

Through the Eyes of Child Soldiers: On War, Violence, and Trauma in Popular Entertainment Fictions

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Abstract: The involvement of child soldiers in war has attracted global outrage through social awareness campaigns in the new century. An increasingly visible topic in a worldwide discourse on popular culture, the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children by armed forces and military leaders also features heavily in contemporary literature, popular television, and film productions. The status of the child soldier is that of the reluctant combatant, and, according to UNICEF's 2016 peace report, a sign of the rise of extreme violence around the world.¹ This paper uses a popular culture studies paradigm to highlight the damaging physical and emotional trauma of child soldier characters such as Melody Pond in *Dr Who* and Naruto Uzumaki in *Naruto*. From Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* to Dumbledore's Army in *Harry Potter*, child soldiers who take up arms against the enemy triumph over evil warlords, insane despots and corrupt regimes. Yet it is the adult world around them which profits from the child soldiers' mutilation, posttraumatic stress disorders, and, oftentimes, deaths. The ingenuity of children and their simplified sense of justice and retribution also serve to foreground as a narrative device the moral politics and discursive appropriation of unconventional warfare combatants. The award-winning story of nine-year-old commander general Ender Wiggin in *Ender's Game* suggests that genocide in today's world is equivalent to child's play, while female child soldiers have become synonymous with emancipatory, feminist identities. However, the reintegration of these children into post-war society features only infrequently in popular stories about child soldiers, which this paper suggests in its concluding remarks is an undervalued concept to further debates about asymmetrical warfare.

Keywords: *child soldier, popular culture, violence and trauma, nationalism, entertainment*

Child characters in war fictions

The forced recruitment of child soldiers in transnational war groups like ISIS and LRA has an estimated 300,000 child soldiers currently fighting in armed conflicts around the world.² Their visibility as active participants in the atrocities of war has opened up new debates about childhood and child soldiers, specifically social reintegration and society's acceptance of the erosion of childhood. There is concern that societies sacrifice child soldiers for nationalist purposes, that the children receive no support to deal with the trauma of war after the violent conflict has ended, and that these children could pose an uncontrollable threat to the broader population. In contemporary popular culture, a great number of mass entertainment fictions gives voice to such concerns. Yet, while the essay at hand considers these fictions as productive arenas for public dissemination of war, it also questions their contribution to the construction of war experiences. The danger is to express child soldiers' war trauma in essentialist terms with universal applicability, or to reproduce reductive discourses about war. At the end of the second decade of the new century, child characters in mass-mediated war fictions seem to signal an uncertainty in societies about how to make sense of the complex realities of war.

Close Encounters in War Journal, 1: "Close encounters in irregular and asymmetric warfare" (2018)

A brief survey of the war story genre suggests profound changes in the fictional positioning of children under arms. David Rosen's account of child soldiers in Western literatures details an almost exclusive focus on the "celebration of victory over the enemy, often depicted as captured, defeated, or killed [before] the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (*Child Soldiers in World War: II*, 103). Much of this trend disappeared by the time of World War I, according to Rosen, and "the focus of popular culture became the commemoration of the dead and heroic sacrifice and suffering" (103). The trauma of war, its tremendous rupturing of most aspects of social life, ended with the death and sacrifice of child soldiers in funerary rituals of communal and national grief. It is only in the aftermath of World War I, argues Rosen, that academic fields involved in the study of children and childhood, such as history, anthropology, and psychology, drew clear distinctions between adult and child and their attending rights, needs, and abilities to cope with war (175). With this change, Adrienne Gavin argues, also came a change in the notion of war trauma fictions' constructedness (Gavin, *The Child in British Literature*: 2). The repercussions of the Holocaust during World War II and the death of millions of Jewish children were another catalyst for discursive revisions. At a time when adult writers, and by extension their adult protagonists, were lost for words in the face of modern warfare's unspeakable horrors, a child's inability to express an experience adequately with adult vocabulary or with any verbal language appeared to writers "less realistic but more deeply expressive" (2). As an imaginary position, the child's experience of war did not lay claim to reality but claimed childhood as the most potent perspective from which to narrate war trauma. Gavin writes that

literary children often carry substantial weight in texts, and, in envisioning the child, writers have constructed images and characters that serve various functions: instruction, allegory, pathos, escapism, satire, identification, demonization, or idealization. Childhood sometimes reflects a desire to return to a world without responsibility, of freedom and unsullied imagination where magic lies behind the coal scuttle or in the nursery walls. At other times, it represents a state thankfully escaped from. (2)

