

“This is my story”: Children’s war memoirs and challenging protectionist discourses

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Abstract

Protectionist frames of children as passive, uncomprehending victims characterize the international architecture of responding to children in war. However, stories such as those in children’s war memoirs draw attention to the agency and capacity of children to negotiate and navigate distinct traumas and experiences in war. Children experience particular vulnerabilities and risks in conflict zones and their potential as contributors to the solutions to war must also be taken seriously. Children’s authoritative voices in memoir writing reveal the limitations of protectionist-dominated approaches and offer a rationale for taking the participatory elements of international humanitarian mechanisms and responses to conflict more seriously. Such a move may help address the comprehensive silencing of children’s voices in the institutional architecture concerned with children in war.

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Introduction

“Who is Malala?” [the man] demanded. ... My friends say he fired three shots, one after another. ... By the time we got to the hospital my long hair and Moniba’s lap were full of blood. Who is Malala? I am Malala and this is my story.¹

So concludes the prologue to *I Am Malala*, the memoir of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl who campaigned for education in the Swat Valley and was shot by the Taliban at age 15 in October 2012. Yousafzai frames the book as a story of a specific experience of conflict and its consequences. Sudanese former child soldier Emmanuel Jal prefaces his book, *War Child*, by noting that “this one is not meant to be a history of a country to be read by scholars. It is the story of one boy, his memories, and what he witnessed.”² Seventeen-year-old Syrian refugee Nujeen Mustafa says:

I hate the word refugee more than any word in the English language. ... The year 2015 was when I became a fact, a statistic, a number. Much as I like facts, we are not numbers, we are human beings and we all have stories. This is mine.³

The genre of children’s war memoir is growing in popularity in literary publishing. Narratives of children’s experiences of war, such as a memoir, open space to overcome the distance and abstraction of numbers. Thus, this article argues that such stories offer a counter-narrative to dominant framings of children in war as passive victims. Children’s war memoirs show children who, even when violence and conflict overwhelm their lives, find ways of navigating, resisting, surviving amidst conflict. Such memoirs reflect how ideas of children and childhood are constructed, reveal “cultural spaces available to host and circulate these narratives”⁴ and are fundamentally located in a space of “struggle for recognition of individuals and groups”⁵. Thus, they can reveal complex aspects of children’s experiences of war that offer a rich resource for better understanding children’s lives in war and possibilities for better addressing violence and supporting peace.

Protracted conflict, increasingly urbanized warfare⁶ and unprecedented forced displacement around the world⁷ present a particularly challenging

- 1 Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2013, p. 6.
- 2 Emmanuel Jal and Megan Lloyd Davies, *War Child: A Child Soldier’s Story*, St Martins Griffin, New York, 2009.
- 3 Nujeen Mustafa and Christina Lamb, *Nujeen: One Girl’s Incredible Journey from War-Torn Syria in a Wheelchair*, William Collins, London, 2016, p. 12.
- 4 Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2010.
- 5 Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2010.
- 6 Vincent Bernard, “Editorial: War in Cities”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 98, No. 901, 2016.
- 7 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*, Geneva, 25 June 2018; Vincent Bernard, “Migration and Displacement: Humanity with its Back to the Wall”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No. 904, 2017.

environment for children and for efforts to protect and empower them. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General’s 2018 *Annual Report on Children in Armed Conflict* noted that “children continue to be disproportionately affected by armed conflict in many country situations”, with a significant increase in violence through 2017 compared to the previous year.⁸ Shifting patterns of conflict since 2016 have seen children increasingly caught up in violence, including recruitment by armed groups in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and South Sudan.⁹ Ongoing violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, Myanmar and other countries has resulted in the death, maiming, starvation and serious illness of large numbers of children.¹⁰ The use of children by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State, including as suicide bombers,¹¹ presents new challenges in responding to the multiple and complex forms of violence and risk that children face.

The difficult and complex environments of conflicts have a profound effect on those who live within these spaces. Children actively resist war and go on living amongst its daily consequences. Despite this, their agency is largely absent when speaking about children and war. Their overwhelming, and pressing, requirements for safety, shelter, food and health care, as well as the longer-term needs of education and employment, dominate discussions of children’s experiences of conflict, and position them as passive. Such totalizing narratives of victimhood obscure and homogenize the complexity of the lived experience of children in war. Legal and humanitarian mechanisms for assisting children in war, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Geneva Conventions and the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda, are characterized by a protectionist discourse which limits capacity for understanding multiplicity of experience. Saying this is not to dismiss the significant role these documents and practices have in productively supporting children in conflict, but rather to ask what other experiences of war children have, and what other forms of support they require. To fully understand the implications of children’s experiences of conflict, we must consider the persistent everyday lives of those within conflict zones not reducible to either “victim” or “combatant”. As children’s agency is often erased in formal discussions of preventing or resolving conflict, accounts of their experiences of everyday life can offer a way of recognizing their capacity and legitimating their voice and experience, particularly when produced for mass literary markets. Taking lived experience as meaningful helps in understanding how children experience conflict and suggests ways for working with them for change. It is difficult for these stories to be heard

8 *Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*, UN Doc. A/72/865-S/2018/465, 16 May 2018, para. 5.

9 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *A Credible List: Recommendations for the 2018 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict and Listings*, March 2018, available at: https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2258-watchlist-policy-note_web.pdf (all internet references were accessed in August 2018).

10 *Annual Report of the Secretary-General*, above note 8.

11 John G. Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, “From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No. 7, 2017.

beyond zones of conflict which are distant from the realities of many people's lives globally, particularly in the global North.

This article considers the particular example of child-owned and -authored narratives of war in order to discuss the limits of protectionist framings and illustrate its argument for taking children's experiences seriously. Narratives produced by children offer a different way of thinking about children in conflict. The article takes children's war memoirs as an example of the value and complexity of children's own narratives. As a form of popular literature, they offer a way of accessing the detail of children's daily experiences of conflict. Thus, this article suggests that children's war memoirs offer a site where the complexities of children's experiences of conflict are visible and accessible to a broad popular audience. Taking such accounts seriously can offer a productive way of thinking about children's agency in war that can inform discussions about institutional architecture and humanitarian interventions.

