

Who Gets to Be a Child? Ms. Rachel, nationalism, and the global politics of childhood

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Introduction

In an Instagram video viewed more than a million times, children's YouTube sensation Rachel Accurso, known as 'Ms. Rachel', sings in a cheerful, melodic voice, 'Here, little bunny, hop, hop, hop!' A beaming three-year-old child named Rahaf with curly brown hair hops up next to her and cuddles into her arm. Nothing seems particularly novel about this scene besides its overwhelming cuteness and the joy that radiates off the child's face. Upon a closer look, however, the little bunny named Rahaf is hopping lopsidedly on two prosthetic legs. In the caption, Ms. Rachel explains that Rahaf lost both of her legs due to an Israeli airstrike in Gaza and was evacuated to the U.S. by the Palestine Children's Relief Fund.¹

Before her outspoken advocacy for Palestinian children, Ms. Rachel was famous to many parents with young children and relatively unknown in the sphere of global politics. She has over nineteen million subscribers on her YouTube channel, in which she posts educational music videos promoting children's literacy. Ms. Rachel's work, rooted in her background in early childhood education and her experience as a mother of a child with a speech delay, leads her to advocate for a seemingly uncontroversial world view: 'Every child of every religion from every place in the world is equal and deserves to be cherished'.² This statement was contested by the public only when she started posting about Palestinian children.

¹ R. Accurso (@Ms.rachelforlittles), 'I was so honored to spend time with Rahaf from Gaza.' <https://www.instagram.com/msrachelforlittles/p/DJjhJp0O6TU/>, accessed 22 May 2026.

² R. Accurso, 'Ms. Rachel on Advocating for Gaza's Children: 'I Wish Leaders Would Hear Their Voices.' <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/ms-rachel-on-advocating-for-gazas-children-i-wish-leaders-would-hear-their-voices>, accessed 22 May 2026; R. Accurso (@Ms.rachelforlittles), 'We, the Grown Ups of the World, Need to Come Together and Stop Failing Children the Children of the World.' <https://www.instagram.com/p/DUGPI0Njju8/>, accessed 22 May 2026; S. Barry, 'The Meaning of Ms. Rachel.' <https://www.glamour.com/story/ms-rachel-women-of-the-year-2025>, accessed 22 May 2026.

The video of Ms. Rachel and Rahaf, along with other posts advocating for children in Gaza, sparked an onslaught of backlash. The American pro-Israel organization ‘Stop Antisemitism’ called on the U.S. attorney general to investigate whether Ms. Rachel was acting as a foreign agent being paid ‘to disseminate Hamas-aligned propaganda to her millions of followers’.³ ‘Stop Antisemitism’ also nominated her for the category of ‘antisemite of the year’, despite her numerous but less viral videos targeted at Israeli and Jewish children in the wake of October 7th.⁴ Hateful comments and threatening letters flooded Ms. Rachel’s account, and multiple venues refused to host her meeting with Rahaf.⁵ Ms. Rachel previously used her platform to raise awareness for children around the globe, as can be seen in her work with organizations such as UNICEF, but her advocacy was uncontroversial until it became specific. The intensity of this public backlash raises a broader question: Why does the figure of the child, often framed as universal and apolitical, become so politically charged when discussing Palestinian children? I approach this question historically, arguing that the category of childhood itself is not universal, but is rather historically constructed through intertwining ideologies that frame children as future embodiments of national projects.

This work emerges from intersecting intellectual trajectories: a background in gender studies attentive to colonial power dynamics and a growing engagement with studies of nationalism in central and eastern Europe.⁶ The rise of nationalism in twentieth century central and eastern

³ J. Gedeon, ‘Pro-Israel Group Asks DoJ to Investigate Ms. Rachel over Posts on Gaza Children.’, accessed 19 April 2026.

⁴ L. Lenkinski, ‘This Is the ‘Crime’ That Got Ms. Rachel Nominated for ‘Antisemite of the Year.’ <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2025-12-08/ty-article-opinion/.premium/this-is-the-crime-that-got-ms-rachel-nominated-for-antisemite-of-the-year/0000019a-fd98-de90-adfa-ff981c090000>, accessed 22 May 2026.