That child combatants share immediate truth about core existential experiences during war as imperfect narrators holds further implications. Claire Gorrara sees in child perspectives on wartime societies a remobilisation of civic memory. In the case of France's complicity with the Nazi regime's extinction of Jews during World War II, she argues that child narrators are helpful in the post-war "reframing of memory which allowed a more plural set of war memories to gain public prominence" (Gorrara, *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War*: 109). Gorrara explains that a child's viewpoint offers a more sincere forum for cultural transition of war trauma from one generation to the next, because the child intuitively wants to know more about the world, while the adult filters experiences into a preconceived system of categories. Above all, the child narrator conveys that curiosity about past and present events leading up to war should be encouraged to probe questions of ethical responsibility (112-115). The pervasive anxiety of adult narrators about reflecting on war trauma or crimes, in contrast, indicates that adult perspectives on war experiences can be of limited representative value to public or transgenerational war memories. As David Stahl and Mark Williams assert in their discussion of

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popular post-World War II trauma fictions in Asian countries, child soldier characters deserve more attention and acknowledgement for their pivotal contribution to unearth buried realities of war trauma from adults' hidden or tabooed experiences (*Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: 2*).

The elements in children's accounts of war are oftentimes at odds with one another, hinting at the physical and psychological cost associated with the collapse of a pre-pubescent's pre-war reality. Indeed, Andrew Butler suggests, through symbols and motifs of silence and failed communication, unelaborated ways of understanding and expression, the child in a wartime story stands in for the traumatic figuring of erratic cognition (*Solar Flares: 168*). Butler explains that the notion of the child's fragmented processing abilities was "effectively conceived during the Enlightenment by authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Sigmund Freud" (168). The proposition is that the child is closer to affect than to language, effectively moving the child as subject closer to the object of war than is possible for an adult. And, unlike the self-aware adult narrator, the child soldier's perspective is without anxiety over complete representation. In general, a child is not aware of any need for a truthful paradigm, as best illustrated in the child characters of Mark Twain's classic childhood adventure story, *Huckleberry Finn*; neither, as the children in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* show, do child characters think in moral absolutes. Such use of childlike perspective evokes an intuitive interpretative agency, which Freud posits as the condition for understanding the acute anxiety related to war as an interruption of everyday life outside of an individual's lived environment (170).

To make a child ostensibly the lens for a fictional interpretation of war as large-scale caesura in modern life is an increasingly common feature in stories with mass entertainment appeal. Alan Gibbs suggests that war trauma narratives constitute perhaps the principal genre of twentieth-century culture due to nation-states' constant involvement in modern, large-scale warfare (*Contemporary American Trauma Narratives: 45-46*). That reports on ethnic cleansing, drone-aided killings, and attempts at genocide have become the norm in non-stop news cycles also explains, according to Gibbs, the rise of the child soldier's compelling perspective. "There emerges", writes Gibbs, "in the twentieth and the twenty-first century a preoccupation with formal devices that become established methods of depicting trauma, including fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition" (47). The application of the child's point of view to mark profound rupture is exemplary of these three qualities in all the texts discussed in this essay; not least, to refer to Gibbs' criticism of texts about war, as there has transpired an inundation of literature, cinema, and television with formulaic versions of war trauma fictions. Because of their often-unassuming depictions of war trauma and a gender, ethnic, or ideological bias, critics have labelled the reductive fictions in related studies on 9/11 or on the wars in Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan as trauma kitsch (48). Sabine Silke gives a detailed explanation for such "trauma troping" (*Why 9/11 Is (Not) Unique, or: Troping Trauma: 385*). Her, and Rosen's, work on the reproduction of Africa's postcolonial war discourse in the Hollywood imaginary reverberates in later studies on trauma communication by Karolyn Steffens (*Communicating Trauma: 2014*) and a circumspect review of trauma discourse in Latin American literature by Julia Dickson-Gómez (*One Who Doesn't Know War, Doesn't Know Anything: 2004*). Suffice it to say that the texts analysed here are not part of the

trauma kitsch genre, although there is a delineable line of enquiry in trauma fiction more concerned with literary works in the new century (for example Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, 2007; Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, 2008; Richard Ford's *Canada*, 2013; and, most famously, Kahled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, 2003) than with mainstream entertainment cinema or television.

