Introduction:
Facing Malala Yousafzai, Facing Ourselves

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On October 9, 2012, fifteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai, an advocate for the educational rights of girls, was shot by a masked Taliban gunman while she was riding home from school on a bus in Mingora, Pakistan, a region in the Swat Valley from which the Pakistani army had claimed to have eliminated the Taliban. A bullet grazed Malala’s skull and lodged in her neck. Two other girls, Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan, also were injured during the shooting. All three survived, though Malala remained in critical condition for some time. Ehsanullah Ehsan, the chief spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the shooting and characterized Malala Yousafzai as “the symbol of the infidels and obscenity” (Da Silva 1). Declan Walsh, The New York Times reporter, summarized the sentiments of the Western rationale world: “that Ms. Yousafzai’s voice could be deemed a threat to the Taliban—that they could see a schoolgirl’s death as desirable and justifiable—was seen as evidence of both the militants’ brutality and her courage” (“Taliban Guns Down” 1). Speaking to a group of Girl Scouts U.S.A., Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Malala as “very brave in standing up for the rights of girl,” and characterized the Taliban as “threatened by that kind of empowerment” (“Malala: Reward Offered”). Coincidently, the attack occurred the same week as the first International Day of the Girl Child.

Malala’s advocacy for children’s right to education has made her an appealing subject within the political framework of liberal internationalism. Malala’s assertion of a liberal political subjectivity, which Secretary Clinton recognized and U.S. audiences are predisposed to affirm, carried her safely into the folds of liberalism as an individual subject contesting

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subjection. Within the liberal internationalist imaginary, Malala shoulders the representational burden of liberal humanism and its configuration of empowerment as visibility, and U.S. citizens, as part of an imagined public, are expected to accept the right to look and to confer recognition on her as a “foreign” child with rights. Malala is not simply a passive subject onto whom liberal recognition is conferred, however; Malala herself is invested in and stakes claim to the liberal public imaginary and its distribution of visual capital. Indeed, it is precisely Malala’s claim to empowerment rights that enabled elite international media to project onto her the moral conscience of the globalized world.

Figure 1. During a candlelight vigil in Karachi, Pakistani children pray for the recovery of Malala Yousafzai. Shakil Adil/AP

I begin this introduction to our special cluster of essays on rhetorics regulating childhood and children’s rights with competing assessments of Malala Yousafzai as a symbol of liberal internationalism because these assessments provide concrete rhetorical occasions to engage the normative frameworks that delimit the recognition (or lack of recognition) of
children as political agents. These occasions prompt us, as scholars of rhetoric, to think about the protocols of intelligibility that structure the terms of public engagement with her story and to assess liberalism’s promise of global order. The liberal international imaginary eagerly adopts certain narratives and affects, among them are the individual defender of children’s rights and the exceptional child with ordinary needs narrative. What can a rhetorical perspective bring to our understanding of youth activism and the formation of twenty-first century transnational media publics? What forms of public subjectivity does liberal internationalism open up to children navigating the geopolitical fields of resurgent nationalisms, religious fundamentalisms, and the perpetual international war on terror? Contributors to this special cluster of articles take on questions about children’s political and rhetorical agency, but they do not stop at the formulation of representational challenges. Instead, they push us to think about our ethical obligations in reshaping public discourse on childhood and generating deliberative publics that welcome children as political, cultural, and moral actors.

International coverage of the assassination attempt against Malala Yousafzai spread rapidly, as did proposals to provide medical assistance and resources. Initially, Pakistani and American officials talked about the possibility of relocating Malala to an American military hospital in Germany. Former U.S. Congresswoman Gabby Giffords and her husband, Mark Kelly, offered to bring Malala to the United States for treatment, and an unnamed celebrity offered to cover the fuel bill. In the end, Pakistani and British officials came to an agreement. After emergency treatment in a Pakistani hospital and six days after the shooting, Malala was relocated to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England, known for its critical care unit for patients with gunshot wounds and major head injuries. Three months later, Malala was discharged and rejoined her family, who now reside in the West Midlands, her father having accepted a three-year position at the Pakistani Consulate.

