Real? American? Hero?
An Autoethnography About Playing Creatively and Cathartically with G.I. Joe

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In what the author calls an autoethnography, he examines two aspects of his love of a favorite childhood toy: G.I. Joe. First, because the author is a contingent pacificist and this military figure—a fundamentally violent toy— played so important a role in his life, he now seeks to reconcile his aversion to (real life) violence with his enjoyment of G.I. Joe. Second, he explores how his experience as a Third Culture Kid (TCK)—born in the United States, but growing up in Africa—was affected by his enjoyment of G.I. Joe. He combines research, reflection, analysis, and narrative in an account of how his experiences with G.I. Joe may have been manifested in his creativity and how they provided a therapeutic catharsis following his exposure to actual violent conflict. Hopkins also argues for the future use of autoethnography in play studies. **Key words**: action figures; autoethnography; cathartic play; contingent pacifism; creative play; G.I. Joe; TCK (Third Culture Kid); toy soldiers; violent toy play

ON MAY 7, 1989, I received my first G.I. Joe action figure—a gift from an older boy named Michael. I know the exact date because my mom filmed a home video and documented my excitement at my new acquisition. It may be my imagination, but I fancy I can hear in her voice that she is less pleased than I am about "a real G.I. Joe."

I do know that my parents shared the concern of many adults from that time that playing with violence-associated toys might make children become more violent people (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990; Best 1998; Chudacoff 2007). G.I. Joes like mine—one from a series of 3.75-inch military-themed action figures and their accessories and play sets manufactured from 1982 to 1994 by toy company Hasbro and marketed as A Real American Hero—were a frequent target of such concern, a concern that might seem understandable given the potential impact of play in one's life. Thomas Henricks (2014) sug-

gests that play is an act of self-realization: "Creatures who play seek to acquaint themselves with the character of the world in which they operate and to evaluate the personal standings they can achieve within that world" (197). We play to understand ourselves and our surroundings. Even without knowing Henricks's theory, parents could reasonably wonder how this military action figure might form a child's belief about the character of the world and the best way to behave in it. And, in the case of their children playing with G.I. Joe, they might ask what the youngsters are learning about being a hero—or an American, for that matter.

Both worries were relevant to my experience—the first, particularly, given my adult aversion to violence; the latter, especially, given my growing up in Senegal, West Africa, as a Third Culture Kid (TCK). In this autoethnography, therefore, I explore the effects of my experience playing with G.I. Joe. Specifically, I show how being a TCK may have contributed to my playing creatively with G.I. Joe and how that play might have provided a sense of therapeutic catharsis following exposure to violent conflict during childhood.

Ironically, given the toy's Real American Hero moniker, my first G.I. Joe was neither American, nor a hero. The character's codename is Taurus, according to the file card—the brief biographical dossier included in the packaging of each figure. The file card identifies Taurus as Turkish, an ex-Interpol agent, fluent in a dozen languages, and a circus acrobat, with a specialization in demolitions:

Figure 1. Justin's first G.I. Joe. Still photograph captured from home video taken by author's mother on May 7, 1989. Video available to view on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/597450335

"He stops hockey-pucks with his forehead and opens bottles with his nostrils" (Hama 1987). Taurus was part of a three-person G.I. Joe subteam called Slaughter's Renegades. Not officially part of the U.S. military, Taurus and his maverick mates reported to Sergeant Slaughter, the pro wrestler turned G.I. Joe team trainer. Slaughter's Renegades operated off the books and "were paid through a special fund earmarked for 'Pentagon Pest Control'" (Hama 1987)—hardly a heroic designation.

Taurus was originally packaged with two accessories, a backpack and a gun. Michael gave me a backpack, but not the gun. I suspect my mom told Michael I couldn't have a gun, not even such a tiny toy gun. Like many parents reluctant to allow their children to engage in violent play, my mom tried for years to keep me and my younger brother from owning toy guns or other war toys, toys like G.I. Joe (Mechling 2008; Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990). She says eventually she just gave up, acknowledging a truth that may be nearly universal: "Boys would make guns out of Lego blocks, sticks, plastic '7s' and 'Ls,' and their bare hands. Boys would chew sandwiches into the shape of guns" (Mechling 2008, 202). I can remember making guns of sticks and fingers, yes, definitely, and while I can not remember pretending a sandwich was a gun, I do not doubt some do.

Lacking Taurus's gun, how would I have played with my first G.I. Joe, following the video recording? Perhaps something like this:

> The boy leans against the rock. The rock is taller than he by half his height and many times the weight. The rock is volcanic in origin. Once it was lava. The surface of the rock is pock-marked, dotted with cavities caused by gas bubbling out of the cooling magma.
>
> In his hand, the boy holds a toy soldier with a bright yellow shirt and bright red beard. The boy holds the toy half way up and against the rock. The soldier's arms are spread wide, his grip clinging, his knees bent to press into the tiny pits in the rock.
>
> The boy uses his forefinger and thumb to shift the toy, twisting the soldier's bald head to the side and back to look up the rock. The boy imagines sweat pouring down the soldier's face, just as the boy himself sweats. The boy is shaded from the tropical sun only partially by the frangipani tree standing nearby.
>
> The boy murmurs, attempting to roughen his voice like he thinks the soldier would sound, "Still a long way to go," and then: "And who will be waiting at the top?"
>
> The boy again shifts the toy, so the soldier's forehead rests against the rock, gathering strength for the rest of the climb.
>
> The boy rotates the soldier's right arm, angling over the shoulder, then

back. The toy's hand is empty, but the boy imagines the soldier sipping from the canteen he has retrieved, then returns to the pack. The water tastes metallic, but it refreshes the soldier. The boy remembers he has not yet consumed his weekly soft drink allowance, and he anticipates the tart, fizzy tang of the orange Fanta.

The boy hears the sound of industrial equipment operating in a nearby warehouse complex—a crane, a forklift, a drill, a power saw. The boy imagines the soldier listening to the construction of some horrific weapon on top of the mountain.

The boy again shifts the toy, imagining the soldier gathering strength for the rest of the climb and the inevitable fight at the mountaintop.

