President Obama’s speech following the January 2011 mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona employed a series of temporal shifts to help the nation integrate the tragedy into its collective consciousness. This essay identifies four dimensions of temporality that were developed in the Tucson Memorial Address and analyzes their interrelationships. It argues that rhetoric can better facilitate judgment by providing auditors with multiple interrelated but individually untotalizable temporal perspectives. By that standard, the Tucson Address employs a temporal network that serves as a significant impediment to rhetorical judgment.

When President Obama arrived in Tucson, Arizona on January 12, 2011 to memorialize the victims of the recent shooting at Representative Gabrielle Giffords’s “Congress on Your Corner” event, he faced rhetorical challenges at once familiar and unprecedented. In the wake of national tragedies such as the Challenger explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush each had been called on to help the nation mourn, create shared understanding, and rearticulate common values. President Obama himself had accepted this responsibility following the massacre at Fort Hood, Texas, only 14 months...
previously. Nevertheless, Tucson was different in one crucial respect: whereas previous tragedies had temporarily smothered partisan hostilities, the Tucson shooting inflamed them.

On Saturday morning, January 8, 2011, Jared Lee Loughner entered a Safeway supermarket where Giffords was holding a public meet and greet with her constituents. In a few short minutes he killed six people and wounded thirteen others, including Giffords herself, who was shot in the head. Like other mass shootings in recent U.S. history, the Tucson massacre prompted renewed discussions about gun control and mental health services. However, the most pronounced reactions to the tragedy came from liberal journalists and public officials who located Loughner’s attack within the broader context of an increasingly divisive and violent rhetorical culture, as well as from their conservative counterparts, who vigorously opposed this framing. During a press conference on Saturday afternoon, for example, Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik said, “When you look at unbalanced people, how they . . . respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths, about tearing down the government, the anger, the hatred, the . . . bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. And unfortunately, Arizona has . . . become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry.”¹ The Arizona Republic responded forcefully three days later: “The Democratic sheriff of Pima County is revealing his agenda as partisan, and . . . every bit as recklessly antagonistic as the talk-show hosts and politicians he chooses to decry.”² On January 10, 2011, Paul Krugman of the New York Times wrote a scathing editorial in which he said that he had “expect[ed] something like this atrocity to happen,” because of the right-wing’s “saturation of our political discourse . . . with eliminationist rhetoric.”³ Liberal commentators criticized Sarah Palin for her use of a map during the 2010 midterm election that marked “targeted” congressional districts—including Gabrielle Giffords’s own—with symbols that resembled rifle crosshairs.⁴ Palin responded to her critics on the same day as Obama’s speech, declaring that “journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn.”⁵

Addressing the nation in the midst of a controversy about the contentiousness of politics, Obama did not enjoy the goodwill that had followed tragedies such as Oklahoma City. The contrast was not lost on members of the news media, leading Catherine Philp of the London Times to wonder if
it were possible for Obama to “issue a much-needed call for civility and healing without appearing to capitalise on the tragedy?”

Philp’s concern was anything but prophetic. By almost any measure, Obama’s speech of January 12, 2011—which eulogized the dead, celebrated the survivors, and issued a sentimental call for civility in politics—was a resounding success. In an ABC News/Washington Post poll released January 17, 2011, 78 percent of respondents reported that they approved of the way the president had responded to the shootings; 71 percent of Republicans and conservatives responded similarly. The Pew Research Center found that 56 percent of Republicans, 67 percent of Independents, and 83 percent of Democrats thought his speech was “excellent” or “very good.” Numerous prominent conservatives praised the speech, including syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, Fox News anchor Brit Hume, National Review editor Rich Lowry, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. Even Fox News host Glenn Beck found something positive to say about the speech: “This is probably the best speech he has ever given, and with all sincerity, thank you Mr. President, for becoming the president of the ‘United’ States of America last night. . . . It was needed and you accomplished the job and you did it expertly.” Historian Garry Wills was not alone in comparing Obama’s speech to other rhetorical masterpieces, including Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural. Lincoln and Obama, Wills argued, “looked for larger patterns under the surface bitternesses [sic] of their day. Each forged a moral position that rose above the occasion for their speaking.”