Pakistani news coverage was likewise intense, as leaders across the nation united to condemn the attack. Thousands of children and civilians
gathered to pray for her recovery (see Figures 1 and 2). Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf characterized Malala as “the true face of Pakistan” and the Taliban’s targeting of Malala as an indication of its fear of “the power of her vision” (Walsh, “Taliban Reiterate” A5). Even Jamaat ud Dawa, the charity wing of a militant Islamist group, characterized the attack as a “Shameful, despicable, barbaric attempt” (“Malala Yousafzai’s Courage”). Soon after the assault, a Taliban spokesperson confirmed that Malala had been pursued because she had “become a symbol of Western culture (“Malala Yousafzai’s Courage”) and that her advocacy for educational rights for girls was an “obscenity” (Walsh, “Taliban Reiterate”). If she survived, he vowed, Taliban militants would try to kill her again. “Let this be a lesson,” he said. But the Taliban’s assassination attempt did not silence Malala. Instead, the brutal assault turned Malala into a martyr for political moderation. As one reporter put it, Malala, a “potent symbol of resistance to the militants’ extremist ideology,” represents hope for Pakistani moderates (Walsh, “Girl Shot”). In a video statement in February 2013, Malala’s father, Ziauddin, describes his daughter as having drawn a line between “barbarity and human civilization” (Huffington Post). In becoming a symbol for Pakistani moderates, Malala has also become a symbol for the West—a symbol for the rationality of rights and irrationality of extremism.

Malala’s story not only functions as evidence of the brutality of the Taliban and its oppression of women and girls but compels rationalizations for the perpetual international war on terror, which includes NATO-led drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The New York Times declared that Malala “has shown more courage in facing down the Taliban than Pakistan’s government and its military leaders” (“Malala Yousafzai’s Courage” 1). The editorial appealed directly to the Pakistani Prime Minister and government officials: “What will he and other leaders do to bring Malala’s attackers to justice and stop their threat to ordinary citizens and the state?” (2). Not surprisingly, conspiracy theorists claim that the U.S. government orchestrated the assault against Malala and then blamed the Taliban in order to bolster the continuance of drone strikes on Afghanistan and Pakistan. But one doesn’t need to self-identify as a conspiracy theorist to recognize the
high-stakes and political investments in controlling accounts of violence against children.

A comparative analysis of elite international media coverage of the assassination attempt against Malala Yousafzai and the Afghan and Pakistan civilian casualties caused by NATO-led drone attacks reveal the disproportionate attention to international stories that implicate the U.S. as a violent actor. In the Dissident Voice, Edward S. Herman reported that fourteen feature stories on Malala appeared in The New York Times between October 10 and October 28, 2012, and only one story about the three children who died as a result of an Afghan Strike by the NATO-led Coalition appeared during that same period, and it was located in the paper’s mid-section. A study from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism at the City University of London reports that U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan have killed between 411 and 884 civilians and between 168 and 197 children (“Covert”). In contrast to the unnamed children in Afghanistan and Pakistan killed from drone strikes, Malala Yousafzai is not a nameless casualty of war. She is not stripped of historical, cultural, or biographical specificity (Malkki 64–65). She is not stripped of her personhood. There is a clear distinction between Malala and the dead drone children: Malala has positioned herself as a political actor. Yet international culpability in the escalation of violence in Pakistan is not part of Malala’s messaging. Thus, Malala’s difference rests in her actions not in media representations of her, which direct attention away from volatile international relations between Pakistan and the United States, presently and historically.