The boy swings the toy's right arm up to grab at a chip in the rock surface. The soldier reaches for a handhold, and a foothold, finds both, and continues the mission. . . .

The episode described above is an example of what Vivian Paley (2004) calls fantasy, or pretend play. Throughout her career, Paley championed the value of fantasy play: "From the earliest 'pretend I'm the mama and you're the baby,' play is the model for the life-long practice of trying out new ideas. Pretending is the most open-ended of all activities, providing the opportunity to escape the limitations of established rituals" (92). Fantasy play, then, is imaginative action in which the distinctions between the self (subject) and the toy (object) may appear blurred to outsiders, but clear to the players themselves. It enables the player to experiment with different identities and actions.

Asserting the value of playing with toys—even violent toys—Brian Sutton-Smith (1992) offers a deconstructive perspective, deploying Derridean theory of signification in a semiotic analysis of the paradox of, for example, a child playing with a baby doll: "The ludic (play) sign is inherently negative (it communicates that it is not what it says it is) and distortive (because it uses a variety of false materials, appearances, and cues that leave no doubt that it is a variant signifier) and yet is also positive because it is, after all, called a 'baby'" (8). That is, the child knows that the baby (doll) is not a real baby (person); the satisfaction is in the pretense, the fantasy constructed.

From such a perspective, I might wonder, when I was playing with G.I. Joe, to what extent was I identifying with the action figures, animating them with my own personality and adopting theirs. Did I take on the character of Taurus the Turkish Renegade who stopped hockey pucks with his forehead, or did Taurus represent me, the TCK who had never even seen hockey played and who was not allowed to own a toy gun? Both? Neither? Henricks (2014) asserts, "When

people play, they realize themselves through activity in the world" (203). But is that realization more a recognition or a reconstruction?

Now, thirty-some years later, I do not identify with Taurus. I consider myself not quite an absolute pacifist, but rather a contingent pacificist (Fiala 2021). That is, real life violence appalls me, but I believe sometimes violence is necessary to protect a greater good. I have never marched in protest against a war, and I hope and believe I would fight to protect my loved ones from an immediate threat but not for much else. Yet I spent much of my childhood playing with these toy warriors, and even as an adult I continue to collect, display, and occasionally play with G.I. Joes. I also regularly read comic books, listen to podcasts, and watch movies and TV shows and YouTube productions about Joe's heroic (and usually violent) exploits. I think of certain G.I. Joes as heroes, as models of humanity, and I aspire to (some of) their attributes—courage, commitment to one's comrades, consummate performance of one's duties. Here then, is a paradox, leading to the first focus of this essay. How do I reconcile my aversion to (real life) violence with my enjoyment of G.I. Joe?

Another area of apparent tension, if not contradiction, in my relationship with G.I. Joe relates to my cultural and national identity. I was born on the fourth of July in New Jersey—does not get much more Yankee Doodle Dandy than that—but I grew up a Third Culture Kid, mostly in Senegal, West Africa, as the son of missionary linguists. As a child, I considered myself basically American. My racial and cultural and socioeconomic difference from my Senegalese playmates was obvious. They owned few toys, and even in our games of soccer, I had to provide the ball. While I could not then articulate the concept, my privilege was evident. Henricks (2014) notes the significance of privilege in play, "when people feel themselves to be (relatively) in control of their circumstances" (204). The manifestation of my racial, cultural, and socioeconomic privilege in play would make for an interesting future study in itself.

Later, in adolescence, and then in young adulthood, as I returned to live in the United States, I realized how very different I also was from many of the people with whom I share a nationality. I adapted, uneasily at times, to U.S. American life, but my childhood in Africa contributed to a complex cultural identity, further complicated by years spent studying in Europe during college and graduate school. Even now, having resided in the United States for over a decade, I consider myself an adult Third Culture Kid, or Third Culture Individual (TCI) (Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell 2011; Melles and Schwartz 2013; Hopkins 2015). Although I appreciate and admire many aspects of my passport country,

I shudder at the white, religious, often violent nationalism and jingoism that far too many now pass off as patriotism in the United States.

Yet, again, for years, and to this day, I have enjoyed toys that can be considered representations of U.S. American neocolonialism from the Reagan and first Bush era. So, another paradox, leading to this essay's second point of focus: How has my experience of being a TCK affected my enjoyment of G.I. Joe?

Given the breadth of G.I. Joe's global penetration, I am probably not the only person who grapples with these issues. G.I. Joe—along with a slew of other more or less violent toy and transmedia franchises (e.g., Mattel's He-Man: Masters of the Universe; Playmates' Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; Bandai's Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers)—did indeed help define heroism for generations of children around the world born in or after the late 1970s (*The Toys that Made Us* 2017; Eberle 2009; Cross 1997). Given the scale of this impact, the social and cultural ramifications of my questions are far greater than my individual experience. Hence this autoethnography.

Genre and Methodology

Still a relatively recently established genre, autoethnography may require some general description, as well as some specific explanation of how this unique form of scholarship can contribute to the field of play studies.

Essentially, autoethnographers study their personal experiences, connecting those experiences with larger social and cultural contexts (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015; Bochner and Ellis 2016, Hopkins 2020a). Approaches to autoethnography vary widely, but several elements are usually present in the genre. First, autoethnographers embrace subjectivity. Personal perspectives and biases are not to be ignored but examined and explicated. Second, autoethnography should be accessible not only to scholars, but also to audiences outside the academy. Most often, such accessibility comes from some artistic, usually narrative component. Third, although the principal data in autoethnographies are the life experiences of the author, autoethnographic research should also include reference to other scholarly sources. Finally, autoethnographers typically do not seek the kinds of direct answers to questions or broadly applicable conclusions sought in more traditional research. Instead, autoethnographers share their accounts hoping they resonate with readers, perhaps prompting further research, reflection, or action.

