

Motherhood, Time, and Wendy Davis's Ethos

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Abstract: *Maternal abortion narratives, in which mothers describe the experience of choosing to abort (and grieving the loss of) a wanted pregnancy, enable rhetors to construct maternal pro-choice ethē. This “between” ethos is achieved most saliently through the ways mother rhetors shape time in these narratives. In particular, this essay looks at the temporal dimension of the ethos-building in former Texas State Senator Wendy Davis’s memoir Forgetting to Be Afraid. Davis deftly provides insight into the ways that women’s rhetoric can resist and potentially change the lived temporalities of women in the future, thereby enabling broader possibilities for ethē construction.*

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As women’s reproductive rights appear more and more precarious given electoral and legislative trends in recent years, the need for credible, compelling, and inclusive models of pro-choice ethē is all the more urgent. An obstacle to meeting this need is the fact that the reproductive-rights movement has been slow to acknowledge what Lindal Buchanan calls the “public fetus,” the invocation of the idea of a fetus in public discourse, or to adopt a “two-person paradigm” wherein pregnancy involves two distinct *persons*, a woman/mother and a potential child. Dichotomizing the “woman” (a person) and the “fetus” (a non-person), Jeannie Ludlow argues, “has played a role in the gradual diminishment of support for and access to abortion in the United States” (28). The challenge for pro-choice rhetors, as Lindal Buchanan sees it, is to “devise new rhetorical strategies capable of protecting women’s fragile reproductive freedoms” while also “[s]oftening the movement’s stance on pregnancy and fetal value” in order to “repair damaged movement ethos and attract new (or alienated) audiences to the cause” (112, 114). A promising strategy for pro-choice rhetors, then, Buchanan argues, might be appropriating the cultural code of motherhood, which has been primarily a resource for the pro-life movement. Harnessing the topoi of motherhood may afford women rhetors the moral and cultural authority traditionally granted to mothers even as they make progressive arguments.

Former Texas State Senator Wendy Davis’s 2014 memoir, *Forgetting to Be Afraid*, is a concrete example of how pro-choice rhetors might harness motherhood not only to create ethos as an individual but also to frame abortion positively as a compassionate decision. Davis is, of course, most famous for

her advocacy of reproductive rights in a thirteen-hour filibuster in 2013, of a bill which when passed into law resulted in a fifty percent decrease in abortion-providing clinics in Texas (Feibel); however, in June 2016 the Texas law was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in a five-three decision (Liptak). Harnessing her notoriety from the filibuster, Davis campaigned for governor in 2014 against the Republican Attorney General Greg Abbott. Hitting bookstores just two months before Election Day that year, *Forgetting* is in many ways a political memoir, but it also transcends its immediate context by addressing issues such as what it means to be a mother. The memoir recounts Davis's childhood and early adulthood, her financial and personal struggles as a single mother, and her rise to fame as a champion of public education and women's reproductive rights. The excerpt of the memoir that cable news and social media fixated on, however, was a chapter in which Davis publically discloses that she had had an abortion in the 1990s.

I argue that this chapter strategically presents Davis as embodying a pro-choice *and* maternal ethos, which may help the pro-choice movement begin recuperating its image and attracting new audiences. Davis powerfully shows that reserving the right to have an abortion and acting as a loving mother are not mutually exclusive actions. Identifying as both a mother and pro-choice, two entities traditionally antithetical in American public discourse, engenders a "between" ethos. Nedra Reynolds has argued that subject positions on the margins and between discourse communities can serve as *topoi* for ethos construction (33), and Carolyn Skinner has demonstrated the utility of a "between" ethos in her study of nineteenth-century women physicians. Davis's "between ethos" is, in large part, constructed via the ways in which she discursively represents time—relationships to the past, present, and future; routines and duration; the physical and emotional toll of enduring lengths of time; and so on. In this way, Davis deserves scholarly attention not only because she constructs an ethos that can serve as a model for recuperating the broader ethos of the reproductive-rights movement, but also because the nature of her ethos-building speaks to a gap in the feminist ecological interpretation of ethos.

I begin by explaining what it means to think of ethos as temporal and how gendered rhetorics of time, particularly *maternal* temporal rhetorics, influence women's ethos construction. Next, I recap some of the events in Davis's life leading up to the memoir's publication and provide an overview of the memoir itself and its significance. Finally, I will explain how Davis shapes time in one of the central chapters of the memoir to construct a maternal pro-choice ethos, presenting the reproductive rights movements with a contemporary model for how to effectively reframe abortion as potentially congruous with motherhood.