Malala Yousafzai does not fall into the commonplace configurations of children who appear as headliners in international affairs; children portrayed as innocent (unworldly) victims, representations that reconfirm Western myths of childhood innocence and development. As a reporter for The New York Times declared, “Malala was no ordinary target” (“Malala Yousafzai’s Courage”). Malala is well-known in the region for speaking out for the educational rights of children; she had given interviews for national radio, television, and international papers, and just months before the shooting she led a UNICEF sponsored delegation of children’s rights activists to Peshawar to meet with local politicians (“Taliban Guns” 2). Her entrée into international media came
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Malala is not president, prime minister, general, corporate chief executive, nor an entertainment celebrity—but this lovely young girl arguably has influenced and inspired more people around the world than any other luminary this year. —Ghosh

Although reporters around the world characterize Malala Yousafzai as an exceptional child, they also constrict her exceptionality by filtering her actions through normative and convergent developmental discourses on childhood and democratic maturation (Bystrom and Werth). Documentary filmmaker Samar Minalla writes, “She knew her voice was important, so she spoke up for the rights of children. Even adults didn’t have a vision like hers.” (Walsh, “Taliban Guns”). Not only is Malala’s characterized as mature beyond her years, she is also seen as an exceptional role model for girls in the West. Palash R. Ghosh, a writer for the International Business Times, claims that the “most compelling and important person [of the year] was a beautiful, little, dark-haired, dark-eyed Pashtun girl from remote, rural Pakistan who simply wanted to go to school” (1). Ghosh ties Malala’s exceptionality to perceptions of her as an “exotic” beautiful other and balances her exoticism with the familiar and seemingly simple desire to attend school. This balance between the exotic and familiar alleviates any potential discomfort on the part of Western readers. Ghosh quotes extensively from the Irish novelist Sinead Moriarty, who compares Malala’s “uns selfish lifestyle with the behavior of spoiled, lazy, uncaring youths in the West” (3). Moriarty writes, “Perhaps we need
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...to take down the posters of Cheryl Cole and Rihanna from our teenagers’ bedrooms and replace them with posters of Malala Yousafzai. Where are the girls who want to change the world, not the size of their breasts? Where are the teenagers who want to grow up and rule the world, not the tabloids?” (qtd. in Ghosh 3). Ghosh concurs with Moriarty: Malala is “no shallow, empty-headed, media-created idol—she is a flesh and blood young woman who has already challenged the fearsome Taliban militants who still threaten her life” (1).

Orientalist portraits of Malala as the distant and exotic other are drawn in relation to another Pashtun girl—the Afghan Girl, whose nameless face appeared on the 1985 cover of National Geographic Magazine—a face that came to stand in for the plight of Afghan refugees. As I discuss elsewhere (2011), the mass circulation of the photographic image of the anonymous Afghan Girl gendered the representational politics of pity, and it is precisely the feminization of suffering and hope that the U.S.-Pakistani writer Saleem Ali invoked in his National Geographic blog in which he allied Sharbat Gula and Malala Yousafzai as “Pashtun icons of hope” (1). Women and girls like Gula and Yousafzai are “testament to the feminine spirit that we often find as the most promising beacon at any frontier of human despair.” Gula and Yousafzai are not only geographically proximate (Sharbat Gula lived in an Afghan refugee camp in Northwestern Pakistan, just 100 miles from Malala Yousafzai’s home town), but their circumstances, he argues, are politically proximate in that the violence that permeates both areas can be traced to the Cold War “rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, [which] ignite[ed] the ‘Afpak’ Frontier with militarized religious fanaticism for decades to come.”

Ali also draws attention to class distinctions between the girls’ lives and circumstances. He writes, “We will need to remember not only the Malala’s of the urban educated class of Pashtuns but also the Sharbat Gula’s of remote and uneducated parts of the hinterland” (1). Like Sharbat Gula, Malala Yousafzai was displaced from her home as a result of violent conflict. Her family separated in 2009, when the Pakistani army moved into the Swat Valley to fight the Taliban. After three months, she returned home. Although Ali’s goal may have been to widen the circle of recognition beyond exceptional figures, linking Malala to the intensely
commodified National Geographic image of the Afghan Girl sets up both girls as products of the Western imaginary, which opens up only certain public spaces for “foreign” children, especially Muslim children. Malala’s direct media intervention, however, distinguishes her from the Afghan Girl, who for eighteen years, until the National Geographic team and forensic investigators “found” her, had no access to international media outlets (see Hesford and Kozol 5).