⁵ R. Accurso (@Ms.rachelforlittles), ‘We also received physical threatening letters to us and our family members.’

https://www.instagram.com/p/DR2ZedvD1mD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, accessed 22 May 2026; R. Accurso, ‘Ms. Rachel Stands Up for the Littles of Gaza’. <https://jewishcurrents.org/ms-rachel-stands-up-for-the-littles-of-gaza>, accessed 22 May 2026.

⁶ Throughout this article I keep ‘central and eastern Europe’ in lower case letters to keep in mind the ambiguity of a region whose geographic boundaries have been contested throughout history, rather than emphasizing it as an established category through capital letters.

Europe and contemporary debates around Zionism are rarely connected in scholarship, even though Zionism emerged as a nationalist ideology within this regional context.⁷ Jewish critiques of Zionism increasingly look towards the past to examine alternative responses to antisemitism and fascism, parsing apart narratives that equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism.⁸ These histories reveal that Zionism was neither a unanimous Jewish desire nor an inherently Jewish ideology. Examining how nationalism was constructed throughout the region, particularly its investment in children, illuminates how contentious debates around Zionism and antisemitism are rooted in complex historical struggles.

Historian Tara Zahra writes extensively about the construction of childhood and nationalism both in the early twentieth century Bohemian lands, and across Europe in the aftermath of World War II. I begin the article by discussing academic debates surrounding nationalism alongside a close reading of Zahra, demonstrating how the construction of the category of childhood aligned with the rise of nationalism in twentieth century Europe, both in nationalist movements and post-war reconciliation efforts.⁹ Zahra demonstrates how supposedly neutral and internationalist organizations such as UNICEF were simultaneously invested in nationalist projects, allocating aid to displaced children based on nationality.¹⁰ I connect this historical context to the case study of Ms. Rachel through the lens of feminist scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's concept of 'unchildling', a theoretical framework that examines how Israeli legal structures push Palestinian children out of the protected category of childhood.¹¹ I do not draw direct comparisons between the experiences of Palestinian children and central and

⁷ I understand Zionism as nationalist and colonial ideology advocating for a Jewish nation-state, first conceptualized by Hungarian Jewish journalist and lawyer Theodor Herzl at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁸ For example, *Here where we live is our country: the story of the Jewish bund*, published by Molly Crabapple in 2026, tells the story of the Jewish Bund, a movement of socialist Jews active in 20th century central and eastern Europe that rejected Zionism and embraced home in the diaspora.

⁹ T. Zahra, *Kidnapped souls: national indifference and the battle for children in the bohemian lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY 2008); T. Zahra, *The lost children: reconstructing Europe's families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA 2015).

¹⁰ Zahra, *The lost children*, 19.

¹¹ N. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarverated childhood and the politics of unchildling* (Cambridge, 2019).

eastern European and Jewish children, but rather examine how the category of childhood is shaped within distinct political and historical formations.

While Zahra engages with historical theories of nationalism and archival sources, Shalhoub-Kevorkian analyses interviews with contemporary Palestinian children and older survivors of the Nakba through a feminist and decolonial lens.¹² This article brings together these frameworks to argue that twentieth century central and eastern European history offers important insights for understanding how and why some children come to be recognized as more deserving of a childhood than others. The backlash against Ms. Rachel functions throughout the article as a case study, illuminating how historically contingent definitions of childhood continue to shape and limit who is allowed to occupy this protected category today.

Nationalism and the Construction of Childhood

Through her social media presence and in countless interviews, Ms. Rachel repeatedly emphasizes the universality of children. She urges that all children need care, protection, and a space to play, regardless of their nationality. ‘Can I just tell you, Jo, every three-year-old is the same,’ she says in an interview with CBS news, where she discusses her video with Rahaf and the backlash it received.¹³ This seemingly self-evident claim obscures a more complex history: despite universal qualities of early childhood development that transcend nations, childhood has never been universally defined. Rather, it was shaped and contested through nationalist projects that sought to determine which children belonged, and on what terms.