Ethos, Time, and Motherhood

For twenty-plus years, scholars in feminist rhetorical studies have been recovering and analyzing women's ethotic practices in order to interrogate—and regender—the field's definition of ethos (Jarratt and Reynolds; Reynolds; Christoph; Pittman; Applegarth, "Genre"; Skinner; Ryan, Myers, and Jones). This scholarship has made the "ethical appeal" accountable for extra-textual and non-deliberate factors, especially the ways in which social location (gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, etc.) and accompanying power relations shape and are shaped by women's ethē construction. Location, however, is more than a metaphor for sociocultural identity: Women's ethē are shaped also by literal locations, cultivated in relation to spaces and places. Julie Nelson Christoph has observed "strategies of placement," such as using regional terms, in the autobiographical writings of pioneer women (677). Risa Applegarth argues that rhetors can employ "place-based ethos strategies" to create audience-based credibility and trustworthiness based on the rhetor's affiliation with a certain place and the meaning a place has for an audience or discourse community ("Genre"; see also "Working With" 217). Combining this place-based approach to ethos with the social approach above, Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones ask feminist rhetoricians, in analyzing women's ethē construction, "to acknowledge the multiple, nonlinear relations operating among rhetors, audiences, things, and contexts" (3)—in short, to grant that ethē are cultivated in relation to an ecology of social constructs, power relations, embodied practices, technologies, and the physical world.

In order to fully appreciate the feminist ecological ethē of women rhetors such as Davis, I would like to pivot from Applegarth's use of place-based ethos strategies to draw attention to *time-based ethos strategies*, which have garnered less scholarly attention. A turn to the temporal is merited because a rhetor's relationship to/experience of time can function as a location from which she speaks, a place in which she dwells, a material resource that may or may not be available, and a material field that, like space, accrues meaning through its discursive invocation. Whereas time is normally affiliated with *kairos* (timing or qualitative time) in rhetorical theory, my goal here is to explore the possibilities of *chronos* (quantitative time) for shaping ethos. *Chronos* is not "an abstract, neutral backdrop for our activities," writes Jordynn Jack, because "it too is shaped by rhetorical injunctions about its organization and use" (288). Injunctions about the organization and use of women's time can, of course, have a direct bearing on women's ability to craft effective ethē. At the very least, a spatial interpretation of ethos necessitates a temporal corollary, for conceptions of space are also often conceptions of time (Jack 301n). For example, Mary Austin's place-based ethos strategy of *attestation*, explains Applegarth, involved attesting to not only her firsthand observations in the

desert but also “the length of time she has spent in making them”: “Combining specificity ... with long sweeps of time, Austin affirms that her desert experience ... [was] distilled from years of habitation and experience, rather than from brief forays as a tourist or adventurer” (“Genre” 55-6). Furthermore, a “dwelling place,” the original meaning of ethos (Chamberlain; Halloran; Miller; Hyde), may indeed be that, a place, but dwelling occurs over certain lengths of time, at a certain pace, orienting a subject to the past, present, and future. Michael J. Hyde writes that “one can understand the phrase ‘the *ethos* of rhetoric’ to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space *and time* into ‘dwelling places’” (xiii, emphasis added). Time is a component of the ecology in which *ethē* are constructed. A “feminist ecological *ethē*,” write Ryan, Myers, and Jones, “... describes women’s public ethos construction relative to *time*, contexts, and different relationships” (2, emphasis added).

How, then, does temporal location shape women’s *ethē* construction? How are women’s *ethē* shaped by gendered experiences and conceptions of time? While women’s experiences of time are shaped by diverse factors (e.g., structural racial inequalities, workplace dynamics in a globalized economy), women’s time is perhaps most gendered by the cultural code of motherhood: shared beliefs, values, and unstated assumptions in American culture which establish normative expectations for how women and mothers should spend their time, where it should be spent, with whom, for how long, and why. It naturalizes a certain orientation to the past, present, and future, and creates a “right” order and pace of events centered on childbearing and childrearing. The experience of motherhood itself necessitates a number of timely considerations: would-be mothers must negotiate the “biological clock” and the “best time” to get pregnant, issues of work-life balance and family leave, time with children but also restorative time away from children, arrangements for day-care, and so on. In short, motherhood generates certain “rhetorics of time [which] dictate when [a] space,” such as the body,¹ home, classroom, or workplace, “should be used, who uses it when, and how activities are scheduled and sequenced within that space” (Jack 288).

Not surprisingly, the temporal dimension of ethos—as is the case with the sociocultural and spatial dimension—is not “harmonious or conflict-free,” and competing maternal beliefs and values are often at the root of such conflict for women (Reynolds 333). Indeed, in *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, Sarah Sharma argues that time is highly relational, hierarchical, and

1 Feminist geographer Linda McDowell calls the body “the most immediate place ... The body is the place, the location or site, if you like, of the individual, with more or less impermeable boundaries between one body and another” (34).

consequential—in a word, ecological. Sharma argues that time functions in a manner similar to how power functions in the work of Foucault. Time is not a universally experienced orientation to or sense of the past, present, or future, or something one can somehow step out of. Rather, Sharma posits “a conception of time as lived experience, always political, produced at the intersection of a range of social differences and institutions, and of which the clock is only one chronometer” (15). It makes less sense to speak of Time than of temporalities—contingent experiences or senses of time. Temporalities, much like power relations for Foucault, are entangled in other temporalities, our time always potentially affecting, supporting, or exploiting the time of others. For “temporal interdependence [pervades] ... the entire social fabric” (20).

