? What theoretical lenses or frameworks, research models, methods, or methodologies can we use to help develop analyses? How can such models be used by others?
6. How do mothers learn to be a mother? How do mothers become literate in this identity, and who are the sponsors of this literacy, for better or for worse?

Projected Timeline

Submission of 150-250-word abstracts:	January 9, 2026
Notification of Selection for Special Issue Proposal:	January 20, 2026
Full Articles (6,000-8000 words) due:	August 2026
Revisions (based on reviewer feedback):	November 2026
Publication:	Summer 2027

Submission Instructions and Contact Info

Please submit 150-250 word abstracts in MLA format to this Google form [at this link](https://forms.gle/qf6m6cQJu5m22UBh7) (or use: <https://forms.gle/qf6m6cQJu5m22UBh7>) by **Friday, January 9, 2026**.

Please contact the editors with queries about fit, timeline, etc. at rsqmother@gmail.com.

Works Cited

- Adams, Heather B. *Enduring Shame: A Recent History of Unwed Pregnancy and Righteous Reproduction*. U of South Carolina P, 2022.
- Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165-85.
- Buchanan, Lindal. *Rhetorics of Motherhood*. Southern Illinois UP, 2013.
- Clements, Jessica, and Kari Nixon. *Optimal Motherhood and Other Lies Facebook Told Us: Assembling the Networked Ethos of Contemporary Maternity Advice*. The MIT Press, 2022.
- Hallstein, Lynn O'Brien, editor. *Mothering Rhetorics*. Routledge, 2019.
- Renegar, Valerie and Kirsti Cole, editors. *Refiguring Motherhood Beyond Biology*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.
- Vinson, Jenna. *Embodying the Problem: The Persuasive Power of the Teen Mother*. Rutgers UP, 2017.
- Wooten, Courtney Adams. *Childfree and Happy: Transforming the Rhetoric of Women's Reproductive Choices*. Utah State UP, 2023.