Malala Yousafzai may unsettle common representations of children in international news as “innocent of politics and history” (Malkki 62). But it was not long before elite international media lessened Malala’s political agency by transforming her into a diminutive humanitarian subject, analogous to National Geographic Magazine’s 1985 configuration of the then anonymous Afghan Girl refugee. This diminutive portrayal further vilifies the Taliban and places Malala, as a child, at the pinnacle of the “hierarchy of innocence” (Moeller). Not surprisingly, media coverage of Malala’s recovery attached her exceptionality to her vulnerability. A video report on Malala’s condition on the Huffington Post website is accompanied by photographs of a poised Malala wrapped in a pink and red floral headscarf, sitting in hospital chair reading colorful get-well cards from children across the world, a teddy bear at her side. Similarly, in her research on the figure of the child in transnational media representations, Lisa Malkki notes that the agency of the child configured as an ambassador of peace is conscribed and that what often survives in media is a “diminutive conscience” (71).

Whose interests are served by the distillation of Malala Yousafzai’s political struggle for children’s rights through humanitarian frameworks? When asked about the decision to transport Malala to Britain, for example, an unnamed senior U.S. official claimed, “We never saw this in a political light. This was a humanitarian story, not a political one” (Walsh, “Pakistani Girl”). Not only does couching Malala’s story in humanitarian terms defuse the ongoing adversarial relationship between the U.S. and Pakistani government, but it translates a political struggle into the palliative rhetoric of humanitarianism with its presumption of political neutrality.

The U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights, Navi Pillay, released a statement on the occasion of the International Day for the
Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 25, 2012, called “The Malala Effect,” in which she admonished the international community to remember that “Malala’s case is not an exceptional one” (1). Pillay stated that had Malala “been less prominent, her attempted murder might have passed more or less unnoticed.” “Despite all the advances in women’s rights around the world,” she continued, “violence against girls and women remains one of the most common human rights abuses—and the assault on their fundamental right to education continues in many countries.” Although the international news media coverage of Malala may be exceptional, violence against women and girls is an everyday occurrence around the world. “In the first six months of 2012 alone,” Pillay reports, “the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan verified 34 attacks against schools, including cases of burnings of school buildings, targeted killings and intimidation of teachers and school officials, armed attacks against and occupation of schools, and closures of girls’ schools in particular. Incredibly, there have even been at least three separate attempts this year to poison girls attending schools in Afghanistan, with over 100 girls affected on each occasion.” She continues, “It is estimated that education—especially, although not exclusively, girls’ education—has been subjected to deliberate attacks in more than 30 countries because of religious, sectarian, political or other ideological reasons.”

“The Malala Effect” might be best described as a rhetorical process through which acts of political resistance are coded as exceptional only if they can be contained by familiar and therefore nonthreatening ideological frameworks. *Time Magazine’s* decision to feature Malala on the cover of its December 19, 2012 issue as the No. 2 person of the year (runner-up to President Obama) exemplifies one version of this codification process. The “I am Malala” petition, which was launched by Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister of England and current U.N. Envoy for Global Education, serves as yet another example of projected identification, or what might be understood as a form of misrecognition. Signatures to the “I am Malala” petition pledge to take up the fight for universal education and to get the sixty-one million primary school age children who are shut out of school into school by the end of 2015. Brown’s goal was to collect and deliver one million signatures to
the Pakistani President Asif Ali Zadari and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon by November 10, 2012, which the U.N. designated as Malala Day. Not only did Brown meet his goal, but on December 10, 2012, the Pakistani President announced the establishment of a $10 million educational fund in Malala’s name. Both the U.N. declaration of Malala Day and *Time Magazine*’s ranking of Malala as the No. 2 Person of the Year attribute to Malala a singularity that separates her political struggles from those of other girls in similar situations.

In her response essay to this cluster of articles, Arabella Lyon discusses other “I am” campaigns, and rightly notes that such identifications tend to “rebuff both appropriate reflection on the political situation, cultural and experiential difference, and the strategies which would lead to justice.” Similarly, as scholars we need to be mindful of using Malala as a singular authenticating presence for ourselves—a risk that I attempt to mitigate here in my focus on the circulation and reception of Malala’s image and story.