Sharma’s theory of temporalities provides insight into the ways in which temporal location, much like spatial and sociocultural location, can function as a constraint and/or resource for women’s *ethē* construction. Specifically, Sharma follows Bourdieu in enumerating the ways in which power or agency may be exercised temporally: “taking one’s time[,] ... making people wait[,] ... adjourning, deferring, delaying, raising false hopes, or conversely, rushing, taking by surprise” (qtd. in Sharma 74). Power is often experienced temporally, then, as “anxious, powerless waiting” (qtd. in Sharma 74). For many women, this kind of power is felt in experiences of motherhood. For example, in the classic text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich characterizes women’s temporality generally as one of waiting:

a woman pregnant is ... a woman waiting. Women have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for menopause. (39)

According to the institution of motherhood, which holds that mothering ought to be intensive and continuous, women’s temporalities are “naturally” entangled with those of male suitors and husbands as well as children; a mother is told to “find her chief gratification in being *all day* with small children, living at *a pace tuned to theirs*” (Rich 22, emphasis added).

Maternal waiting is reinforced by pro-life beliefs and legislation, which hold that childbearing is always-already the outcome of pregnancy. For example, Buchanan points to the word choice of the pro-life legislators in the debate over the 2004 Unborn Victims of Violence Act. For these legislators,

fetus = baby and pregnant woman = mother (Buchanan 100).² In the pro-life view, "a woman pregnant ... is a woman waiting" for the one and only possible outcome of pregnancy (Rich 39). Pregnancy automatically produces—or rather, should produce, barring miscarriage or abortion—the birth of a child. And this temporality is often universalized to all pregnancies, wanted and unwanted, normal and abnormal, healthy and life-threatening. In contrast, pro-choice rhetors' figuration of pregnancy includes what I call a *pregnant pause*, an exigent moment of indeterminacy, a need for decision-making in which an agentive pregnant woman decides whether or not to let the pregnancy continue developing—opting to make no decision, in this case, still being a decision. When the outcome of a pregnancy is not predetermined in isolation from the woman's reproductive agency, the sense of time is non-teleological. Childbirth may or may not be the outcome depending, in part, on what the pregnant woman decides.

Abortion narratives that presuppose the existence of a pregnant pause but situate it in the context of a wanted pregnancy constitute a pro-choice genre that, if foregrounded more in pro-choice rhetoric, can soften the movement's stance on giving presence to the "public fetus." In the 1970s and 80s, pro-choice rhetors failed to match the visual forcefulness and directness of pro-life rhetors, who would often bring pickled fetuses in jars into courtrooms (Condit 82). In response to powerful tactics like this, pro-choice rhetors would ineffectively advocate abstractions such as personal liberty.³ "Until the pro-choice movement reconsiders its one-person paradigm of pregnancy and comes to terms with the public fetus," writes Buchanan,

it will continue to produce ineffective discourse and to hemorrhage its base of support. As the intensifying War on Women indicates, it is imperative to devise new rhetorical strategies capable of protecting women's fragile reproductive freedoms. ... A willingness to wrestle with the complexities and moral ambiguities of pregnancy and abortion may be essential to (re)winning the backing of a broad

2 The same pro-life word choice is observable in the transcript of Wendy Davis's 2013 filibuster. A senator questioning Davis catches himself doing it: "You've mentioned about the health of the mother and you've mentioned that the mother would have—pregnant woman would have to be brought to the point of compromise of immediate injury or death" (qtd. in Mardoll 79). But a moment later, he switches back to *mother*: "[I]f there's a condition that threatens the life of the mother, you don't have to wait until that's about to happen" (80). Earlier in the day, another senator had used the term "pre-born child" (2).

3 For a similar critique from a women's studies perspective, see Ludlow 35-41.

constituency of Americans, many of whom have been alienated by the movement's intractability. (112-13)

One of the most promising discursive sites for producing effective, moving pro-choice arguments that wrestle with moral and emotional gray areas is the maternal abortion narrative. These abortion narratives recount the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of mothers who have had an abortion for reasons consistent with the beliefs and values traditionally associated with the Mother figure, such as, for example, protecting a child from unnecessary pain. Furthermore, time and temporal location are salient themes in these narratives, in that, women are differentially positioned relative to a birth event in the past, present, and future; they endure spans of time with varying degrees of agency (i.e., the pregnant pause) and in different material and sociopolitical contexts. Examining representations of time in maternal abortion narratives provides understanding for feminist rhetoricians into the nuances of maternal pro-choice ethos, a vital rhetorical construct in the movement's current moment. In her own narrative, Davis describes the pregnant pause but, rather than insisting on abstractions like choice and personal liberty, Davis situates the pregnant pause in the context of great emotional pain, the loss of a wanted pregnancy, a mother's loss of a child. Davis thereby combines the pro-choice and pro-life orientation to the future during pregnancy: indeterminacy and the exigence for a decision as well as maternal longing and the expectation of childbirth.