The genre of autoethnography can offer unusual information and insights to scholars of play. The phenomenon of human play is both deeply personal and also significant in a broader social and cultural context, as Henricks (2014) articulates: "Play occurs in cultural, social, psychological, bodily, and environmental settings. . . . Like self-experience, play is intensely particular. Players live in the moment. . . . Yet, and also like self-experience, these momentary participations draw energy from—and are given meaning by—ongoing formations that instigate and support these activities" (203). Autoethnographers seek such meaning in self-experience as framed by ongoing formations of society and culture. Scholars of play could find the genre of autoethnography an especially useful tool to study the intensely particular and momentous aspects of their own play.

Some studies of play have already employed autoethnography. For example, Wei-Hsu Lu's (2017) autoethnography about playing the game go explores the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins 2007) through the lens of the Confucian concept of self-transformation. Lu highlights the benefits of autoethnography by mixing both analytical and evocative writing, alternating between narratives about playing go and philosophical commentary on the game. Other more traditional play scholarship may still include autoethnographic components. For example, Cathy Thomas (2021), in her recent ethnographic study of Black femme cosplay, includes photographs and descriptions of herself cosplaying to help contextualize her participant observer methodology. These references, arguably autoethnographic in nature, are engaging, informative, and important demonstrations of Thomas's researcher positioning, though they are not the main focus of her work.

Focusing research primarily on the experiences of others, as in an ethnography or case study, does not generally allow the kind of self-representation and reflection required by autoethnography. (I must emphasize that I do not suggest one approach is better than another, only that they are different, each offering its own advantages and disadvantages.) For example, one could conduct a series of surveys and interviews of individuals who played with G.I. Joe, questioning them about their childhood play patterns and their subsequent attitudes towards real-life violence. Such a study could result in a broad portrait of this demographic, but the researcher would likely try to bracket, at least, their own experience as separate from that portrait. Similarly, one could perform a critical analysis of themes in G.I. Joe media, providing theoretical insight into its portrayal of violence, but researchers would likely limit, at least, references to their own memories of reading comic books or watching television. More traditional scholarship rightly requires some

degree of distancing from the subject of study for the sake of objectivity. However, since play is so personal, studying one's own play through autoethnography can benefit from the closeness of the subject, the self.

Further, since play is a fundamentally enjoyable experience and a widely if not universally experienced activity, it seems an ideal subject for auto-ethnographers, who value vivid, artistic writing alongside rigorous analysis. There may be the risk of, as Gary Fine (1981) admits in his ethnography of role-playing games, "alchemically transforming that which is inherently fascinating into something as dull as survey research computer tapes" (xi). But the risk can serve as a challenge to autoethnographic scholars, who strive for accessibility and wide dissemination of their research and writing rather than limiting their audience to a small cohort of specialists (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015). The potential benefit for researchers is that sharing experiences of play from a personal perspective, artfully framed, might prove resonant to nonacademic readers who are otherwise disinclined or unable to participate in more traditional scholarly discourse.

Finally, educators might consider using play-focused autoethnography in their pedagogy to motivate and empower students to do meaningful research (Hanauer 2012). Given the subject of autoethnographic study, students who might otherwise be reluctant to engage in research may find themselves eager to investigate the social and cultural context of their own experiences of play. So far, practicing autoethnography has been the province primarily of professional and graduate-level scholars, but more teachers at the undergraduate level are incorporating the genre into their pedagogy (Tombro 2016, Hopkins 2020a). It would be worth exploring how students at the secondary, and possibly even primary, level might use autoethnography to examine their experiences of play. Using autoethnography, could sixth-graders study their experience of Little League baseball or could high-school sophomores examine their experiences playing *Fortnite*? Obviously, there would be limitations to the extent of research and reflection one could expect from such young students. On the other hand, studying such personally relevant topics might inspire surprisingly insightful and engaging work.

Autoethnographers may use a wide range of methodological approaches, but for most autoethnographers, data collection and analysis involve remembering and reflecting on past personal experiences. The memories are the data, and reflection assigns them meaning (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015).

For this autoethnography, as I have in the past, I began my data collection using Tessa Muncey's concept of snapshots (Muncey 2010, Hopkins 2020b).

According to Muncey, snapshots "capture episodes of life like stills in a film; they convey the skeleton of a life without the flesh and consciousness of the being" (57). Videos, photographs, and other records or objects prompt memories for the researcher to use as data and to represent their lived experience. Reading an interview with Steven Mintz about his study of American childhood and play, I was reminded of Muncey's snapshots: "memories, along with artifacts and photographs, can help us recover a lost world of childhood and, to a certain extent, also reconstruct the meanings that children invested in play" (Mintz 2010, 145). For the sake of such recovery and reconstruction, I wish I could travel back in time to record snapshots of much more of my play as a child, both for my own sake and for the readers. As it is, I can provide a variety of snapshots as data. In addition to the video depicting my excitement at receiving my first G.I. Joe, I also include a scan of a childhood drawing, excerpts from a story I wrote, and some still photographs of my playtimes.

Alongside data collection, I reviewed scholarship on play and on toys, which sparked other memories and helped make connections between my own experience and the experiences of others. Those connections led to more reading—and more remembering. Such recursive reflection and analysis are typical of autoethnographic research and writing (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015).

Third Culture Identity

Because autoethnographers embrace subjectivity, it is important for me to articulate the positional, relevant experience from which my perspective derives. As have my previous autoethnographies, this article explores my experience as a Third Culture Kid (TCK). Ruth Van Reken, David C. Pollock, and Michael V. Pollock (2017) popularized the abbreviation "TCK" and provided an enduring definition: "A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture . . . build[ing] relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any" (Pollock and Van Reken 2009, 13). I was a TCK because my parents are U.S. citizens, but their careers brought the family to Senegal, West Africa, where I spent most of my childhood years. For many years, I lived in the Casamance, a rural, southern region of Senegal. When separatist fighters in the Casamance began a violent and prolonged conflict with the national government, my family moved to Senegal's capital city, Dakar.

As Van Reken and Pollock (2009) note, most TCKs eventually return to

live in their passport countries. However, TCKs often struggle to adapt to life in their passport countries (Purnell and Hoban 2014; Smith and Kearney 2016). If TCKs have spent their crucial formative years abroad, when they finally return "home," that place may not feel familiar or comfortable, especially if they do not understand the common cultural references—like music, television, movies, and perhaps toys—shared by their peers (Priest 2003).