This article illustrates its argument by considering a range of popular children's war memoirs. This includes stories of former child soldiers such as Sierra Leonean Ishmael Beah's 2007 *A Long Way Gone*¹² and Emmanuel Jal's 2009 account of his time in the Christian Sudanese Liberation Army, *War Child*,¹³ as well as the 2015 *I Am Evelyn Amony*,¹⁴ which recounts Evelyn Amony's time with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and as the wife of LRA leader Joseph Kony. It also includes stories of those who have lived through and escaped from war such as Syrian refugee Nujeen Mustafa's 2016 *Nujeen*, telling the story of her journey to Europe in a wheelchair to escape Syria's civil war, and 8-year-old Syrian Bana Alabed's 2017 *Dear World*,¹⁵ which began as live tweets from Aleppo during the 2016 siege. Finally, it includes, from 2013, *I Am Malala*¹⁶ by Malala Yousafzai, telling of a young woman's activism against extremism. This is a non-exhaustive collection of children's war memoirs, chosen to illustrate a breadth of experience and selected due to popular reception to these stories.

In discussing children's war memoirs as a source of knowledge about conflict that centres the capacity and agency of the child and may offer one avenue for considering how such agency can be better accounted for in formal responses to children in conflict, there is an important consideration of the ethics of "using" these texts, analyzing them, bringing them in to broader debate.¹⁷

12 Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2007.

13 E. Jal and M. Lloyd Davies, above note 2.

14 Evelyn Amony and Erin Baines, *I Am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2015.

15 Bana Alabed, *Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2017.

16 M. Yousafzai and C. Lamb, above note 1.

17 This article does not look at fictional stories of children in war such as the filmic depiction of child soldiers in *Blood Diamond* (2006) or *Beasts of No Nation* (2015). Nor does it explore stories told about children such as through NGO advocacy or journalism, as these are stories told without the participation of children, which is central to the discussion (see Jana Tabak and Leticia Carvalho, "Responsibility to Protect the Future: Children on the Move and the Politics of Becoming", *Global Responsibility to Protect*, Vol. 10, No. 1–2, 2018). The article also does not look at visual depictions by children or "children's stories" told through images of children such as the image of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi's

Kate Douglas, writing in her scholarly discipline of literary studies, offers an incisive consideration of the ethics of considering trauma texts authored by young people, calling for the need to “find appropriate methods for reading these texts within diverse disciplinary and scholarly contexts”.¹⁸ She draws attention to how the narratives of these texts may be taken up in ways that are potentially damaging and reflects on the intersectional imbalances of power and voice in their production. More crucially, she asks scholars to reflect on their engagement with accounts of trauma. While this article cannot delve into the content of these memoirs as much as desired due to space limitations (and as it is not a literary studies analysis but one grounded in international relations), I am profoundly conscious of not reproducing the worst forms of superficial analysis or unethical engagement with the texts considered here.

Children’s capacity is often excluded in dominant narratives of their experiences of war; this article suggests that children’s war memoirs can work to complicate such simple narratives. This article first unpacks the dominant narrative of passivity and totalizing victimhood that characterizes much framing of children’s experiences of war; it argues that such a framing limits our capacity to fully understand children’s experiences and narrows possible responses and support for children affected by conflict. This limited conception of childhood is evident in the protectionist framing of the UN’s Children and Armed Conflict agenda, as well as much of non-governmental organizations’ (NGO) advocacy. Instead, this article argues that recognizing children as having agency and working to respond to violence and navigate conflict allows children’s stories to be seen as a legitimate source of knowledge about conflict. Building on this, the article secondly outlines an argument for recognizing the importance of everyday accounts in constructing fuller and more responsive understandings of conflict.

Having demonstrated that the agency of children should be considered more critically, the article turns to consider the role of children’s war memoirs as a powerful, culturally recognized space for children’s voices in accounts of war. It argues that memoir can be seen as one site where children’s agency in war is evident. Such books offer stories of agency, resiliency and meaning-making by children affected by war, demonstrating the diverse ways children are affected by and navigate armed conflict. Children’s authoritative voice in memoir writing reveals the limitations of protectionist-dominated approaches and offers a rationale for taking the participatory elements of international human rights mechanisms and responses to conflict more seriously. Through these explorations, this article argues for taking children’s own stories of conflict into

death on a Turkish beach, although the visual is an important site in both fictional and non-fictional depictions of children in conflict (see Helen Berents, “Apprehending the ‘Telegenic Dead’: Considering Images of Dead Children in Global Politics”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2019; Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 900, 2015). All these sites are important additional spaces where the stories and voices of children might be productively explored.

18 Kate Douglas, “Ethical Dialogues: Youth, Memoir, and Trauma”, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2015, p. 273.

account in order to help move towards addressing the systematic and comprehensive silencing of children's voices in the institutional architecture concerned with children in war.

Children's vulnerability

Definitions of childhood are contested, but there is a broad consensus that childhood is the period from birth to 18 years of age. At the most basic definitional level, the CRC defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".¹⁹ While in some legal and cultural systems, different competencies are recognized before (and sometimes after) the age of 18 – such as voting, purchase and consumption of alcohol or tobacco, age of consent for sexual activities, and legal accountability – at some point every society recognizes a person as transitioning from childhood to a "competent adult". The notion of the child that dominates in popular discourse and underpins international conventions such as the CRC is presented as universal but is in fact the product of Western philosophical, psychological and sociological thought: an incomplete, irrational "becoming"²⁰ who is the passive recipient of socialization and a site of investment for the future.²¹ Thus, childhood can be understood as the condition experienced by all children,²² and their passivity and incompleteness justifies the protectionism of the family, concerned institutions, the State and the international community.²³ Removing children from the public sphere and legislating an "appropriate place" for children reinforces their incomplete status and legitimizes their marginal condition and silencing. They are often seen as "presocial", which precludes them from being able to articulate political or social positions.²⁴ Brocklehurst argues that there is a "conceptual separation" of the child and the political, a "containment" of the concept of the child as specifically not political.²⁵ This also allows the child to be deployed as a motivation for political action (for example, as an emotive symbol) when necessary.

19 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989 (entered into force 2 September 1990), Art. 1.

20 Jens Qvortrup, "Childhood Matters: An Introduction", in Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta and Helmut Wintersberger (eds), *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1994.