Wendy Davis and *Forgetting to Be Afraid*

Wendy Davis's memoir likely would not have been written or published when it was without Davis's national profile thanks to her strong identification with reproductive rights. On 25 June 2013 Davis stood on the senate floor of the Texas state capital and filibustered Senate Bill 5 (which later became House Bill 2), all while being prohibited from eating, drinking, sitting, leaning on any furniture, using the restroom, or speaking about any topic besides SB 5. Davis received help from her Democratic colleagues, who stalled proceedings with procedural questions, as well as from the protestors in the gallery, who cheered and chanted in the final moments before the midnight deadline—an event that has become known as the “people's filibuster.” But the people's filibuster would not have been possible without the physical, mental,

and emotional perseverance and rhetorical savvy of the senator from Fort Worth, Texas.⁴

The filibuster succeeded in preventing the passage of SB 5 until Gov. Rick Perry called a second 30-day special session to start on 1 July 2013. Because an identical bill would reach the senate floor weeks—rather than hours—ahead of the deadline, as was the case on July 13, filibustering likely would have been impossible. The law (now called House Bill 2) went into effect in Oct. 2014, forcing the closure of about half the 40-plus abortion clinics in Texas. A lengthy legal battle ensued, culminating two years later in the SCOTUS decision in favor of the law's opponents. In the meantime, Davis had, because of the filibuster, become a national political celebrity, a "feminist superhero" (Walsh). The filibuster generated a level of enthusiasm Texas Democrats hadn't experienced since Gov. Ann Richards was in office in the 1990s.⁵ The filibuster had made Davis a viable candidate for governor against the Republican Attorney General Greg Abbott. In Oct. 2013, Davis officially announced her candidacy for governor. Interestingly, *The New York Times* noted, in "her 15-minute speech ... she mentioned neither abortion nor her filibuster—and [the omission] seemed an

4 Beth Daniell and Letizia Guglielmo note that Davis's ethos during the filibuster was "borrowed and shared in collective action," for thousands of women and men contributed their personal stories regarding abortion to Davis's office for her to read (104). Davis has even on multiple occasions acknowledged that "It was your voices—lent to me—that made it possible for me to stand those 13 hours" (qtd. in Daniell and Guglielmo 105). While Daniell and Guglielmo draw our attention to the collectiveness of Davis's ethos as an example of cyberfeminist activism, Davis is important to understand more fully as a feminist rhetor because her rhetoric, especially *Forgetting*, highlights temporal location, an understudied component of the ecology in which women construct ethē.

5 Almost immediately following the filibuster, journalists began comparing Davis to Ann Richards. Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood and daughter of Ann Richards, described "Wendy [a]s the kind of woman that my mother was always nurturing, and nothing would have made her more proud than to see Wendy lead Texas" (Mitchell). Most rhetorical scholars are probably familiar with Ann Richards for her use of "feminine style" in both its formal qualities and as an ethic of care (Dow and Tonn). Similarities in Davis' and Richards' feminist political philosophy aside, a significant difference between the two is that Davis was clearly identified with the feminist movement from the outset of the filibuster, whereas Richards may have "identified herself as a feminist, [but] her primary public role [was] not as a feminist advocate" (Dow and Tonn 300).

attempt to ensure she does not become a single-issue candidate" (Fernandez). The Davis campaign's main strategy was apparently to give as much presence as possible to her personal success story, her overcoming poverty and adversity through hard work and opportunities for higher education.

Before the filibuster and the accompanying national prominence, Wendy Russell Davis had been married and separated by the age of 19, left to care for her infant daughter, Amber, in the mobile home she had shared with her first husband. While waiting tables at her father's restaurant, she met her second husband, who worked in local government and would encourage her to pursue her education. Davis worked her way up through the paralegal program at Tarrant County College, pursuing a bachelor's degree in English at Texas Christian University before attending Harvard Law School. She served on the Fort Worth city council for nine years prior to becoming a state senator in 2008. And Davis's first filibuster was of a 2011 bill that would decrease funding for public education by \$4 billion.

Many journalists and voters, however, had already decided Davis was in fact a single-issue candidate regardless of her biography or commitment to public education. The pro-life majority of Texan voters saw Davis as, to quote a conservative blogger, "Abortion Barbie," a moniker intended to degrade both Davis's appearance, as a blonde white woman, and her position on reproductive rights (Erickson). After months of Davis discussing her inspiring life story in speeches on the campaign trail, conservative reporters took aim at her biography. Wayne Slater in a Jan. 2014 *Dallas Morning News* article argued that Davis had been "blurring the facts" about when she was divorced from her first husband. Slater further intimates that she had used her second husband to pay her Harvard Law School tuition and had neglected her children while she was there.⁶ A number of journalists were quick to point out the sexist tropes thinly veiled in Slater's article, painting Davis as a "gold digger" and a "bad mother" (Luther; Marcotte; Mundy). Many conservative news outlets treated Slater's criticisms unproblematically as breaking news (e.g., Darby). The "bad

6 Slater writes: "Davis was 21, not 19, when she was divorced. She lived only a few months in the family mobile home while separated from her husband before moving into an apartment with her daughter. A single mother working two jobs, she met Jeff Davis, a lawyer 13 years older than her, married him and had a second daughter. He paid for her last two years at Texas Christian University and her time at Harvard Law School, and kept their two daughters while she was in Boston. When they divorced in 2005, he was granted parental custody, and the girls stayed with him. Wendy Davis was directed to pay child support." Later, he speculates: "Some will question how much of her success was her own doing, and how bad her circumstances were to start."

mother" label in particular would remain hard to shake. In response to the article, the Davis campaign gave selective interviews, issued news releases with a detailed timeline of Davis's life, and released a two-page open letter from each of Davis's daughters with the expressed purpose being to combat the "bad mother" criticism (Root).