Contra the “I am Malala” petition, photographs of Pakistani girls holding closely-cropped photographs of Malala on placards and t-shirts at vigils, tributes, and protests divert attention away from the distant spectator’s gaze at Malala to another’s recognition of her significance. As in any representation, normative frames set the parameters of recognition. Among the most instructive of the photographs that circulated in elite international news media, for my purposes here, is of young girls at a protest in Lahore, just days after the Taliban’s brutal assault against Malala. The girls are affiliated with a school developed by the Pak-Swedish Teachers Association (PSTA) in Pakistan. According to its website, the association’s purpose is “fighting poverty and enforcing basic rights in accordance with the U.N. Charter. PSTA does so through supporting education programs, female co-operatives and health care programs. Our aim is to eradicate illiteracy from the society & make every child a useful educated citizen.” In addition to images of Malala pasted onto get well placards, there are also several posters that host the phrase “I am also Malala” (see Fig. 2). Such images do not point to Malala as the subject of recognition. Rather they prompt us to acknowledge the *process* of recognition itself. What if we consider this photograph and others like it, in Levinasian terms, as the “face of the other” that places certain
demands on us? What if we consider the mass circulation of photographs of Malala as a form of transnational public address?

Figure 2. Pakistani students carry placards with the photographs of child activist Malala Yousafzai during a protest against the assassination attempt by the Taliban on Malala in Lahore on October 16.

While the addition of the adverb “also” may seem insignificant, it is a sign of respect and recognition of difference. The declaration “I am also Malala” moves away from depictions of Malala as an exceptional, singular figure, toward an acknowledgement of the ordinary and widespread violence against women and girls. “I am also Malala” implies a shared vision but not a collapsed identification. As distant spectators, we are NOT also Malala. Nor do these images present a recognition occasion. Pakistani youth holding signs that read “I am also Malala” do not present American audiences with the authority of conferring or withholding recognition. That role has been taken from us—and importantly so. American audiences may not be accustomed to bearing witness to acts of solidarity among “foreign” children, although our government often elicits us to serve as witnesses to the alleged liberation of
“foreign” women and children in areas in which the U.S. has militarily intervened.

Consider the staging of the mass media spectacle of Afghan women in Kabul unveiling themselves immediately after the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan post-9/11, and the use of such images to bolster support for the U.S. invasion on the grounds that the invasion liberated Afghan women. Readers may also recall reports of foreign newspaper photographers having coerced women into removing their burqas for the camera as evidence of the liberation of the city. As rhetorical critics, we are right to be skeptical of exceptional images and stories. But analytical skepticism can also lead to the effacement of ethical responsibility. For example, some American scholars might assume that the images of Pakistani girls holding up signs written in English were orchestrated only for Western eyes. Such a view, however, overlooks the fact that although the national language of Pakistan is URDU, many Pakistani children, like Malala, learn to speak and write in English at school. Thus, to describe these children’s rhetorical acts as a capitulation to Western audiences is to fail to register the risks that these particular children face in politically aligning themselves with Malala and their efforts to claim a rhetorical space among local and global deliberative publics. On February 4, 2013, before undergoing an operation to reconstruct her skull, Malala released a video statement to the world: “Today you can see that I’m alive. I can speak. I can see you. . . . I want to serve the people. I want every girl, every child to be educated” (“Malala Speaks Out”). If Malala can reject the transnational projection of the identity of the suffering “foreign” child in need of rescue, then why can’t we? Let us “interrupt that narcissistic circuit” (Butler 138); let us resist facile incorporations and soft alliances. In declaring to the world that she “can speak” and “can see” us, Malala summons a face-to-face rhetorical address. Let’s not efface the ethical obligations that such an address places on us as academics working in the field of children’s human rights.

Academics often think of ethical obligation in terms of reflexive interrogations. As scholars, we do have an ethical obligation to be mindful of how we represent populations excluded from dominant international media publics. Clearly, we should be mindful and not use marginalized groups “to represent the point of ‘authenticity’ for our
critical discourse” (Chow 44). Of course, these are not new concerns. But the mass circulation and appropriation of Malala’s image and story bring these concerns back into critical view. If our questions and concerns are unlikely to be answered directly by youth activists, such as Malala Yousafzai, but by other scholars in our field, and if we perceive the faces of youth activists as addressing us and placing certain demands on us, then our ethical responsibility must not end with the critical interrogation of classification habits and representational patterns. Instead, we should work in reverse; we should look toward youth activism as a rhetorical modality that presses upon international and domestic publics the necessity of a deliberative response, a response that expands the parameters of action and adult capacities to work with children as political actors.