To understand how childhood became a site of political struggle, it is necessary to situate the discussion within the rise of nationalism in Europe. The very language of the ‘nation’ reflects an inherent connection between childhood and nationalism, with the word ‘nation’ stemming from the Latin root *natio*- to give birth. The meaning of the ‘nation’, just as that of childhood, is historically unstable. During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the ‘nation’ typically referred to the noble classes and rulers of a particular territory rather than to the common people residing in a territory.

¹² *Nakba*, Arabic for catastrophe, refers to the mass displacement of Palestinians from their homes by Israeli military forces, beginning in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

¹³ R. Accurso, ‘Ms. Rachel on Raising Her Voice for Kids Everywhere.’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yEBSIUwC5E>, accessed 22 May 2026.

There was little sense that peasants and nobles formed a unified community.¹⁴ The French Revolution marked a profound shift in this understanding by introducing the idea that ‘the people’ possessed the right to govern. In this new framework, ‘the people’ assumed the role that had previously been occupied by the ruler, becoming the ‘personality’ of the state.¹⁵ This shift made it possible to conceive of the nation as something that could be reproduced across generations, placing new emphasis on the upbringing of children.

Nationalism, as historian John Connelly argues, was the defining ideology of twentieth century central and eastern Europe, transforming diverse imperial populations into nation-states that equated ethnicity with political sovereignty.¹⁶ These new national communities depended on the formation of future citizens. Children, therefore, became central to nationalist projects, as the site through which national identity could be reproduced over time. Historian Benedict Anderson describes nations as ‘imagined communities’, collective identities created through commonalities and shared narratives.¹⁷ While nations may be imagined by adults, they must be embodied by children to have any chance of long-term survival.

Zahra demonstrates an important example of nationalist focus on children in the Bohemian lands in the twentieth century, which was governed by the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1918. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was common for families in the region to speak multiple languages, and few people conceptualized their identity in purely Czech or German terms. Rather, bilingualism was promoted, as seen in the common practice of child-exchanges, in which German children would spend a summer with a Czech family, and vice versa.¹⁸ This embrace of the ‘other’ language came under attack as German and Czech nationalists mobilized around language as an indicator of national identity. Nationalist activists fought fiercely over the education of children, precisely because children represented the future demographic and cultural makeup of the nation. The fight to monopolize the

¹⁴ J. Connelly, *From people into nations: a history of eastern Europe* (Princeton, NJ 2020), 54.

¹⁵ H. Case, *Between states: the Transylvanian question and the European idea during World War II* (Stanford, CA 2009) 14.

¹⁶ Connelly, *From people into nations*.

¹⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London 1983).

¹⁸ Zahra, *Kidnapped souls*, 2.

linguistic capacities of children was not just about language; it was a fight for their souls. Nationalist activists sought to use language education to instil a sense of national identity that would inspire a new generation of national citizens. Despite nationalists' best efforts, however, national indifference remained, with parents strategically invoking Czech or German identity to guarantee the best possible education for their children. Children were not inherently recognized as uniformly deserving of education but were instead selectively invested with these privileges as childhood became a potent site for advancing competing nationalist projects.

In *The lost children*, Zahra extends her analysis of nationalism to the post-1945 world, describing how the idea of a childhood worthy of protection came to fruition in the aftermath of World War II. She provides compelling examples of how the category of childhood was complicated by the war through efforts by relief organizations attempting to rehabilitate displaced children. Just as nationally indifferent parents in Zahra's first book strategically employed Czech or German identity, children and young adults displaced in World War II lowered their age to receive help from aid agencies designed for children. Zahra describes an Austrian psychologist's frustrated note that 'men with beards say they are fourteen or fifteen, a girl that looked like a twenty-five-year-old said she was sixteen.'¹⁹ This anecdote demonstrates the difficulty of delineating clear boundaries for childhood when so many people needed assistance.