Less than two months before the election, Blue Rider Press published Davis's memoir, *Forgetting to Be Afraid*, the inside cover touting it as "the exhilarating and deeply moving story behind one of the nation's brightest young political stars." In the memoir, Davis recalls personal struggles, such as her mother's suicide attempt, her parents' divorce, her own divorces, an ectopic pregnancy which had to be terminated, and a late-term abortion of her would-be daughter Tate Elise which was prompted by a severe fetal abnormality. Conservative pundits criticized her for having had an abortion as well as the book's release two months before the election, calling it an attempt to merely pull at the heartstrings of voters. Some critics even questioned the truth of Davis's disclosures (Siggins). What these pundits and critics failed to see was that *Forgetting* transcended the immediate situation of a tough election. The book was not an extended stump speech. *Forgetting* is the most sustained effort by Davis to tell her personal story and to present herself to voters as a complex human being whose upbringing and adulthood, complicated as they were, have informed who she is today. On *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Davis explained that she wrote with the intention of helping readers understand

how I became who I am and why it is that I fight for the things that I fight for. I wanted to put it all out there and to be real. ... I hope that women and the men who love them who may be facing very difficult decisions like the one that my former husband and I faced with our daughter, Tate Elise, I hope that they'll find some comfort in knowing what we went through and how we handled it. These stories are important, I think, for people who are looking for comfort, looking for inspiration, and that's what I hope to achieve through this book. ("Wendy Davis")

Davis did not use her memoir to counter the conservative criticism of her being a "bad mother," but rather transcended the situation to construct a more useful, ecological ethos for pro-choice women. Dan Solomon of *Texas Monthly* explicitly links the memoir to the 2013 filibuster, writing that, during the filibuster, Davis was an "abstract, ... figurative representative" of Texans who have experienced difficult choices with abortion, whereas her "abortion reveal" made her "a literal representative of some of the circumstances under which people have abortions ... Her decision to tell her own story," Solomon continues, "will strike many supporters as a powerful follow-up to the stories

that she told from the floor of the Senate during her now-famous filibuster” (Solomon).

The memoir’s connection to the filibuster is unsurprising because in the opening pages Davis explains that the exigence for the book was in part the “awakening” she experienced while reading a particular personal testimony during the filibuster (*Forgetting* 4). Davis recalls the testimony of Carole M., who learned at four months that her baby had a terminal condition where “abnormal amounts of fluid build up in the body” and so she and her husband faced the difficult choice of birthing a stillborn baby or aborting (qtd. in *Forgetting* 272). Davis began to cry while reading this testimony, especially because, as she later reflects, “[i]t could have been my story. ... And it felt as though I was reading words I could have written” (272). For a moment, Davis writes, she considered sharing her own story about Tate Elise, but ultimately she decided a personal disclosure like that would have made the filibuster about her, not the millions of Texas women she was representing (275). The testimony is especially devastating because Carole’s language is maternal: This was “a much-wanted pregnancy,” her “beloved child,” her “baby, who we named Amber Grace” (qtd. in Mardoll 46-7). *Forgetting’s* disclosure of Davis’s abortion, then, is not only generally connected for reproductive-rights activists to the meaning of the filibuster, as Solomon observes, but also specifically connected for Davis to the difficult experience of a mother aborting a wanted pregnancy.

Abortion narratives written about wanted pregnancies are (and should only be) one type of abortion narrative. We need more and a diversity of abortion narratives circulating in print and online in order to reduce the myths and stigma around abortion. We need books like Caitlin Moran’s *How to Be a Woman* and films like *Obvious Child*⁷ wherein women undergo abortion procedures and do not feel guilty. As Emily Shire of *The Daily Beast* points out in a review of *Forgetting to Be Afraid*, Davis fits the narrative of “a tortured, loving mother acting out of almost pure medical necessity” whereas, on the other hand, “[f]or a woman to reveal she has had an abortion because she wanted one ... and, further, to declare she has only felt happiness towards her decision is truly groundbreaking. Davis’ abortion narrative,” Shire continues, “has helped diminish the social stigma surrounding abortion. But until the ‘bad’ abortion stories are just as acceptable, pro-choice advocates have a long way to go”—“bad” stories being the “truly groundbreaking” ones (Shire). Despite Davis’s narrative fitting the type “easiest for people to digest,” for many people in Texas, especially voters, even the “good” abortion stories are still unacceptable (Shire): Davis lost her bid for the governorship by over twenty percentage

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2GN3wdfqbA>

points to the pro-life Abbott. Nevertheless, the wanted-pregnancy abortion narrative—the maternal abortion narrative—is especially rhetorically significant because it collapses the dichotomy of moral mother vs. selfish, oversexed, abortion-seeking woman. Narratives like Carole's and Davis's appropriate the topoi of motherhood while advancing a pro-choice message, creating perhaps the best chance for reproductive-rights rhetors to move and persuade pro-life audiences and to decrease the stigma around other abortion narratives as well—including the “bad” ones. “Good” abortion narratives, ones of mothers who only reluctantly undergo an abortion out of medical necessity and concern for their child's quality of life, represent one way reproductive-rights rhetors might appropriate the code of motherhood.

