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WSQ: Child Editor's Note

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Editors' Note

On October 10, 2014, Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for their struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education” (NNC 2014). Sharing the award with Satyarthi, an Indian advocate for the end of child labor, Yousafzai became the first Pakistani to win the Peace Prize. At seventeen, she was also the youngest-ever recipient. Yousafzai had been a local and then national figure since she was twelve and began blogging under a pseudonym (for the BBC’s online news service in Urdu) about her experiences as a girl living under the oppressive rule of the Taliban in Swat, Pakistan. Though she won the 2011 International Children’s Peace Prize, Yousafzai’s full entrance onto the international stage came after an assassination attempt by the Taliban in October 2012. That shooting left her with a grave head wound but did not derail her political work. Known best as Malala—her 2013 memoir is titled *I Am Malala*—the young activist calls to mind the power of children to articulate a world-changing vision.

The exceptional child who carries an ostensibly adult message occupies an important place in the cultural imaginary. But narratives such as Malala’s also raise the thorny question, to adapt Tim O’Brien’s phrase, of how to tell a true *child’s* war story—or any true child’s story. What does it mean for children to be global peacemakers even as they remain uniquely vulnerable to violence, as the recent mass kidnapping of girls in Nigeria, the police shootings of black children in the United States, persistent bullying and bashing—much of it familial—that targets LGBTQ youth, and

the murder of 132 schoolchildren in Malala's Pakistan tragically attest? A recent report from UNICEF documents unprecedented numbers of children directly impacted by armed conflict in dozens of nations, as casualties of war, as refugees, and as child soldiers; in war-torn areas, hundreds of thousands of children suffer from homelessness, malnutrition, and preventable diseases (UNICEF 2014). Malala advocates eloquently for herself and for children, but does the very act of speaking out *as* a child change the truths spoken? Further, how has Malala's story been re-narrativized by and for adults to whom she appeals so compellingly for peace and justice? Even before the Nobel Peace Prize was bestowed, the blogosphere and the mainstream media roiled with speculation about the extent of Malala's agency—and her deployment as a symbol with a cacophony of meanings by adult advocates with far-ranging agendas.¹

If adults at times privilege the figure of the child messenger, they also reshape—and therefore often misrepresent or obscure—the child's message. The well-documented history of censorship of sexual subject matter from *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank preserves an innocence for the author that is, precisely, childlike: an imagined version of acceptable girlhood that corresponds to the “goodness” of her message. Likewise, the child preacher in the work of James Baldwin becomes a vessel in which adults deposit and then extract their own religious language and ideology in a process rendered invisible, and thus successful, by the association of the child preacher's youth with the transparency of Truth. Perhaps nowhere is the dissonance between children's language and adults' language theorized more pointedly than in psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi's 1932 paper “Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child,” which posits childhood trauma as the result of an adult sexual aggressor mistaking the child's “infantile tongue” that expresses tenderness for the “passion tongue” of adult eroticism. As these examples suggest, when children speak, the adult ear filters their voices in complicated and contradictory ways.

Child, the spring/summer 2015 issue of *WSQ*, is implicitly framed by the question of the legibility of children. In its various responses to this question, the issue advances the scholarly and artistic investment in the stories, messages, and meanings of children, even as it reflects on its own acts of critical re-narrativization. The meta-story here, as the essays chosen by issue editors Sarah Chinn and Anna Mae Duane demonstrate, is that the academy has taken a broadly interdisciplinary interest in the child.

Though the contributors are all adults writing about children, the contents speak in many registers and from diverse perspectives. *Child*, singular by name, in fact offers a kaleidoscopic view of children. By happy coincidence, and as evidence of the timeliness of our chosen theme, the *Child* issue of *WSQ* appears contemporaneously with *The Child Now*, a special issue of *GLQ* edited by Kathryn Bond Stockton, Rebekah Sheldon, and Julian Gill-Peterson. Though conceived and produced independently, it is the editors' hope that these special issues operate in dynamic relation to each other and to the field of Child Studies. To that end, we are happy to share news of "The Child," the upcoming Cultural Studies Conference at Indiana University to be held in the fall of 2015. The conference, hosted by the Cultural Studies Program at IU, is expected to bring together editors and contributors from both the *WSQ* and *GLQ* issues as well as scholars from the sponsoring institution for a two-day symposium. Look for details on the IU Cultural Studies Program website: <http://www.indiana.edu/~cstudies/>.

In the poetry and prose sections of this issue, edited with grace by Kathleen Ossip and Asali Solomon, respectively, our authors inhabit children's worlds both with immediacy and from a mediated distance, whether adult memory or parenthood. Several poems in this issue balance on the borderline of pre/childhood, as figured by (potentially) pregnant women (Andrea Baker's "Be a Cage That Holds," Amy Lemmon's "M23," Mary Jo Salter's "A Woman's Tale," Martha Silano's "At the zoo,"). Others variously explore what it means to nurture and raise children. Reading Katrina Roberts's "What Rough Beast," we wonder just how little children know of parents' sometimes painful efforts to nurture them, and the cost of that nurturance. "Proxy" upends this question of indebtedness as a girl becomes her mother's "small confidant, an eager untrained therapist" and repository for the mother's dark memories of the child's father. Set in Aba, Nigeria, Obi Nwakanma's story, "The Fishmonger's Boy," positions twelve-year-old Ariri between the destitute mother who sold him, the rich American woman who would be his new mother, and his own burgeoning sense of self-sufficiency and agency. We glimpse the possibility that children might become their own best caretakers.

Some poems here confront the physical, material, and social constraints of childhood and adolescence. Evoking race and class, Kathrine Varnes's "24 Divisadero" constructs the geography of childhood around a street whose name means "the thing that divides," while the naturalistic imagery

of Cassie Duggan's "Daughter of West Virginia" offers the child "a skeleton key and a spit-handshake to open the world." In Bonita Lee Penn's "1,2,3, jump over Watts Tower," a girl escapes high above her urban landscape through playful wish fulfillment, while in Michael Homolka's "County Fair" a contemplative child's vision telescopes outward from cotton candy whips to "cheap existence's deeper temples." In AprilJo Murphy's prose piece, "Off We Go Like a Herd of Turtles," the cartoonish and fantastical Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles nevertheless prove more resonant figures for gendered adolescent selfhood than the normative models of "real life" that stigmatize intersex and gender nonconforming individuals.

It has been our great pleasure to work with Sarah Chinn and Anna Mae Duane as guest editors on this issue. Sarah and Anna Mae brought to the issue not only impeccable editorial skills but also an expansive vision of the concept "child." Editorial assistant Elena Cohen shepherded this issue toward completion with her usual acuity and efficiency; her work, and that of editorial assistant Lindsey Eckenroth, are indispensable to the journal. The *WSQ* Editorial Board is a tireless resource; special thanks to Dagmar Herzog, who worked with us to invite Meike Sophia Baader to contribute to this issue's Alerts and Provocations section, and thanks to the CUNY Graduate Center's interim associate provost David Olan and associate director of Graduate Assistant Programs Anne Ellis, who supported the translation of Baader's essay. The Feminist Press, *WSQ*'s publisher, provides us with a collegial home; we are particularly indebted to assistant editor Julia Berner-Tobin and art director Drew Stevens for their work on this and other issues.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Shamsie 2013 and Shadid 2014.

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