Before World War II, the separation of children from families was not always understood as traumatic in Europe, where familial separation in the form of wet-nursing or child labour was common.²⁰ In the postwar period, however, childhood became a protected category, 'reserved for learning, play, and freedom from adult responsibilities'.²¹ The promotion of nuclear families represented a 'return to normalcy', with the 'family and the nation' seen as 'the very basis for European reconstruction'.²² This transformation was deeply entangled with nationalist projects, as postwar reconstruction combined the expansion of humanitarian institutions with the belief that lasting peace required nationally homogeneous states. Within this framework, children became valuable political subjects, 'prioritized in rescue and migration programs because they were seen as more easily assimilable into

¹⁹ Zahra, *The lost children*, 8.

²⁰ Ibidem, 13

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem, 18.

national communities than adults'.²³ Childhood as a category was therefore actively produced through the intersection of humanitarian governance and nationalist state-building. While increased protection and advocacy for familial integrity was certainly a positive development for many children, it prioritized a Western, individualized approach to child rearing, contrasting with more communal methods active throughout central and eastern Europe.²⁴

Shifting attitudes toward childhood were also codified in international frameworks, most notably in the evolving definitions produced in Geneva. The 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child reflects an interwar understanding of childhood defined by material deprivation and crisis: 'The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed'.²⁵ Here, childhood is framed through vulnerability and basic bodily need. By contrast, the 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child marks a significant shift toward a psychological and relational understanding. It emphasizes that a child 'needs love and understanding' and should grow up within a family environment, thus cementing childhood as a uniquely protected category.²⁶

Zahra's account of the post-1945 reconstruction highlights how Jewish children displaced by war became central to competing political projects. Across refugee camps, relief networks, and resettlement programs, debates unfolded over whether Jewish children should be integrated into existing European societies, adopted into Jewish families in the U.S, or redirected toward a distinct national future in Palestine. These postwar struggles cannot be understood without tracing the longer genealogy of nationalist thought that shaped them. At a time when maps were being redrawn and nation-states forged, what would happen to Europe's Jews who had been systematically othered and oppressed throughout the history of the region?

²³ Ibidem, 21. The prioritization of children is often repeated in contemporary migration politics, as in the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program in the U.S. in which children of undocumented immigrants receive some legal protection while their parents remain vulnerable to deportation.

²⁴ For example, Zahra quotes journalist Dorothy Macardle reporting, 'For little children, even a mediocre family home is better than the best of communal nurseries.' Ibidem, 98.

²⁵ Ibidem, 236.

²⁶ Ibidem.

It is within the broader context of rising nationalism in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe that Zionism emerged as one influential response to the question of Jewish political belonging. This question of what becomes of a population that is simultaneously inside and outside the nation informs Sarah A. Cramsey's account of Jewish belonging in interwar Poland and Czechoslovakia.²⁷ She traces how some Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers moved from imagining Jewish rootedness in central and eastern Europe toward increasingly supporting a homogeneous Jewish nation-state in Palestine. Cramsey shows that this shift cannot be reduced to a post-Holocaust rupture alone but must be understood within broader discussions of nationalism and belonging. Within this shifting landscape, Zionism developed as one among several competing responses to the increasing difficulty of secure Jewish life within Europe.

The founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, conceived of Zionism not only as a national project, but also as a colonial endeavour. Zionism's colonial origins can be traced through Herzl's 1902 correspondence with British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, a dominant figure in South African settler colonial politics. Herzl urged Rhodes to support the Zionist cause as 'something colonial', positing a connection between the settler colonialist project of South Africa and what was then the hypothetical colonization of a faraway land for the Jewish state. While Argentina and Turkey were scouted as potential places for the Zionist project, none had such a draw as *Eretz Israel*, due to its biblical importance in the Jewish religion and colonial geopolitical negotiations over the future of the region.²⁸ Herzl's writing emphasizes metaphors of radical transformation for this colonial project, including his statement: 'If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct'.²⁹ Herzl died in 1904, and he did not live to see how Zionism would be put into practice under dramatically different historical conditions. The establishment of a Jewish state was not the inevitable realization of Herzl's vision, but the outcome of overlapping and

²⁷ S. A. Cramsey, *Uprooting the diaspora: jewish belonging and the 'ethnic revolution' in Poland and Czechoslovakia, 1936–1946* (Bloomington, IN 2023).