Davis's narrative, in particular, deserves our attention because she remains one of the central, most influential figures of the reproductive-rights movement today. While the filibuster propelled her into the national spotlight, she has remained active working to advance women's and reproductive rights as well as civic participation, giving college-campus talks about her inspiring life story, the importance of and strategies for civic engagement and gender equality, and the general economic benefits of workplace gender equality. She contributed an amicus brief in support of Whole Woman's Health (13-16) which was largely based on the abortion chapter in *Forgetting*, and she campaigned in several states for Secretary Hilary Clinton this past year. She also founded Deeds Not Words, an Austin-based non-profit organization that targets millennials and advocates for greater civic participation. Deeds Not Words maintains a website that aggregates news about gender equality and links to organizations and resources for advancing women's rights; it also publishes a weekly newsletter, *Deeds Digest*.

Temporality and Davis's Maternal Pro-Choice Ethos

Chapter 14 of *Forgetting* begins with an account of Davis's third pregnancy. When her daughters had reached ages six and twelve, Davis wanted to have another child, but halfway through the first trimester Davis and her then-husband Jeff discovered “[o]ur Lucas had implanted in a fallopian tube, rather than in my uterus,” which is also known as an ectopic pregnancy, making the pregnancy “unsustainable and not viable” (172). Davis had the surgery to remove the tube and terminate the pregnancy. “I was heartbroken. ... We all grieved the loss, but I grieved most deeply,” she writes (172). Soon after, Davis and her husband stopped taking measures to prevent pregnancy, knowing the chances of Davis getting pregnant with one fallopian tube were greatly diminished, but “I secretly prayed that were it God's plan for us we would find ourselves expecting again” (172). Two years later in 1996, they found themselves expecting again. Happy but cautious, Davis dutifully prepared for her

third baby, whom she named Tate Elise, by being “completely dedicated to having the healthiest pregnancy possible, reading every book on the subject that I could get my hands on” (173). Because Davis was thirty-three at the time, her husband in his late forties, she took a Tri-Screen to test for possible risk of chromosomal or neural defects. When the results came in, the doctor recommended she follow up with a high-risk pregnancy specialist. The specialist told them Tate had a slightly enlarged head but it was nothing really to worry about. A few weeks later, Davis went in for a second ultrasound and the doctor was very quiet. “[W]hen he finished,” writes Davis, “he repositioned my chair to its upright position and reached for a box of Kleenex, his hand actually shaking. ... I could see in his eyes the news even before he opened his mouth to speak” (175). Tate had developed Dandy-Walker syndrome, a fetal brain abnormality where the left and right hemispheres of the brain develop in complete separation. On top of that, “[h]er condition, extremely rare, fell on the most severe end of the syndrome’s spectrum” (175). Davis describes her reaction: “I couldn’t breathe. I literally couldn’t catch my breath. My baby. My precious baby Tate. I don’t remember much else about that day other than calling Jeff, trying to contain my hysterical crying. The rest of it is a shocked, haze-filled blur” (175).

It is in Davis’s description of her grieving and the series of actions before finally deciding to abort the baby that I see Davis discursively incorporating the pregnant pause: Her right to choose abortion is taken as granted. Davis exercises her reproductive agency through waiting, to recall Sharma and Bourdieu. Davis describes waiting as long as possible, gathering “as much research as I could” and consulting multiple specialists, before making the decision (176). Because the pregnancy is, of course, a wanted pregnancy, Davis’s reason for waiting is maternal love:

When I was alone, with time ticking away and the urgency of making a decision pressing down upon me, I would talk to her. I spoke in the most reassuring way I could. I promised I would not let her suffer. But I needed more information. To make such an impossibly awful decision, I needed to feel surer. (176)

The choice to have an abortion is presented as a last resort and an extremely painful one in her situation. Davis gets a second opinion from “a doctor in Austin who specialized in obstetric neurological diagnoses” and a third opinion from a specialist at “a teaching hospital in Dallas” (176). After seeking out a fourth opinion, Davis had “[found] her own way of getting there,” that is, resigning to the last resort.

In contrast, agentive waiting was ultimately only partially available for Carole, who wrote the testimony that inspired Davis. Carole’s testimony

similarly takes as granted the pregnant pause but describes the prolonged pain a mother can feel when a faith-based insurance policy forces a mother to wait after she has already decided on abortion. After being informed that her baby had Hydrops Fetalis, Carole and her husband had three options: "We could wait until she passed, induce my labor, or have a dilation and extraction" (qtd. in Mardoll 46). Similar to Davis's narrative, Carole recognizes the need for decision-making: "[W]e had a decision to make. Even if we decided not to do anything, we were still making a decision, and we had a limited amount of time to decide" (46). Carole's initial agentive waiting soon turns, however, into powerless waiting: After Carole and her husband decided to have her labor induced, they were informed by her husband's employer Seton, a Catholic medical organization, that the Seton insurance "would not allow us to have our labor induced while our daughter still had a heartbeat. That meant that we were either forced to wait until she passed or agree to have her heart stopped" (47). After weeks of waiting, they decided to have their daughter's heart stopped. In Carole's case, she had made her decision but had to endure a protracted waiting period and limited options for which Carole could be waiting. The temporal politics of Carole's and Davis's abortion narratives, then, include the conditions under which a mother waits—if waiting is chosen or imposed—and the available medical options for which a mother is waiting.