21 Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1998.

22 Tobias Hecht, *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

23 Olga Nieuwenhuys, "Growing Up between Places of Work and Non-Places of Childhood: The Uneasy Relationship," in Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv (eds), *Children's Places: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 99.

24 D. Sears and N. Valentino, "Politics Matters: Political Events as Catalysts for Pre-Adolescent Socialisation", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 1997.

25 Helen Brocklehurst, *Who's Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, p. 140.

In being located in the passive, private sphere against the public, political world, the child is prevented from participating or speaking. Moreover, the dominant discourse delegitimizes any attempt by children to speak for themselves. It places “the child” in front of the multiplicity of experiences and institutionalizes the dominant conception of childhood. The concept of “children” as seen by adults may not reveal the lived experience of young people themselves, a “phenomenon of duality and misrepresentation which is unique to this cohort, since they cannot represent themselves”.²⁶ Cordero Arce points out that children are considered dependent, incompetent and irrational, not because they actually are any of these things, but because adults acknowledge children only as lacking competency and rationality; furthermore, he notes that “the child” embodies a whole set of ideas that reinforce this formalized adult “knowing”.²⁷

These cultural norms of childhood, even when not in conflict zones, limit children’s agency and prevent them from being seen as competent contributors to communities and societies.²⁸ In conflict, children are often characterized inherently as victims. They are not seen as having agency, and thus

most approaches to building peace marginalize issues surrounding children: they are little discussed in peace-building policies, seldom asked to participate in peace-building projects, and peace-building strategies are rarely informed by knowledge regarding either their wartime experiences or their post-conflict needs.²⁹

Children in conflict zones, therefore, may be perceived by aid and development agencies and collective public understandings as “the ultimate victim”.³⁰ Childhood has been “decontextualized” and is characterized by “dependence and vulnerability”.³¹

As a result, children in conflict environments are portrayed as being consistently, and universally, negatively affected. With their childhoods “lost” or “stolen”, children in these environments are seen as either dangerous delinquents to be reformed or innocent victims to be protected. Adults label former child combatants as “out-of-place” and dangerous because they have transgressed what is seen as appropriate behaviour and appropriate place for a child or young person. Additionally, the presence of large youth populations is constructed as a

26 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

27 Matías Cordero Arce, “Towards an Emancipatory Discourse of Children’s Rights”, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2012, p. 379.

28 Michael Wyness, Lisa Harrison and Ian Buchanan, “Childhood, Politics and Ambiguity: Towards an Agenda for Children’s Political Inclusion”, *Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2004; Alison James and Alan Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, Falmer Press, Basingstoke, 1990; Jo Boyden, “Children under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children’s Resilience”, *Children, Youth and Environments*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2003; Nick Lee, *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2001.

29 Alison M. S. Watson, “Can there Be a ‘Kindered’ Peace?”, *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2008.

30 Alison M. S. Watson, “Resilience is Its Own Resistance: The Place of Children in Post-Conflict Settlement”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015, p. 51.

31 J. Boyden, above note 28, p. 1.

thing to fear.³² Alternatively, children are constructed as passive victims, seen as the unwilling and uncomprehending tool of vicious regimes³³ or the unwitting sufferer of tragic circumstance. Thus, collectively, young people are frequently portrayed as dangerous; individually they are seen as in need of care and protection.

Yet, a compelling and every-growing body of detailed research evidence demonstrates that children are not merely or solely victims or delinquents. In 1990, James and Prout identified the key features of the “emergent paradigm” of research and researchers committed to recognizing children in their own right.³⁴ They argue that while children are still in a process of development, their experiences are not invalidated because of this. They note that childhood can be understood as a social construction, contingent on geographic and historical location; comparative analysis demonstrates a multiplicity of childhoods that run counter to the notion of a universal construction. Those researchers adopting and contributing to this view see children as active in the construction of their own social lives. Young people thus acquire a form of full social position, different in each society, whereby they occupy “subordinate positions within the social structure as ‘dependent beings’ rather than ‘dependent becomings’”.³⁵

In conflict contexts, children act to negotiate the difficulties they encounter. This includes joining but also escaping from armed groups, supporting their families financially and taking on head-of-household roles, and persisting to pursue their education when possible. They also have their own opinions on the state of national or local politics, mourn and grieve for loss, and navigate insecure and violent contexts.³⁶ In Colombia, children affected by the conflict, living as internally displaced people in informal communities, position themselves as active in daily efforts to mitigate violence and construct strong community.³⁷ Finnstrom’s work in Uganda demonstrates that child rebels do not position themselves as passive but rather negotiate, as actors with agency, their own circumstances.³⁸ Similar examples are evident in other environments.³⁹ In conflict

32 Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, “Conclusion: Youth and Post-Accord Peace Building”, in Siobhán McEvoy-Levy (ed.), *Troublemakers or Peacemakers? Youth and Post-Accord Peace Building*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2006, p. 282.

33 Vanessa Pupavac, “Misanthropy without Borders: The International Children’s Rights Regime”, *Disasters*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2001.

34 A. James and A. Prout (eds), above note 28.

35 N. Lee, above note 28, p. 47.

36 See Alcinda Manuel Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2006; Michael Wessells, “A Living Wage: The Importance of Livelihood in Reintegrating Former Child Soldiers,” in Neil Boothby, Alison Strang and Michael Wessells (eds), *A World Turned Upside Down: Social Ecological Approaches to Children in War Zones*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT, 2006; Carolyn Nordstrom, “The Jagged Edge of Peace: The Creation of Culture and War Orphans in Angola”, in S. McEvoy-Levy (ed.), above note 32; Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry (eds), *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2004.

37 Helen Berents, *Young People and Everyday Peace: Exclusion, Insecurity and Peacebuilding in Colombia*, Routledge, New York, 2018; Helen Berents, “Children, Violence, and Social Exclusion: Negotiation of Everyday Insecurity in a Colombian Barrio”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015.

38 Sverker Finnström, “Wars of the Past and War in the Present: The Lord’s Resistance Movement/Army in Uganda”, *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 76, No. 2, 2006.