David Zarefsky has argued persuasively that one of the most important functions of presidential rhetoric is defining political reality, and the positive reception of Obama’s address strongly suggests that his definition of the tragedy resonated broadly with the nation. From this perspective, the president did more than simply rise above the occasion; he named it and thereby allowed the audience to integrate a traumatic indeterminacy into their collective consciousness. The particular frames through which presidential definitions accomplish their integrative function are incredibly significant, moreover. As Zarefsky explains: “The definition of the situation . . . highlights certain elements . . . for use in arguments and obscures others, influences whether people will notice the situation and how they will handle it, describes causes and identifies remedies, and invites moral judgments about circumstances or individuals.” I would emphasize also that presi-
dential definitions are capable of forestalling or attenuating judgment. Situations can be defined so as to circumscribe their ultimate significance, obscure their internal dynamics or external relationships, isolate them from human agency, and prefigure their development. In such cases presidential speeches may succeed in helping the nation make sense out of a shared situation (and may enjoy widespread popularity) but still fail to offer the audience symbolic resources for invention and agency.

I argue that, despite its unquestionable eloquence and generally positive reception, the Tucson Memorial Address failed to provide symbolic resources productive of rhetorical judgment. I demonstrate that the president defined the shooting as a national trauma and defined trauma as a typical and recurrent feature of both democratic and domestic experience, thereby offering the audience a prefigured and ultimately unproblematic way of integrating the situation into their collective consciousness. Defined from the perspective of an abstract, universal, and inexorable temporality, trauma may be traumatic but it is hardly exigent; it does not demand the reexamination of appearances, the reformulation of collective relationships, or the exercise of agency. Ultimately, because Obama transcended the temporal specificity of the event and projected his audience into a generic temporality, they were left with neither the impetus nor resources to engage productively with the challenges of democratic politics.

This essay progresses in three stages. First, I engage in a close textual analysis of Obama’s Memorial Address, teasing out the four dimensions of temporality through which Obama frames his occasion: a mythic democratic time that is homogeneous, progressive, and irreversible; a qualitatively distinct era of partisan polarization that interjects in but cannot interfere with mythic democratic time; the moment of the speech itself, which serves as an occasion for the country to reflect on its rhetorical choices; and a mundane, cyclical, and generic domestic time in which families reflect on the expression of values in everyday life. Next, I explain how rhetorical judgment is implicated in a discourse’s temporality and outline the failures of the Tucson Memorial Address. Finally, I argue that Obama’s peroration—which centers on the image of nine-year-old victim Christina Taylor Green—figures democracy as an aspiration only realizable outside of time.
SYNOPSIS AND OVERVIEW OF TEMPORALITIES

The Tucson Memorial Address develops in four sections. The first section establishes the president’s relationship with his audience, acknowledges their grief, and recalls the events of January 8, 2011. The next section celebrates the lives of the six victims and gives the audience reason for hopefulness, announcing that a short time before Obama arrived at the memorial “Gabby [Giffords] opened her eyes for the first time.” The third section reflects on what the occasion might offer for a democratic public and for individuals striving to find meaning in their everyday lives. Finally, the peroration takes up the image of nine-year-old victim Christina Taylor Green and calls for the audience to commit themselves to “forging a country that is forever worthy of her gentle, happy spirit.”

Four distinct temporalities emerge in the Tucson Memorial Address: mythic democratic time, the era of partisan polarization, the occasion of the speech, and generic domestic time. While these temporalities do not map neatly onto the speech’s organizational structure, I discuss them roughly in the order in which they appear.

MYTHIC DEMOCRATIC TIME

President Obama opens his address by welcoming the audience and identifying as “an American”—rather than as a president—“who, like all Americans, kneels to pray with you today and will stand by you tomorrow.” After acknowledging the audience’s grief and offering a few words from Psalm 46 in hopefulness for the recovery of the surviving victims, he sets the scene for the tragedy:

On Saturday morning, Gabby, her staff and many of her constituents gathered outside a supermarket to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and free speech. They were fulfilling a central tenet of the democracy envisioned by our founders. . . Gabby called it “Congress on Your Corner”—just an updated version of government of and by and for the people. And that quintessentially American scene . . . was shattered by a gunman’s bullets.