After graduating high school, I did return to the United States to attend college. Although my reentry was challenging in some ways, it was not as difficult as for others, perhaps partially because of my childhood investment in aspects of U.S. American culture, including G.I. Joe. My experience playing with G.I. Joe served as a kind of cultural capital, an intangible but also invaluable asset helping me navigate a society that otherwise might have proved even less recognizable to me. Granted, my closest U.S. American friends preferred Star Wars and Transformers, but at least they knew what I was talking about when I mentioned G.I. Joe.

A Real American Background

G.I. Joe itself may not manifest positionality, but for those unfamiliar with the toy, some history may be helpful to understand how the action figure has influenced my perspective. In 1964 Hasbro Toy Company coined the term "action figure" for the original twelve-inch soldier (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017; Eberle 2009; Cross 1997*)*. Emphatically not a doll, G.I. Joe nevertheless followed the same marketing strategy as Mattel's Barbie, both borrowing from Gillette shaving. Sell the base product (razor, doll, action figure) for a low price, then customers will keep returning to purchase more blades, dresses, and accessories (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017; Cross 1997). Specifically, children could accessorize—arm—G.I. Joe with a wide variety of weaponry, uniforms, and gear (sold separately, of course) and deploy the toy for their own militaristic recreation.

From the beginning, Hasbro explicitly invoked American heroism in G.I. Joe. The company sagely capitalized on the patriotism of the Greatest Generation and counted on these survivors of World War II to instill similar values in their offspring. As Eberle (2009) recounts one collector of G.I. Joe recalling, "Back in those days [the mid-to-late 1960s], most of our fathers were WWII veterans (some Korean War), and we looked up to them and reveled in the glory of their accomplishments and heroism. Now we had a perfect image of that ideal, one

with which we could reenact our fantasies and our dreams" (177). Millions of units were purchased, and during the next twelve years, G.I. Joe brought Hasbro national and global recognition and riches, making the company a leader in the toy industry (Miller 1999; Cross 1997).

Unfortunately for Hasbro, the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War stifled enthusiasm for military toys, and international oil shortages rendered the manufacture and distribution of the plastic action figures prohibitively expensive (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017). In 1976, G.I. Joe was retired . . . or, rather, placed on temporary reserve.

Several years later, observing the resurgence of patriotic and militaristic fervor following the election of Ronald Reagan, as well as the lowering oil prices, Hasbro reintroduced G.I. Joe in 1982 (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017). However, the action figure had shrunk in stature to a new, smaller scale: three and three-quarter inches. Officially branded A Real American Hero, these shorter action figures proved even more commercially potent than their twelve-inch predecessors. Part of that success must be due to the political atmosphere of the early 1980s. As documented by Patrick Regan (1994), even as real-life U.S. militarization experienced a "sharp increase" under the Reagan administration, the sales of war toys soared from 3.5 percent of overall sales in 1975 to 9.5 percent in 1985 (54). By the early 1980s, many of the owners of the original twelve-inch G.I. Joes had children of their own. Perhaps the nostalgia for their own childhood toy soldiers outweighed any distaste lingering from the Vietnam War.

More definitely and directly instrumental to Joe's success, however, was the innovative marketing of the action figure through media licensing—coincidentally, another result of Reaganite policies. In 1984 the Federal Communications Commission significantly deregulated children's television, permitting much more aggressive advertising of toys (Cross 1997; Chudacoff 2007). Accompanying the G.I. Joe action figures were animated commercials, a cartoon television series, and a comic book, making the Real American Hero one of the first among many brands to employ such a variety and volume of media in its marketing strategy. This use of transmedia intertextuality (Kinder 1991), or transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), is more common in toy marketing now. Indeed, arguably, it has become more a norm for toys to be sold in conjunction with an already (or, at least, likely to be) popular film or television or book series (Gulden 2016). With these licenses bolstering sales, G.I. Joe enjoyed an uninterrupted dozen-year-long run from 1982 to 1994—my peak playing years—dominating the market for many of these years.

Perhaps partly to push back against the image or reality of peddling war toys via mass media marketing, Hasbro worked hard to present its products as socially conscious and progressive. Despite the fundamental function of a soldier—to fight—Hasbro sought to temper the portrayal of violent conflict in the marketing of G.I. Joe. Model soldiers have been sold as toys in both Europe and the United States since the nineteenth century, so there is nothing new about children enacting miniaturized war (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990; Brown 1990; Chudacoff 2007). However, according to G. Wayne Miller, the makers of G.I. Joe took pains to contextualize—some might say sanitize—the violence in the toy's marketing. Once more, the financial motivation for such sanitization must be noted—Hasbro certainly did not want to alienate parents or other potential consumers of its product by making it appear gratuitously violent. Furthermore, killing characters whose corresponding action figures might still occupy toy store shelves was not likely to encourage their purchase (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017). Here, the transmedia marketing may have been especially useful, since, as Miller (1999) notes: "[Hasbro CEO] Stephen [Hassenfeld] sanctioned violence but strictly forbade depiction of its consequences" (37). The cartoon series was infamous for portraying no casualties in any of the many battles occurring in each episode (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017). Rather than bullets, guns shot lasers that had a tendency only to wound, or to miss their targets outright.

On the other hand, comic book writer (and U.S. Army veteran) Larry Hama refused the Hasbro edict for a bloodless version of combat, calling it morally bankrupt (*The Toys That Made Us* 2017). Somehow evading the Hassenfeld dictates, Hama insisted on depicting casualties—on both sides of battles—to show the reality of war. Although the stories Hama wrote certainly represented G.I. Joe as heroic, these narratives were also more complicated and realistic than the television shows, and Hama did not shy away from portraying the devastating cost of violence. Depending on which media portrayal of G.I. Joe children encountered or preferred, they might develop radically differing perspectives on violent conflict. Still, whether children were watching the television series or reading the comics, or both, or neither, the toys themselves remained open to interpretation by each person who played with them. Or did they?