39 A. M. Honwana, above note 36; C. Nordstrom, above note 36.

zones, children may continue to pursue everyday activities such as schooling, play or family life.⁴⁰ Even in the foundational document for the UN’s Children and Armed Conflict agenda, Graça Machel’s 1996 report, there is evidence of children undertaking a wide array of activities and supporting their communities.⁴¹ These kinds of activities may, as Kate Lee-Koo argues, evidence “experience, skill, strength, cunning, political consciousness, capacity for judgement and the ability to act, all of which ... qualify as a form of agency and all of which have the capacity to shape a child’s immediate environment”.⁴²

It is crucial, in recognizing the agency of children, to acknowledge that the ability to exercise agency is intimately connected to power. States or institutions have the capacity to act in a strategic manner – planning, using resources, establishing control. However, those individuals or groups who are marginalized and lack power can still respond to the context of their daily lives. De Certeau refers to this as “tactical agency”,⁴³ often invisible, it involves individuals and communities navigating and negotiating structures of power and oppression. Recognizing that children have agency is to recognize that children can enact that agency in ways which are broadly seen as negative, such as joining armed groups and participating in armed conflict, or positive, such as participating in peacebuilding or seeking out education or employment opportunities post-conflict. If we take the definition of “child soldier” from the 1997 Cape Town Principles, we can see that the range of activities in which children are compelled to engage within conflict are multiple and complex:

“Child soldier” in this document is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.⁴⁴

Children recruited to armed groups also find ways of avoiding their responsibilities or subverting orders, to avoid killing or hurting other children for example. Thus, even within a subset of children affected by conflict – child soldiers – it is evident that children exhibit tactical agency in a range of ways.

It is instructive here to bring in Marshall Beier’s distinction between “agency” and “subjecthood”: the former refers to the “capacity to act”, while the

40 Kim Huynh, Bina d’Costa and Katrina Lee-Koo, *Children and Global Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

41 Graça Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Report of the Expert of the Secretary-General, Ms. Graça Machel, Submitted Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157*, New York, 1996.

42 Katrina Lee-Koo, “‘The Intolerable Impact of Armed Conflict on Children’: The United Nations Security Council and the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict”, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, Vol. 10, No. 1–2, 2018, p. 62.

43 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1984, p. 14.

44 UNICEF, *Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa*, Cape Town, 27–30 April 1997, available at: [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles(1).pdf).

latter implies “mastery of one’s own agency or the idea that actions are the products of one’s (at least relatively) autonomous choices”.⁴⁵ Child soldiers, for instance, “might have some measure of acknowledged agency”, but “recognition of autonomous subjecthood runs counter to hegemonic understandings of childhood”.⁴⁶ To reduce children in war to simply victims limits our capacity to fully understand their experience. As Beier argues,

the denial of subjecthood leaves little room for serious engagement with the possibility that some young people might choose participation in armed conflict as an autonomously reasoned survival strategy. Moreover, directing our gaze instead toward the presumed “real” subjects—those adults in the name of whose projects child soldiers fight—also leaves us potentially inattentive to the material conditions that could motivate a young person to see such a choice as an opportunity for improved circumstances.⁴⁷

Such attentiveness to the agency of children moves towards recognizing their subjecthood, as per Beier’s insight, and permits an understanding of children’s experiences of conflict as being constituted of victimization, but also acts of resistance and resiliency. It offers an understanding of “children” that takes lived experience seriously and recognizes the inadequacies of universalizing notions of childhood.

To understand children as being worthy of study allows engagement with children in order to understand how they construct and determine their own lives, the lives of those around them, and their societies. In conflict-affected environments, where children act in ways beyond the “appropriate” forms of childhood, flexible and responsive approaches to children allow them to be recognized alongside other marginalized and structurally powerless groups. If children are active contributors and participants in conflict environments, approaches to their protection and support need to account for their lived complexity. To do this, their stories must be taken seriously.

Limitations of protectionist-focused architecture

At a broad, overarching level, children’s rights are articulated in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC establishes a set of universal rights to which all children are entitled, and which all signatory nations are obligated to assure. The CRC is the most ratified document in UN history (only the United States has not yet ratified it), and it both enumerates the rights that

45 Marshall Beier, “Shifting the Burden: Childhoods, Resilience, Subjecthood”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2015, p. 241.

46 Marshall Beier, “Ultimate Tests: Children, Rights, and the Politics of Protection”, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, Vol. 10, No. 1–2, 2018, p. 177.

47 M. Beier, above note 45, p. 242.

children should be guaranteed and outlines space for children’s participation in matters affecting them, “in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”.⁴⁸

International humanitarian law makes special provision for the protection of children in conflict. Article 77 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly outlines the principle of special protection:

Children shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected against any form of indecent assault. The parties to the conflict shall provide them with the care and aid they require, whether because of their age or for any other reason.⁴⁹

Other elements of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols address the evacuation of children, their right to medical care, and other protections against hostilities.

The UN Security Council’s Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda, comprised of twelve resolutions, provides a comprehensive architecture for the protection and support of children in conflict. In 1999, the initial resolution of this agenda, Security Council Resolution 1261, identified six grave violations of children in conflict as follows: killing and maiming of children, recruitment or use of children as soldiers, sexual violence against children, abduction of children, attacks against schools or hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access for children.⁵⁰ These grave violations have formed the infrastructure of subsequent compulsory monitoring and reporting to the UN of children in situations of armed conflict. In 2018 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2427 on “Children and Armed Conflict”, which emphasized the need for “child mainstreaming” in security sector reform, meaning “to mainstream child protection”.⁵¹ Such language is typical of UN documents on the engagement of securing children’s rights in conflict. These are well-established mechanisms, and represent widespread support for the protection of children in conflict; such efforts are significant and laudable.

However, there are valuable and important critiques of child protection systems that do not adequately centre the child in considerations of responding to children’s experiences of war.⁵² Children are particularly vulnerable in conflict environments, their rights are often violated with impunity, and their perspective on war is often dismissed as “childish”. Yet protection, while the most pressing of concerns for children facing violence and insecurity, is often over-emphasized at a general level without accounting for the complexities of children’s lived experiences of conflict.

48 Article 12 of the CRC states: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

49 Protocol Additional (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, 1125 UNTS 3, 8 June 1977 (entered into force 7 December 1978), Art. 77.