While Obama uses the simple past tense (“gathered”) to locate Giffords’s meet and greet in a particular moment in time (Saturday, January 8, 2011),
in the next sentence he transitions to the past continuous tense (”were fulfilling”) to give her political activities a prolonged temporality, one that would have been sustained had it not been for a tragic interruption; just as the scene would have remained had it not been “shattered” by Loughner’s violence. Obama identifies Giffords’s political outreach program with the values of the nation’s founders, while alluding to the words of a president who oversaw a bloody rededication to those values. In this section Obama begins to locate democracy in a universe of historically enduring and ideologically eternal values. Articulated in relation to those values, “quintessentially” democratic practices such as Giffords’s are cast into a temporality shared in common with a distant (and idealized) past and an idealized (and distant) future.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue that epideictic speeches are particularly well suited to the production of timelessness, because they can operate in a “mythic time” that “allows one to experience a universe of eternal relationships.” Nevertheless, John Murphy cautions rhetorical scholars to distinguish between two different kinds of mythic time, corresponding to two different expressions of the U.S. civil religion: one utilizes “the language of Being, of eternal principles, of religion, tradition, and authority,” while the other is more sensitive to change and accepts the “injunction that the arc of the universe is long but that it bends toward justice.” David Frank and James Darsey argue that Obama generally utilizes a language emphasizing the second form of mythic time, and in this regard the Tucson speech is no exception. In the third section of the speech, for example, he describes civic engagement as an “always necessary and never-ending process to form a more perfect union.” He also remarks that the nation’s task “is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations.” Even in these cases, however, he uses words to emphasize the inevitability and underlying homogeneity of historical change: “necessary,” “never-ending,” and “constantly.” These terms are characteristic of a temporality that assumes change (defined as progress) while bracketing contingency.

Mythic democratic time provides the underlying narrative context for the address, and it is in relation to that context that the other three temporalities are rendered meaningful. Whenever President Obama extolls political activities in the historical present, for example, he projects them into mythic democratic time, framing them not as multiple and varied efforts to
respond to concrete exigencies but singularly and abstractly as an “exercise of self-government.” The activities in question are taken out of the present and identified with an idealized democratic tradition, and it is in relation to that tradition, and from the perspective of its temporality, that they derive their value.

**THE ERA OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION**

Early in the third section of the speech Obama recognizes a “national conversation” about the tragedy and proposed responses. “This process,” he concedes, “is an essential ingredient in our exercise of self-government.” Then he continues:

But at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized—at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do—it’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.

Twice the president repeats “at a time” to characterize the current political climate as a momentary punctuation of or diversion from the stable trajectory of mythic democratic time. The exact boundaries of this temporal moment are undefined, of course. Democrats may read the sentence as a characterization of conservative rhetoric during Obama’s term, and Republicans may read the sentence as a characterization of the left’s rhetoric in the wake of the tragedy. The speech provides equal opportunity for partisans to “lay the blame” for the era of blame. In either case, the effect of characterizing “polariz[ation]” as a periodic phenomenon is to minimize its significance vis-à-vis mythic democratic time.

The president reaffirms the temporally marginalized status of partisan politics later in this section. He says, “If this tragedy prompts reflection and debate—as it should—let’s make sure it’s worthy of those we have lost. Let’s make sure it’s not on the usual plane of politics and point-scoring and pettiness that drifts away in the next news cycle.” While he uses the adjective “usual” to describe the “plane of politics” in which “point-scoring and pettiness” are the norms—suggesting a protraction of partisanship that is
arguably in tension with his earlier characterization of it as momentary—he also notes that any accomplishments produced on this plane will “drift away” in short order, thereby maintaining a temporal separation between partisan victories and the waypoints of the mythic democratic journey. Whether described as incongruous or ubiquitous, the president consistently marks partisanship as ephemeral. Moreover, although the president characterizes partisan time as attentive to the consequentiality of discourse (“point-scoring”), it is nevertheless marked as ultimately inconsequential (“petty”) in relationship to the arc of history.

**THE OCCASION OF THE SPEECH**

After locating political polarization “at a time” distinct from the temporality of mythic democracy, Obama says, “it’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.” In essence, the president is calling for his audience to take a moment within a moment, to interrupt that polarization that is itself only a small interruption in the grand scheme of democratic time. This second pause constitutes the temporality of Obama’s speech. It is the time of *kairos*, an opportune moment for interrupting an interruption.