²⁸ *Eretz Israel* means 'Land of Israel' in Hebrew. I italicize it here to emphasize its distinction from the contemporary nation-state of Israel. In Jewish tradition, *Eretz Israel* is the land associated with the biblical homeland of the Jewish people, with varying interpretations of its exact geographic boundaries existing across religious and historical sources.

²⁹ T. Herzl, *The Jewish state* (Dover Publications, 1988) 6.

often conflicting trajectories shaped by European nationalism, colonial governance, war, and displacement.

Children figured prominently in later Zionist nation-building imaginaries, as the leaders of this new state were tasked with educating a new population of Israeli citizens. The character of the 'sabra' emerged in Zionist culture as a new type of Israeli-born Jew characterized by strength and resourcefulness.³⁰ In addition to Zionist youth groups within Israel, the Zionist project mobilized Jewish youth across the world through youth movements, summer camps, and Hebrew language education. These organizations and programs held and continue to hold diverse iterations of Zionism, from more religious branches to secular socialist models. Scholars such as Zeev Sternhell, however, argue that even socialist Zionist movements reproduce narratives of Jewish superiority that justify the displacement of Palestinians.³¹

While the establishment of Israel was celebrated by many Jews as the realization of a long-sought national project, it was also met with ambivalence and opposition within other Jewish communities. Bundist movements, for example, continued to advocate for diasporic cultural autonomy rather than territorial nationalism, while some Orthodox groups rejected Zionism on theological grounds.³² For Palestinians, the events of 1948 constitute the Nakba, a catastrophe of mass expulsion, dispossession, and violent rupture of familial and communal life, within which countless children were killed, displaced, orphaned, and forced into new and uncertain forms of belonging. From Europe to Palestine, then, children occupied a central place in nationalist imagination. They represented the future of the nation and the promise of its continuity. At the same time, the very category of childhood remained unstable, allowing children to function as instruments of nationalist projects, protected only when they benefit the growth of the nation.

³⁰ Y. Zerubavel, 'The 'Mythological Sabra' and Jewish Past: Trauma, Memory, and Contested Identities,' *Israel Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002) 115–144.

³¹ Z. Sternhell, *The founding myths of Israel: nationalism, socialism, and the making of the Jewish state* (Princeton, NJ 1998).

³² While Bundist influence declined due to the vast numbers of members murdered in the Holocaust, surviving members began international coalitions that continued to oppose nationalism and Zionism.

Unchilding and the Uneven Distribution of Childhood

Building on the argument developed throughout this article, the category of ‘childhood’ emerges as a politically produced category essential to the reproduction of national identity. If, as Zahra demonstrates, childhood was imagined in the twentieth century through shifting ideas of family and national futures, then the question becomes not only how childhood is defined, but also who is permitted to inhabit it fully. I shift the focus to the present, discussing how these dynamics function in the case of Ms. Rachel, analysed through the lens of Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s concept of ‘unchilding’.

In a podcast interview, Ms. Rachel described a conversation that exemplified the exclusion of Palestinian children from the protected category of childhood:

‘I talked to...James Elder, who works with UNICEF, and he said: “I’ve never had to start at square one, where I explain that they’re human, and the kids are human, and that I’m sitting with a little boy who’s burned, and he doesn’t have painkillers, and his dad’s here with him crying, and they’re both humans. When I posted little kids watching Ms. Rachel in Gaza, I did get a few comments that were like: This made me realize that they’re like my kids. So, I think there are people who are like: These lives aren’t as valuable. And I did have a Palestinian mom say: Thank you for seeing our children as human.”’³³

What is striking in this account is the apparent difficulty of producing a basic recognition of shared humanity. The need to ‘start at square one’ with the idea that Palestinian children are human points to a deeper rupture of what is ordinarily assumed to be a universal moral response: empathy toward children.

As scholars of Palestine demonstrate, this uneven distribution of empathy is closely tied to broader ideologies that determine whose lives are recognized as worthy of saving. Multiple scholars, notably Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick have discussed at length the specific ways advocating for Palestine disrupts Western notions of progressive politics.³⁴ Judith Butler writes about the

³³ Accurso, ‘Ms. Rachel Stands Up for the Littles of Gaza’.