50 UNSC Res. 1261, 25 August 1999.

51 UNSC Res. 2427, 1 July 2018, p. 3.

52 Cecilia Jacob, “‘Children and Armed Conflict’ and the Field of Security Studies”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015; K. Lee-Koo, above note 42.

For example, Jo Boyden argues that UNICEF's discourse on the "world's children" presupposes a monolithic notion of childhood which applies everywhere, a notion that many international organizations adopt and promote.⁵³ Another pervasive rhetorical device is the idea that childhood can be "lost" or "stolen" from young people. Such a conception performs two functions. The first is that children are seen to either have or not have a "childhood" and that childhood is seen as a set of conditions, but more than this, any absence of these conditions results in the wholesale loss of childhood. The second function is that in claiming a child has "lost" their childhood, that child becomes the perfect (passive) victim of that loss, and responsibility falls upon concerned adults to redeem them and restore the conditions of childhood.

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified more quickly and more widely than any other UN Convention, its creation was not uncontested, and critiques of the so-called "children's rights regime", including and beyond the formal documents of the UN, are enduring.⁵⁴ Particularly in conflict contexts, "participation" of children in decisions that affect them, which is one of the "guiding principles" of the CRC, often gets subsumed under the urgency of the protection mandates of the Geneva Conventions and the UN Security Council's CAAC agenda. In this, opportunity is missed for engaging children's own experiences in order to better respond to children's needs in conflict.

The CAAC agenda, argues Lee-Koo, is "animated by a protection ethic"⁵⁵ that constitutes an "overbearing focus" which "blindsides the Council to the breadth of experiences and multiple subjectivities of children in armed conflict".⁵⁶ This protectionism isn't limited to the CAAC agenda but can be seen more broadly in the Security Council's approach to civilian populations.⁵⁷ Lee-Koo notes that the Security Council's approach can be seen to stem from three imperatives: "international legal obligation to uphold children's right to be free of violence, moral obligations to protect children from violence, and – importantly – instrumentalist claims that children's protection is a tool in the maintenance of peace and security".⁵⁸ Similar arguments can be made of the international humanitarian framework – that it is heavily protectionist-driven and universalizing of children's needs in conflict.

53 Jo Boyden, "Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood", in A. James and A. Prout (eds), above note 28, p. 183.

54 See, in particular, M. Cordero Arce, above note 27, who has a significant and radical critique; see also Obijiofor Aginam, "Erosion of Indigenous Values and the Poverty of International Legal Protection of Children in Wars and Conflicts: An African Perspective", in *Children and War: Impact, Protection, and Rehabilitation*. University of Alberta, Los Angeles, CA, 2006; Ann Sheppard, "Child Soldiers: Is the Optional Protocol Evidence of an Emerging 'Straight-18' Consensus?", *International Journal of Children's Rights*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2000; Andrew Mawson, "Children, Impunity and Justice: Some Dilemmas from Northern Uganda", in J. Boyden and J. de Berry (eds), above note 36.

55 K. Lee-Koo, above note 42, p. 57.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

57 Gina Heathcote, "Women and Children and Elephants as Justifications for the Use of Force", *Journal of the Use of Force and International Law*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017.

58 K. Lee-Koo, above note 42, p. 59.

Crucial to this discussion is Cecilia Jacob’s argument that child security and child protection need to be distinguished. The “*politics that determine children’s insecurity* as a site of intervention is as important, if not more so, than the political influence or agency exerted by children”.⁵⁹ Yet, evidence of children’s agency may motivate changes to the political and legal structures that respond to their insecurity. This article is not arguing that the existing international architecture for responding to children in war is not important or valuable; rather, it draws on a well-established literature which recognizes children’s agency, to argue that the inclusion of children’s direct experiences of war within international architecture and mechanisms can strengthen and complement existing efforts to address children’s needs in conflict.

The children’s war memoir as genre and generative

Hearing children’s accounts of war, accounting for their everyday experiences, and including their insights on surviving unimaginable violence and horror, if done meaningfully, could contribute to strengthening efforts for their protection and engagement. Although not uncontested or unproblematic, children’s war memoirs offer evidence of one way of understanding children as having agency and subjecthood that could productively inform debates about international mechanisms for responding to their needs in conflict.

While many memoirs of childhood that appeared through the 1990s in particular put the family in the global North under scrutiny,⁶⁰ memoirs of children’s experiences of war that grew in popularity in the early 2000s place the broader context under scrutiny as much as the family. Revolving around a single experience of conflict, children’s war memoirs provide space to unpack and explore the nuance and complexity of life in a war zone, the choices that children make, and the geopolitical context in which these decisions occur. Children’s memoirs of war are not new; Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, for instance, presents an account of World War II from the perspective of a Jewish girl in hiding. These accounts have cultural currency and enduring relevance to understanding and accounting for young people’s experiences of war. This article uses the term “children’s war memoirs” as a shorthand for what is a much more complex genre of writing. These children’s books are not *solely* about their experiences of war; rather, they are memoirs of children’s lived experiences which include experiences of war. This distinction is important to make, as it acknowledges that young people writing about their lived experience produce accounts greater than reductive stories of “war”.

59 Cecilia Jacob, *Child Security in Asia: The Impact of Armed Conflict in Cambodia and Myanmar*, Routledge, London, 2016, p. 47 (emphasis in original).

60 Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas, “Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth”, *Prose Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2013.