In premodern Greece the word “*kairos*” carried connotations of timeliness, proper measure, opportunity, and appropriateness. Unlike the English term “time,” which approximates more closely the Greek term “*chronos*,” describing a chronic, rational, and quantifiable temporality, *kairos* describes moments that are irreducible, transitory, and nascent. In the Tucson Memorial Address, the president suggests that the trauma experienced in the wake of the tragedy creates an opportunity to reflect on the nation’s rhetorical choices. The memorial occupies a qualitatively distinct moment in time that creates a space for reflection, a function of *kairos* that Benjamin Crosby discussed in his study on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Last Sunday Sermon.” In that case, Crosby demonstrated that King was able to interrupt the “linear accumulation of history” that “produces changes and exerts movement irresistibly” by opening up a space of revelation in which the invisible is made visible.

Nevertheless, while Obama describes his occasion as a time for “pause” and “reflection,” a time to “mak[e] sure we align our values with our
actions,” it is important to note that the moment is defined in relationship to the era of political polarization rather than mythic democratic time. Auditors are asked to direct their critical attention to the rhetorical excesses of the present era because that era has allowed them to become alienated from the myth of their civil religion. Like a double negative, the pause of the president’s address reinvigorates the auditor’s adherence to the timelessness of democracy by interrupting the era of partisan polarization that had interrupted mythic democratic time. The moment of reflection, as characterized by the president, is not paradigmatically kairotic because while it is qualitatively distinct from the perspective of the era of polarization, it ultimately functions to reimmerse the audience in the chronic temporality of mythic democracy.

This function is apparent later in the speech when Obama discusses the usefulness of the occasion:

What we cannot do is use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on each other. That we cannot do. . . . Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let’s use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together.

Obama implicitly contrasts two meanings of “occasion”—a justification for action and a special or distinct time. As “one more occasion,” the tragedy would function to rationalize the typical partisanship of the day, leaving the audience confined by the temporality of the era of polarization and eliminating the possibility that the tragedy might be “used” to constitute a qualitatively distinct “occasion.” Conversely, as a genuine occasion, the tragedy can be used to interrupt the rhetorical violence of partisan time and to reconnect the nation with the enduring time of pure democracy. There is a subtle irony in the president’s appeal, however, insofar as his qualitatively distinct moment of reflection allows the auditors to reimmerse themselves in the uniform temporality of mythic democratic time. The moment of reflection functions as a conduit to timelessness, and Obama’s “occasion” is constituted but never consummated.
Any remaining *kairotic* potential is soon dissolved when the president transitions into a discourse that characterizes the memorial as a generic occasion reflecting typical emotional experiences. After calling upon his audience to “use this occasion” to foster empathy, understanding, and “moral imagination,” Obama notes, “that’s what most of us do when we lose somebody in our family—especially if the loss is unexpected. We’re shaken out of our routines. We’re forced to look inward. We reflect on the past.” The president’s comment suggests that the nation’s (political) reflection on the mass shooting in Tucson should be occasioned by sentiments analogous to those of families who are struggling through grief at the loss of a loved one. And the analogy is significant enough for him to spend the next three minutes elaborating:

> Sudden loss causes us to look backward—but it also forces us to look forward; to reflect on the present and the future. . . . We may ask ourselves if we’ve shown enough kindness and generosity and compassion to the people in our lives. . . . We recognize our own mortality, and we are reminded that in the fleeting time we have on this Earth, what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame—but rather, how well we have loved.

The president lingers here in a metareflection on the psychological experiences occasioned by personal loss. I characterize this as a *metareflection* because he transcends the circumstances of the specific occasion and reflects on the constituents of this type of occasion, thereby allowing the audience to acknowledge a generic psychological need to make sense of tragedy *as a substitute* for actually making sense of the events of January 8, 2011. Obama had employed a similar temporal shift earlier in the speech when he spoke of the human “nature to demand explanations” and to “make sense out of that which seems senseless.” Taken cumulatively, these transitions from the occasion of the speech to the temporality of generic bereavement constitute one of the most significant structural features of the text.