³⁴ J. Butler, *Parting ways: Jewishness and the critique of Zionism* (New York, NY 2012); I. Pappé and N. Chomsky, *On Palestine* (Chicago, IL 2015); E. W. Said, *The question of Palestine*, (New York, NY 1979).

concept of ‘grievable lives’, arguing that Western discourse posits Palestinian lives as less ‘grievable’ than Jewish Israeli lives, therefore justifying mass violence against Palestinians.³⁵ This argument incorporates Said’s work, who builds on his body of research on orientalism to discuss how the Muslim world and the Arab are both intelligible and subhuman to the ‘West’. Lamont Hill and Plitnick describe how this creates a particular type of paradox, particularly in the U.S., where progressives champion social justice and human rights except in the case of Palestinians. The above authors untangle some of the ideologies that illuminate the reaction to Ms. Rachel’s advocacy, helping to explain why advocacy for Palestinian children is often treated as politically suspect rather than morally self-evident.

Feminist scholar Shalhoub-Kevorkian conceptualizes this process as ‘unchildling,’ which she defines as the ‘authorized eviction of children from childhood’.³⁶ She argues that Israeli state practices systematically strip Palestinian children of the conditions that make childhood possible. This process is deeply intimate, penetrating the spaces of family life that are typically imagined as protective. Her analysis of child arrests is particularly revealing, illustrating how Israeli law removes Palestinian children from the very category of childhood that the legal system is supposed to guarantee. In the West Bank, which is governed by the Israeli military legal system, as opposed to civilian law, Palestinian children as young as twelve years old can be arrested, prosecuted, and detained in military courts. While Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are under the same civilian legal system as Israeli children, human rights organizations report significant disparities in enforcement and treatment.³⁷

Drawing on interviews with affected families, Shalhoub-Kevorkian highlights the broader impact of child arrests, noting that the removal of children from the family ‘disrupted the entire family structure, stripping parents of their ability to father, to mother, to protect their children—

³⁵ J. Butler, ‘What Is the Value of Palestinian Lives?’, <https://autonomies.org/2023/10/judith-butler-what-is-the-value-of-palestinian-lives/>, accessed 22 May 2026.

³⁶ Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated childhood and the politics of unchildling*.

³⁷ European Parliament, ‘New Israeli Law Allows Children as Young as 12 to Be Jailed’., https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/dpal/dv/4d_dci-p_new_israeli/4d_dci-p_new_israelien.pdf, accessed 22 May 2026.

stripping families of the safety and security of the home space'.³⁸ In a world that constructs the nuclear family as a core element of the nation, the Israeli legal system targets Palestinian children to destabilize the nation itself and disrupt any semblance of protection. Unchilding operates simultaneously at the level of the child, the family, and the nation, revealing how the denial of childhood becomes a mechanism through which entire communities are rendered vulnerable.

Prominent media outlets reinforce this process of unchilding through language and representation. Media analysis by Mazhar Ahmad Al Zo'by and Imed Ben Labidi demonstrates how linguistic framing contributes to differential recognition of Palestinian children.³⁹ The authors argue that word choices in major news outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* reveal implicit assumptions about which lives are deserving of empathy through the invocation or denial of the word 'child'. Al Zo'by and Labidi illustrate how within the same news articles, Israelis under eighteen years of age are consistently described as 'children,' while Palestinians are referred to as 'minors,' 'young people,' or 'people aged eighteen or younger.' By withholding the term 'child,' these reports distance Palestinian youths from the innocence and vulnerability the category implies, narrowing the scope of empathy afforded to them. In extreme cases, this logic is made explicit, such as when Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked referred to Palestinian children as 'small snakes' in a Facebook post, framing them as future terrorists who must be suppressed at a young age before they become too dangerous.⁴⁰

It is against this unstable and stratified category of childhood that the work of Ms. Rachel becomes particularly powerful. Her pedagogy draws on a longer tradition of children's media that uses the presumed innocence of childhood to expose contradictions in adult political life. A key reference point in this tradition is *Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood*, particularly the 1969 scene in which Mister Rogers cools his feet in a small plastic pool alongside Officer Clemmons, a Black police officer. This episode aired during a period in the U.S. when segregation had formally ended but remained deeply embedded in everyday life. Through this quietly radical moment, Mister Rogers communicated to his wide audience that racial segregation was neither natural nor necessary. As Ms. Rachel has emphasized in her own reflections on this

³⁸ Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated childhood and the politics of unchilding*, 74.