Finally, there is the matter of credibility. Audiences seem willing to suspend their disbelief readily despite the obvious fact that an adult author or group of screenwriters uses the child narrator in their stead. The child protagonists in Stephen's King's 1986 horror novel, *It*, and the 2017 film adaption, must navigate appalling horrors in their fight against an evil monster. This scenario, of course, is not related to any real-life war. Rather, a metaphor for fighting one's primal fears, a group of misfit children must band together to battle a supernatural entity who feeds on trauma. However, millions of audiences aligned their gaze with that of the children, posting online fan fictions about the defeat of the fantasy warlord by a victorious band of youngsters. King purposefully tells the story through the eyes of the children, thus magnifying both primary (for example, shock) and secondary traumatic effects (for example, post-traumatic stress disorder). Maria Nikolajeva interprets this displaced subject position as the figurative unity of experiencer and experience. She argues that contemporary audiences tend to perceive adult narrators as complicit in the postmodern separation of subject and object through language, which makes the initiation of the child protagonist into the adult world through heightened forms of emphatic suffering so compelling (Nikolajeva, *The Changing Aesthetics of Character in Children's Fiction*: 433). Any child protagonist, even if disagreeable when committing a crime or act of violence during war, can gain the viewer's or reader's sympathy as a focalising character of emotional affect. With "subjectivities recognizably equal to one's own" (440), posits Nikolajeva, the child is not a war hero to admire or a villain to hate, but an identificatory insight into human nature's embattled virtues and vices.

A child to critique the war collective

The most noticeable trend in contemporary war fictions from the child's point of view explores the uneasy alignment of individual and society. What Jean Luc Nancy calls "violent relatedness" (*Being Singular Plural*: xvii) defines humanity's shared experience of war as community-building. National cultures, as described by Benedict Anderson, have a habit of connecting war experiences to national history to create a sense of collective. Nation states commemorate war trauma, for instance, to formulate a common identity (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*: 2-8). Traditional war fictions with adult soldiers play a major part in this discourse on imagined communities. The narratives can serve to position the combatants in struggles for selfhood, which is the ethical justification for the need to commit acts of violence against the enemy Other. One nation suffers at the hands of a hostile nation, which in turn tells its own war stories from a competing perspective. Nationalising discourses on war narratives are thus dehumanising the enemy collectively while simultaneously championing humanity among one's own group of war heroes or victims. Claire Seiler points to Japanese post-war fiction after 1945 to illustrate a need for academic vigilance because of such purposeful reductivism. The efforts of academic engagement with war stories of children must be to re-articulate the human rights discourse

in war fictions as unequivocally human and not contingent on ethno-national communality (Seiler, *Fictions of the Human in Postwar Japan*: 176-178). She writes: "War stories about occupied Japan could be told from an American viewpoint in reference to humanitarianism, fundamental human rights, and democratic freedoms, [while a Japanese novel like] *The Great Fire*, despite an otherwise dated portrayal of postwar Japan, offers a subtle, humanised critique of the US rhetoric of humanitarianism at Hiroshima" (*Fictions of the Human in Postwar Japan*: 176). Contemporary mass entertainment fictions about war reflect Seiler's idea of reading or viewing books, films, and television series with greater moral nuance. That the child soldiers in these fictions reclaim the individual's suffering from "the [adult] collective trauma of the nation means to bring a human rights oriented reading practice" (177) to tales enshrined in the national tradition of community formation. In the paradigm of critical transnational discourse and primary texts in this essay, the child's individual war trauma opposes the normalisation of war with the aim of creating a collective. This aspect is crucial because it adds to Seiler's reading practice an awareness for both war memorialisation's and war celebration's dehumanising effect on society.