As Obama approaches his peroration it becomes clear that he has interrupted an era of partisan conflict to reframe civic relationships as largely
(though not entirely) analogous to familial relationships and to mark the tragedy of Tucson as an “occasion” not dissimilar to ordinary occasions of personal loss. Four dimensions of temporality converge in the address as a whole: a mythic democratic time that is homogeneous, constant, and irreversible; an era of polarization that interrupts but cannot alter fundamental democratic values; a moment or “occasion” in which the nation can reflect on its rhetorical choices; and an ordinary, perennial, and ritualistic time of domestic bereavement. In the next section I argue that these temporalities and their interrelationships are ill suited to facilitate rhetorical judgment.

**RHETORICAL JUDGMENT AS A MEDIATION OF TIME**

One cannot articulate the terms “rhetoric” and “judgment” without altering both fundamentally. If judgment is enacted rhetorically, then it must be theorized in such a way as to acknowledge its reliance on collective agency, its unique relationship to appearances, and its aesthetic as well as ethical significance. Likewise, if rhetoric culminates in judgment, then the function of rhetorical theory is not merely to account for the techniques of persuasion but to characterize the norms constitutive of a practice that produces certain public goods. As Edwin Black noted 50 years ago, this project must begin with a set of standards for distinguishing persuasive discourses that facilitate judgment from those that neglect or undermine it.22

Whatever else it may be, judgment is an activity that utilizes reason while abjuring rationalism. It acknowledges the significance of general principles but denies that they can be applied to particular cases unproblematically.23 Thomas Farrell builds on this foundation by arguing that the rhetorical tradition—particularly as articulated by Aristotle—contains theoretical principles and practical norms that are conducive to the project of cultivating public judgment.24 While I do not have the space to summarize fully Farrell’s arguments, nor to offer a comprehensive theory of rhetorical judgment, two of his contributions are particularly useful for understanding the relationship between rhetorical judgment and temporality.

First, Farrell argues that while rhetorical and dialectical modes of inquiry both treat subjects that do not admit of certainty they are distinct in that dialectic “presuppose[s] an already identifiable problematic” under which appearances may be subsumed while rhetoric uses appearances to contest “the realm of the problematic.”25 Therefore, while Platonic dialogues are
replete with cameo roles for physicians, athletes, generals, and shepherds, these “appearances” serve a limited function predetermined by the propositional structure of the dialogue. Socrates offers his interlocutors insight and aporia at turns, but at the cost of denying them resources for invention and a space within which to affirm their agency. Rhetoric, by contrast, takes appearances seriously. It recognizes that their form, sense, and significance are not exhausted by any given typology, and that citizens can “recombine and individuate [appearances] so as to interrupt the quotidian of ordinary policy and practice.”

I do not mean to suggest here that transgression is a necessary feature of rhetorical judgment; only that its emergence cannot be foreclosed by a mode of rationality that prefigures the realm of the possible.

Second, Farrell argues that rhetorical judgment requires the participation of collective audiences that are morally accountable and bound by a relationship of civic friendship. Because rhetoric addresses publics, the internal dynamics of which may be more or less conducive to critical agency, the articulation of rhetoric and judgment envisages modes of consubstantiality that emphasize the practical interdependency of self and other. Members of a rhetorical culture identify along other lines, of course—ideological, experiential, demographic—but when addressed as a judging public they are identified by their commitment to a practice that cultivates goods not realizable by individuals or factions acting in isolation. Critics can distinguish rhetorical discourses that facilitate judgment from those that do not, therefore, by examining the internal dynamics of their implied auditor.

If rhetorical judgment requires the configuration of irreducible appearances and the attribution of collective agency, how might these conditions be implicated in a discourse’s temporality? The answer proffered in this essay is that possibilities for invention and agency exist in proportion to the complexity of a discourse’s temporal networks. Rather than suggest that one temporal dimension is inherently more conducive to judgment than another, I submit that rhetoric can better facilitate judgment by providing auditors with multiple interrelated but individually untotalizable temporal perspectives.

Kenneth Burke provides a model for this argument in “Four Master Tropes.” There he contends that to exploit fully the possibilities inherent in metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony is to collapse the distinctions ostensibly separating their respective functions: perspective, reduction, rep-
presentation, and dialectic. Thus, to engage in irony—which is for him the culmination of the tropological sequence—is to enact a dialectic by which one term provides a perspective on another and simultaneously functions as a representation of a larger totality, a representation that is by necessity reductive. From Burke’s perspective irony is figuration par excellence because it does not succumb to “the simplification of literalness” that fixes the operation of terms; rather, it allows the principal terms in a discourse to operate in different roles simultaneously.