The available medical options in these particular abortion narratives are severely limited not only by institutional forces but also, in the first place, by terminal prenatal illness, which, in the context of a wanted pregnancy, engenders heartbreaking incongruities: "Instead of planning a nursery," writes Carole,

I was picking out a headstone for my baby. Instead of choosing an outfit for her to wear home, I was picking out her burial gown. ... Every time that I left the house, someone would comment on my pregnancy. They asked perfectly normal questions about my due date, the gender, the name. I answered their questions as nicely as I could, and then I would turn around and burst into tears. So eventually I stopped leaving my house. (qtd. in Mardoll 47)

Death in this instance replaces childbirth as the eventual conclusion of a wanted pregnancy. Davis and Carole respond to this devastating temporal reorientation, this revision of what the future holds, by assessing their child's likely quality of life and ultimately choosing abortion as a maternal, loving option, framing abortion as an end-of-life issue. "I could feel her little body tremble violently," writes Davis, "as if someone were applying an electric shock to her, and I knew then what we needed to do. She was suffering. ... It was time to accept the grim prognosis shared by those four physicians" (*Forgetting* 176).

Ultimately, it is “[w]ith the heaviest of hearts” that Davis and her husband decide to terminate the pregnancy, knowing “it was the most humane and compassionate thing we could do to spare Tate ... further pain and suffering” (177). Carole’s testimony more explicitly frames abortion as a humane measure:

Being told that you don’t really have any control over how your baby is going to die is devastating and self-defeating. I chose to have a baby, and to bring her into this world. I should be allowed to make the very personal, very private, and very painful decision as to how she leaves it, guided by the best interest of my child and my family. (qtd. in Mardoll 48)

Framing abortion in this context as an act of compassion is not unique to Davis’s and Carole’s narrative. For Phoebe Day Danziger’s 2014 *Slate* article, “A Peaceful Death” even more explicitly and deftly explores the issue with moral and emotional nuance. I briefly put Danziger’s narrative, too, in conversation with Davis’s to illustrate the range of maternal appeals in abortion narratives. Danziger, who is herself training to be a neonatologist, describes and reflects on the events after she and her husband learned “[o]ur baby had what is called a bladder outlet obstruction, meaning that the urine that was being stored in his bladder was unable to exit” (Danziger). They decided to have an abortion. Danziger’s moral justification for the decision is couched in maternal concern for the quality of her baby’s life:

Because of the choice we made to end his life, our son never got the chance to gaze up at his parents, to see who it was that had been talking and singing to him all along. He never got the chance to fall asleep in our arms, bundled and cozy, pink lips and fuzzy hair like a duckling, smelling of milk and baby, the very best smell in the world. Neither, however, did he have to suffocate to death at birth, his small body gasping to fill his woefully hypoplastic lungs. He did not have to feel pain shooting throughout his abdomen, grossly distended with urinary ascites. He did not have to experience one minute away from the warmth and love of my body. We chose, instead, for him to be born straight into peace. (Danziger)

Danziger, like Davis and Carole, clearly shows childbirth as the expected and desired outcome of a wanted pregnancy while also showing that the love for her son extends to curtailing his suffering at the end of his life.

Each of these three narratives assumes the rightful existence of the pregnant pause but situates this pro-choice temporal orientation within the context of a wanted pregnancy and further attends to the reality of a terminal condition. Situating the pregnant pause in this way enables these narratives

to tap into the expectation of childbirth and the grief of this expectation going tragically unrealized—both of which resonate with the pro-life view of pregnancy. After Davis's abortion, she mourned the loss of her child:

An indescribable blackness followed. It was a deep, dark despair and grief, a heavy wave that crushed me, that made me wonder if I would ever surface. It would take me the better part of a year to ultimately make my way up and out of it. And when I finally did come through it, I emerged a different person. Changed. Forever changed. (*Forgetting* 178)

Enduring that heavy wave of grief required counseling in the early days, stories of couples going through a similar experience, the time and comfort of family and friends, and group counseling in the weeks after. In her grief Davis further describes a specific re-orientation to the past. For memorializing Tate enabled and continues to enable Davis and her family to cope with her death. Davis keeps "a wooden memory box ... [with] the photographs [of Tate after she was delivered], the program from a private memorial service ... cards sent by people who reached out to us to provide comfort, and that little crocheted bunny [a nurse made for Tate after she was delivered]" (178). The following year Davis and her family participated in a Walk to Remember in Tate's honor: "It was important to all of us to memorialize her, to recognize that she *was*. That she was loved, and is still loved, and always will be loved by us" (179). For Davis, Tate was a real person, a real part of her family, a part of her past that lives on in her.