³⁹ M. A. Al Zo'by and I.B. Labidi, "Unchilding' Palestine: Media Representation and the Limits of Civilizational Discourse,' *Cultural Studies* (2025): 1–22.

⁴⁰ Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated childhood and the politics of unchilding*, 16.

moment, the scene generated backlash at the time but also shifted perceptions within many households, demonstrating how children's media can intervene in the moral imagination of the adult world.

In her video with Rahaf, Ms. Rachel consciously follows in the footsteps of Mister Rogers's pedagogical tradition. Perhaps the video resonated with the public so much because of its contrast with the images of suffering Palestinian children that dominate international media. In Ms. Rachel's video, Rahaf is laughing, playing, and singing. It is a rare counterexample to Shalhoub-Kevorkian's unchilding. And yet, the scene is profoundly marked by her prosthetic legs, a visible reminder of the violence that has drastically altered her life. This tension becomes increasingly evident in Ms. Rachel's account of resistance to the video, including her description of venues that refused to host her meeting with Rahaf.⁴¹ Such refusals demonstrate how childhood is not only a moral category but also a regulated social space, one that can be selectively extended or withdrawn depending on national and political identification. What appears in Zahra's work as a historically constructed framework of protection becomes, in Shalhoub-Kevorkian's analysis, a field of exclusion in which only some children are permitted to occupy the official category of childhood. The case of Ms. Rachel and Rahaf brings these histories into the present, showing how the boundaries of childhood are not only inherited from past nationalist formations but are actively reproduced and contested in contemporary cultural and political life.

Conclusion

This article has traced how childhood is constructed as an exclusive and unstable category through a comparative analysis of Zahra's histories of childhood and nationalism in 20th century Europe and Shalhoub-Kevorkian's concept of unchilding in the Palestinian context, using Ms. Rachel as a case study throughout. The intention is not to place Ms. Rachel on a pedestal or to position her as the voice of Palestinian children. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian emphasizes throughout her work, even within violent contexts of unchilding, Palestinian children exhibit remarkable acts of agency, continuing to resist, play, and grow within suffocating conditions. There are countless Palestinian children who speak for themselves through social media platforms, notably

⁴¹ Accurso, 'Ms. Rachel Stands Up for the Littles of Gaza.'

10-year-old chef Renad (@renatwatermelon), 11-year-old war reporter Sumayya Wushah (@sumayyawushahofficial), or 9-year-old journalist Lama Jamous (@lama_jamous9). Ms. Rachel's massive audience and ensuing global scrutiny, however, highlight a contradiction that, as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would say, is 'good to think' with.⁴²

The controversy surrounding Ms. Rachel's statements reveals the deep relationship between childhood and nationalism. As scholars of nationalism have long demonstrated, national movements rely on children for their reproduction and survival. The success of nationalist projects in 20th century Europe depended not only on political mobilization but also on the education of the next generation. Yet, as historians such as Zahra demonstrate, children also complicate these efforts. Despite their importance for political projects, their linguistic flexibility and ability to adapt to different cultural contexts can also make it difficult to assign them neatly to a single national category. This tension helps explain the reactions to Ms. Rachel's advocacy. By insisting that all children, including Palestinian children, deserve care and protection regardless of nationality, she invokes a vision of childhood that challenges nationalist logic that deems only some children worthy of protection. Childhood is not only a biological stage of life but a political status unevenly distributed. When Ms. Rachel sang 'Here, little bunny' with Rahaf, she was insisting that Palestinian children belong fully within the category of childhood. The reaction to this exposes the fragile boundaries through which childhood itself is defined.

⁴² C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, reprinted, trans. (London 1991).