Just as irony provides for a more complex, dynamic, and productive engagement with the characters in a drama, so too a rhetorical discourse can better facilitate judgment by providing a multiplicity of symbolic resources by which to mediate among competing temporalities. For example, when the U.S. Supreme Court locates a particular case within the horizon of an established precedent, they in effect relate the temporality of the case with that of the legal tradition synecdochically, as part to whole. Depending on how the Court articulates their relationship the former may lose its distinctiveness and be subsumed under the logic of the precedent, in which case the temporality of law colonizes that of the case; or the appearance of the case may demand a reformulation of the precedent, in which case each temporality provides a perspective on the other. As Burke put it, synecdoche ideally “stresses a relationship or connectedness between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction.” This is quite different from metonymic reduction, which “follows along this road in only one direction.” In these terms, a temporal network that operates synecdochically is more complex than one that operates metonymically—offering more possibilities for invention and agency, and thereby better facilitating judgment.

While these observations are insufficient to sustain a comprehensive theory of rhetorical judgment, they provide a useful perspective from which to consider the functions of time in Obama’s Tucson Memorial Address. It should be clear from my earlier synopsis of the speech that its temporalities do not relate to each other symmetrically. Mythic democratic time and generic domestic time operate, in different parts of the speech, as perspectives through which all other elements may be summarized. The era of partisan polarization and the occasion of the speech, on the other hand, operate as passive temporalities. They are modified in accordance with their felicity to mythic and generic time, but they do not function as modifiers
themselves. The two most prominent nodes in the speech’s temporal network are those that connect mythic democratic time with the era of partisan polarization and the occasion of the speech with generic domestic time. In each case the node functions metonymically rather than synecdochically, limiting the auditor’s resources for invention and agency.

The relationship between the era of partisan polarization and the mythic democratic journey is one of simple opposition. The politics of blame cannot be reconciled with the logic of the progressive democratic journey because the latter assumes a course by which ideological differences are ultimately transcended. At the same time, the era of partisanship does not compete with mythic democratic time because its aims and effects exhaust themselves in the moment. Instead of an alternative course, partisanship offers a lack of direction.

After the era of partisan polarization has been subtracted, what remains of politics proper are appearances prefigured to confirm the democratic myth. Political activities occurring in the historical present have value in the speech only insofar as they can be reduced to exemplars of a broader democratic tradition. In the Tucson Address mythic democratic time offers a transcendent perspective by which to understand and appreciate political conflicts that would otherwise be experienced in a temporality that is present, immediate, and inescapably self-interested. The speech does not, however, allow the temporality of politics to in any way modify, amplify, or concretize the democratic myth. In other words, while Obama’s auditors are given to understand differently the experience of everyday political conflicts—insofar as those conflicts are mythologized—their conception of democracy is not refined in any meaningful sense.

Because the relationship between mythic democratic time and the temporalities of political conflict is asymmetrical, it is more consistent with the metonymic logic of reduction than the synecdochical logic of representation. The “corporeal reference” of democracy ultimately vanishes, and only the mythological extension survives. This logic has consequences for the public imagined in Obama’s address. Just as political activities derive their value from the perspective of democratic providence, so too members of the democratic public identify with each other not as members of a community of practice but in accordance with their shared role in the democratic mythos.
Proclamations of national unity recur throughout the speech. The president reminds his audience that “we are all Americans” and “that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.” He also calls on us to “sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together.” This last comment speaks directly to the practical consubstantiality of citizens in a democratic public. Nevertheless, just as Obama acknowledges the need to make sense of tragedy as a generic principle rather than actually making sense of the events of January 8, 2011, here he acknowledges the general interdependency of citizens in a democratic public as an alternative to actually characterizing the kind of relationships implicated in democratic practice. Although the president calls for “empathy,” the mode of identification articulated in the Tucson Address does not rise to the level of genuine empathy, which requires a willingness to imagine unity while honestly confronting difference. As characterized by David Frank and Mark McPhail, empathy requires a tropological plasticity analogous to that of irony. It “refus[es] to obliterate differences” and yet imagines their ultimate resolution in a higher unity. While it would be unfair to suggest that the Tucson Address functions to “obliterate difference”—and it certainly acknowledges difference in principle—it does obliterate the temporality in which those differences are incarnated, allowing citizens to identify with one another only to the extent that they project themselves into mythic democratic time.