The intersection of narrative style and function may increase in importance with portrayals of the bereavement of war children. Exposure to initial trauma and associated aftereffects are hardly new emplotments in the genre of war fiction. But their popularity in recent iterations of trauma and war calls into question humans' acceptance of war in the psychosocial development of society at large. Roderick McGillis argues that the horrors of war put an end to the child as a free individual. The child narrator's participation in armed conflict introduces him or her to traumatised adult collectives, thus serving author and reader both as restorative fantasy and cautionary tale (McGillis, *Irony and Performance*: 104). J.K. Rowling makes extensive use of this feature in the *Harry Potter* series, which, as McGillis notes, "doesn't sidestep the issue of systemic violence and encapsulates a host of tropes of child soldiers' exploitation and abuse" (104). The titular hero, Harry Potter, is a child soldier who was orphaned as a baby through the acts of an evil warlord. Harry bears his trauma outwardly as a lightning scar, and inwardly as a determination to kill the warmonger, the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort. And while the people around Harry dare not even speak Lord Voldemort's name, they revere the boy who survived for reintroducing peace and normalcy after he-who-must-not-be-named's supposed downfall in the attempt to kill an innocent child. Fast-forward sixteen years, Harry recruits his best friends from boarding school to a private militia group called Dumbledore's Army. The group of teenagers is instrumental in the final battle against Voldemort in the second Great Wizard's War, while incurring several fatalities during heavy shelling and brutal, direct attacks. In the end, though, Harry's prosocial behaviour wins out over his desire to enact revenge. The vicious cycle of war ends with Harry's intended self-sacrifice and Voldemort's inability to comprehend Harry's childlike faith in humanity. Yet Rowling makes it clear that Harry is no longer an innocent child at the end of the story. The film adaptation makes this even clearer than the book series, as Harry snaps the Elder Wand in two and discards the formidable armament Voldemort had used. The astonishment of Harry's friend Ron implies that without his war trauma, Harry may not have made the decision to abandon the most powerful weapon of war in the series' universe, for "no one

should have it". It is the traumatised child warrior who rejects yet another reformulation of the adult war society and its continuous return to warfare. The reversible figure of the child at war is "then, both a sign of life and death; it is ironic in that it represents a wholeness that contains its own separation, its own discontinuity" (104).

It is important to stress that children at war highlight uneven forms of power in fictional accounts of societies at war. In the new century, a growing number of mainstream entertainment fictions about the experience of war turn on Harry's radical rejection of repetitive mechanisms in adult war collectives. Peter Burkholder and David Rosen comment that elements of fantasy and science fiction also enable audiences to focus on emotional and psychological authenticity of the war trauma depicted, rather than historical accuracy: "In these settings [...] children can also be rendered capable of bravery, personal transformation, and moral decision-making. They are clearly endowed with the ability to play out the sometimes heroic, sometimes brutal and bloody aspects of the warrior's role" (Burkholder and Rosen, *Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema*: 178). The moral thrust of such considerations is that adult rationales for war are incongruent with children's thinking and that the audience should re-evaluate the justification for irregular warfare. At some point in current mass entertainment war stories, the child combatant seeks to reconstruct in his or her mind the logic for their actions as prescribed by adult society. *The Hunger Games* trilogy's main character, Katniss Everdeen, does so when told by the adult regime around her to kill girls and boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen for the benefit of her community. This mandate presents Katniss with conflicting emotions. Adults hold authority of a higher, collective order of nation or ethnic group over her. Primary attachments to family, friends, and peers, however, subvert the adult order because they appear more natural and authentic to the child (McGillis, *Irony and Performance*: 105). It should come as no surprise that Katniss repeatedly chooses her younger sister, her mother, her friends, her lover, and her humanity, over the ruling regime's claims to her identity before and after war erupts in the regime's centre, the Capitol. The anime movie *Grave of the Fireflies* consolidates these aspects in a larger cultural current of mainstream war fiction in the 1980s in a subversive rewriting of the genre. The film also turns on Seiler's insistence upon an expanded notion of the human cost of war. The popular adaption of the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Akiyuki Nosaka tells the story of two orphaned children from the Japanese port city of Kobe. Made homeless by American bombings of their town during World War II, the older sibling, Seito, is charged with the care of his younger sister, Setsuko. Initially, Seito's viewpoint is aligned with that of his father, an adult Japanese man. Young Seito proudly wears a military bonnet, gifted to him by a random soldier during a military parade, and parrots well-rehearsed propaganda slogans. The traumatic loss of parents and home, however, forces Seito to confront the nationalistic viewpoint. Ultimately, after Japanese society and the military refuse to care for the siblings, and Seito's sister dies of starvation, he passes away, too; the child under arms perishes alone and abandoned in a public space. The adults, who were happy to recruit only slightly older boys to fight in their war, hardly take notice of the tragedy. It is in a series of flashbacks that Seito, at the moment of his passing in a dark railway station, tells the viewer about overwhelming pain that a child could not possibly be equipped to handle. The trauma of war manifests in the innocent