Gillian Whitlock argues that autobiographies function as “soft weapons” which can “personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard”.⁶¹ Kate Douglas, who has undertaken detailed, sensitive and important work on youth memoirs that deal with trauma and war, refers to children’s war memoirs as “trauma texts” and argues that these texts

are affective; they may have a consciousness-raising, social-justice agenda, carrying testimony that might otherwise not be heard or comprehended. Many trauma texts deal with global issues. These texts can shift the margins of global citizenship and social suffering; they address and implicate and call for response.⁶²

The overlap of these books’ content with debates about human rights and humanitarian responses in the audiences that consume these cultural texts means that such accounts are well positioned to demonstrate the capacity of children to tell narratives of their own experience of conflict. Maureen Moynagh argues that child soldier narratives in particular complicate victim/perpetrator binaries and provide “a ‘textual battleground’ for particular representations of childhood innocence across cultural and political contexts”.⁶³ These narratives position children as both victims but also as having agency—or even subjecthood (to invoke Beier). They also present a complex moment that requires critical engagement with how memories of children in war operate as “tools of cultural memory” that contribute to or challenge the way social and cultural life is understood and remembered.⁶⁴ The stories being told are often accounts of places and experiences that are very different to those familiar to the audience, as these stories, often of war and violence in the global South, are consumed and marketed to audiences in the global North.⁶⁵

There are profound power inequalities and layers of co-constitution within the stories. This does not invalidate children’s war memoirs, but it draws attention to them as a complex site of contestation over understandings of war and children’s agency. Writing about children’s memoirs broadly, Douglas notes:

Children’s lives are traditionally constructed as valuable only for what they can tell us about adult lives, or about adult preoccupations with childhood. The subject of the autobiography must be deemed “worthy” to the critics of the time—or else it risks being labelled trivial or inconsequential.⁶⁶

61 G. Whitlock, above note 5.

62 K. Douglas, above note 18, p. 273.

63 Maureen Moynagh, “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2011, p. 47.

64 K. Douglas, above note 4, p. 7.

65 G. Whitlock, above note 5. See also Helen Berents, “Hashtagging Girlhood: #IAmMalala, #BringBackOurGirls and Gendering Representations of Global Politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2015.

66 K. Douglas, above note 4, p. 160.

The memoirs of children’s experiences of war that are published and widely distributed often tell stories of exceptional childhood, traumatic events and experiences that are overcome, presenting accounts that foreground resilience.⁶⁷

While children’s war memoirs might “play a reparative role after trauma, mediating between the trauma and the witness”⁶⁸ in crucial and important ways, Mackey also notes that “the complexities of self-representation do not always line up easily with the cultural work that these narratives are expected to do”.⁶⁹ Children’s war memoirs are complicated because of their entanglement in cultural discourse and political practice; yet it is precisely this entanglement that positions them as important literary texts, and important sites of children’s authoritative voices on their understandings of conflict that highlight the imperative to consider their agency more carefully when discussing their experiences of war.

Children’s stories of war

There is a large popular literary appetite for children’s war memoirs. Malala Yousafzai’s *I Am Malala* has sold over 2 million copies, and the version for young readers has sold over 750,000 copies.⁷⁰ Nujeen Mustafa’s book has been translated into nine languages since its publication in 2017. A year after its release, Ishmael Beah’s book had sold over 600,000 copies.⁷¹ The commercial success of some of these books is assisted by their being discussed by various celebrities: US late-night TV host John Oliver heard of Mustafa’s love for the daytime soap opera *Days of Our Lives* that had she had watched to teach herself English and introduced his audience to her story by staging a made-up ending scene from the show.⁷² Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling heard of Bana Alabed’s love of the books while she was still in Syria and sent her a message of support and e-books of the series.⁷³ The hunger for stories of war told by children is testimony to the potentially important role such books play in making visible and accessible accounts and understandings of children’s experiences of war. These children are, in many ways, exceptional; and yet, while there are exceptional circumstances that enabled the writing of their books, their stories reveal the

67 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

69 Allison Mackey, “Troubling Humanitarian Consumption: Reframing Relationality in African Child Soldier Narratives”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2013, p. 101.

70 Sarah J. Robbins, “Four Questions for Malala Yousafzai”, *Publishers Weekly*, 12 October 2017, available at: www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/75059-four-questions-with-malala-yousafzai.html.

71 Gabriel Sherman, “The Fog of Memoir”, *Slate*, 6 March 2008, available at: www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2008/03/the_fog_of_memoir.html.

72 “Refugee Syrian Girl ‘So Happy’ at Days of Our Lives Tribute”, *BBC News*, 30 September 2015, available at: www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-34406034/refugee-syrian-girl-so-happy-at-days-of-our-lives-tribute

73 “Syrian Girl Thanks JK Rowling for Sending Harry Potter Books”, *BBC Newsbeat*, 25 November 2016, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/38101262/syrian-girl-thanks-jk-rowling-for-sending-harry-potter-books.

importance of considering their stories not as exceptional but as illustrative of everyday experiences of war. All these narratives reveal complex and distinct experiences: direct experiences of violence, the challenges of being a child in these contexts, the importance of community and children's contributions to that community, the challenges in getting those beyond the situation to pay attention and understand, and aspirations for the future. There is a note of caution, however, as there is a danger in these books reproducing simplistic stereotypes as well as simplistic solutions for deeply complex problems.

The children's war memoirs explored here all begin in a similar fashion. Most begin with a prologue or first chapter describing a key moment in the child's experience of war, such as Malala Yousafzai being shot in the head, Ishmael Beah and Emmanuel Jal's experience of being taken by armed groups to become child soldiers, or Nujeen Mustafa's recounting of the sea-crossing from Turkey to Greece. All return to their childhood and a description of life either before war or before war became all-engulfing. These early chapters of children's war memoirs tell stories of everyday life and "typical" childhood behaviour. Bana Alabed tells the reader: "[M]y baba always took me swimming at Alrabea Pool, which was my favourite thing to do. Going to the swings was my second favourite thing to do."⁷⁴ Yousafzai describes Swat Valley as "the most beautiful place in the world" and tells of her early years, interwoven with history and myths that her father told her growing up.⁷⁵

The memoirs also tell of the incremental, inexorable arrival of conflict to these children's lives and communities. Jal notes that "there was peace in Sudan for the first three years of my life, but I cannot remember it. All I knew was a war that grew as I did."⁷⁶ Jal describes the arrival of refugees to his village, where his Mamma still woke early for church to "make us porridge made of sorghum grain before putting on our 'Sunday best'".⁷⁷ Experiences of school are also foregrounded, reminding the reader of the crucial importance of education and highlighting the tragedy of war's impact on children's ability to safely access schooling. Evelyn Amory tells the reader that her "happiest memory" is when she received "the second-highest grade in my class in Primary Four When my dad heard the news, he slaughtered a goat and gave me the liver."⁷⁸

Extended attention to education also features in Yousafzai's story, as it is her advocacy for girls' education that resulted in the attempt on her life. Douglas argues that the texts produced by Yousafzai, including her memoir, make "visible moments of resistance"⁷⁹ and allow her to "authorize herself",⁸⁰ including explicitly presenting her position as an advocate for girls' education. In Mustafa's

⁷⁴ B. Alabed, above note 15, p. 10.