The other prominent node in the speech’s temporal network is that which connects the occasion of the speech with generic domestic time. Obama asks the nation to relate to the shooting in Tucson just as it would any other tragedy, thereby transforming the “when” of the speech into a “whenever.” Still, the very act of assuming a metareflective stance on the psychological constituents of personal loss ensures that the audience does not experience the event as it would any other memorial service. Memorials are an occasion for reflection, after all; not an occasion for reflecting on reflection. By reducing the “Together We Thrive” event to an archetype, the president loses the opportunity to make sense of the situation as a situation, in its own temporality. Moreover, because he provides the audience with a temporal perspective that is summational and totalizing—there is no reference to any elements of the occasion that might not be explainable under the generic categorization—he cannot use the occasion as a resource for problematizing the audience’s relationship to political trauma.
Obama identifies the public sustained by this temporality: it is “an American family,” he explains, “300 million strong.” Family provides an apt metaphor for a public whose members identify along the lines of shared trauma and typical psychological responses. Indeed, the family is so deeply ingrained in the texture of the speech that it is difficult to distinguish literal and figurative usages. The president begins by comparing public and domestic realms—“after all, that’s what most of us do when we lose somebody in our family”—and ends up saying that the nation must enact “a more civil and honest public discourse” because it “would make [the victims of the tragedy] proud.” To suggest that citizens should act out of a felt obligation to appease the sentiments of others assumes a particular kind of relationship between them, a relationship that is consistent with the experience of (certain types of) family but that translates poorly, if at all, into temporalities where exigent circumstances demand coordinated collective action among strangers. Again, the possibilities for invention improve if the public can imagine its internal dynamics via different registers. A public that is comprehensible only via a temporality that assumes emotional intimacy is ill suited to respond to situations where citizens are traumatized by fragmentation.

In the Tucson Memorial Address Obama constructs a temporal network in which modes of experience that are characterized by immediacy, contingency, and conflict are replaced by those characterized by distance, universality, and unity. The unspecifiable and irreducible materials through which rhetorical invention is accomplished—the appearances that abound in moments of uncertainty and trauma—here are prefigured so as to be fixed and typical. Moreover, the linkages that sustain the public exist only insofar as its members share psychological experiences and are able to project themselves into a universal democratic tradition. If Farrell is correct to assert that rhetorical judgment depends on resources for invention and the attribution of collective agency, the temporal networks in the president’s address serve as a significant impediment to the goal of facilitating judgment.

**CONCLUSION**

President Obama began his speech by configuring Representative Giffords’s “Congress on Your Corner” event as a metonym embodying the principle of democratic self-governance. As a ubiquitous and yet “quintessential” dem-
ocratic practice, the meet and greet served as a link between the temporality of politics and that of mythic democracy. The link was fragile, however, because political conflicts in the present were prefigured so as to confirm, by affirmation or exception, the transcendent, progressive, and irreversible democratic journey. Ultimately, mythic democratic time became summational and totalizing, and the “corporeal reference” of democracy faded.

In his peroration the president again provides a concrete metonym for democracy. But this metonym, nine-year-old victim Christina Taylor Green, functions quite differently than did Giffords. Whereas Giffords’s “Congress on Your Corner” event exemplified a model democratic practice, Green is characterized as someone who never had the opportunity to participate in politics but whose imagination nevertheless embodies the aspirational character of democracy. Indeed, it is because Green never experienced democracy as a practice that Obama commends her expectations.

Imagine for a moment, here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that some day she, too, might play a part in shaping her nation’s future. . . . She was off to meet her congresswoman, someone she was sure was good and important and might be a role model. She saw all this through the eyes of a child, undimmed by the cynicism or vitriol that we adults all too often just take for granted. I want to live up to her expectations. I want our democracy to be as good as Christina imagined it.

According to the president, it is because Green’s expectations were never integrated into the temporality of democratic practice (she was “just” becoming, beginning, starting) that they can inspire citizens to transcend the limitations of that practice. As a deceased child, she is the perfect symbol of timelessness, occupying a space that is simultaneously pre- and posttemporal. Rather than mediating between competing temporalities, then, she provides a temporally pure and autonomous metonym for mythic democracy.