narrator's death amidst a crowd of complicit adults, which makes the film emblematic of the advocacy for the individual's traumatic war experience.

Benjamin Cooper concludes that the reading of child characters in war culture has come to a point where the battlefield converges with and is largely dependent on a revisionist worldview. The trauma of the adult soldier is frequently appropriated by national discourse and communal history, whereas the child soldier's experience reifies alternative understandings of war (Cooper, *In This War But Not of It*: 211-214). George Bonanno brings social trauma models as productive additions to this argument. With the possibility of nuclear wars, the presence of ethno-social collectives in war fictions becomes a balancing act between societies attending to the idea of total war and the "drastically uneven positions of individuals' experience within the events of a war" (Bonanno, *Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience*: 23). There is also a generational issue. Gorrara adds that younger authors and producers of popular war fictions are less hesitant to confront society with the "duty to assume knowledge of the past, not with the intention of judging others but in order to live with (and not against) the past" (*French Crime Fiction and the Second World War*: 118). One can interpret the surge of opposing child-view narratives to monolithic accounts of war and war trauma as newer generations' desire to extend their knowledge about their own cultures' and others' war traumas. Rosen suggests that the patriotic child soldier is virtually non-existent in current mainstream war fictions anymore, for its function is clearly that of wilful bias against exposure of war history to broader truths about economic incentives or nationalistic colonialism. He writes that "novels such as *Song for Night* by Chris Abani, *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iewala, *Moses, Citizen and Me* by Delia Jarrett-Macauley, and finally *Johnny Mad Dog* by Emmanuel Dongala, exemplify this trend" (Rosen, *Child Soldiers in World War*: II, 111). Indeed, one can argue that most contemporary war fictions told from a child's point of view have tipped from a reliance on patriotic rationalisations of war into an uneasy discourse of unanswered questions about the isolation and abandonment of soldiers as victims of war trauma. The responsibility of societies and complicity of nation-states have also added nuances of culpability to interdisciplinary research studies like the ones cited in this essay.

Recruiting child soldiers for war in time and space

It would seem only logical to ground the child's experience of war in an expansive critique of human suffering; hence, it is important to recognise that the war fictions discussed in this essay compellingly illustrate the presence of individual and universal war trauma in the extensive imagination of their authors, screenwriters, and producers. Hardly any other genre in popular television or cinema appears to test the ethical boundaries of child soldier recruitment more imaginatively than that of science fiction. To determine the futuristic place of underage combatants in war scenarios resonates readily with audiences, as the genre's ahistorical premise keeps the images of real child soldiers "with abused and exploited children at a safe mental and moral distance" (Burkholder and Rosen, *Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema*: 149). For instance, in the fourth season of the popular science fiction and time travel series, *Doctor Who* in 2008, head writer Steffen Moffat created the character River Song, born Melody Pond. Raised by an aggregation of The Doctor's