How Violent Play Works

Having shared my own identity as a TCK and described the development of the

G.I. Joe brand, I turn now to the works of play scholars to help me address the paradoxes that prompt my research. How do I reconcile my aversion to (real-life) violence with my enjoyment of G.I. Joe? How has my experience of being a TCK affected my enjoyment of G.I. Joe?

First, I should address the obvious question of whether violent play, with or without toys, causes children to act violently. Can violent toys and play be linked, causally, to real-life violence? Probably not, according to an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*, in which Jennifer Hart and Michelle Tannock (2013) review scholarship on play fighting and playing with violence-associated toys. Distinguishing carefully between playful aggression and actually aggressive behavior, Hart and Tannock assert that research shows how play fighting can be valuable, even essential to social development in early childhood.

To begin with, much research has explored pretend person-to-person fighting, particularly the physically vigorous rough-and-tumble play. Studies of this kind of play have shown benefits both physical and social (Fehr and Russ 2013; Logue and Detour 2011; Tannock 2008; Holland 2003; Reed and Brown 2000; Bauer and Dettore 1997; Humphreys and Smith 1987). Again, and importantly, the value of rough-and-tumble play depends on children understanding the difference between pretend fighting and real fighting. Studies have demonstrated that children do understand that difference, including children from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Rao, Fink, and Gibson 2021; P. K. Smith, Smees, and Pellegrini 2004; Holland 2003; Schafer and Smith 1996; Costabile et al. 1991). That children understand the difference between pretend and real fighting in rough-and-tumble play might suggest that children can also differentiate between real-life violence and play violence with war toys, including toy soldiers like G.I. Joe.

However, as Hart and Tannock note, not everyone agrees that children can make such crucial distinctions. Some assert the contrary, though these studies also demonstrate the difficulty in evaluating the impact of violence-associated toys, given the many complex factors involved (Dunn and Hughes 2001; Watson and Peng 1992; Turner and Goldsmith 1976). Hellendoorn and Harnick (1997) attempted to parse several such factors, observing the preferences of fifty-four Dutch, male, and female four-to seven-year-old children for war toys (including G.I. Joes) over more neutral toys (such as a tea set or farm and zoo animals). They also noted that "make believe and other playful behaviors dominated, while real aggression was rare" (351). Similarly, Gisela Wegener-

Spöhring (2004) studied German, male, and female nine- to twelve-year-old children's attitudes toward playing with war toys. She conducted studies in 1985 (429 participants) and again in 2002 (634 participants)—coincidentally spanning the years during which I did most of my playing with G.I. Joe. In 1985 Wegener-Spöhring found that children maintained "balanced aggressiveness" in playing with war toys: "aggressive actions are restricted to the level of pretense, thus enabling all participants involved in the play to cope with its aggressive and alarming elements"(19). But by 2002, Wegener-Spöhring (2004) observed, this notion of balance had "visibly begun to falter," reporting that children were less able to distinguish between reality and pretend and also less aware of the reality of violent conflict in general (30). Wegener-Spöhring speculates that the increased exposure of children to real-life violence through entertainment and news media may be responsible for the faltering balance, but whatever the reason, the trend is troubling.

It is a trend frequently noted by Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin, who for decades have distinguished between children imitating violence in media and children playing creatively with violence-associated toys (Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006; Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990). Carlsson-Paige and Levin have also acknowledged the difficulty, or even apparent futility of banning war play, whether in classrooms or homes, and they have focused on offering creative approaches to playing with violence-associated toys. For example, adults can actively engage with children in their play. They can provide simple materials—everyday household objects—to complicate war play and lead the play in new and surprising directions. They can ask questions or make comments to help children process the significance of their actions and consider alternatives: "I wonder if there's a way to capture the bad guy without killing him" (Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006, 69). Adults can establish basic limits and prioritize a sense of safety—physical and emotional—in play areas and play times, so that children feel free to express themselves within the appropriate boundaries. Such facilitation may have a positive impact on children's development through playing with violence-associated toys. At least, it may be more effective than trying to stop such play altogether.

Given the scholarship addressing violence-associated toys and rough-and-tumble play, I feel comfortable proceeding under the assumption that it should not be surprising that I am a violence-averse person, despite playing with G.I. Joe. Instead, of more interest to me is what effects, instead, such play did have on me and how might these effects be connected with my TCK experience.

Two such effects, I suggest, are the fostering of creativity and the opportunity for emotional catharsis.

Creative Divergence

Once again, a common, crucial element in arguments made by defenders and some doubters of the potential value of violent play is the claim that children can distinguish between play and real life (Rao, Fink, and Gibson 2021; Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006; P. K. Smith, Smees, and Pellegrini 2004; Schafer and Smith 1996; Costabile et al. 1991). Such a distinction also seems a fundamental component of play, especially the pretend, or fantasy play, described earlier (Henricks 2014; Paley 2004; Sutton-Smith 1992).

　Further, it may seem intuitive that play, especially fantasy play, corresponds with creativity. Sandra Russ and Claire Wallace (2013) certainly believe so, stating unequivocally: "Pretend play is a creative act" (136). But Russ and Wallace also acknowledge that creativity is difficult to define or to demonstrate in empirical terms. One element of creativity, they propose, is divergent thinking: "the ability to produce many ideas . . . and to think flexibly" (137). In playing with toys, divergent thinking may occur when, rather than simply following instructions or suggestions that accompany or frame toys, children find different ways to play. As I have noted, even critics of violence-associated toys acknowledge the potential value of such divergent thinking: "Children can use the content of war play to work on the developmental tasks of their stage…[but] children need to be involved in an active process over which they are in control—they must determine the script" (Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006, 30). That is, children must be able to tell their own stories.

　Can I find evidence of divergent thinking in my own pretend play, my own stories? Did my G.I. Joes manifest or motivate creative flexibility? Well, my G.I. Joes didn't just fight battles. I remember spending a lot of time setting up my action figures and the stories they would enact. This phenomenon is not rare, apparently, according to Joel Best (1998).