This is what Nathan Crick referred to when he wrote that Obama’s peroration offers “an imaginative projection into the future, a future in which our actions have matched our values, and in which we have transcended the finitude of our biological selves to commune with others in a
shared space that links us to the memory and the expectations of a young
girl.”36 Green’s imagination functions not as a standard for political judg-
ment but as a screen upon which to project the audience’s faith in the very
idea of progress embodied in mythic democratic time. It remains, however,
to specify the precise manner by which her imagination is linked with “the
future.” It is noteworthy that the president visualizes Green in heaven and
twice distinguishes her existence from that experienced by the living who
must remain “here on this Earth.” Her expectations do not symbolize a
future point in chronological history, it would seem, nor even the end of
history, insofar as it could be experienced by mortals. If she offers a “pro-
jection into the future,” it is a sacred and not secular future, providing
inspiration but not guidance.

While Crick argues that Obama’s peroration “set[s] in motion a narrative
that we are obliged to complete,” I remain skeptical that it provides re-
sources for invention and collective agency.37 If rhetorical judgment de-
PENDs on the mediation of temporality, few tropes could impede judgment
more than one which defines democratic providence from the perspective
of a child spirit isolated from democratic practice. It is not merely that the
future Obama projects is imaginary—for human beings are capable of
imagining many futures that are within our sphere of agency—but that it is
defıned from the perspective of a temporality that is inaccessible to us. To
complete Obama’s narrative, the audience would have to be able to imagine
a path traversing multiple temporalities and ultimately linking the moment
of the address to the mythic democratic future through the agency of
rhetorical judgment. As stunningly beautiful as is the image of a child
jumping in rain puddles in heaven—the most concrete and vivid image
Obama provides of Green—it does not offer a temporal link between the
tragedy of January 8, 2011 and the “more perfect union” of our imaginary
future.

The public constituted in the president’s peroration is one that shares
neither specifiable objectives nor modes of practice but an aspiration to
transcend the limitations of human practices. When Obama says, “I want to
live up to her expectations,” his pitch rises and his tone softens, and he
gestures as though he were clutching his heart. It is almost impossible not to
hear a subtle lament behind his voice, as if he were saying, “I wish I could live
up to her expectations.” And when he says that “all of us . . . should do
everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children’s
expectations,” while his voice has regained its strength, there is no longer any sense of what kind of actions might live up to those expectations, what kind of practices might organize those actions, or what kind of temporality might sustain those practices. The audience knows nothing of the president’s idealized future except that it is “as good as Christina imagined it,” and that it is as far from our present as heaven is from Earth.

Garry Wills was right when he said that at Tucson President Obama “forged a moral position that rose above the occasion” of his speech. Indeed, he forged the occasion itself—an occasion that called for his audience to rise above deliberative politics and aspire to something greater. As this analysis has shown, however, spatial metaphors are inadequate to account for the rhetorical consequences of the Tucson Address. Obama not only “rose above” partisan politics; he also paused and asked his audience to pause with him. In this pause he crafted a sacred and mythic temporality for democracy, one defined by values rather than choices, one judged by the dead and not the living, one that unified in spirit if not in action. In this moment lay a substantial opportunity for the president to refigure the relationship between the U.S. civil religion and its quotidian democratic practices. Instead of crafting a bridge linking mythic democratic time with the temporalities of politics, Obama asked his audience to adopt the faith of a subject who embodied the former precisely because she had done so and would never know the latter. The Tucson Address provided the nation with a powerful reminder that, outside the temporality of politics, “the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.” Still, if the forces that divide and unite are not made to share a common temporality, each will tyrannize within its own domain, and the myth of democracy will function as but a poor and intermittent guide for those of us who must remain here on Earth.

NOTES


12. Wills, “Obama’s Finest Hour.”
All subsequent quotations of Obama’s Tucson address are from this source. For a video of the speech see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztbJmXQDIGA (accessed April 11, 2013).


35. It is not uncommon for ceremonial speeches to reflect on the constituents of their genre, of course. Pericles’s Funeral Oration began with just such a metareflection. It is the extent to which Obama focuses on the meta level that distinguishes this address.