⁷⁵ M. Yousafzai and C. Lamb, above note 1, p. 1.

⁷⁶ E. Jal and M. Lloyd Davies, above note 2, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ E. Amory and E. Baines, above note 14, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Kate Douglas, "Malala Yousafzai, Life Narrative and the Collaborative Archive", *Life Writing*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2017, p. 298.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

story, her brother says that she “only need[s] to hear something once to remember it exactly”, and yet her disability prevents her from attending school, something the onset of the civil war makes even more unbearable for her. This deep desire to learn and to have an education is an ongoing thread in Mustafa’s story. Education is not only a lived marker of normalcy of childhood, but reflects the importance placed on education by many children in conflict zones. Education provision often suffers in war, and yet opportunities for education can provide spaces for children to escape the violence in their lives and to plan and work towards future goals.⁸¹

These similarities in children’s war memoirs reflect a broader convention of autobiographical writing. It is common to return to the beginning in telling a story, but in these stories, this also provides an important frame of “normalcy” for these children’s lives. These are children who, like children everywhere, have both modest and grand visions for their future, have families who love them, and have aspirations to learn and grow. Each of these stories frames a “normal” childhood that is removed from the child, perpetuating the dominant discourse of childhoods that are “lost”. The children in the first chapters of these books are profoundly human and relatable, but they also introduce key themes of relevance to considering how children experience conflict and the major challenges they face: from education as discussed above, to health care and disruption of services, war impacts children’s everyday experiences.

Children’s memoirs of war also offer an argument for recognition of their capacity for resilience and navigation of violence and risk. Many of these children are profoundly affected by the events they have endured. Evelyn Amory finds it difficult to narrate certain experiences of her time with the LRA and the abuse she suffered. Beah speaks of the experience of being inducted and indoctrinated into the group. They made the children burn their clothes and possessions: “I ran towards the fire but the cassettes [with his favourite rap music] had already started to melt. Tears formed in my eyes, and my lips shook as I turned away.”⁸² Beah also describes how he was made to kill others, and to take drugs that made him “fierce”⁸³ and without fear of death. These experiences are reflected upon later in the book when he is involved in a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme and transitions out of life as a child soldier. Bana Alabed shares her terror and fear as Aleppo was bombed around her while she was trapped with her family:

I didn’t know what it was when the first big bomb came. It was just a regular day It was the loudest noise I had ever heard in my life, a noise so big you could feel it in your body, not just hear it. The sound and the surprise made my body feel like jelly.⁸⁴

81 See, for example, Helen Berents, “‘It’s About Finding a Way’: Children, Sites of Opportunity, and Building Everyday Peace in Colombia”, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2014.

82 I. Beah, above note 12, p. 110.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

84 B. Alabed, above note 15, pp. 21–22.

These stories, as Beah says, put “a human face” on an “issue that is bigger than everyone and me”.⁸⁵ They remind the reader that the statistics are comprised of individual children with unique stories; that every one of the approximately 300,000 child soldiers has a story like Beah or Jal or Amony; that of the tens of thousands of refugees arriving in Europe since 2014, each child carries with them memories of war like Mustafa or Alabed; that while Yousafzai was airlifted to the UK to recover, thousands of girls still risk violence simply by attending school every day. Yet, just as adults do, children in conflict zones find ways of navigating and resisting violence and making sense of the chaos around them to seek out safety.⁸⁶ Children’s war memoirs, in this framing, offer a way of recovering children’s agency, recognizing that while they undoubtedly need protection and support, they also have well-developed understandings of conflict and solutions for peace.

Traumatic texts and the value of children’s voices

The stories in these children’s war memoirs present a window into the minds and experiences of children and the diversity of their experiences of wars. Children’s war memoirs can be read as a way of recognizing children’s authoritative voice, presenting children as knowledgeable about the situation around them and able to position their single story within the surrounding context. Recalling Douglas’s observation of children’s war memoirs as “trauma texts”, these narratives that recount experiences of violence (both as victims and as perpetrators) and experiences of fear are narratives of negotiating significant trauma. Similarly, while they are literary texts, this also means they function as cultural and political texts.⁸⁷ Demands for “forensic truth”⁸⁸ undermine the crucially important value in recounting a narrative truth about a lived experience of trauma. A sustained campaign as to the “truth” of Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* by *The Australian* newspaper claimed that Beah’s account was fundamentally suspect and thus, by implication, had little merit.⁸⁹ This deeply problematic critique misses the valid and valuable contribution that Beah has made to a genre of life writing which helps us to better understand the experience of child soldiers and children’s navigation of traumatic memory.⁹⁰ Alabed, who started documenting the Syrian conflict via her Twitter account, with the help of her mother, was dismissed as “propaganda” by Assad, and has experienced organized attacks against the

85 I. Beah, above note 12, p. 14, postscript.

86 H. Berents, *Young People and Everyday Peace*, above note 37; Helen Berents and Charlotte ten Have, “Navigating Violence: Fear and Everyday Life in Colombia and Mexico”, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2017.

87 K. Douglas, above note 18, p. 281.

88 Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2007, p. 17. Sanders’ use of the terms “forensic truth” and “narrative truth” is critically adapted from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report, and is discussed by Douglas in relation to Beah: see K. Douglas, above note 18.

89 G. Sherman, above note 71.

90 K. Douglas, above note 4; K. Douglas, above note 18.

legitimacy of the Twitter account, as well as accusations that she is not a real person.⁹¹ Even Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai has been accused of telling her own story at the expense of those still back in Pakistan.⁹² Literary arguments aside, these critiques of the child authors of these books draw upon deeply held stereotypes about children as innocent and uncomprehending victims. The telling of stories in children’s first-person voices⁹³ challenges perceptions of children in conflict as passive or ignorant of what is happening around them; accounting for trauma as a lived experience offers crucial insight into children’s experiences of war.