enemies, Melody's sole purpose for existence is to kill the series' hero for his alleged war crimes in a future yet to transpire. The enemy collective, referred to as The Silence, abducts Melody's mother and jails Amy Pond until she gives birth to Melody. Because she is a Timelord-human hybrid, Melody can regenerate at the moment of death, changing age, race, and physical appearance with each shift. This plot point is crucial. Moffat introduces a baby with the ability to die repeatedly as the greatest weapon in an intergalactic army's war against The Doctor. The childlike Melody in her first life, played by an eleven-year-old actress, is brainwashed by The Silence's Madame Kovarian to kill The Doctor. Melody's mental conditioning takes place over the course of several years, with the child growing up inside a retrofitted spacesuit which feeds and sustains her. Melody kills The Doctor with a rare poison in a later regeneration, after starving and freezing to death in her previous, child-like form. The more adult version of Melody, though, succeeds in breaking The Silence's mental conditioning, and she gives up her remaining regenerations to revive The Doctor's corpse. With Melody's first words being "kill The Doctor", it seems that the intrusion of warfare into her existence is critical to the conceptualisation of war trauma in a child soldier's adult life. The character goes through the horrors experienced by almost all child soldiers: abandonment, isolation, desensitisation, and training to obey, hate, and kill. Bred only for warfare, the child soldier grows up in her own moral world. She is taught that killing is excused by the events occurring around her. Yet the series allows for Melody's redemption. Adult Melody transitions into the character of River Song, who travels the universe and wants nothing more than to reunite with The Doctor and live out the remainder of her life peacefully with children and a family. It is telling that River's final act is to save The Doctor once more, along with four thousand other people. Moffat proposes the character's maturation from infant soldier to heroic defender of human life. Nikolajeva as well as Rosen argue that this development conforms to the abusive recruitment trope of children in war fictions and heightens for audiences the clash between redeeming righteousness and involuntary malevolence (Nikolajeva, *The Changing Aesthetics of Character in Children's Fiction*: 441; Rosen, *Child Soldiers in Medieval(esque) Cinema*: 97-98).

The topic of underage conscription also appears as a challenge to ideals of human evolution in Gavin Hood's science fiction film *Ender's Game*. Based on Orson Scott Card's novel of the same title, the military regime of Earth tricks the child protagonist, Andrew "Ender" Wiggin, into thinking that the interstellar genocide he commits against an alien race, the Formics, is only a dry run for actual combat. Hood associates the visual style of *Ender's Game* with utopian science fiction images via a barrage of CGI projections, and sets the story in a future world in which all humans live in peace. The threat to this peace posed by a race of insectoid aliens leads the viewer to believe that all of mankind could perish. The danger for the collective makes it permissible to enlist children. Whereas magic and fantasy genres such as *Harry Potter* still operate within the boundaries of legal age discourse, as Rowling's wizards and witches come of age at seventeen, the space war with hostile aliens suspends these definitions. If anything, the survival of the planet trumps the survival of specific cultural values, which negates the self-imposed rules of traditional warfare among humans. Ender trains from the age of nine – in the book from the age of six – to become a master of screen-mediated combat. His role is to operate battleships and give commands to Earth's space fleet from a remote location. To

win the alleged final simulation of his training, Ender launches a massive bomb, nicknamed Little Doctor, at the aliens' home world. While the adult soldiers cheer, fully aware of the situation, Ender is devastated to learn that he committed genocide in the name of humanity. The revelation deprives Ender of his child-like innocence, and he cannot overcome his feelings of guilt. The adults have turned him into a monster and deprived him of the capacity to act as an independent moral agent. Ender's reaction is to question whether such humans deserve to survive. More importantly, though, his role as child soldier presents the idea of a guiltless mentality towards sophisticated means of warfare. Unlike *River Song*, Ender cannot take back the killing of his victims. The death of millions at the hands of a God-like child happens in seconds. There should be, according to Chris Hables Gray, more post-humanist stories like *Ender's Game* or *Doctor Who*, where the experience of war trauma is connected to accountability and an abhorrent cult of militarism (*Posthuman Soldiers in Postmodern War*, 225).