Contributors to this special cluster “Rhetorics Regulating Childhood and Children’s Human Rights” direct our attention precisely to these deliberative spaces and to the intersections of children’s rights with rhetorical concepts of the public sphere, public good, and rhetorical agency. Childhood and children’s rights are increasingly contested concepts. But little research in the humanities has focused on how child advocates discursively navigate these contestations. Contributors aim to provide a fuller sense of the important contribution of rhetorical studies to the international children’s human rights movement by bringing to the foreground the discourses that shape the experiences of children and families whose marginalized status and histories have kept them below the radar of humanities scholarship to date. Contributors approach the political effectiveness of rhetoric in terms of how, when, and why certain tropes, arguments, and narratives gain momentum at particular historical moments and define the parameters of childhood and the public’s engagement with children’s rights issues. But they also invite us to reconsider the developmental trajectory intrinsic to conceptions of children’s rights and longstanding justifications for the exclusion of children from the public sphere (Stephans).

The cluster begins with Kerry Bystrom and Brenda Werth’s essay “Stolen Children, Identity Rights, and Rhetoric (Argentina, 1983–2012),”
in which they connect rhetorics of nationalism within Argentina to the right to identity enshrined in the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child. Bystrom and Werth examine archival, media, and legal materials to explore the late 1970s Argentinean practice of kidnapping families and stealing children from their parents for the purpose of eradicating “Communist terrorists.” Their analysis astutely tracks how developmental rhetorics of childhood and democratic maturation converge in legal and cultural campaigns to find stolen children, and how the “right to identity” discourses shaping contemporary public debates about identity and national values can work in ways that constrain the agency of the adult “children” that they were designed to benefit.

We follow the international emphasis of the Introduction and first essay, with two essays on education and social reform in the United States. Katrina Powell focuses on the convergence of rhetorical discourses surrounding eugenics, social reform, and eminent domain. Providing rhetorical analyses of 1930s reports and surveys, asylum commitment documents, and oral histories, Powell links the ways that constructions of “feeblemindedness” led legislators and government officials to justify the forced displacement and subsequent sterilization of children. Examining rhetorics of poverty and progressivism, Powell explores how communities were convinced that compulsory sterilization was in the best interests of the poor and their children, and how the public discourse surrounding these issues were overridden by the “authority” of physicians, legislators, and social workers. Like the other authors in this special cluster, Powell addresses the long history of and implications of excluding children from the public sphere, interrogates more recent discourses of apology, and suggests the relative lack of rhetorical power such apologies can have.

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw turns our attention to U.S. public schools as regulatory sites in her focus on patterns of “upcriming” in American culture (6). Hinshaw examines the issues of reform, nation, and identity through the gendered, racial, and classed-based discourses of bullying and criminality, which, as she suggests, provide the rhetorical apparatus for identifying some youth as threatened and others as threatening. She is particularly interested in the discourses of female criminality that aim to regulate gender and sexual behavior. Specifically, Hinshaw examines
the effects of changing discourses of criminality on girls and girlhood by focusing on public rhetorics and policies related to the relabeling and increased prosecution of minor juvenile crimes and the development of terms like “relational aggression.” “Relation aggression” is a concept, she argues, that has led to exaggerated and threatening depictions of girls’ violence that result in disproportionate targeting and prosecution of minority girls.

Finally, Arabella Lyon’s response essay “Recognizing Children” examines the difficulties of recognizing children as agents and subjects of rights as demonstrated here and in the cluster of essays. While this dossier represents only a small contribution to the much needed analysis of the rhetorics regulating childhood and children’s rights, we hope that it sparks other such research in the fields of rhetoric, culture, and communication studies.

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Works Cited