The exceptional children of war memoirs

Children’s war memoirs are particularly good examples of “resilient autobiographies” that are seen as “most appropriate” for publication and consumption.⁹⁴ Such “resilience” is demonstrated through the overcoming of a traumatic event. These children, who have experienced war, escaped or overcome suffering and violence, and found the resources to tell their story, can be seen as exceptional. Not all children affected by war have the capacity or opportunity to tell their story as these young people do; and not all children are given the opportunity to make new lives post-trauma and post-war. The stories that are told via memoirs are instances where children’s agency is visible, and where more complex stories of children’s lived experience of war are told.

Significantly, all these memoirs exist alongside paratexts and intertexts.⁹⁵ These young people, having overcome individual trauma and survived a collective experience of violence, move their narrative on beyond the reflection and retelling that memoir offers. For example, Yousafzai has gone on to study philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford while running the international girls’ education advocacy organization The Malala Fund. Beah is an ambassador for UNICEF, and Jal has a musical career and runs an NGO. In giving interviews, writing and

91 Nick Waters, “Finding Bana – Proving the Existence of a 7-Year-Old Girl in Eastern Aleppo” *Bellingcat*, 14 December 2016, available at: www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/14/bana-alabed-verification-using-open-source-information/.

92 Thomas Olesen, “Malala and the Politics of Global Iconicity”, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2016.

93 It is worth noting that these books do have a diversity of by-lines. Both Emmanuel Jal and Ishmael Beah are the sole authors of their memoirs. Nujeen Mustafa and Malala Yousafzai co-authored their books with journalist Christina Lamb. Bana Alabed is sole author, but the book acknowledges that she received help from her mother and editor in telling her story. Evelyn Amory’s book is edited and introduced by associate professor Erin Baines, piecing together notes from conversations with Evelyn to produce the book, which Baines explains in the front matter (pp. xvii–xxiii). Kate Douglas argues that mediation of text – whether via translation or collaboration – is often assumed to create “inferior cultural texts”, but it is important to recognize the bias inherent in such accusations, which particularly affect “young writers and writers whose first language is not English” (K. Douglas, above note 4, p. 307). If, as this article argues, children’s war memoirs can offer a site for conveying children’s experience of war and a way to better account for children’s agency when considering responses to their suffering in war, the implications of adult assistance in authorship must be acknowledge and considered, even as they do not invalidate the narrative themselves.

94 K. Douglas, above note 4, p. 158.

95 See Kate Douglas and Anne Poletti, *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, p. 96.

speaking publicly, and continuing to live with public attention, the stories of children's experience of war told by these young people continue beyond the books they have authored. Their agency is evident in their daily advocacy for children in war.

There is a necessary caution in focusing on these stories. Often described as "exceptional", these young people have overcome and escaped violence and war; they are held up as icons⁹⁶ to be aspired to. But this framing is imposed and carries particular expectations of performance of certain values and narratives. It also implicitly condemns those children who are not able to escape and succeed in the same way. By emphasizing exceptional agency, it reinforces the implied incapacity of other children and reinforces certain expectations of Western exceptionalism. This is the paradox at the heart of the presence of these young people in popular discourses about war: the contribution of their war memoirs to effecting meaningful change is predicated on highly unequal global power relations, on highly unequal power relations between child and adult, and on the sharing of experiences of trauma. In recognizing the capacity and agency of children, legitimizing their subjecthood as rights-bearing individuals in conflict, these memoirs offer more complex ways of understanding children's experiences of war.

Memoirs are one example of child-owned narratives that demonstrate the value and complexity of children's experiences. For instance, alongside formal published memoirs, children tell their stories through Twitter and blogs. There are other spaces in which the voices of children (or adults who were children at the time of the events in question) are heard, such as accounts of war in which children, as victims, tell their experience to a court record, or a record formed as part of a transitional justice mechanism. These accounts tend to be more formalized and restricted, and the child speaking is a vessel for the legitimacy of experiences of violence; their script is limited. Nevertheless, these multiple sites, in which children's voices are heard and their experiences recounted, present spaces where children's agency is evident. They offer insight into how protectionist-driven frameworks can be enhanced by discourses that more fully account for the complexity of children's experiences of war.

Conclusion

Stories like those told through children's war memoirs can help us to better understand children's experiences of conflict. In their best form, they can prompt action, support, and investment in solutions that account for children's agency when addressing their suffering in conflict. At a minimum, they expose readers to experiences beyond their daily lives, fostering awareness of the complexities of violence and insecurity, but also the resilience and hope of children living amidst war.

96 See H. Berents, above note 65.

This article has taken children’s war memoirs as one source in which children’s agency is foregrounded and their diverse and complex experiences of conflict are recognized as legitimate. Narratives of children’s lived experience of war have a large audience, with no signs of abating interest. They enter the popular discourse as books discussed in book clubs and in literary reviews, and they influence the ways in which people interact with human rights campaigning and discussion. In these spaces children’s voices are granted authority and—although always implicated in uneven global circulations of power—offer a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of conflict for children in countries often quite distant to the lived experience of the readership of such books.

The institutional architecture that engages children in conflict is frequently characterized by a “protectionist ethic” that subsumes other concerns. While documents like the CRC offer a space for children’s participation (established as a key guiding principle of the document), such participation is often overlooked in practice. The drive to protect children in conflict is crucially important and overwhelmingly urgent. This article seeks to draw attention—via accounts of conflict in children’s war memoirs—to the spaces and ways in which children already participate and demonstrate the “due weight” that their views should be accorded.⁹⁷

While protectionist frames dominate the international architecture of responding to children in war, stories such as those in children’s war memoirs draw stark attention to the agency and capacity of children in negotiating and navigating incredibly different traumas and experiences of war. While children experience particular vulnerabilities and risks in conflict zones, their potential as contributors to the solutions to war and conflict must be taken more seriously. These children’s war memoirs demonstrate existing avenues for doing so and reveal children themselves as narrators and authors of that experience. This article has highlighted the contributions of a selection of these accounts to argue that taking them seriously offers ways of thinking about war that centre the child as actor rather than just a passive victim. Broadening the inclusion of children’s voices in formal spaces of humanitarian and peace and security practice can offer novel ways of addressing conflict, and prompt new urgency to addressing the enduring challenges and violations experienced by children in war.

97 CRC, Art. 12.