Transgenerational and redemptive war fictions

Progressive aspects in popular fictions about child soldiers remain the most underexplored area in the study of mediated mass entertainment. One reason for this could be the fact that researchers have shown hesitation to combine content analysis with historical and archival research practices in the field of cartoon culture. Yet the increased emergence of animation studies as an academic discipline has engendered a tremendous amount of interest in Japan's anime world, which offers the viewer multifaceted stories about such topics as warfare through the eyes of children. The number of relevant productions in the Japanese anime universe is staggering, due to the medium's multiple uses and functions in Japanese culture. *Grave of the Fireflies* is one prominent example of this. Among the most popular format of televised war fictions with child soldier protagonists are *Fullmetal Alchemist*, an anime series adapted from the manga of the same name by Hiromu Arakawa; *Mobile Suit Gundam*, a series produced and animated by Sunrise Studios, created and directed by Yoshiyuki Tomino; *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, produced by Gainax and Tatsunoko Productions and directed by Hideaki Anno both as a popular series and feature film releases; and, possibly the most successful war fiction franchise of all in Japan and abroad, the *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* series, adapted from Masashi Kishimoto's manga series by the same name and directed by Hayato Date.

Naruto and *Naruto Shippuden* tell the story of Naruto Uzumaki, aged twelve in the first part of the series and fifteen in the second. The plot is set in a fictional world of warring ninja nations, the Ninja World. With the nations constantly battling each other, society relies on skilled warriors to defend resources and secure peace with neighbouring settlements. The so-called Shinobi, a class of high-skilled ninjas, determine the fate of the lands. The military structures encoded in these characters, such as the Hokage/lord commander or the Shinobi Academy/military recruitment camp, are pervasive. Twelve-year-old Naruto features in this context as the outsider, a child soldier orphaned by the preceding Great Ninja War. Unbeknownst to him, Naruto carries a weapon of mass destruction, a fantastical beast, inside his body, which any other resident of Naruto's village is forbidden to discuss. The fact that Naruto's father, a great ninja warrior, has placed the beast in his son's body,

and that the mother was also a ninja and the previous carrier of the beast, the Nine-Tailed Fox, are revealed only later in the series. Initially, Naruto's status as outsider others him from the rest of the community. Only his acceptance into the Shinobi Academy as a child soldier validates Naruto's proper place in the village. Naruto is quick to catch on. He guesses that higher rank in the ninja structure also means greater social integration. Most of the plot turns on Naruto's desire to belong. The child soldier's fascination with the memorial cult of his village's Hokage, mountain-carved face sculptures like Mount Rushmore National Memorial in the United States, motivates him to take over leadership as Hokage in future. Naruto achieves his goal after experiencing decades of fights, genocide, loss of limb in a battle with his arch-rival Sasuke, and a vast array of tactics by hostile ninja nations to topple local governments and assume supreme power. Naruto faces the destruction of his nation several times. In fact, *Naruto Shippuden's* final Great Ninja War threatens to destroy the whole world. In a very real sense, the series blurs with an original run of fifteen years the line between fiction and reality in countries with large military tradition like America. One could argue that Naruto attends a junior version of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at school only to enlist fully as an adult later. Acts of bravery explain his meteoric rise through the ranks in several service tours.

The *Naruto* franchise's similarities with the cult of the military seem evident. However, the series makes it clear that there is nothing heroic about war at all. Naruto's early admiration for Shinobi warriors conveys the sense that pro-war sentiments are positive, for they sustain the development of the collective. The series, though, is quick to stress the impact of war on previous generations, especially on children like Naruto. Almost every season confronts Naruto and his fellow child combatants with hard-won truths about armed conflict. The soldiers in training learn that war undermines people's common humanity and that only war criminals present war crimes as a superior solution to diplomacy and non-violent negotiations. Central to Naruto's character is his ability to learn these lessons almost intuitively, which explains why empathy and a drive to bring people together is his explicit strength as a ninja. It has become the hallmark of the series that Naruto objects to moral ambiguity. A line frequently quoted by the character as "My ninja way" points to Naruto's mental as well as emotional competence, which matures with each incident of war in the five hundred episodes of the series. To locate such moral nuance in mass entertainment texts produced for consumption by millions affirms Seiler's point about the complex relationship between war and memory in contemporary Japanese entertainment culture. It is not surprising that the spin-off series, *Boruto*, which premiered in 2017 and centres on Naruto's first-born son, has inherited and continues to move forward a child soldier's iconic resistance to war. To date, critical reception of the *Boruto* series has been largely positive, in the main with praise for the complicated relationship between father and son. *Boruto* deconstructs the war idol that is his father by humanising the relationship with the leader of a post-war community. Reminiscent of the uneasy father-son dynamic in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, *Boruto* struggles to define his own ninja way. Indeed, the overpowering legacy of his father's heroism implies that *Boruto* cannot inhabit the same values or an identical position towards war. So even with the benefit of the previous generation's diverse experiences of war, the makers of *Boruto* retain the idea that each