> Moreover, when children do play with toys, they seem to spend much of their time in what analysts may mistakenly consider peripheral activities. For example, my casual observations of my sons' play—and my recollections of my own play as a boy—suggest the importance of what we might call "fore-play"—making preparations to play. One reason that Barbie and G.I. Joe are

so popular may be that they come with lots of little accessories—costumes or weapons or whatever. Children seem to spend a very large share of their playtime with these toys setting things up, getting organized, getting Barbie or Joe ready to do whatever is going to be done. (205)

I can relate to Best's description of these peripheral activities. A major part of my own G.I. Joe play pattern was the process of assembling, arming, and equipping the troops; establishing environments; and building bases. It could be contended that these preparatory actions should be considered at least adjacent to the violent conflicts they must have preceded. Yet I would argue there remains a difference between constructing a fort out of mud, rocks, and tree branches, then positioning sentries around the perimeter and performing the actual assault on that base.

Then there was the lead-in to each adventure, which, for me, typically involved groups of figures talking a lot, either planning or simply socializing. These social interactions, beyond any narrative function, contributed to the establishment and evolution of characters who, in my play over time, developed strong bonds with each other. For example, here is an excerpt from a story I wrote around the age of thirteen: "O Christmas Tree!" The story conveys the typical pattern that I followed while playing G.I. Joe at that time. The jovial scene played out among the G.I. Joes after a similar conversation between members of Cobra, the enemy who had planned an attack on what it expected to be a solitary Joe on holiday. (I have made minor changes to the text for clarity, and I accompany the narrative with some bracketed and italicized explanatory commentary.)

> Meanwhile, fifty miles away, in the clearing where Snake Eyes's cabin rested, there was a cheery bonfire roasting. And boy was Cobra in for a surprise. All of Snake Eyes's team, and some, were gathered around it singing Christmas carols. Storm Shadow, Dusty, Gung Ho, and more had all come up from the Pit to spend Christmas with Snake Eyes in the high Sierras. . . .
>   *[Snake Eyes is perhaps the most iconic G.I. Joe figure: a masked and black-clad ninja commando of improbable prowess and a constant Cobra target. Storm Shadow is Snake Eyes's ninja sword brother. Dusty is a desert warfare specialist. Gung Ho is a marine. The Pit is the G.I. Joe headquarters.]*
> After "Deck the Halls," "Jingle Bells!" and other favorites, the Joes started eating goodies.
>   That's when Mutt discovered Airtight was eating the last of his corn chips. "Ahhhhhhhh!" he screamed. "You yellow-bellied, bug-eyed weirdo. You ate my corn chips!"
>   "MMM. Brilliant observation!" said Airtight, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. . . .

[*Mutt is a K-9 specialist who likes dogs more than people. Airtight is a chemical weapons specialist. Mutt's insult is technically accurate, given Airtight's protective headgear and hazmat suit.*]

Snake Eyes observed the many familiar faces around the fire and smiled to himself as he saw all the usual routines going on between the friends.

Sergeant Slaughter was following Jinx around like a lovesick puppy until she finally got mad at him and kicked him. Dusty was shivering and complaining about the weather. Gung Ho, Rock 'n Roll, Blowtorch, and Han Solo were playing a card game. As usual, Han was winning.

Scoop was trying to interview several people but finally gave up and began taking still pictures of the fire and the group of friends. Lifeline was snoring away. . . .

"Hey, Snake Eyes, wanna test my new recipe for Crawdad Stew?" Roadblock, the former gourmet chef asked.

[*Sergeant Slaughter, mentioned earlier in this article, is a professional wrestler turned military trainer. Jinx is a female ninja. Rock 'n Roll is a heavy machine gunner. Blowtorch is, despite the Geneva Convention, a flamethrower specialist. Some Star Wars characters showed up alongside the G.I. Joes, including Han Solo. Scoop is a battlefield journalist. Lifeline is a medic. Roadblock is an even heavier machine gunner than Rock 'n Roll.*]

The most violent action during this portion of the story is Jinx evading and eventually ending the sergeant's unwanted attention. The rest is purely socializing. Although I don't want to go too far by claiming that these elements were my favorite parts of the stories, they are certainly among the parts that remain most vividly in my memory. I contend, then, that evidence of divergent thinking is present in this example from my play. Henricks (2014) writes, "Play is an exploration of powers and predicaments. We play to find out what we can—and cannot—do and to see if we can extend our capabilities" (203). My action figures could do anything I wanted them to do, not just fight. They could go on friendly picnics as well as deadly missions. As the story shows, my Joes did not go hungry.

It is possible that my specific experience as a TCK contributed to my creativity in playing with G.I. Joe or at least helped me avoid certain blocks to divergent thinking. Doris Bergen (2016) notes a common phenomenon considered an obstacle to creativity.

Today's children use themes from popular culture to a great extent as they play, but if they are not totally immersed in that culture, their play tends to start with one of those themes and then diverge into their own experiences. The problem is that these themes are now so pervasive that it is almost impossible to escape from them. . . . In my studies, I have observed that some

children do override the themes or expand them; for example, making the superhero go home for supper or go to bed. Only some children are able to do this and, if they are constantly exposed to the themes the figures portray, it becomes harder to override those themes. (153)

I believe I was among the children whose play did not conform to popular culture themes. I think that was, at least partly, because I was a TCK, experiencing little exposure to the transmedia marketing of G.I. Joe.

Tore Gulden (2016) reports that children play less creatively, or in a more limited way with toys that carry heavy transmedia storytelling, which "reduces variability and possible eventualities, risk-taking, cognitive and practical experimentation, and imagining as stimuli and facets of a quest for the creation of their own experiences" (89). Given my growing up in Senegal, I did not watch the television series or read the comic books that framed G.I. Joe for many children, perhaps to my creative advantage since I did not need to escape from the pervasive themes Bergen laments. Instead, I told my own stories—including home and supper. I used my divergent thinking to determine my own scripts, as Levin and Carlsson indicate is necessary for war play to have a positive impact rather than perpetuate real-life aggression and conflict.