Readers might observe the surprising similarities between this account in *Forgetting* and the story of how, also in 1996, Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum—a staunch pro-life advocate—and his wife, Karen, brought home their son, Gabriel's, body after he had lived only two hours, having been born after 20 weeks of gestation, so their two other children could meet and say goodbye to him. Karen Santorum later published letters she had written Gabriel while pregnant with him in *Letters to Gabriel: The True Story of Gabriel Michael Santorum*. While Karen and Rick Santorum's view of pregnancy and their descriptions of this tragic experience do not presuppose the pregnant pause, they grieved the loss of their son similarly to how the Davis family grieved the loss of their daughter and baby sister. The Santorums did everything they could to ensure their son lived, if even for two hours, whereas the Davises prioritized their daughter's quality of life, her living without unnecessary pain. These narratives share a teleological view of these particular pregnancies, the painful temporal re-orientation caused by a terminal illness (where the expectation of childbirth is replaced by the certainty of death), and a desire to keep the memory of their child alive in the present. That the temporalities of these

two stories are more similar than different suggests the potential power of maternal abortion narratives as a starting point for more genuine dialogue, getting away from the entrenchment of the “abortion debate,” and as discursive sites to cultivate compelling, credible, and maternal pro-choice ethē.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how maternal abortion narratives negotiate the code of motherhood, as a gendered rhetoric of time specifically in relation to childbearing. I would like to conclude by briefly returning to the idea that maternal temporal rhetorics encapsulate more than traditional pro-life ideology. A future line of inquiry complementary to my own might include analysis of how maternal temporal rhetorics pertaining to *childrearing* are negotiated by women rhetors who cultivate the “between” ethos of working motherhood. As the sexist *Dallas Morning News* criticism of Davis demonstrates, working motherhood is still a difficult ethos for women to inhabit—in Texas politics at least. For mothers who perform paid labor, whether by choice or economic necessity, the code of motherhood encourages feelings of guilt and ambivalence about their “double shift” as working mothers, their less-than-total entanglement with the temporality of children (Hays 142), their inability to live “at a pace tuned to theirs” (Rich 22). In a number of passages in *Forgetting*, for example, Davis describes exhaustive daily routines during which she vacillates between being a mother and being a commuter, a receptionist at a pediatrician’s office, a paralegal student at a community college, a waitress, a nontraditional college student, a law student, and finally a lawyer. Whereas economic necessity motivated Davis’s earlier grueling schedules, the logistics of attending Harvard were motivated by Davis’s self-actualization and professional goals. And yet the Harvard chapter constantly returns to Davis’s considerations of her daughters, reflecting her priorities as both a mother and a law student. The early decision of where Davis would live in Cambridge was determined by proximity to “an exceptional public elementary school for Amber and a quality day-care center for Dru” despite meaning a longer commute to campus (*Forgetting* 137). While Davis’s childfree classmates “would essentially stroll across campus, ... by the time I sat down at my desk, my day would already have included getting two girls up, fed, dressed, and off to school and then a commute into Harvard Square” (140). These dizzying daily routines and logistical decisions suggest a negotiation of values and responsibilities, in particular the dual-responsibilities of working motherhood, the competing ideas about what it means to be a “good” mother, and how a “good” mother ought to spend her time. Davis illustrates Skinner’s observation that “*ethos often is ... composed in a dynamic context that includes multiple competing ideas about the ‘best’ virtues; consequently, ethos formation frequently involves value negotiations*

as well as reciprocity between rhetor and audience identity constructs" (175). How one represents how she spends her time, then, is shaped by a negotiation of the values one holds and the values imposed on her via the "popular beliefs about those of her social position" (173).

This essay has sought to respond to Buchanan's speculation about how the contemporary reproductive-rights movement might appropriate motherhood by arguing that maternal abortion narratives, specifically narratives by mothers who describe the experience of choosing to abort (and grieving the loss of) a wanted pregnancy, enable rhetors to construct maternal pro-choice *ethē*. While maternal abortion narratives like Davis's, Carole's, and Danziger's currently "occupy an uneasy place in the mainstream dialogue about abortion" because they blur the seemingly opposing positions in the abortion debate (Danziger) and because they are only one kind of abortion narrative (Shire), they are one of the most promising discursive sites for broadening support for the movement. This is because they make available to pro-choice rhetoric the *topoi* of motherhood and more inclusive "dwelling places" from which pro-choice rhetors may speak and write. Maternal pro-choice *ethē* are achieved most saliently through the ways in which mother rhetors shape time in these narratives, that is, how they are oriented to the past, present, and future and what choices they make to affect their experience of time. Hitherto time, in general, is an understudied component of ethos for feminist rhetoricians. Much scholarship in feminist rhetoric has revised ethos to account for the constraints and alternative resources—including associations with certain spaces and places—of women as they construct persuasive *ethē* in written, oral, and multimodal arguments. Appreciating the full range of rhetorical, historical, cultural, and material contexts in which *ethē* are cultivated means we should also consider time as a material resource (un)available to rhetors. Moreover, incorporating time into a feminist ecological mode of inquiry requires that we politicize time, asking questions about how power and agency are exercised temporally, how time can be gendered, and how time is represented rhetorically.

A time-inclusive model would further consider the ways in which speakers and writers aim to change women's experiences of (gendered) time with their rhetoric. Indeed the broader purpose of maternal abortion narratives like Davis's, for example, is to make the pregnant pause an available temporality for all pregnant women. Considering time from a feminist ecological approach asks that we examine rhetorical acts not only for their constructions of temporality, but also as potential interventions into women's temporalities, as

prompts for the adjustment of women's future experiences of time, thereby broadening the possibilities for women's *ethē* construction.⁸

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