CHAPTER ELEVEN
CONTESTING TRAUMATIC WAR NARRATIVES: SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO AND MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM
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Introduction
For postwar Japanese, no national trauma can compete with the Asia Pacific War. Following the master narrative that holds that unscrupulous militarists forced them into a poorly conceived war of aggression that culminated in the horrific firebombing of most Japanese cities and the first use of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many Japanese not only eagerly embraced pacifism and the anti-nuclear movement, but also the notion that Japan itself was the primary victim of the conflict (Dower 1993: 10, 27; 1996: 120–37). This is not surprising when the immediate aftermath of defeat is taken into consideration: sixty-six major cities heavily bombed, three million dead, nine million homeless, three million civilians stranded overseas, and three and a half million soldiers and sailors needing to be repatriated (Dower 1999: 45–9, 119, 179, 562). The loss of loved ones, the extensive damage to the home front, unconditional surrender and foreign Occupation—the first in Japan’s long history—combined to create a sense of collective victimhood which was only strengthened by the conservative politics which came to the forefront after the official return of sovereignty in 1952 (Shimazu 2003: 106, 115). Catastrophic events such as the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, happening just days before surrender in August 1945, functioned to obscure awareness of the atrocities that Japan’s war machine had perpetrated throughout Asia and the Pacific (Dower 1996: 123). During the long postwar period, prominent popular culture artists who had gone though the war as children sought to represent and make sense of the carnage and destruction of the past in manga and anime (Napier 2005).
Anime scholar Susan J. Napier suggests that science fiction anime provides important insights into historical memory and contemporary identity through its “distinctive narrative and visual aesthetic” (Napier 2001: 4, 8, 10–2, 17). And since image can help constitute shocking realities where language often fails, moving images and the narratives behind them represent an effective means of working over and working through the traumatic past (Davis 2001: 208–9). Japanese comics expert Frederik Schodt notes, however, that with the exception of manga explicitly depicting the horrors of the atomic bomb, Japanese illustrators have approached representation of the War “gingerly”, if at all. Schodt goes on to observe that only one major manga magazine is devoted solely to war, and that Japanese publishers have shied away from all but a few nationalistic military manga (Schodt 1999: 115–9; 1983: 73–6). Yet of the four graphic narratives printed as examples at the back of his seminal book about Japanese comics, Manga! Manga!, Schodt singles out one of them, Matsumoto Leiji’s war story “Ghost Warrior”, as the most “Japanese” (Schodt 1983: 188). Social scientist Eldad Nakar argues that, far from reflecting victim consciousness or avoiding the War, many Japanese artists have created “triumphant memories” emphasizing Japanese victories rather than defeats (Nakar 2003: 57–76).

What is telling about Schodt’s characterization of Matsumoto’s work as “most Japanese” is that Matsumoto is not only widely regarded as one of the reigning manga and animation artists working in the science fiction field, but an artist who is also well known for his nationalistic outlook. Matsumoto played a key role in the creation of Uchū senkan Yamato (Space Battleship Yamato, 1977), which is a fine example of Nakar’s “triumphant memories”. Matsumoto’s later works—Captain Harlock, Galaxy Express 999, and Yamato sequels being the most popular—gradually developed from individual stories into a coherent universe of interlinked narratives (Matsumoto 1997: 150–8). This interconnectedness enables Matsumoto to revisit war, victimhood and the indiscriminate use of power whenever he so chooses in his manga or anime. From the perspective of trauma studies, it can

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1 Matsumoto prefers Leiji, although his given name is Akira.
2 Matsumoto only has the rights to the designs from the Yamato anime (sometime translated as Space Cruiser Yamato); the original producer has the rights to the story without access to the character and mechanical designs.