Cathartic Conflict

Yet my stories did contain conflict. Doubtless, my parents encouraged the kind of social, nonviolent play illustrated in the story above. I even have a birthday card from my grandparents in which they point out that the G.I. Joes they have gifted me are not just fighters, but helpers (Scoop, the battlefield journalist) and even healers (Lifeline, the medic). Sure. But, on the other hand, neither Scoop nor Lifeline were ever the center of my stories. As you can probably tell even from the excerpt I included, they were peripheral and most often obnoxious comic relief. Also, in addition to Scoop's video camera and Lifeline's medical case, both characters carried guns.

Arguably, the fundamental purpose of a toy soldier with a gun (or any other weapon) is to act violently, to shoot (or stab, slice, slash, bash) someone or something else. To ignore the basic functions of these accessories would be to reject the function of the action figure at an essential level. I did not reject that function. After all the setting up and the character interaction, my G.I. Joes fought Cobra, and they fought hard. Plenty of evidence of violent play exists in

the story "O Christmas Tree!" When Cobra attacks Snake Eyes's cabin, here's what happens:

> The Crimson Guards started to close on the cabin and . . . were blown to pieces by land mines.
>   *Crimson Guards are literal red-shirted, faceless cannon fodder.*]
>   The forest erupted. Cobra Commander and the other leaders were suddenly ambushed by dozens of G.I. Joes, who were perched in all the trees. Grenades flew and machine guns chattered in the cold dark.
>   "Hey Cobra Commander!" called Gung Ho. "Here's a present! Merry Christmas!" He lobbed the grenade at Cobra Commander's vehicle. Cobra Commander just barely got out of the truck in time. . . .
>   [*After some back and forth, and the G.I. Joe's strategic retreating*]
>   Suddenly hundreds of lights went on in the trees. Except these lights were not ordinary lights. They were so bright that the Cobras were blinded momentarily. This allowed the G.I. Joe to scramble away.
>   "What's going on?" shouted Destro, trying to shield his eyes
>   "I don't know tin-face!" shouted Dr. Mindbender.
>   [*Destro is an arms dealer who wears a metal mask. Mindbender is a former dentist turned mad scientist and interrogation expert.*]
>   "Nightlight!" said Snake Eyes.
>   All the lights on the trees exploded, killing dozens and wounding more.

These dozens and more casualties were nameless Cobra bad guys—to my adolescent mind, villains through and through. But still, that's a hell of a body count. If I thought about it, which I definitely did not at the time, those are representations of people who were alive and then were not. My stomach turns a bit just typing that sentence. It also does not rest comfortably at the sight of my toy soldiers fighting each other, carefully posed and photographed around the same time that I wrote the story excerpted above. (See figures 2 and 3.)

From these violent confrontations, there must be casualties—bodies ripped apart by bullets or blades or broken from fists and feet. If I did not think about it at the time, why not? Henricks (2014) writes: "Play is a commitment to the act of transformation and to the forms of self-awareness that arise during this process. Consciousness is contained or consumed by these moments of making" (208). What was I making in these moments of play, and what kind of consciousness was I containing or consuming? How was I such a bloodthirsty teenager, so callous to pain and death, even in pretense and plastic?

Further, I cannot confine the record of my callousness or my bloodthirst to my later childhood or early adolescent play. In a picture dated April 1991—I was
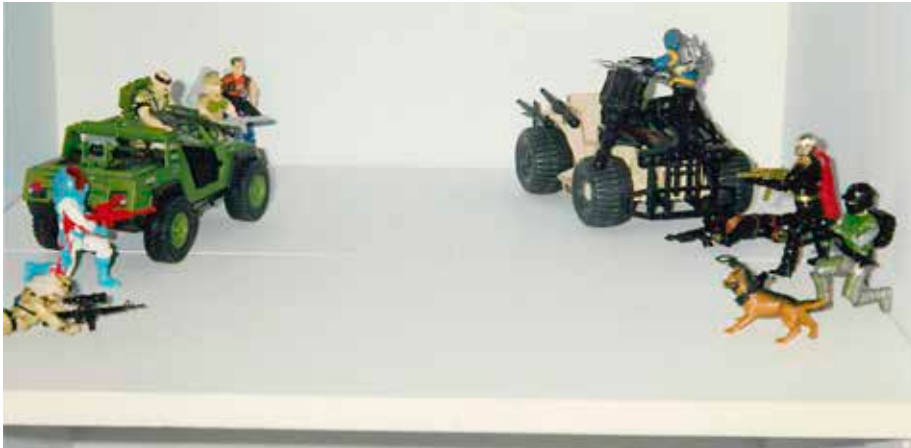
Figures 2 and 3. Photographs of G.I. Joe versus Cobra combat. Taken by the author in the mid-to-late 1990s. Figure 2. Left to right: Dusty, Roadblock, Gung Ho, Rock 'n Roll, Blowtorch (actually a figure called Mercer whom I substituted for Blowtorch), Range Viper, Iron Grenadier, Destro, Cobra Commander (actually a figure called Duke whom I helmeted and turned into the enemy leader). Figure 3. Clockwise, starting with the fellow missing a shirt: Quick Kick, Jinx, nameless enemy ninja, Snake Eyes, Zanzibar, Night Creeper.

almost nine—I drew "G-I + Cobra" (figure 4). The "+" clearly meant "against" since the picture features nine Joes confronting six Cobras in violent conflict. In the picture, two Cobras are firing their weapons at a Joe who is parachuting and shooting back. The lines of fire suggest that the Joe is safe, but a Cobra (carrying a sword) is about to buy the farm. No, I will not hide behind a euphemism. A human being is about to die. Intriguingly, the Cobras appear to be trying to rescue a comrade (drawn in a barred jail cell in the upper right corner of the Joe base)—a mission that might more traditionally belong to the good guys than the bad guys. Also worth noting, although the majority of the scene is violent, one Joe can be seen reclining and reading in the base—off duty, I suppose, though I wonder if they can hear the alarm that must be announcing the impending assault. I wonder what they are reading, too.