generation and each child soldier must find their own reasons to reject the phenomenon of war.

The grounding of war fictions in individual responsibility and human agency regardless of age, however explicitly stated in *Naruto* and *Boruto*, is inherent in all the child soldiers' accounts of warfare discussed in this essay. The fictions I have analysed are part of an evolving genre of popular transnational culture which spans across different media types and national cultures. Though two of the texts detailed here as examples of child soldiers' perception of war stand out for the social reintegration of their underage combatants. The characters of *Naruto* and *Melody Pond* are embedded in a transgenerational storyline, which highlights the evolution from child soldier to adult. The audience does not witness this transition with *Ender*, *Seito*, *Katniss Everdeen*, or *Harry Potter*. Those characters only reappear in brief, single-scene snapshots at the end of their stories, while *Seito's* untimely death precludes any chance of an adult life. *Ender* sets out by himself to repopulate the alien species he killed. *Katniss* lives with fellow *Hunger Games* survivor *Peeta Mellark* in a secluded house to raise their child. *Harry Potter* sends off his son, *Albus*, to start school at *Hogwarts*. Seemingly left to their own devices in dealing with trauma, the audience is denied detailed knowledge about the child soldiers' process of resocialisation. Yet the adult version of *Naruto* appears in *Boruto* as a thirty-something Hokage, leading his village through a prolonged period of peace. Father to three children, the story of *Naruto's* post-war adolescence resembles the traditional war hero's coming of age narrative. He dated and married a fellow child soldier named *Hinata*, with whom he started a family. The home of the *Uzumakis* is shown to be an ordinary family residence in the heart of the village. Home-made dinners, family excursions, and domestic game nights hint at *Naruto's* successful resocialisation process, as do a host of rituals of commemoration and public grieving for the last Great Ninja War's fallen soldiers. The change in *Naruto's* character from loner to community leader is markedly positive. It is highlighted even more by the fact that other characters like *Sasuke* failed to re-join everyday life in the village, leaving behind his child to grow up without a father. Similarly, *Dr Who* thematises the possibility of a child soldier's resocialisation with *Melody Pond's* extended storyline as *River Song*. Born in an active combat zone as a weapon, *Melody's* parents go to great lengths to ensure the child's childhood trauma does not determine the rest of her life. That *Rory* and *Amy*, father and mother to *Melody*, grow up alongside their daughter without knowing so is a time-travel twist revealed to viewers only later in the series. Her future parents model prosocial behaviour for *Melody*. She learns from *Amy* about unconditional love, while *Rory* demonstrates numerous acts of self-sacrifice. It is only through the positive influence of *Rory* and *Amy* that *Melody's* character matures into a person willing to give up her future regenerations for *The Doctor*. As *River Song*, an adult woman, she repeatedly puts love for family and friends first, which allows her to re-join her family and live out decades of romance in marriage to *The Doctor*. *River* saves lives even as she dies. The series rewards this by placing her in a virtual reality paradise without violence or war, and by giving her two perfect children to raise in peace. One would hope that academic engagement with war fictions in mass entertainment grows in number to highlight more of these resocialisation processes and to put them in larger dialogues about the abusive employment of child soldiers in uneven warfare.

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¹ For an extensive report about children at war and the recruitment of child soldiers see the UNICEF report on warfare and child combatants.

² See Siddharth Chatterjee's informative, albeit confronting, report about the real-world abuse of children as child soldiers in active combat zones in countries all over the world.