I also wonder if the violence I enacted in play was a way of coping with the violence that I witnessed in my life as a TCK. That violence included the beginnings of a political rebellion in the Casamance, which Momar Diop (2003)

Figure 4. G.I. Joe + Cobra. Drawing by author, April 1991.

refs to as "a low-intensity conflict" and Martin Evans (2002) calls "West Africa's longest-running civil conflict" and "one of the world's forgotten wars." Witnessing soldiers and military vehicles entering the village where we lived—incidentally, not long before the time I drew "G.I. Joe + Cobra"—felt quite intense, as did our consequent, hasty departure to avoid the government shelling of the forest behind our home where separatists supposedly encamped. For years, according to my mom, sudden and loud noises resembling explosions put me on edge, and on one occasion they caused me to jump into a bush, dragging my younger brother with me, as if to take cover from some kind of attack. I confess I do not remember this, but I do know I still do not much care for fireworks.

However, witnessing war did not prevent me from playing with plastic troops and tanks for years after. Perhaps my play was a way to process the violence I had encountered. For example, I remember when my brother acquired the G.I. Joe figure named Lightfoot, an expert in removing explosive ordnance. I distinctly recall making the mental connection with the land mines that had rendered the roads to and from the village where we lived too dangerous to travel (Evans 2002). Was making this connection therapeutic, somehow? Were my action figure adventures some kind of coping mechanism? Lois Kuznets (1994) writes: "When an adult or child picks up a toy soldier, which is typically two to four inches tall, and holds it in the palm of his or her hand, gazing at its little face and the details of its uniform, I suspect that a near-universal urge manifests itself to project upon it hopes, fears, joys, bad dreams, indigestion, and guilty desires. Above all, the holder imagines its feelings of powerlessness, its dependence even as a combatant not only upon its imagined commander but upon the god that holds it and creates its character and story" (79–80). Was I projecting onto my G.I. Joes my own fears and feelings of vulnerability in the hands of higher powers? If so, did such projection help?

There is significant debate about the therapeutic value of aggressive, even violent play. According to Kay Trotter and Garry Landreth (2003), "Aggressive-type toys also provide the necessary distance from a particularly difficult issue for the child, and therefore allow the child the ability to display feelings about the situation or conflict" (122). Charles Schaefer and Deborah Mattei disagree, directly rebutting Trotter and Landreth: "A consistent finding from controlled research studies is that when adults permit and encourage children's release of aggression in play, the children are likely to maintain this behavior at its original level or actually increase it" (Schaefer and Mattei 2005, 107). (Schaefer and Mattei do acknowledge that most of the studies to which they refer are far from recent:

e.g., Feshbach 1956.) Sutton-Smith (2008) writes that play—specifically violent play—could be considered an important exercise in both creativity and catharsis: "imitative representations both as a way of emulating serious conflicts and as a way to avoid engaging in them" (115). That is, rather than motivating real violence, violent play may actually help children healthily process real violence.

In my own case, I believe that playing with G.I. Joe helped, at least more than it hurt. While not invoking either of the terms "therapeutic" or "cathartic," Henricks (2014) makes the case for the potential of play to meet emotional needs: "When we play, we also seek feelings of control, security, and mastery" (197). I think enacting violence provided me some measure of these feelings of control and security, as if I were reassuring myself that I was safe, even if my plastic toys were vulnerable. Of course, there is always the risk of imitative violence— however cathartic or therapeutic—turning to actual antisocial behavior (Levin and Carlsson-Paige 2006; Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990). But in my case, and maybe in many others' (since I do not wish to suggest that only TCKs suffer exposure to real-life violence), perhaps playing war allowed me to assert some sense of agency in the wake of difficult events beyond my control.

The Next Generation

A Real American Hero may have helped me process some difficult experiences as a Third Culture Kid, even as being a TCK may have helped me more creatively enjoy G.I. Joe. Perhaps my description and interpretation of my experience with G.I. Joe contributes to an answer to Hart and Tannock's (2013) call to fill a gap in scholarship about violent play: "Research is needed to develop a cohesive terminology that clearly identifies various types of aggressive sociodramatic play, targets the developmental benefits of each type, and distinguishes various toys and actions characteristic of aggressively representative play" (2). I would be glad if my articulation of creativity and catharsis could serve as examples of developmental benefits of this kind of aggressively representative sociodramatic toy play.

Beyond any academic significance, however, this autoethnography has made me consider not just my personal past with G.I. Joe, but also my present and my future as a parent, a father to a son. Right now, my son is a toddler. Will his image of heroism, to say nothing of Americanism, conform to the violent masculinity on display in my childhood favorite? Will I allow that? Can I prevent it? I have given him some G.I. Joes, and he poses them, crouching, legs spread,

and he repeats a favorite phrase from his day care yoga: "Strong like a mountain!" Then he pretends to change their diapers, hugs them, pats their heads, and puts them on pillows and under blankets to nap. I find such innocence utterly charming, but as he ages, how will he play? What toys will he choose for himself, and what will he do with them? How will they shape his world view? He will not likely grow up a TCK, and the United States of his childhood is and will likely continue to be a place where firearms are the leading cause of death in children (Owens 2022).

As I reflect on my life with G.I. Joe so far, I return often to the concern my mother expressed about my play with violent toys—a concern I now share. Brian Sutton-Smith (2008) might have tried to reassure my mother, as he wished he could have his own mother, near the end of his career: "Perhaps I had spent a lifetime studying all this play stuff in effect to convince my long-dead mother we were really fine, absolutely normal, even when we were engaging in all that rough stuff. In short, I have been saying here and everywhere only this: nice boys are allowed to act quite horribly as long as they are playing" (123). Despite his expertise, I doubt Sutton-Smith's words would reassure his mother or mine. Despite my own experience, Sutton-Smith's emphatic "really fine, absolutely normal" do not completely calm my own anxiety. As a parent, I sympathize with my mother and with Sutton-Smith's.

When I take my son to the babysitter, he happily plays with tanks and fighter jets boasting the Stars and Stripes, zooming them through the air or over the floor. I feel the need to contextualize these toys with a discourse on the history of violence and nationalism, but of course I cannot. He would not understand, yet. Besides, he will find his own ways to play and his own meanings to make, as have I.

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